

OUTGOING LABOUR AND ITS IMPACT ON THE TEA PLANTATION SECTOR IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT: TEA IS LABOUR INTENSIVE SECTOR, HOWEVER, THE REGISTERED LABOUR ARE MOVING FROM THE ESTATES AND THE ESTATE MANAGEMENT ENCOURAGE TEMPORARY WORKERS TO BE ENGAGED IN THE ESTATE WORK. POOR HOUSING, LOW WAGES ARE NOT MOTIVATED FACTORS TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG WORKERS AND THE YOUNGSTER ARE NOT WILLING TO WORK IN THE PLANTATION SECTOR

Key Words: Plantation, Tea Workers, Estate, Indian Origin, Wages

1. INTRODUCTION

Outgoing labour from the plantation sector to other sectors in search of employment is a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The formation of the plantation sector is considered as a highly labour intensive sector which requires regular supply of labour throughout the year and the requirement is not only for the field operation, but also for manufacturing of tea in the plantation sector. However, the sector is experiencing a drastic decline of labour and a considerable number of labourers are moving out from the tea estates. According to the Statistical Information on Plantation Crops (SIPC) of the Ministry of Plantation Industry, the number of registered labourers in the large scale tea estates was 497,995 in 1988 and it had declined to 405,304 in 1990 and as of 2011 it has further declined to 207,235, which is a 58 percent decline in the last two decades. Therefore, factors which contribute towards this decline of labour in the tea estate are the main focus of this study.

The tea plantation workers are distinctly different from local peasants and other industrial wage labourers in the country. The labour involved in tea plantations are basically Tamils of Indian Origin (Indian Tamils). Around 80 percent of the Indian Tamils are concentrated in the tea plantation sector and most of them are workers in the tea estates and reside within the estate area. They are housed in rows of rooms, which are generally called *labour lines* in Sri Lanka. The clusters of the labour lines are strategically located in different parts of the tea estate to enable quick labour deployment and to protect the boundary of the estates. The nature of work needs the involvement of both the male and female labour force. Plucking of tea leaves is an important activity and is a specialized job done mainly by the female workforce in the country.

Tea plantations were introduced in Sri Lanka by the British during the early part of 19th century and rapidly emerged into a major economic activity and led to the development of a new social structure in Sri Lanka. The successive governments of Sri Lanka have introduced several changes in the industry after the independence. The tea plantation was owned by multinational companies such as 'Sterling' and

'Rupees' until it was nationalised under the land reforms of 1972-75. The nationalised plantation sectors were handed over mainly to the government institutions of Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB) and the Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation (SLSPC). The government embarked upon a number of projects for rehabilitation of the nationalised tea plantation sector. However, the targets that were expected by the implementation of rehabilitation programmes did not sufficiently materialise and thus the financial problem reached a crisis point because of the proportions of heavy borrowing from the state banks and widespread corruption and mismanagement of the tea sector (Ranasinghe Sudatta:1995 and Shanmugaratnam.N:1997). Subsequently, the government dissolved the management of the tea plantation and handed it over to the private companies under the recommendation of the Plantation Restructuring Committee (PRC) in 1992. Accordingly, the tea sector was distributed amongst 23 Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) and had the extent of 89,581 hectares under tea cultivation and it was roughly 42 percent of the bearing tea land in the country in 1995 (Statistical Information on Plantation crops -2011:p.151). Currently, the extent of tea land of the RPC has now declined and bearing around 85,000 hectares which is 40 percent of the total tea land in the country in 2013.

As far as the production of tea is concerned it has reached a record level of approximately 328 million kilograms in 2013. This was about 23 percent of the world tea output and roughly 18 percent of the total tea exports. It should be noted the 70 percent of tea is now produced by the Tea Small Holdings (TSH) sector in the country. TSH has the extent of 132,329 hectares under tea and is mainly spread in the district of Ratnapura (30,441hectares), Galle (27,4127 hectares) and Matara 25,417 hectares) and it is distributed among 397,000 tea small holders in the country. The contribution of tea was roughly 2 percent in the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) in Sri Lanka in 2013.

Tea workers come under the category of wage earning and the daily wage is determined at the collective agreement between the trade unions and the Employer Federation in the country. The daily wage includes the basic wages and other allowances which have been continuously altered, but the amount has always been low when compare to the rural and urban workers of Sri Lanka. At present the basic wage for the estate worker is Rs.450/=. The workers are entitled to receive Rs. 140/= as an attendance intensive allowance only if they attend more than 75 percent of the work offered to them by the estate management per month and the Price Shared is Supplemented by Rs. 30/= which makes total of Rs 620/= per month. Ironically, still the estate workers are identified as low income groups in the country.

Objective of the Study

1. To study the nature of labour in the tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka
2. To examine the opportunities and possibilities of non-estate jobs in the vicinity of tea producing areas in Sri Lanka.
3. The study also draws an outline of the strategy adopted by the large scale estates to mitigate and overcome issues of labour for their task in the country.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on both the secondary and the primary data. The primary data were collected from household survey conducted in the randomly selected four large scale tea estates in the district of Nuwara Eliya. It was decided to select 40 households from each estate and finally the survey was incorporated 122 households

for the analysis. The systematic random technique was used to select the houses from the estates and the survey was carried out in the month of June and July in 2014. A structured questionnaire was designed to extract relevant data from the households. Relevant information also collected from the staff of the respective estates in the sample. The secondary data were collected from the published documents and the information published in the various issues of the Plantation Sector Statistics Pocket Book which is an annual publication of the Ministry of Plantation Industry in Sri Lanka and various issues of the annual reports of the central bank of Sri Lanka.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that the deployment of workers is divided into three categories based on their occupation. These are; i) 52 percent workers fully involved in estate jobs; ii) 35 percent workers partly involved in estate jobs; and, iii) 13 percent workers fully engaged in non-estate jobs. Male workers heavily dominate non-estate jobs. The non-estate workers who study up to secondary level of education do not live in the estates. They are engaged in trade and business in the major cities in Sri Lanka. It is also observed that persons who study up to primary level have the tendency to join jobs other than plantation work. Higher illiteracy rate leads to a greater labour turnout in the estates. Literacy provides extra avenues for alternative jobs mobility from tea estate work to non-estate jobs in the vicinity.

It is also important to see the studies focusing on the potentiality of employment in the tea sector from the inception of independence of Sri Lanka. Accordingly, this section reviews Tea Master Plan (TMP) of 1978, The Tea master Plan in 1978 (The TMP) also suggested that there is a potential for increasing employment on tea estates through enhancing the productivity. Accordingly, the yield level of 900 kilograms per hectare had been able to provide wage incomes, unchanged and stagnated management style, persistence of unchanged housing conditions, attitudes of the trade unions in the plantation sector etc. Coincidentally the successfulness of school education (primary) etc. significantly transformed the socio economic conditions of the estate workers.

The fixed daily wage and the allowances are the major income components of the plantation workers. Wages for the plantation workers were governed by the minimum wage regulation and controlled by the decision of the tripartite institutions called the Wage Boards until recent years. Presently the wages for the plantation workers are governed by collective agreement. The key partners of the collective agreement are the representatives of major trade unions and the Employer's Federation of the plantation sector. It should be noted that the determination of daily wage and other allowances are not routinely considered by the estate management. Almost all wage revisions to the plantation workers were made after considerable pressure applied by the trade unions in the country by way of strike etc.

It should be noted that there were several programmes initiated in order to eradicate the line room system of residence for workers after the nationalisation of the estate sector and a considerable number of projects also have been implemented in this regard. Despite all these efforts the estate workers who are living in the old type of double barrack or single line rooms still constitute 63.4 percent of the total number of households in the estates.

Being a non-estate worker in the estate the worker can lose few advantages such as bonus payments, holiday payments and sometimes when the housing owner ship entitlement etc. The tendency towards unwillingness to join the parental jobs by the youths in the estates also observed. In brief, the existing problems in labour

employment can be categorised as (a) the *Permanent workers* in the estates prefer to be temporary workers in the estate in which they reside in order to engage in the estate job while they also wanted to get the advantages of working outside the estates for higher wages. This mostly persists among some of the male workers in the estates. (b) The persons who have gone up to GCE O/L and could not sufficiently qualified in that examination have become the large portion of unemployed youth in the estates. (c) A considerable number of youth with some education leave to urban areas especially to Colombo for jobs and after some times if they fail to settle down, they revert back to estates and remain as unemployed persons even though estate labour jobs are found in the estates. (d) Though some children of the estate workers have qualified with secondary level education, they have only a limited chance to join in the staff grade jobs available in the estates. The total unemployed persons in our sample were 9.31 per cent of the total labour force in the sample. The unemployed persons in the estates were generally educated youths. When asked about their opinion about joining estate work they showed unwillingness to pursue parental jobs. They also felt that it was not necessary to go for the parental job since they had enough income from several working members in their families. Further, they did not like the working conditions and style of management.

Strength of Labour in the Tea Plantation

As mentioned above the sector is labour intensive, the numerical strength of registered labour in the large scale tea plantations has dropped during last three decades. The distribution of labour in the tea sector could be mainly gauged from the statistics provided by the MPI. The table 4.2 compiles details of the number of registered labour in the large scale tea sector from 1985 to 2008. The total labour force also includes the plantation staff, which is around 4 percent of the total labour force in the sector. The statistics do not include managerial staff such as Manager and Superintendents.

Table 1: Number of Workers in the Plantation Sector 1985 – 2011

Year	23 Private Companies	Others		Total
		JEDB	SLSPC	
1985	-	238,321	220,296	458,617
1990	-	213,703	191,601	405,304
1995	343,536	14,892	11,234	369,662
2000	294,532	8,551*	8,690*	311,773
2005	275,677	8,704	6,908	291,289
2008	229,923	6,448	5,895	242,266
2009	200,439	5,693	5,424	211,556
2010	202,204	5,810	4,812	212,826

2011	196,861	5,807	4,567	207,235
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Source: Plantation Sector Statistical Pocket Book 2000 (August 2000), and Statistical Information on Plantation Crops – 2011 (December 2011), Ministry of Plantation Industries, Colombo 02 .

The statistics provided in table 1 clearly show a drop in the permanent labour strength in the sector. In 1985 it was 458,617, and it dropped by 58 percent to 207,235 in 2011. The drop in the labour force seems to have been a common phenomenon during, the government ownership up to the 1990s and during the private sector management thereafter. The breakdown is as follows:

- a) 459,000 plantation workers retired and were sent back to India as repatriates under the Indo-Ceylon Pact, which was signed in 1964. This exodus continued up to 1984, until the ferry service between Sri Lanka and India was suspended due to the escalating conflict in the north and east.
- b) After 1972, with the land reform (Nationalization of plantations), many families were chased out of the plantations particularly in the Kandy, Kegalle, Badulla and Ratnapura districts.
- c) There had been also migration of plantation workers from the low and mid country plantations to the north and east, in the aftermath of the 1983 ethnic violence, and it continued for some time thereafter.
- d) Some workers also retired taking advantage of the premature retirement package offered for persons volunteering to retire before retiring age since the re-privatization in the 1992s either permanently or temporarily.
- e) Displacement caused by the ethnic conflicts and development projects. After 1983 ethnic violence and with the civil war, a considerable number of plantation workers particularly from southern districts (Kandy, Kegalle, Badulla, Rathnapura and Galle) left the plantations due to isolated incidents of ethnic violence. Due to the development projects like Upper Kotmale hydro project, Victoria project, Randenigala project, Rantembe project and Mahaweli Oya project. When the plantations were requisitioned by the government the workers were displaced.
- f) Plantation youth unwilling to seek employment in the plantations, migrate to cities in search of employment. This is caused by the lack of dignity attached to the plantation workers. Generally the plantation workers are considered socially inferior. According to information gathered at the FGD, 71% of the workers are not willing to send their children for the plantation work for various reasons.

Several studies have focused on the potential for employment opportunities in the tea sector. Thus it is worthwhile to look at the arguments which mainly focus on the necessity of expanding the tea sector, mainly to broaden the scope of employment.

Nature of Works in the Tea Plantation

Pattern of employment for the workers in the tea plantations has significantly changed over the last three decades, although plucking of tea leaves still continues with manual labour. It was mainly performed by the female workers, but it has been now extended to the male workers as well. Involvement of male workers in plucking of tea leaves generally began after the privatisation of tea plantations in the 1990s. Male workers had been regularly involved in weeding, clearing, factory work etc in the plantations, from the inception of the tea plantations in the country. Hand machine was introduced to pluck tea for men in some plantations. Apart from the involvement in weeding, around 20 to 25 percent of the total male workers have, to date been regularly involved in the manufacturing of tea.

The female tea plantation workers spend approximately 9-10 hours per day at work. This includes the preparation for departure from their home and arrival after work. In our close interaction with them we found that they are not inclined to engage in any job other than plucking tea leaves as far as their choice of work is concerned. The workers also felt that they retained year round jobs in the plantation. Illiteracy, lack of interaction with the outside world, the hold of the management on them and the lack of diversified skills are the major reasons which have led to this pattern of thinking. Workers are expected to harvest a minimum of 16-19kg each in order to gain stipulated daily wage. The workers are to receive additional income for harvesting beyond the fixed norm. But the norm is liable to be varied. The current rate for every additional kg of green tea is Rs.12 (2010).

Next to plucking, comes field weeding. The routine cultivation practice requires control of weeds, since it positively influences the yield of tea. Therefore, the plantation management attaches importance to weeding, in which mainly male workers are engaged. There are two types of weeding, namely: manual weeding and chemical weeding. In the former scrapers are used, and the task requires roughly 90 man-days per hectare. However, the method has been outmoded in many plantations, because of the high risk of soil erosion. Chemical weeding is now widely practised, and it helps to prevent the soil erosion and needs only 20 man-days per hectare. As it is cost effective the managements opt for it.

However, with the lengthening of the weeding pace with the use of chemical, the work opportunity for workers has narrowed. In manual weeding, male workers get more number of man-days in the plantations. But with chemical weeding, which is done three to four times a year male workers get only 10 to 15 days work in a given month.

Weeding– using both manual and chemical application of pesticide and fertilizers are performed in the tea plantations by male workers. Labour requirement for this task depends less on the amount of fertilizer and pesticide applied, and more on factors such as the level of field, weather conditions, and types of tea bush, fertilizer and

price of tea in the market. In the sample plantations 12-15 man-days per hectare are required on the average for fertilizer application, and, this includes the supervisory staff. In the plantation sector, large quantities of chemicals are used as fertilizers and pesticides.

Pruning of tea bushes is another job available for male workers in the plantations. Labour requirement for pruning varies with the elevation, variety of tea bush, and type of pruning. Pruning intervals, known as pruning cycle, take 4 to 5 years in Sri Lanka. The average labour requirement for clean pruning is around 20 man-days per hectare, but only 12 man-days are utilized per hectare.

However, there are three other major important development activities, which are fairly labour intensive in the sample tea plantations: nursery maintenance, replanting, new planting and filling vacancies. Replanting involves a series of labour intensive activities such as uprooting old tea bushes, rehabilitation of soil, planting new saplings and maintaining the field until maturity. However, these activities are lax in the tea plantations.

Factory operations also need labour, the demand for which is determined by the type of machinery, the extent of automation, and the quantity of green leaf processed. One man-day is usually required to process 750 kg of green leaf. The factories in the sample tea plantations are still working with old machinery.

A significant adverse effect on labour demand has been generated by the substitution of troughs for tats, use of automated conveyors to transfer green leaf, and use of mechanised sifters and auto tea pluckers instead of manual operations. The factory labour component is less than 10 percent of the total labour requirement per hectare. But, none of these has affected the total employment opportunity in the tea industry.

Engagement Tea Workers

The data collected from the sample households reveals the emergence of different categories of workers among the plantation workers, as shown in the table 4.3. Only 64.84 percent of them are fully involved in the plantation jobs, whereas the other 35.16 percent are involved in various jobs within as well as outside the plantation.

Until the recently the registered workers were not allowed to engage in non plantation jobs, as the management considered it a violation of contract of services, and, the management reserved its rights to take action against such persons. There were several cases of management striking the names of such persons off the check roll, and most of the time expelling them from the plantations. However, now the management, unable to retain the male workers in service due to paucity of work, treats their keeping away from work voluntarily as a blessing in disguise.

The jobs, this group of 35.16 percent can engage in, are divided into five categories: (a) Daily paid urban/rural labourers (b) Monthly paid sales men /hotel assistants (c) Migrants to Middle East (d) Domestic servants and (e) vegetable cultivators.

Part time jobs for tea plantation workers within the plantation are mainly vegetable cultivation and cattle breeding. Bulk of the vegetables like potato, carrot, leeks, cabbage, capsicum, beetroot etc., are produced in the privately owned land and marginal tea land in the Nuwara Eliya district, which is a hill station. Vegetable cultivation provides an average of 10-15 days of work in a month to the plantation workers who are willing to do part time jobs in the vegetable gardens.

The adult females with secondary level education give up the plantation jobs for foreign employment. Around 3 percent of the workers have migrated to the Middle-East t jobs. Most of them have become housemaids.

The educated youth with secondary and post secondary level education secure non plantation jobs in trades and businesses in the cities such as Kandy or Colombo. Those with post-secondary education have either become teachers, or are on the lookout for professional jobs of that sort. The non plantation workers from the plantations are also employed as labourers in gem mines, and some work in tea small holdings, which have a higher demand for labour, than the large-scale tea plantations.

The total unemployed persons in the sample were 11 percent of the total labour force. The unemployed persons in the plantations were generally educated youths. When asked about their opinion about joining the plantation work they exhibited total unwillingness to pursue the jobs of their parents. Moreover, they did not like the working conditions, the style of management and the plantation system.

The administrative staff level job availability for the educated people is very limited in the plantations. Moreover, the educated unemployed among the plantation population do not meet certain criteria set by the management to be recruited into staff. As we have mentioned elsewhere, the elite families exclusively dominate the management of the plantation. And the other middle level staff is recruited largely from the non plantation communities. Therefore, the educationally qualified individuals from the plantation population do not get the higher level jobs, even if they aspire to get them.

David Dunham (1998) and others analysed the future labour supply and possible management responses to tea plantations in Sri Lanka. The study stated that the young workers might in future have very good reasons to look for jobs elsewhere if the strategies of tea plantation management did not change appropriately. For example, during the FGD, some young workers explained that in some plantations when they met the management to discuss their problems, they kept standing outside and talking through the window. So the young workers have a reasonable feeling that their dignity is not respected. This is a serious question raised by the young educated workers.

An ILO study on Employment and Unemployment Situation in Selected Plantation Districts and Creation of Employment Opportunities (1999) reveals that there is a mismatch between the available jobs in the plantation and the aspiration of the unemployed. The study also found a trend of unwillingness for plantation sector jobs among the educated (those who studied up to GCE (O/L) classes) in the plantations. The study showed that a considerable number of educated youth were prepared to accept employment opportunities in the factory but it was limited within the plantations and not readily available in the vicinity of the plantations.

The study also found that the literacy rate which seemed to have determined the labour turnout in the plantation sector. The location of the plantations, health condition of the workers, nature of plantation jobs, opinion of the youngsters about their parental jobs, lack of dignity of the plantation job etc. are also influence labour contribution. It should be noted that the location factor has considerably influenced the labour turnout in the plantations.

The location of the tea plantations is one of the major the key reasons that causes the workers to shift from the plantation sector to the non plantation sector. There are plantations which do not have easy access to the nearby towns. The workers of such plantations do not have any opportunity to engage in non plantation employments and are compelled to freeze in the plantation jobs. Some female workers are able to

do overtime work during the flush season (May-July) and earn 33 days as monthly wage. The entire arable land area in these plantations, is under tea plantation, and this considerably prevents the workers from engaging in subsidiary occupations. Social isolation is common in very many plantations in the high elevation tea region, except for a few plantations which are close to towns and cities.

There are instances of tea plantation workers suffering from backaches and not reporting to work. This is a symptom of anaemia. A study on the health conditions of the tea plantation workers found out that around 67 percent of the lactating women workers were anaemic.

The female workers have a 'dual role'. As housewives, they have to perform numerous household chores like collecting firewood, fetching water, cooking and attending to their children and parents in addition to the plantation work. Their engagement in plantation work begins around 7.30 am. They actually leave home around 6.30 am, and it is a tedious thing for them to climb up hills to reach the assigned field and here they begin their work at 7.30am which extends up to 5.00 pm, with 45 minutes to one hour lunch break. Therefore, experiencing weariness and sometime body pain, they are compelled to take a few days' off in order to attend to family affairs every month. This also affects the turnout of the female workers.

When a mother is unable to send her child to the crèche (Child Care Centre) or Pre School, she stays with the child. This practice is relatively high in the Sri Lankan plantations, which is another reason for absenteeism. In countries like India, there are mobile child care centres in some plantations, and this fact somewhat reduces the burden of mothers.

The tea plantation workers and the youngsters are not satisfied with the plantation management's recruitment policy. If posts fall vacant, sometimes the plantation management offers the educated children of the plantation workers positions such as temporary field supervisor on daily wage basis. The job is to supervise field work. However there is no assurance that such posts will be made permanent.

4. Conclusion

The tea workers are not merely confined to the estate works. The persons who study up to primary level have the tendency to join jobs other than plantation work. Continuity of poor housing, low wages are not motivated factors to attract the young workers to be involved in the privatized large scale tea estates. The privatized tea estate is engaging in recruitment of temporary workers mainly from other than the tea sector rather than traditional workers.

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