

LIFE OF THE PLANTATION LABOURERS IN DARJEELING HIMALAYA: A CASE STUDY OF PHOBSHERING TEA ESTATE

RITI MOKTAN*

*Rajiv Gandhi Research Fellow, Department of Geography, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan 731235

ABSTRACT

Plantation industry has been operating in the hill since last one sixty years and is often considered to be the largest employment providing sector among the rural region of the hills. A lot of debate has emerged over the time on the life of these plantation labourers. With the flourishment of these tea industries in the Darjeeling Himalaya in a commercial front, the requirement for the labourers became a major issue as a result of which labourers were brought from the neighbouring hill district as well as from the foot hill regions, who came with their families and settled in the fringe areas of the tea garden. The main purpose of my study has been to highlight the life and socio-economic condition of these tea industry labourers with special reference to Phoobshering Tea estate. Study has been conducted mainly on the primary data generated from the field and secondary data generated from the garden offices and relevant government offices. The paper has thoroughly highlighted on the socio economic life of these labourers in the garden considering the distribution of labourers in the industry, their housing condition, religion practiced, educational level, sanitation and fuel wood requirements. Which are all related to a life of these plantation labourers in the Darjeeling Himalaya.

Key words: Tea Industry, labourers, Socio-Economy, Education, Housing, Sanitation.

INTRODUCTION

Darjeeling Himalaya is home to a wide range of tea gardens which produces the best and internationally renowned varieties of orthodox tea, green tea and organic tea. It is one of the major tea producing regions of the India. It has a huge international market with the tea being exported to UK, Iran, Pakistan, Russia and Egypt .Darjeeling was initially purposed as a sanatorium for the British troops. It is to the effort of Dr Campbell the tea industry started flourishing in Darjeeling. With tea industry moving towards commercial front more

labourers were required as a result of which there was a large scale migration from in and around the surrounding regions of Darjeeling .At first it was a daunting task to bring the labourers as there was no proper facilities available for the labourers because of which they had to face a lot of health issues and problems. Labourers coming from the foothill region of the Darjeeling were suffering from the adaptability problem as they were not able to survive the extreme weather condition of Darjeeling where as labourers coming from the Nepal region were facing problem of housing and sanitation because of which many of them fled from the tea, more over the dictatorship of the tea estate managers and owners were often considered as one of the major reasons for the labourers leaving their work. With this unending problem of labour scarceness, the tea industry started providing basic facilities to the labourers like free housing, ration, and medicals along with salary. This proved as one of the major luring factors for the weaker section of the society from in and around the areas as a result of which a lot of labourers migrated from in and around the region with their families and settled in the fringe regions of the tea garden as bonded labourers. They have been settled in the garden for almost 150 years and the present labourers are either third or fourth generation labourers working in the tea estates

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to explore the life and socio economic condition of the labourers of the famous tea plantation industry in the Darjeeling Himalaya with special reference to Phoobshering Tea Estate which is one of the oldest and among the first commercial tea estate in the region to operate providing employment to a large section of rural population, the main objective can be cited as follows:

- (a) To study the life and economy of the people living in Phoobshering Tea Estates.
- (b) To gather some knowledge about the life in the tea plantation industry of the Darjeeling Himalaya
- (c) To look into the general demography and family status of the residents of *Phoobshering* Tea Estates and also to study the educational status, male-female literacy distribution, occupational structure and so on.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF TEA GARDENS

The total area of Darjeeling Hills is around 3,149 sq.kms of which about 40 percent is estimated to be under forest, 40 percent under settlement areas, 2 percent under cinchona plantations and 18 percent under tea plantation. Majority of the tea gardens are located in Sadar Darjeeling , Kurseong and Mirik divisions. There are only few tea gardens in Kalimpong Sub-division since as Kalimpong is largely agricultural in character and agriculture forms the backbone of the regional economy of Kalimpong. There are in general 87 registered gardens producing Darjeeling Tea in Darjeeling Hills spreading across the geographical area of about 18,000

hectares out of the total 114 tea gardens located in the district of Darjeeling. They comprise about 5 per cent of the total area under tea plantation in the country.

ORGANISATION OF WORK IN THE TEA GARDEN

The tea plantation industry is a highly labour intensive industry a lot of labour is required in the process of tea manufacturing and production. It provides employment to a large section of population. Work in plantation is basically manual in nature mainly women and children are preferred for working in the gardens. Plantation industry has its own hierarchy of work system, which maintains different structural class of the workers and the management. The work structure has been divided into two parts those working in the field in one hand and those who looks after the management and functioning of the industry on the other hand. There are mainly four categories of workers in the plantation system, namely the management, staff, sub staff and the workers. The management comprises the manager, assistant manager and the factory manager. The staffs are mainly the white collar personal and the sub staff comprises the lower level supervisors. Rests of the workers are the workers in the factory and the labourers in the tea garden or the field. The tea garden labourers are further divided into (i) Permanent workers, (ii) Outside workers and (iii) Temporary workers. A permanent worker is one who resides in the garden and whose name is entered in the estate's register. They work round the year. During the off season they remain engaged in cleaning the weeds, garden etc. An outside worker is one who comes from outside for work and his name may be enrolled in the estate workers list, provided he is a whole time worker. Temporary workers are those who may reside or may not reside in the garden. They are seasonal workers during the peak plucking season when the labourers are required in huge numbers. They get their salary on daily basis. Besides, some estates employ labourers on contract basis. The work structure in the plantation industry is entirely family oriented The hierarchy in the work environment is fairly elaborate. There are several mediators between the manager and the worker a large section of which belong to the sub staff. In fact many of these strata exist only to transmit orders from the top and widen the social distance between the management and the workers. There is a lot of dispute between the management and the workers regarding issue of wages and certain rights, which the management becomes reluctant in delivering to the labourers as a result of which the tea garden labourers are at a stake.

LIFE OF LABOURS IN THE TEA GARDENS: CASE STUDY OF PHOBSHERING TEA ESTATE

An attempt was made to study in detail the life and economy of the labour class people living the tea gardens in Darjeeling Township area. For this purpose **Phoobsering** Tea Estates was selected. An in depth study has been

conducted by questionnaire survey. Families of the workers were made contact with personal visits to their area and primary data were generated upon various aspects related to their life and economy. Report of this study based upon statistical analyses of data and interpretation has been given in the following pages

Phoobshering Tea Estate

Details of the Garden

Name of the Tea Estate: Phoobshering Tea Estate

Year of Establishment: 1856-1860

Location: Darjeeling West Valley **Distance to near market:** 10kms

Ownership: Chamong Group of Companies

Elevation: 3000ft -6000ft

Number of workers: 721 **Female workers:** 465 **Male workers:** 256

Total area: 510 hectares **Area under cultivation:** 240.52 hectares

Gross yield: 133 tons/year **Type of tea produced:** Oolong variety, White Darjeeling tea



Plate 1: Phoobshering Tea Estate factory

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF PHOBSHERING TEA ESTATE

Phoobshering is one of the oldest tea gardens to be established in the Darjeeling region lying towards the west valley, it is a spectacularly located tea garden with a little undulating topography. The estate is located at an altitude of 3000ft to 6000ft which is an ideal height for the growth of exuberant variety of aromatic tea. It has a total land area of 510 hectares, of which 240.52 hectares is under tea plantation, adjoining the tea estate and its surrounding area is encircled by the houses of the labourers. The tea estate has total workers of 721 of which

465 are the female and 256 are the male thus highlighting on the fact that it is mainly a women centric job. The tea garden produces around 133 million tons of tea per year which are exported to the international market. The cool mountain air with abundance of sunshine and rainfall is very much favourable for the growth of the aromatic bushes. According to the source Phoobsering tea estate owes its name to a sardar who was the first supervisor of the tea estate since the labourers has been living in the gardens for more than 150 years and most of them are third or fourth generation workers they rarely have a clue about the origin of the tea estates name.

In order to understand the pattern of socio-economic status of the labours working in this tea garden a detailed survey was conducted. Some secondary data was obtained from the tea estate office and the primary data were generated by questionnaire survey. The results are given below.

a) Male-female proportions in the working population

Proportion of male and female workers working in this tea garden was studied from the data made available from the office of the Phoobsering Tea Estate Office and the data is presented below.

Table 1: Male-female distribution among the total working population

<i>Population</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	256	35.5
female	465	64.5
Total population	721	100

Source: Phoobsering Tea Estate Office

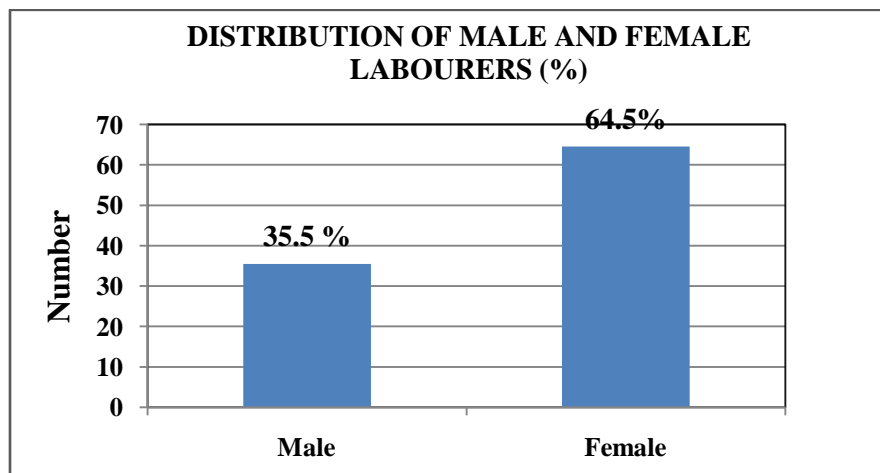


Figure 1: Male-female distribution among the total working population

The data has been graphically presented below and it shows that as much as 64.5% of the working population in this estate is female. The numbers of female labourers are more in number as compared to the females

mainly because for the plucking purpose woman are more required than the male. Women considered being the fragile section of the society they are given less strenuous job whereas males are employed in more strenuous job in the factory for the processing of the tea leaves, packaging and transportation purposes.

b) Religion of the people (sample size 150)

In order to know about their ethnicity and religious practices which is a symbol of communal harmony to have a glimpse about the religion of the workers is important so in order to study about their religious practices following data were collected

Table 2: Religions practiced by the workers

<i>Religion</i>	<i>population</i>	<i>%</i>
Hindu	80	53.3
Buddhist	60	40.0
Christian	10	6.7
Total nos interviewed	150	100

Source: door

to door survey in the tea garden

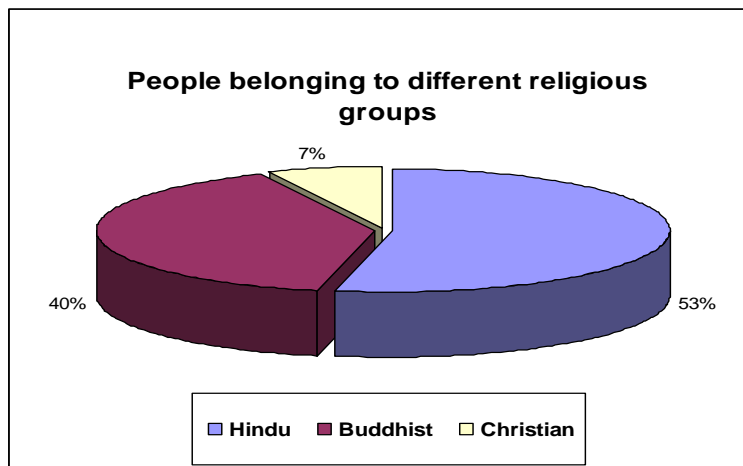


Figure 2: Religions practiced by the workers

From the above data it is very much clear that a very high proportion of the people (>53%) here belong to Hindu religion. The second highest category is Buddhism (40%) and the rest (7%) comprises of Christians and Muslims. Even though there is diversity in the religious practices they have not faced any discrimination based on religion. Moreover people are religious and celebrate their respective festivals occasionally.

c) Occupational structure (sample size 200)

In order to understand the pattern of occupational structure of the workers as many as 200 persons, irrespective of males and females were interviewed and the result of the study and analysis are given below:

Table 3: Occupational structure of the working population of Phoobsring tea estate

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>No's interviewed</i>	<i>%</i>
Service	32	16%
Other job	18	9%
Permanent worker in the tea garden	38	19%
Daily labourer in the tea garden	112	56%
<i>Total Nos. interviewed</i>	200	100

Source; data generated from the door to door survey in the tea estate

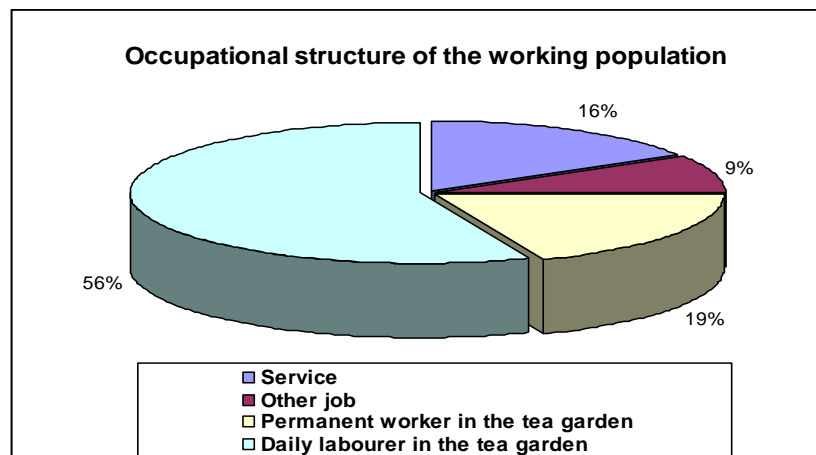


Figure 3: Occupational structure of the working population of Phoobsring tea estate

The occupational structure of the society depends upon both physical and economic land use pattern. In Phoobsring the main occupation is associated with the works in the tea estate. As much as 75% of the working population is attached to the works of tea leaf plucking and working in the factory where tea is processed with the rapid urbanisation and globalisation the standard of living requirement has increased as compared to the past years. Because of which the meagre income which they get from the garden is not essential to sustain their family because of which people are adopting other sources of income like farming growing of vegetables in the garden, small home poultry, cattle rearing etc. With very less education they do not have the opportunity to go out and venture for higher income job. Some of the tea garden youths who have been able to secure certain level of education have joined either army or some are teaching in the nearby private schools

d) Educational status

Education is one of the major and most important tool a man can secure if he wants to lead a comfortable life. It makes one much more skilful and able to live in a society Hence level of education determines your future indirectly. Primary survey on the educational status of the working population (male and female) was conducted in the field and result of compilation is presented below.

Table.4: Education status of the working population of Phoobsering tea estate

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>female</i>	<i>% of male</i>	<i>% (of female)</i>
Illiterate	2	3	6%	10%
Primary	24	18	72%	62%
Secondary	5	3	16%	10%
HS and above	2	2	6%	18%
Total Nos. Interviewed	33	29	100%	100%

Source: data generated in the field through door to door survey

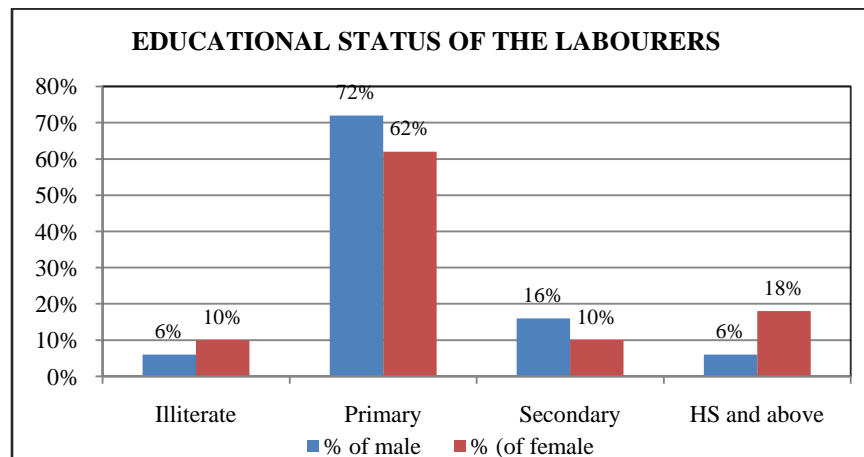


Figure. 4: Education status of the working population of Phoobsering tea estate

It can be observed from the above table and figure that a good proportion (Male 72%, Female 62%) of both male and female population have studied up to elementary level of education as we climb on the ladder of education it can be seen the number starts deteriorating. Very less percentage of people have achieved education upto hs level which highlight on the apathy of the educational system in the tea garden areas.

e) *Housing condition*

Housing condition also determines ones standard of living and their economic condition in order to hight on their economic condition the houses of the labour class people were studied by visiting residence of individual families. Following is result of this study.

Table 5: House types of the workers of Phoobsring tea estate

<i>House type</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>%</i>
Kuccha	30	60%
Pucca	20	40%
All types	50	100

Source: data generated in the field through door to door survey

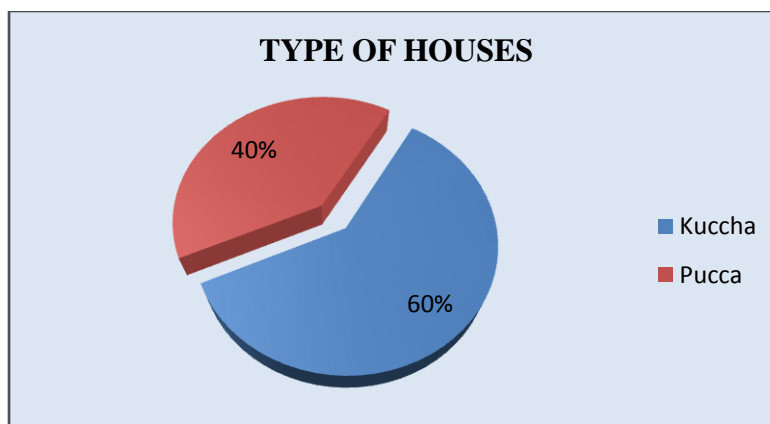


Figure 5: House types of the workers of Phoobsring tea estate

According to the plantation labour act 1951 the tea garden authority are suppose to provide the houses to the labourers in and around the tea garden area as for now houses are provided to them but their maintenance has not been done properly majority of the houses have been affected by the recent earthquakes and natural calamity but no such repair works have been done. Hence It appears from the above table and diagram that the majority of the workers (60%) have (Kuccha) houses and (40%) have (Pucca) Houses thus highlighting on their living condition.

Table 6: Number of rooms in the residences of the workers of Phoobsring tea estate

<i>No of Rooms</i>	<i>Nos observed</i>	<i>%</i>
1 – 2	3	20%
2 – 4	7	47%
4 – 6	3	20%
6 – 8	2	13%

<i>Total Nos. investigated upon</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100%</i>
-------------------------------------	-----------	-------------

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

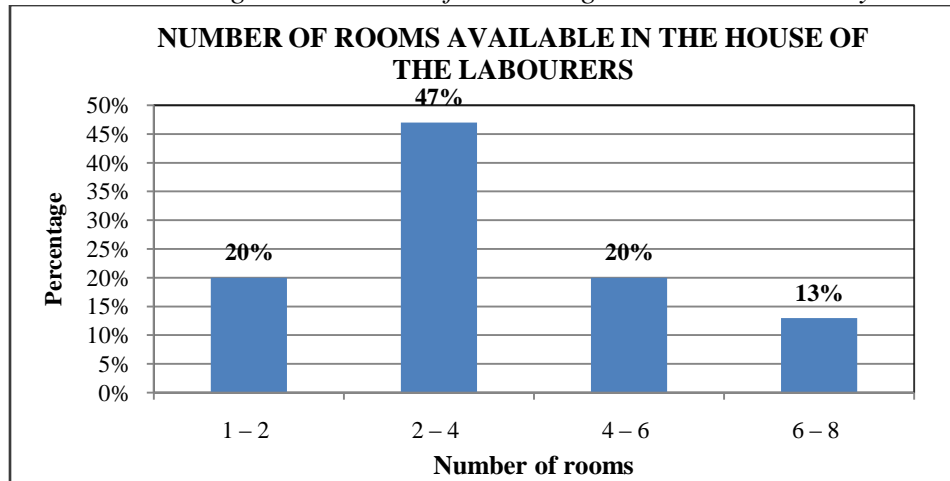


Figure.6: Number of rooms in the residences of the workers of Phoobsering tea estate

No of rooms also represent the living condition of the workers. Rooms were almost to the size of the family. It has been observed that as much as 47% of the workers have 2 to 4 rooms in their houses.

f) Sanitation

In order to have a healthy living environment proper and healthy sanitation facility is very essential. Availability of proper sanitation facility is a mark of awareness on health and hygiene in the society. Hence to look at the sanitation facility available in the Phoobshering Tea Estate the following samples were collected from 15 houses of the labourers and data collected is represented below:

Table 7: Condition of sanitation in the house premises

<i>Toilet (sanitation)</i>	<i>Nos. found</i>	<i>%</i>
Pucca	4	27%
Semi-Kuccha built up	6	40%
Kuccha	5	33%
<i>Total nos. observed</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>100%</i>

Source: Data

generated in the field through door to door survey

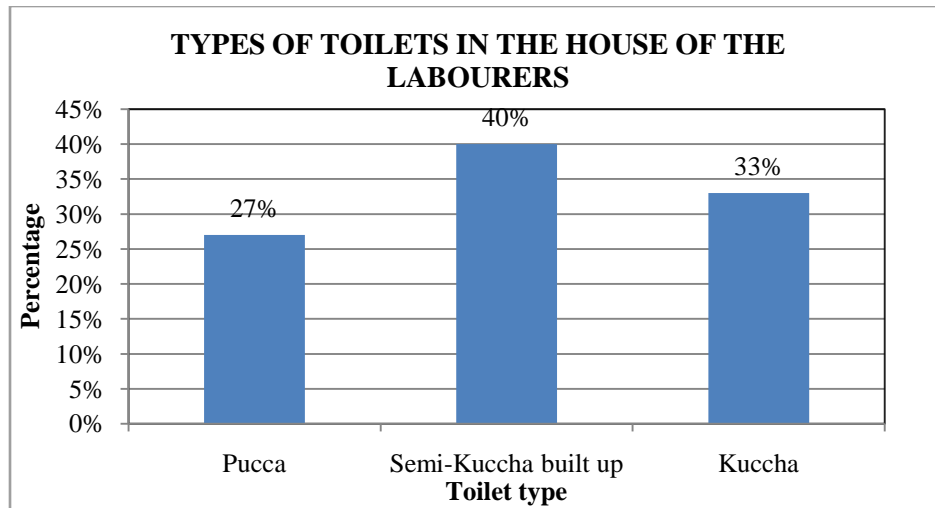


Figure 7: Condition of sanitation in the house premises

The analysis of the house hold survey in the area presents the fact that 27% have a built up (pucca) toilet, 40% have a partly built (Semi-Pucca) toilet and 33% have only temporary(Kuccha) toilet. It can be seen that no more than 27% have access to propr sanitation facility most of the houses were seen without a toilet they use common toilet in their neighbouring premises. Thus the standard of sanitation is not up to the level of expectation.

g) Sources of drinking water:

Availability of clean driniking water is a must for a healthy living. In Phoobshering Tea estate some of the workers have access to water through their private water lines wheras most of them depend on nearby springs. A thorough survey was also conducted to explore how the labours collect or obtain water to meet their day to day requirements. The data table as well as its diagrammatic representation is given below.

Table 8: Sources and availability of fresh water for the workers’ families

Sources	No. of cases	%
Private tank	4	20
Spring water	16	80
Total Nos. identified	20	100

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

The table shows that only 20% of the residents among the workers can collect water from water tank and the rest 80% of the families have depend on the water from the temporary or semi permanent springs which are locally known as *jhoras*. So it is quite understandable that as far as the water supply is concerned the life is quite hard for the workers family.

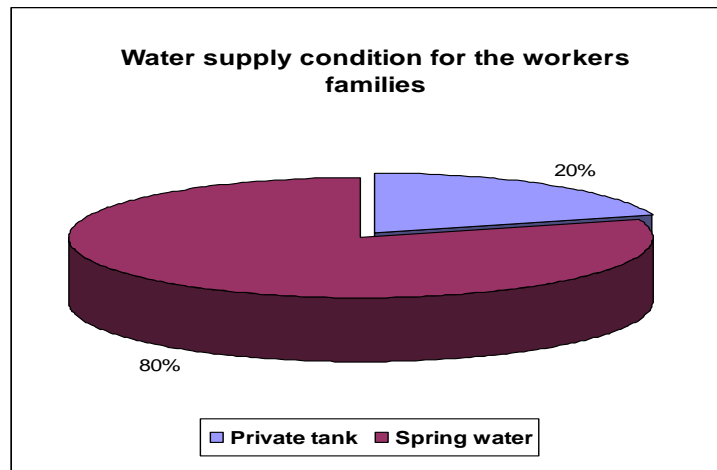


Figure.8: Sources and availability of fresh water for the workers’ families

h) Source of fuel

Study of source of fuel for the domestic works of the labour families was done by asking the head man of the individual families. As many as 20 families were interviewed in this purpose and the result is given below:

Table 9: Sources of domestic fuel wood for the labour class families

<i>Sources of fuel for the families</i>	<i>Nos. said Yes</i>	<i>%</i>
Fuel wood	14	70
Gas	2	10
kerosene	4	20
Total Nos. interviewed	20	100

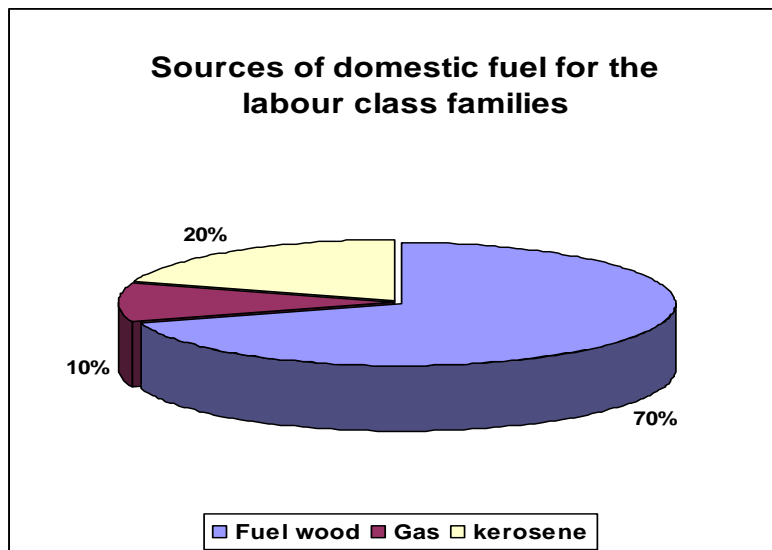


Figure 9: Sources of domestic fuel wood for the labour class families

Fuel is also an important aspect of life sustenance. It was found that the people here heavily depend upon wood from the nearby jungles to meet the need of their domestic fuel. As much as 70% of the inhabitants go for collecting fuel wood and have a very hard life doing so. Standard domestic fuels like gas and kerosene are not so easily available for the people.

OVERALL ASSESMENT AND CONCLUSION:

After a thorough field survey conducted upon various aspects like the male female distribution in the working population, their religious practices, educational level, their housing condition, sanitation facility, source of drinking water and availability of fuel wood .It can be seen that in this period of rapid urbanisation and modernisation their standard of living and their socio-economic status is in a highly detrimental condition from the study conducted above we can see that:

- The proportion of female workers in the industry is more than the male workers thus making it a more women centric job and
- Most of the labourers family has been staying in the garden since the time of the establishment of the tea estate. They are almost the third or fourth generation workers.
- We can see labourers belonging to all religion in the tea estate with maximum number of people belonging to Hinduism and a moderate proportion to the Buddhism and a small proportion to Christianity and other religions.
- When we look into the occupational structure majority are working in the tea garden as that is their major source of income a very slight proportion is engaged in kitchen gardening and livestock rearing and among the younger generation most of them had joined army or some of them are working as a teacher in the nearby private schools and some are doing petty jobs in the nearby Darjeeling town thus their occupational pattern and interest are slowly changing and progressing outside from the tea gardens
- Among the persons studied following random sampling system it has been found that most of the workers are educated up to primary level and as we move up towards the educational level the number slowly dwindles with only young generation or the children of the labourers engaged in higher studies.
- Most of the houses are kuccha type according to the plantation labour act the housing condition should be provided by the management the houses are provided but no maintenance is provided some of the houses are very old.
- The tea estate does not have a proper sanitation facility with just 27% of the houses has access to pucca toilet
- According to Plantation labour act 1951 the management is supposed to provide a clean drinking water and fuel wood to the labourers but it could be seen that the labourer's themselves are taking initiative for the the

arrangement of the drinking water facility and regarding the fuel wood they were provided with fuel wood in the earlier times but now they are given money whose cost is not even equivalent to the fuelwood price they are entitled to get.

CONCLUSION

In order to upgrade the living standard of the labourers, the three main conditions on which attention should be given, are wages, job security, and working and living environment. The second most important need is education, setting up enough educational schools for the children of the labourers and providing scholarships to meritorious students and encouraging them for further studies. There should be a constant check on the facilities being provided to the workers whether they are being given to them on time or not. According to the survey conducted in 2012 by the government of West Bengal it was seen that there was no labour welfare officer in 175 tea estate. Even though the government is planning to take initiative to monitor food security in the tea gardens affected by shutdowns. This should be implemented as soon as possible without any delay. In order to avoid conflict between the workers and the management; the distance between them should be reduced by the managers, thereby becoming more approachable by the workers.

REFERENCES

- Banerjee, G. and Banerjee, S. (2007): Darjeeling Tea, The Golden Brew. International Barua, P. (2008): The Tea Industry of Assam, Origin and Development. EBH Publisher, Guwahati Book Distributing co., Lucknow
- Barua, P. (2008): The Tea Industry of Assam, Origin and Development. EBH Publisher, Guwahati
- Bhadra, R.K. and Bhadra, M. (1997): Plantation Labourers of North East India. N.C. Publishers, Dibrugarh.
- Chhetry, S. (1999): Women Workers in The Informal Sector: A Study Of The Hill Areas Of The Darjeeling District In West Bengal. Gyan Sagar Publications, Delhi
- Karmakar, M. (2011): A Geographical Outline of North Bengal. N.L. Publishers, Shiv Mandir Siliguri, West Bengal. pp.1-217.
- Dash, A.J. (1947): Bengal District Gazetteer, Darjeeling. N.L. publishers, Siliguri
- Tamang, S., and Chattopadhyay, G.P. (2014): The Socio-Economic Status and its Changing Pattern of the Tea Garden Workers of the Western Dooars area in West Bengal. International Journal for Current Research and Techniques, Parth Earth & Environment Consultancy, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India pp.8-20.