

Assessment of MGNREGA as a Sustainable Livelihood Support in Closed Tea Garden of Dooars: A Case Study of Dheklapara Tea Garden

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***Abstract:** Dooars is home for tribes and tea plantation, located in the district of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar the belt consists of huge tribal population whose livelihood depends on tea garden. The number of tea garden around the Dooars region is 163 and the number of workers engaged in tea plantation is 168867. The total area under tea plantation is 7298 hectare and the production throughout the year is 144.80 million kgs. The tea gardens of Dooars depict two case scenarios. Tea Garden which are managed under big private firms are in a good shape functioning well and earning huge revenue from it. Another scenario is the failure of tea gardens in terms of functioning and earning revenue since they are under the ownership of small investors. Such tea gardens are termed as “sick tea gardens” and “closed tea gardens.” The present study is based on one of the closed tea gardens of Dooars which have been closed and left out abandoned since 15 years leaving the people associated with the tea gardens unemployed, deprived them from their livelihood and even leads to death. The study has been focused to understand the sources of livelihood that has been adapted by the tea workers in the field. The study is completely based on field study which has found that the role of government schemes developed for providing employment opportunities like MGNREGA has been very much crucial in providing a new source of livelihood in the study area. the contribution of government schemes like MGNREGA has helped them to at least overcome their certain financial problems to some extent. The participation of women folks is much higher in the MGNREGA scheme but the scheme too has some loop holes, but nevertheless it has been a saviour to the population surviving the sudden shock.*

Keywords: Close Tea Garden, Dooars, Employment, Livelihood, MGNREGA.

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Introduction

Tea plantation in Dooars was an experimental venture which started around 1857 under the ownership of Dr. Haughton in a small area of Gazalduba. After a massive success in her hilly region the tea plantation around Darjeeling and Kurseong where tea plantation was developed in a small nursery farm.¹ Dooars also saw a huge commercialization in a short period of time. The tea plantation in the region not only added a new source of income for the country than under the administration of British Raj but also brought about changes in its demographic, economic, social and cultural profile of the region. The region saw a massive flow of tribal migrants from Chhota Nagpur region of country as well as from the neighbouring country Nepal.

Since tea plantation was a labour-intensive commercial economy, it required huge labour forces for preparing ground by clearing of forest, and planting tea bushes. As such to employ cheap labour forces tribal people were brought from their homeland since they were hard working and ready to work at even low wages. The tribal migrant who had come from their homeland settled themselves permanently with tea industry flourishing over the region rapidly.²

The proportion of tribal labour forces in tea industry is much higher in Dooars. Dooars resembles a region of mixed ethnicity, culture, customs and religion with different communities living and working in harmony in tea gardens in the region. At present there are around almost 235 tea gardens covering an area of 81,338 acres under cultivation covering two administrative districts of Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri.

Present Scenario of the Tea Gardens

North Bengal being a tea belt of West Bengal has more than 200 tea gardens including hill, terai and Dooars region. As per the latest statistics available from the Tea Board of India, at present there are 15 tea gardens that are permanently closed in the region. Out of the 15 tea gardens 6 tea gardens were operational in the Dooars region of North Bengal.

Name of the Tea Gardens	Area in Hectares	No. of Workers		Date of Closure
		Permanent	Temporary	
Red Bank	369	888	700	19.10.2013
Surendranagar	172	301	150	19.10.2013
Dheklapara	197	604	200	11.03.2006
Dharanaipur	265	357	450	21.10.2013
Bandapani	530	1215	68	13.07.2013
Madhu	323	947	0	23.09.2014

Source: 66th Annual Report, Tea Board of India (www.teaboard.gov.in/home)

The Study Area

Dheklapara is a small tea garden in Madrihat Block of Alipurduar District (26°45'33"N; 89°6'23"E) located between the two rivers banks, the tea garden was opened in the year 1911 and has around 650 workers. The garden was locked out in the year 2006.

Present Scenario of Tea Garden

Tea plantation and production of Dooars provides two different pictures, in terms of production it has been doing well, but if compared among the tea gardens around themselves it is noticed that many tea gardens have been failing to function and has been operationalising in a very bad shape.

Table 1: Tea Production in different region of West Bengal

State (West Bengal)	Area under tea cultivation in hectare	Production of tea 2014 (Million Kgs)
Darjeeling	17.82	8.91
Dooars	72.92	177.85
Terai	49.70	125.34
Total	140.44	312.10

Reproduced Source: Tea Board of India (www.teaboard.gov.in)

The data highlights the area under tea plantation and production within the state. The cultivated area under tea plantation falls with the North Bengal district of the state where most of the tea gardens are located. The production of tea within Dooars is high as compared to the other regions of the state, as the area under cultivation is higher than the other regions. The production of tea thus reflects that the contribution of Dooars in tea production is much higher than other areas, but still the tea gardens of the region are unable to sustain and have been incurring losses and sometimes even lockouts.

Instances of shut downs of tea gardens are not new to this belt, every now and then one or other tea garden is reported of being shut down due to failure of providing wages which remains due for many months. Managerial worker conflicts have become very common in small tea industry and instances of managers fleeing away or being beaten up by the workers have come across in many tea gardens of the Dooars.

Few tea gardens have seen a permanent shut down for many years. One such tea garden is the Dheklapara Tea Garden which now falls under the administrative division of newly formed district of Alipurduar. The tea garden has been shut down for last 15 year from August 2006 till present. The workers of the tea have been thriving hard to earn their living on daily basis.

In the last 15 years the workers of the tea garden have seen many ups and downs with

reports of loss of life due to starvation and proper health facilities have been a common scene in the field. 60% of the deaths can be attributed to lack of health facilities and labours suffering from diseases like Tuberculosis.

Table 2: Deaths occurred in the field area during pre and post closure of tea garden

YEAR	Number of deaths in study area before and after the closure of tea gardens
1998	24
1999	25
2000	32
2001	19
2002	24
2003	31
Average number of deaths per year after the closure of tea garden	28

Reproduced Source: Report on Hunger in Tea Plantations in North Bengal, January, 2004

The above data highlights the number of death that have occurred during the early years of the closure of tea garden, though during the field instances of death had remained under control. One of the main reason for increase in death rate during the early years could be the failure of sudden adaptation to other livelihood and weak coping up strategies among the workers. The tribal workers are completely dependent on tea garden for their livelihood and are not skilled in other economic activities hence it had been difficult for them to find new livelihood for sustaining their family.

At present the workers have been engaged in different livelihood activities to earn their living. The effect of the closure of tea garden has fall upon the daily livelihood means of the workers and as such both male and female counterparts of the family has been engaged in the earning activities actively at present. Though discrimination can be seen in terms of earning among the women as they are paid less as compared to their male counterparts, but the role of women in sustaining their family has been very much curtail through their active participation in different household chores and their contribution by adding income in family survival.

Table3: Present Livelihood Source

Livelihood Sources	Number of workers at percent
Querying	42.74
Forest Dependence	15.32
Daily Wage Labour	20.16
Agricultural Labour	7.25
Shops	4
Private Sector	1.61
Migrated labour	6.45
Cattle rearing	1.61

Source: Field Survey, March-April 2014

The earning through this livelihood sources are not enough to sustain the daily needs of the household. The reason can be attributed to the two factors that could be determined from the field.

- 1) Semi-permanent nature of the livelihood sources
- 2) Less Income from the livelihood sources

The above livelihood sources are mostly semi-permanent in nature and livelihood activities changes on daily basis in the field. The workers are never up to single livelihood sources as it changes with changing seasonality. For instance, querying as a livelihood source is practised for 6-7 months in a year as during the monsoon the source cannot be accessed due to increase in water level of the river. The income earned from the above livelihood sources are not enough for fulfilling the daily needs of the workers family. The participation of women in earning income thus provides vital contribution in the area.

MGNREGAs contribution in sustaining the survival

MGNREGA Act was passed in 2005 that guaranteed 100 days wage of employment in a year to every rural house. Government of India has renamed the NREGA as MGNREGA on 2nd October 2009. On Feb-2, 2006 it was launched in 200 select districts and was extended to 130 additional districts during 2007-08. It is now implemented in 645 districts of the country. Under MGNREGA work is provided for about 90 days for every households reside in villages.³

The programme in the field can be regarded as one of the important source of earnings in such a crisis state, with employment lost at one go, the means of survival among the labours in the tea garden are either work on daily basis or migrate to cities and towns in different locations around the country. The implementation of the programme has helped the workers to add a little to their existing income in order to support their livelihood.

Robert Chambers define livelihood as “*a livelihood comprises of people, their capabilities, and their means of living, including food income and asset. Tangible assets are resources and*

stores, and intangible assets are claims and assets. A livelihood is socially sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, and provide for future generation.”⁴

The survival possibilities with their different diversified sources of livelihood is very harsh due to non-permanency in nature, but with government schemes like MGNREGA operating in the field the workers have been able to sustain to their needs to a minimal extent.

The tea garden falls under the Panchayat administration of Bandapani Gram Panchayat, and as per the data derived from the source it has been found that the number of job cards that has been issued in the Gram Panchayat is 2652. The exact number in the field could not be enumerated due to certain limitations in the field while collecting data.

The overall finding has been based on filed survey with number of household sample of 100 households collected through random sampling during a filed visit in the month of March to April 2014. Out of the total household surveyed it was found that 80% of the household had been issued with the job cards and had been registered in the 100 days employment scheme. The remaining households had not registered themselves to the scheme as the women of the houses were working on daily basis in the nearby army cantonment as construction labourers or had migrated to big cities where they were working as maids with better monthly income.

The 80% of the households included both male and female in the 100 days' work, but female dominated the working milieu, where number of women involved in the scheme was around 65% than compared their male counterparts. The male labour forces in the field area were basically enjoyed working of their own in querying or in other activities, and since the scheme ensured rural employment of more women force it can be considered as one of the reasons for women being active in MGNREGA scheme.

While interviewing the supervisor of the scheme in the field he considered the scheme to be really beneficial in the area where drought of income and livelihood has been a problem since many years. Though he also accepted the fact that the wage payment from the scheme remains delayed, but it had helped the women of the village to empower through equal participation in contributing the household income.

The scheme not only provided the chance for women to be empowered but also helped in increasing the household income of the family. The income of the individual households can be divided into three periods.

- Prior to the closure of tea garden
- After the closure of tea garden
- The late phase of closure (MGNREGA scheme)

Prior to the closure of the tea garden, on an average two members of the family used to be working as tea labour in the tea garden. While surveying the field it was found that out of 650 workers only 370 workers had their name enrolled as permanent workers in the field and were entitled for the benefits as per the Plantation Act of 1951, the other remaining workforce were either semi-permanent or working on temporary basis. The

average income used to be around Rs. 1500-1800 in a month, working on a wage of Rs. 64 on daily basis.

After the sudden closure of tea garden sharply declined from Rs. 64 to Rs. 35 and even sometimes to Rs. 20 depending upon the workers capability to sell their crushed stones or find themselves a job to work on the others agricultural field or by selling fire woods. This was the phase when the tea garden saw rapid increase in the death rate due to malnutrition and hunger.

The present phase is though struggling phase but the tea garden has seen some stability and rise in income with schemes like MGNREGA being implemented in the field. At present the average monthly income of the family remains within the range of Rs. 3000-35000 which includes the earning of both male and female members, remittance from the migrated members and the monthly “*fawlai*” of Rs. 1500 from the government.

The scheme has played a crucial role in bringing a halt in the migration process of women folks of the tea garden, who migrated to different cities of the country to work as maids and earn a living. Though some women from the tea garden have migrated to few cities of the country but one who have returned have stayed to work by enrolling themselves in the 100 day employment scheme and helping their families in household chores. They considered working as a better option than working as migrated labour in big cities where vulnerabilities of being a victim of domestic violence is much higher. Some of the women have opened up shops in the village with the support of the money received from the scheme, though they sell home-made liquors along with other stuff but their contribution has been vital for bringing stability to such hardship and struggle.

The women enrolled in the MGNREGA scheme were engaged in clearing filed for plantation, which was the only work during the field. Though the tea garden has been shut down for almost 10 years but the leaves bushes still yield tea leaves which are sold by the local tea union to other tea gardens to help the families of the workers in earning some more income through such income generation programme. Thus, the workers have been earning through diverting themselves to different occupations.

Income Diversification

Which are the areas where the money earned by the women through MGNREGA is invested? While looking for the answer of the question, and interviewing women folks of the tea garden the answer was simple and logical. The income earned by their family heads is not enough for fulfilling the daily needs of the family, as being a finance manager of the family, they need to be cautious in balancing every need with that little amount. The contribution of women folks in income generation is utilised by diverging it to different uses.

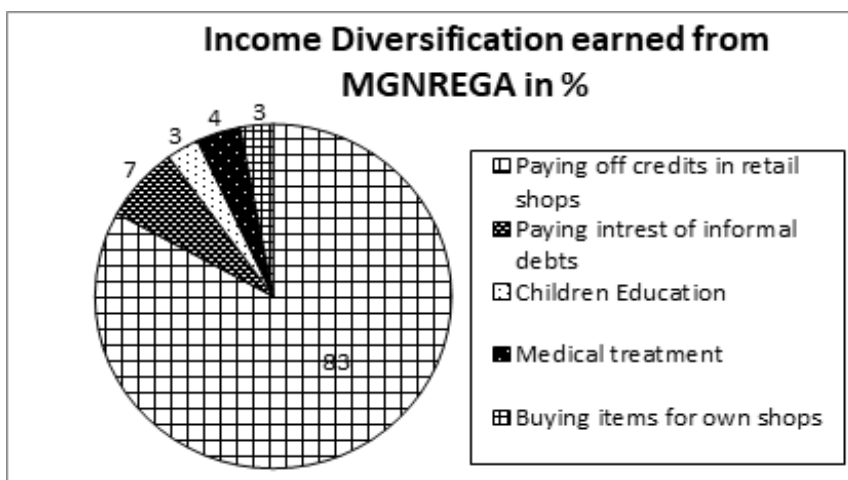
The most common answer that was generated from the interview was paying up the debts of the shops from where they buy their daily household needs. Since they need food for their survival, they buy the required food items in credit which they pay off after

receiving the amount.

The other source where the amount is diverged as again paying interest of the debts taken by the family during the early phase of the closure of the tea garden for certain reasons like health and medical purpose, funeral purpose and even for sustaining their family during the early phase. And the remaining areas where the income have been diverged is either on education of their children, buying required materials for their shops, repairing houses, medicines etc.

Thus, the income generated through MGNREGA is not solely utilised for single use but have been diversified to different channels as such the benefits of MGNREGA can be summarised as a source which helps the workers family to sustain the vulnerability.

Fig 1: Income Diversification earned through MGNREGA



Source: Field Survey, March-April 2014

Problem and Prospects of MGNREGA in the field

Considering the present situation, the scheme has been beneficial to the study area, as it has been providing employment opportunities to the women forces in the field. Contribution of MGNREGA in generating income is much important than any other income. Though the scheme was introduced as a seasonal job, but it does not ensure a full time form of nature. The engagement in job is only 100 days and within which the assurance of being employed for whole 100 days is marginal, thus the preference to 100 days work is quite less in the field.

The second problem is the amount received from the MGNREGA is not regular; as such it has been one of the reasons for lack of interest even among women counterparts to engage themselves in the 100 days schemes. One of the benefits of the scheme is the working activities generated through the scheme requires less physical labour than compared to the

labour involved in the tea garden.

At present even the 100 days works has become a major source of earning in the field, and as said “something is better than nothing” considering even semi-seasonal type of employment have helped a lot participation.

Conclusion

The struggle for livelihood still continues in the field area, surviving a day is also a challenge in the tea garden. Infrastructural facilities are lagging far behind, situated between the two rivers banks during the monsoon time the area remains cut off from everywhere. The government’s approach to solve the crisis have just remained a newspaper headline, with no solutions coming out over a last decade, the area faces problems that needs to be resolve. Providing rice and food grains for Rs. 2 per kg is not a permanent solution to the crisis. Meanwhile the schemes may be considered as an alternative along with other incentive like fawlai, but the core solution lays in solving the crisis and re-opening the garden instead of making a topic of discussion among different political houses.

With time passing by vulnerabilities have further added to the crisis with human trafficking being a major problem in the closed tea gardens of the region⁵ and children dropping out from their education to support their family income, the area really needs a solution as soon as possible.

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