

Interrogating *Social Security*: Experiences of Labourers in the Closed Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills

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Abstract

The tea industry in India witnessed a setback in the five major tea-growing states of India, i.e., Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, during 2003–04, when as many as 118 gardens were closed. The present research is an exploration of the vulnerabilities and sudden loss of social security of the labouring community engaged in three closed tea gardens in West Bengal, ensured under the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act. Three gardens are Dooteriah, Kalej Valley, and Peshok Tea Garden, situated in the Darjeeling hills. These gardens were abandoned in October, 2015 but it was officially declared as closed in January, 2018. The workers have receivable dues from the company, and provident fund contributions are not withdrawn in many cases. As evident from the field survey, labourers are engaged in different types of economic activities as per the demand of the local labour market, namely quarrying and extraction, agricultural labour, animal rearing, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) jobs, grocery and stationary shops, and daily wages in nearby urban centres and markets. They also out-migrate to distant cities to join urban informal services, such as the army slums, and are in constant search of jobs as they lost regular work after the closure of the gardens.

Introduction

"*Social Security*" is the protection that a society provides to individuals and households to ensure access to health care and to guarantee income security, particularly in cases of old age, unemployment, sickness, invalidity, work injury, maternity, or loss of a breadwinner (ILO, 2001). The Plantations Labour Act, 1951, regulates the conditions of work in plantations and provides for the welfare of plantation labour, which includes tea garden workers. The Act envisages employers to provide housing, medical facilities, sickness and maternity benefits and other forms of social security measures to the

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workers. There are provisions for educational facilities for the workers' children, drinking water, conservancy, canteens, crèches, and recreational facilities for the benefit of the tea plantation workers and their families in and around the work places in the tea estates. The Plantation Labour Act is implemented by the respective state governments, and labourers employed in the organised tea industry receive social security benefits (GOI, 2021). But the tea industry has witnessed a crisis in all the traditional five major tea-growing states of India, i.e., Assam, West Bengal, Tripura, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala during 2000–04, when as many as 118 gardens were closed (Tea Board of India, 2005; Hannan, 2020). This has impacted the social security of labourers in closed gardens across states. In fact, in a judgement of WP (C) No. 365 of 2006 (Contempt Petition (C) No. 16 of 2012), the Hon'ble Supreme Court on April 04, 2018 directed the State Governments of Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala to make an interim payment of Rs. 127 crores to tea garden workers who had not been paid for 15 years in Closed Tea Gardens. The central government has submitted that the dues of workmen were Rs. 249 crores in Assam, Rs. 27 crores in Kerala, Rs. 70 crores in Tamil Nadu, and Rs. 30 crores in West Bengal. The Hon'ble SC has directed further in its order dated 04.04.2018 to the state governments to comply within 60 days by way of interim relief to the suffering workers and their families (HRLN, 2018 & 2021; Hannan, 2020).

A crisis of similar nature existed in the 1970s and has been successfully managed by the Government of Tripura with the support of the Tea Board of India. The *Durgabari Co-operative* in Tripura is a successful model today for all. The *Durgabari Tea Estate* was a private tea garden and had a grant of 145 acres of tea plantation. The garden was passing through a deep crisis and was abandoned by the owners in the 1970s. Then the Government of Tripura cancelled the grant of the abandoned garden and formed *Durgabari Tea Estate Workers Cooperative Society Ltd.* in 1978 (Hannan, 2020). Similarly, the *Sanjukta Vikash Co-operative* (SVC) was formed in 1996 with the support of DLR Prerna (NGO Initiative) in the Darjeeling hills. The SVC is spread over *Harsing*, *Dabaipani*, and *Yankhoo* villages, with 448 members. These villages are part of the closed tea gardens of Harrison's and Mineral Spring in Darjeeling. The gardens had around 1200 acres, with 600 acres of tea plantation and the rest under reserve forests (DLR Prerna, 2005; Hannan, 2020). There are exceptional cases too, like the Goalgach Tea Garden, run by Duncan Tea Industries, situated in the Chopra block of district Uttar Dinajpur, which has been closed since 2013. It has 473.72 hectares of planted area and 1153 permanent workers with 88 staff (Field Survey, 2019). So far, no alternative plan has come up, and labourers have lost their provisions for social security. In this background, three closed tea gardens have been chosen to understand the impact of social security on labourers in the Darjeeling hills of West Bengal.

Study Area

In the Darjeeling hills, there are 87 tea gardens, which were recognised under the Geographical Indication status in 2004 (Datta et al., 2010). The total leased land area of the Darjeeling tea industry is 47460.56 hectares, of which only 20441.04 hectares of land is used for tea cultivation. It accounts for approximately 43 percent of the total leased area (DTA, 2019). In 2019, it produced 5565281 kg of made tea. The total number of labourers employed is 49915, with 5258 members of supervisory and support staff. The current daily wage rate in plantations is Rs. 202/-per day and supervisory staff are paid Rs. 15000/-per month (DTDPLU, 2019). The three closed gardens under the current study are *Dooteriah*, *Kallej Valley*, and *Peshok Tea Gardens*, situated in Sukhia-Pokhari Development Block and Rangli-Rangolit Development Block. They have been closed since October, 2015 (Himalayan Plantation Labour Union, 2015). But officially, it was declared as locked out in January, 2018 (Office of the Labour Commissioner, 2019). All the gardens were handed over to *Trident Agro Chemical Pvt. Ltd.* (2016) and later to *Fortune Chemicals Ltd.* (2018), as reported by Factory Babu and staff during the field survey (see the ownership pattern in Figure-1). During this period, the wage rate was Rs. 176/-per day. The leased land area of the three gardens together is 2748.49 hectares, and the tea area is 1056.20 hectares. They receive a provident fund, a yearly bonus, a ration, health care facilities, etc. under the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act. The number of labourers is 2568 persons and their dependents are 7740 persons collectively in three gardens together (Office of the Labour Commissioner, 2019). Besides, the participation of the female workforce is greater in all the three gardens compared to the male, i.e., 58.11 percent in *Dooteriah*, 60.90 percent in *Kalej Valley* and 82.46 percent in *Peshok* tea garden out of total labourers (refer table-1). The present research captures the narratives and experiences of the labour community after the closure of the gardens and the hardships encountered in their day-to-day life.

Table1 Employment Pattern in Closed Tea Gardens

Indicators No		Dooteriah		Kalej Valley		Peshok	
		(%)	No	(%)	No	(%)	No
Gender	Male	568	41.89	251	39.10	100	17.54
	Female	788	58.11	391	60.90	470	82.46
	Sub-total	1356	100.00	642	100.00	570	100.00
Types of Labourers	Staff	24	1.77	13	2.02	18	3.16
	Sub-staff	100	7.37	58	9.03	35	6.14
	Factory Labour	41	3.02	12	1.87	0	0.00
	Field Labour	1191	87.83	559	87.07	517	90.70
	Sub-total	1356	100.00	642	100.00	570	100.00

Source: Based on Authors Field Survey, 2019-20

Objectives

The current research aims to encompass and comprehend the following objectives:

1. To investigate the dynamics of the local labour market and the loss of social security for labourers in the closed tea gardens;
2. To evaluate and assess the impact of closure on the labour community's health, education and housing for their sustenance.

Methodology

The current study collected data using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. Information gathered from the Land Reform and Labour Department, Darjeeling, Government of West Bengal, is used for the assessment of land resources and pattern of employment of labourers in the three closed tea gardens in Darjeeling. The field data is collected through both structured and open-ended questionnaires, in-depth personal and telephonic interviews. Frequent field visits by researchers and repeated interactions with the stakeholders validated the focus of the study during the period 2019-2020. The first round of fieldwork was carried out during November-December, 2019; the second round in February-March 2020; and the third round in October-December, 2020. The subjects who were included and interviewed in the present study were chosen by using purposive sampling methods. Informed consent was obtained and the objectives of our research were explained to them before the collection of data. Eight labourers, two office staff, and one health worker were interacted with and interviewed. The four key informants who interacted were: Special Revenue Officer (SRO), Land Reforms Department, Darjeeling; Headmaster, Dooteriah School; Labour Commissioner, Darjeeling; and Manager of a Closed Garden. Focus group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted in October, 2021, one each at three gardens: Peshok, Dooteriah, and Kalej Valley tea gardens, and discussions and results are analysed throughout the paper. The experiences and associations with the subjects and key informants gained by the authors during the fieldwork enriched the explanations and analysis of the present research study.

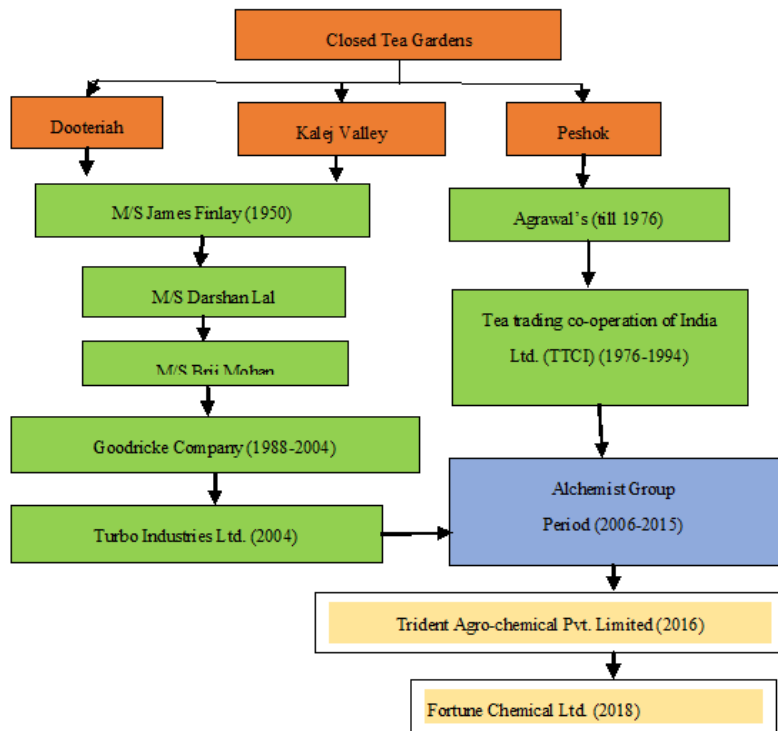
Results and Discussions

Ownership Pattern of the Closed Tea Gardens

Figure 1 below shows the changes in ownership patterns during both the pre-independence and post-independence periods of the closed tea garden. From 1897 to 1955, Dooteriah was managed by British personnel. From 1955 onwards, the Indians have been managing the garden. These three gardens were run by the Alchemist Group from 2006 till the time of closure in 2015. As per the interview with Factory Babu and other staffs of the garden, a number of protests were carried out by the labourers

against the company for their various grievances, unpaid dues etc., and the Alchemist Group handed the garden to the Trident Argo-chemical Private Limited in 2016. The Trident Company was not in a position to run these gardens because of the large overdue and handed the gardens to Fortune Chemical Limited in 2018. This company also could not run the gardens, and the gardens have remained closed till date. An unpublished report of all the three gardens was prepared by the Regional Labour Office Darjeeling on 26.09.2019 with a verbal communication dated 28.06.2019 from the District Magistrate District Court (DMDC), Darjeeling. As per the said report, all the three gardens are owned by Trident Agro-Chemicals Exports Pvt. Ltd., Bajaj Bhavan, 91 Nariman Point, 9th Floor, Mumbai, and they were declared abandoned or closed w.e.f. 10.01.2018 (Government of West Bengal, 2019). Hence, the field survey suggests that during the tenure of the Alchemist Group, all the gardens were closed and the Trident Agrocom and Fortune Chemicals might have tried to reopen the gardens, which was not successful.

Figure 1 Ownership Pattern of Closed Tea Gardens after Independence



Source: Based on Authors Field Survey, 2019-20

Household Assets, Job Loss and Available Alternatives

After the closure of the gardens, the labourers lost their regular employment and the management company was absent. All the labour households are deriving their means of living from alternative sources. Women have been facing difficulty balancing the demands of work and household responsibilities. There is also an increase in domestic violence due to the closure of the garden, as people are facing difficulties coping with the current situation, and women, the elderly, and children are the foremost victims. Interaction with the labourers revealed that the common household assets possessed by the labourers are cooking gas, mobile phones, televisions, and domestic animals. The majority of the labourers have simple mobile phones with no internet connections. During interaction with the labourers, it was found that some have bought mobile phones in recent past for their children's online classes during the pandemic. Labour households are dependent on firewood for cooking. Though they have an LPG connection, provided by the government under the scheme "Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana", they are not in a position to refill it due to their financial crisis. The electricity connection is available in almost all the households in all the closed tea gardens, but they have to take a Non-Objection Certificate(NOC) from the management for any new connection. The main assets of the labour households in these tea gardens are domestic animals. Labourers rear animals, mainly cows, goats, pigs, and hens. In times of need, they sell a cow for approximately Rs. 25,000-30,000/-, a goat for Rs. 6000-7000/-, a pig for Rs. 14000-15000/-, and hens for Rs. 200/-per kg. Besides, labourers also occupy a little additional land attached to their home stead where they cultivate some seasonal crops and vegetables like cardamom, maize, lentils, radish, peas, beans, etc., which is mainly for self-consumption.

During the period of closure, people relied heavily on the "Public Distribution System" (PDS) and "Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked-Out Industry" (FAWLOI³), however, these two schemes do not provide them with optimal subsistence and survival for day-to-day household expenses (Anonymous, 2020). They look for alternatives within and outside their locality. The alternatives which fall broadly within localities are road construction under PMGSY, sand and stone quarrying on river bed economy in nearby plantation areas, building up of pucca houses within the village or adjacent villages, a hundred days of work under MGNREGA, and firewood collection for household energy and cooking. Some of them engage in green leaf plucking in the abandoned garden under the 'Joint Action Committee', (JAC⁴) or privately on individual basis. Younger people commute to nearby urban centres for to work as daily wage

³ The 'Financial Assistance to the Workers of the Locked-Out Industrial Units' (FAWLOI) is a social protection scheme run by the Government of West Bengal that provides unemployed tea garden workers with Rs. 1500/- per month as an interim stipend.

⁴ The 'Joint Action Committee' (JAC) is formed by the labourers, staff and union members in Dooteriah, Kalej Valley and Peshok tea gardens to support themselves and the needy workers. There are two committees: i) Sramik Samity/Workers' Committee and ii) Chaya Bagan Sangram Samity. Under the committee, they pluck leaves and sell them to nearby gardens like Lopchu, Ring tong, Takdah etc.

labour in places like *Rangbull, Sonada, Ghoom, Jorebunglow, Darjeeling* etc. with a travel distance of 15-20 kms. The local market wage is approximately Rs. 300 for a male and Rs. 250 for a female. Sometimes there is shortage of demand for wage work in the urban centres; when the labourers find work for a few days in a month ranging from 10–20 days. The labourers narrated that there is no social security available in the urban informal economy in comparison to the tea garden work, where in normal conditions they are protected by PF, bonus, health facilities, rations etc. However, elderly, sick, and female labourers are no longer capable of performing difficult physical labour, and their demand in the local labour market is also low. In the case of the leaf trade managed by JAC, only young people are encouraged and work is available during peak plucking season, unlike in an operational garden where labourers get work throughout the year. In some cases, labourers try to find work in gardens adjacent to their place of residence within a distance of 10–15 kms (approx.), namely, *Manju Tea Garden, Pussimbeng Tea Garden*, etc. In some cases, the labourers particularly youth, out-migrate to urban centres like Gangtok, Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore etc. Their monthly salary ranges from Rs. 5000–10000/-per month. Since the tea plantation area is located in the remote corners, the availability of alternative sources of livelihood is very limited for the labourers. The same situation also prevails in the closed tea gardens of Darjeeling Hills (Roy et al., 2018).

In addition, majority of labourers have a small patch of land near to their quarters, ranging from 0.02-0.05 hectares of cultivable land. Normally, crops and vegetables like maize, cardamom, beans, lentils, etc. were cultivated earlier but at present these cultivations have stopped due to menace of wild animals like monkeys, leopards, wild boars, deer, rabbits etc. When the gardens were open and functional, the attacks on crops by wild animals were a rare phenomenon. But after closure, the tea bushes have grown to the size of big trees and there is an undergrowth of jungle, which causes frequent animal attacks. The labourers find it difficult to grow crops now, which was normal practise in labour households to compensate their food basket. The households also exchanged their harvests within the community, which is no longer prevalent now and interdependent coping strategies are missing. It is also known from field surveys that a number of are in - During dry seasons labourers engage quarrying in which they earn Rs. 200-250/-per day.

After the closure of the garden, the labourers were absorbed for work under MGNREGA for a period ranging from 40–60 days in a year, with an average earning of Rs.8000–12000/-approximately. The labourers who have job cards mostly do the construction of pony roads, protection walls, drains, water tanks, footpaths along the *ghoras* (rivulets), etc. As revealed, at times, even though no works are allotted, payments are made to the job card holders on a 50:50 sharing basis between beneficiaries and panchayat representatives or supervisors. At times, the job cards are also given on rent of Rs. 50-100/-for a day without engaging in work. So, there are varieties of leakages of work and asset formation under MGNREGA job cards as reported during field survey.

Housing and Land Rights

As per the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act, the housing facilities for labourers are provided by the concerned company to the regular workers. The repairs and other petty expenses are also taken care of by the garden management. Since the garden management is absent after the closure, these facilities are not available to labour households of the garden. One of the labourers from Peshok Tea Garden, during interview revealed that her house is in a vulnerable condition and she had knocked every possible door for help but got no help from anywhere. The house is in very bad shape and during the rainy season water leakages from roof of the house is a common feature. She said, "I fear going to sleep at night, as I am afraid the house will collapse at any moment." The labourers live in the quarters which had been provided by the company and the local administration cannot provide them with a new housing facilities. The labourers in the closed tea gardens are not in a position to repair their existing quarters owing to their low earnings. They can neither avail benefits of housing schemes like Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) of the local administration as they have no land under their ownership within or near the garden area. Almost 82 per cent of the people in the hills of Darjeeling are landless as per the government records and only 18 per cent have their own land (DTDPLU, 2019). A Senior Revenue Officer (SRO) of the Land (Touzi) Reforms Department, Darjeeling, observed:

"There is no existing policy of the government regarding land rights in tea gardens." The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 has not given land rights, but instead lease land has been given. Though the tea garden workers have no legal right over the land, they are not deprived in terms of physical ownership. There is no law to control them at the moment; they carry things on their own. Possession is important and they have it, he said. Further FAWLOI, MGNREGA, and Self-Help Cooperatives are put forward by the various organisations so as not to displace people and to provide employment, rations, and other essential commodities.

However, the fate of the labour households in these closed gardens continues to be vulnerable as availability of regular sources of income continues to be hugely challenging in the nearby towns.

Access to Health Care

In Dooteriah Tea Garden, there are four dispensaries in each of the four divisions, and in Kalej Valley, there are two dispensaries in each of the two divisions. There is no dispensary or health centre in the Peshok garden. The dispensaries were served by, a Compounder and a female attendant and basic medicines and injections were provided to the patients when they visited for any illness. However, the dispensaries have. There was no health camp or programmes organised in these gardens after closure. Paucity of income and regular employment has made it difficult for the

labour households to seek medical assistance in the event of sickness. At present, the health workers from the government of West Bengal have been managing these dispensaries in the garden and they provide basic health care with medicines and injectables. It has to be mentioned that the health facilities provided in the gardens are mostly in sufficient (Talwar et al., 2005). The dispensaries in the gardens do not have regular doctors and the hospitals with doctors for any kind of medical emergency are located 20-25 kilometres away from the gardens. Commutation to the hospitals is also a challenge as the gardens have no ambulance service of their own unlike some big te estates which have an ambulance for emergency requirement of the garden labourers and other staffs of the garden. Under the Plantation Labour Act labourers in gardens which are functional enjoy health care facilities but due to closure the facilities have also been left defunct by garden management. When the gardens were functional, the management provided health care support to the labour households including cost of treatment and the households had minimal out of pocket expenditure. However, the situation has changed after closure and the out of pocket expenditures of labour households in the closed gardens have increased many folds. This has affected particularly the elderly, women, and children. Paucity of funds for treatment has also led to death of labourers in Peshok Tea Garden and the families have not received any financial assistance from the management till date. The health care insecurity for labour households remain biggest challenge after closure.

Access to Educational Facilities

The interview with the teachers of the garden school revealed that the infrastructure of the school is in dilapidated condition with absence of sanitation facilities, safe drinking water, and damaged roof over the class rooms. Though books have been supplied free of cost as per of the SSA programme, the management has not been very keen on providing basic minimum infrastructure for education of the children of the garden labourers. Due to the closure of the garden, it has largely impacted the education and health care facilities of the children. An immediate fall out of the closure of the garden school is the increase in the number of school drop outs in the garden. In the closed tea gardens, the education of the children of the labourers has been adversely affected (Roy et al. 2018). The young boys who had dropped out of school have joined as workforce to support their parents in income earning so as to avoid starvation. Parents are forced to send their children to the nearby towns to work. The young girls have been sent to work as maids in hotels, shops, etc. in the nearby town and as domestic helps in other states. Some girls have found work contacts in countries like Singapore and Dubai. It was revealed by the labour households that when the garden was functioning and they received regular wages and other benefits, they could afford to send their children to nearby private schools where teaching was better and their children too learnt. However, once the gardens closed down and they lost their wage income, they have been forced to withdraw their children and some sent them to public schools in nearby town areas while majority children have joined the workforce. The closure of the gardens has directly impacted the quality of life of

the children in respect of access to education and health care facilities. One of the respondents shared that before the closure of the garden, he had sent his children to private school, but once the garden closed down he transferred them to a government school as he had no regular employment. For education of his two children, he had to spend an amount of Rs. 25,000–30,000 annually, which he could not afford after the closure of the garden.

The Government of West Bengal has few schemes like *Sikhashree* for ST and SC students who are studying in classes five to eight; *Akyashree* for students from minority communities; *Kanyashree* for unmarried girl students upto pre-matric level etc. But children from these closed tea gardens were not able to avail any of the schemes due to a lack of the documents fulfilling the criteria for such schemes like caste certificates, bank accounts, Aadhaar cards etc. Further parents of many of the children have migrated to other places in search of work and the children have been left under the care of old grandparents who often are incapable of taking adequate care due to their old age and sickness. The net result has been wasted childhood for these garden children and many have fallen victims of drug and substance abuse. Closure of gardens and the schools has not only led to dropout but has deprived these children their right to education and good life.

Absence of Social Security

The tea gardens are mandated to maintain the Provident Fund (PF)⁵ account for labourers working in tea gardens. . The fund from PF was withdrawn to meet household expenses during marriages, festivals, health emergencies, etc. The PF contributions of the labourers have been stopped once the gardens closed down and the labourers have been facing problems in withdrawing from their PF account due absence of an authority to give consent for withdrawal. Many labourers have also fallen victims of brokers who promised to help them withdraw from their PF fund. As the labourers are unfamiliar with ways of withdrawal of funds, visits to the PF office has gone in vain and added to the cost liability due to transportation cost incurred for visiting the PF office. Further, the garden authorities are yet to deposit the due amount of contributions to the PF for a long time (DTDPLU, 2016). The overall liabilities and dues of the company stands at rupees 14.42 crores (Table: 2). Unpaid PF dues stand at Rs. 6843087/-of Dooteriah Tea Garden, Rs. 3005336/-of Kalej Valley Tea Garden and Rs. 6014766/-of Peshok Tea Garden labourers (Golay, 2021).

As per the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act, every tea gardenis mandated to provide weekly ration to the labour households Survey findings revealed that many households did not receive ration either from the company or the PDS as their ration cards had not been transferred to the PDS shops by the comapanay management.

⁵ PF dues are the funds that owners have deducted from labourers as PF but have not deposited with the PF Commissioner (Talwar et al., 2005)

These households sought support from local administration and local trade unions to redress their grievances. It was found that labourers from the Samrik division of Dooteriah Tea Garden had not received ration from any source since the closure of the garden. They sought help but failed to find any redressal, the situation worsened further during pandemic. Closure of gardens has kept the management away from fulfilling the basic minimum provision of weekly ration to the labour households. The labour households have thus been deprived of their basic minimum requirements for sustenance.

Table 2. Liabilities towards Labourers (Up to March 2016)

Name of the Garden	Gratuity Dues (₹)	Workers Dues (₹)	Statutory Dues (₹)	Other Dues (₹)	Total (₹)
Dooteriah Tea Garden	45340437	10981761	24398145	7355715	88076058
Kalej Valley Tea Garden	18881182	6623179	5365146	1826000	32695507
Peshok Tea Garden	8393307	5934471	8498129	641268	23467175
Total	72614926	23539411	38261420	9822983	144238740

Source: Computed from unpublished data collected from respective tea gardens in December 2020

The Government of West Bengal has been providing 35 kgs of free rice to labour households in the tea gardens. However, the provision of the same has stopped in some of the closed gardens where the ration cards of the labour households have not been transferred under the PDS. Although the Plantation Labour Act 1951 lays down the conditions and norms for social security and welfare measures for tea garden workers/labourers, yet after closure, the gardens have shied away from fulfilling the minimum social security and welfare measures for the labour households. The labour households which had basic minimum provisions from the gardens faced deprivation once the gardens closed down. The vulnerability of the households in terms of access to basic minimum food sufficiency, health care and education of children, and provident fund benefits have increased manifold with closure of the gardens. Further lack of skill and education also leaves these households with weak bargaining power in the labour market. While out-migration is often taken as one coping mechanism, the stress and vulnerability of migrant workers have been laid bare by the Covid-19. The plantation workers continue with vulnerabilities despite the provisions of welfare and social security measures as promised in the Plantation Labour Act 1951.

Conclusion

The labourers from the closed tea gardens remain vulnerable as they neither have regular employment nor any other secured alternatives. They survive on alternatives which are uncertain in so far wages and benefits associated. The absence of regular wage and other social welfare measures following closure of the garden has pushed these families into vulnerable situation where they face insecurity of income and basic sustenance

of life. Poultry, piggery and farm activities are some alternatives that have been taken recourse by the labour households to tide over the crisis, besides outmigration to other towns and cities where uncertainty and employment vulnerability continues. The land, water bodies, forest, and village commons, are owned by government and have been leased to the management of the tea company, the labour households do not have the right to use these common resources of the garden which further add to the vulnerability of the households. (Chamber, 1995). The households have been engaging children to work as a coping mechanism to compensate for the loss of income. The closure health care facilities have adversely affected children and women who suffer from anaemia and other morbid conditions. Although work opportunities are sought to be created under MGNREGA, but lack of work and leakages prevent labourers from finding gainful employment under the scheme. Closure of schools has led to drop outs among children and the youths and majority of the youths have migrated to other places in search of employment. As social security and welfare measures ceased from the management following the closure of gardens, and as there are no government support for labour households in the closed gardens the families of the tea garden labourers have been pushed to a vulnerable situation with income and welfare loss. Although the Plantation Labour Act lays down the norms for welfare and protection of labour, however in practice the vulnerability of garden labourers remains unaddressed in the event of closure of the garden and labourers are left to their own fate. The declining employment opportunities and growing unemployment across the country adds further to the uncertainty for the tea garden labour households who also lack other skills to find any alternative gainful employment.

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