



An Investigation on Livelihood Status of Tea Workers at Doldoli Tea Garden, Sylhet

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Abstract: Doldoli Tea Garden is situated in Sylhet Sadar Upazila of the Sylhet district and is one of the 163 tea gardens in Bangladesh. The purpose of the study was to investigate the livelihood status of tea workers at Doldoli. A field survey was conducted and 60 tea workers were chosen randomly. The study revealed almost half of the workers had no formal education (48.3%). Regarding monthly income, 55% of workers earn only 4500-5500 Taka. Most of the workers gave positive attitudes toward getting living facilities like electricity, sanitation, medical care, and hygiene maintenance. Though most workers have job security they don't have bank deposits (80%). A low percentage (only 40%) of workers know human rights. Maximum workers (70%) agreed that trade union is not playing their role properly. About 86.7% of the workers have no inclusion in politics. Homestead practices and livestock farming are done by workers for both family and selling purposes but to a lesser extent. The study revealed that low wages are the main problem of the workers (30% agreed) and the possible solution given by most of the workers was increasing the wages which was 36%. For elevating socioeconomic standards, tea garden workers' daily wages should be prioritized appropriately. The study's findings can assist in understanding and improving the livelihood of the Doldoli tea workers through policy recommendations for government and stakeholders, and approaches aimed at promoting labor rights, education, health, and overall well-being.

Keywords: Livelihood status; Tea workers; Doldoli; Sylhet.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's second largest export-oriented cash crop is tea which has significant value in cultural legacy, social fabric, and economy. There are 163 tea gardens in the country which consist of almost 49,000 hectares of land and produce about 1.37% of the produced worldwide tea trade (Kamruzzaman et al. 2015). Bangladesh's labor-intensive, agro-based tea industry needs the hard work of laborers throughout the whole production process (Hossain et al. 2017). The study area, Doldoli Tea Garden, is situated in the northeastern divisional city of Sylhet. In the country's main tea-producing location Sylhet, many low-income tea workers who live in and near the area are entirely dependent on the extremely laborious economic activity for their daily needs (Ahmed et al. 2010).

Despite working too hard, the livelihood of the Doldoli tea workers is still miserable. The tea workers are the lowest-paid laborers in our country with a daily wage of 120 BDT (About \$1.25). The low wages in the tea plantation industry, even by the plantation norms, are far from sufficient to meet

basic demands (Oldenziel and Otten 2006). As the majority of the workers are impoverished, they frequently lack access to fundamental human rights. The workers are not provided with sanitary toilets and the bulk of the workers use the open place for excretion, even if they are clueless about their rights to adequate sanitation (Ahmed et al. 2006). Children of the workers are not eligible for any kind of reservation in educational institutions, and young people are not given any opportunities in the job sector (Kamruzzaman et al. 2015). Current water supply and sanitation conditions are appalling which is causing health hazards in the study area. Additionally, the quality of water people is using for drinking and other household uses is lower than what is acceptable (Chowdhury et al. 2012). According to the Tea Plantation Labour Rules of 1977, the management of the tea garden is in charge of providing all medical facilities to the workers. However, the lack of awareness of general health and poor treatment-seeking behavior is a constraint.

Human basic needs like food, clothing, housing, health care, education, and others are all deprived to the tea workers collectively. They are compelled to continue living a

traditional lifestyle with few opportunities due to a lack of education, misinformation, social marginalization, financial constraints, etc. (Ahmad et al. 2015). There was no specific research on the livelihood status of both male and female tea workers in Doldoli. That’s why the investigation was undertaken specifically in this area with a serious and dedicated effort with the objective of knowing the livelihood status and finding the sectors that need more attention for a better livelihood.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The study area is located at Sylhet Sadar Upazila, next to the Lakkatura Tea Estate in Sylhet region (Figure 1). Its coordinates are 24°N latitude and 91° E longitude.

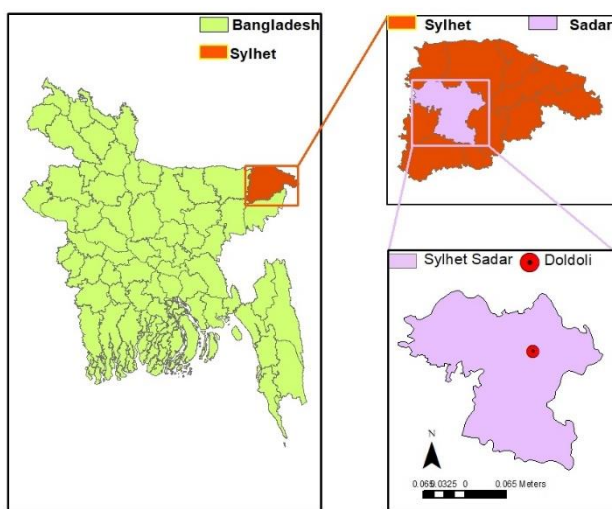


Figure 1. Location map of the study area

Population and Sample

The whole area was divided into 3 parts, including Mandob area, Muslim area and Laltila area for random data sampling. These three parts vary from characters like education, inclusion in politics, housing structure, knowledge about human rights, etc. Twenty respondents were chosen from each area for a total sample size of 60.

Data Collection and Techniques

A questionnaire was used as a component of a survey approach to gather data. The questionnaire was designed, to

consider social and economic aspects. To include pertinent responses that show social and economic conditions, an interview was scheduled in the study area before finishing the questionnaire. The data was collected by face-to-face interview technique as well as FGD method from the respondents. Several topics were emphasized including the characteristics of tea workers, homestead practices, livestock farming, available facilities, and the issues that workers faced. The time frame of data collection was February 2024 to March 2024.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by using SPSS 27 software, in line with the objectives of the study. To describe the data descriptive statistics were used, including frequency counts and percentage distributions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Doldoli tea workers

When searching for effective features (table 1), it's clear that 40% of tea workers are between the ages of 26 to 35 years old. This highlights that their workplace might not be appropriate for workers who are younger or older. Female workers cover the majority of the tea industry (55%) which was far exceeding the ratio of male workers. 75% of tea workers said they were married. Their monthly income fluctuates with their consistent attendance. They receive between 100 to 200 taka per day during the off-season like other tea gardens (Rahman and Hossein,2019). They live a low standard of living as 55% of tea workers said they earn between 4500 to 5500 tk monthly. The higher percentage of illiteracy makes the education level even more notable. (Saha et al. 2017; Fatema et al. 3019). An additional finding of this study was that the lack of educational institutions affects the illiteracy rate (about 48.3%) among workers. This issue is happening because there is only one primary school in the entire Doldoli tea estate. But in many tea estates like Malnichara, Lakkatura, and Langla area the tendency of primary level education is high. (Ahmed et al. 2015). With five to ten members in 55% of the respondents, these workers come from large families, which also makes it harder for them to fulfill their basic needs with their low wages. As a result, they don't feel any interest in giving their kids to school. 40% of respondents said they only had one earner because of the lack of work options, whereas 41.7% of respondents said they have two earners.

Table 1. Characteristics of Doldoli tea workers.

Characters		Frequency	Percentage
Age	15-25 years	8	13.3
	26-35 years	24	40.0
	36-45 years	14	23.3
	46-55 years	14	23.3
Gender	Male	27	45.0
	Female	33	55.0
Marital status	Married	45	75.0
	Unmarried	4	6.7
	Widowed	11	18.3

Educational level	No formal education	29	48.3
	Primary	22	36.7
	Secondary	7	11.7
	Above secondary	2	3.3
Family size	1-4	25	41.7
	5-10	33	55.0
	>10	2	3.3
No. of earning members in the family	1	24	40
	2	25	41.7
	3	7	11.7
	4	4	6.7
Monthly income	Up to 3500	7	11.7
	3500-4500	5	8.3
	4500-5500	33	55.0
	Above 5500	15	25.0

Available facilities at the living place of Doldoli tea workers

The facilities that are provided have a significant impact on the living conditions of the workers. The data was collected through the FGD method from the workers. A substantial majority of 81.7 % of participants (Figure 2) are provided with electricity in their homes, as opposed to the situation of the different tea states of Sylhet region where many tea workers lack this facility (Ahmed et al. 2015). Considering the unhygienic state of sanitation, the overall situation is quite advantageous, with 71.7 % of those who were surveyed saying they have a ring system in their toilets, which is better than many tea states where it is usual for many people to urinate in public (Ahmed et al. 2015; Dey 2017) or unavailable any proper latrine (Pal and Hussain 2016; Chowdhury et al. 2018). 83.3 % of the participants are concerned about maintaining hygiene when it comes to health, frequently visiting Tea Estate or a government hospital seeking medical treatment when needed (Ahmed et al. 2015). However, due to financial difficulties, merely 15 % of the workers can afford private healthcare, whereas 56.7 % of workers choose government hospitals.



Figure2. Available facilities at the living place of tea workers.

Livelihood capitals of tea workers

Tea workers' financial situation is influenced by several factors saving capacity, job security, working conditions, and general job happiness. The majority, 80% of respondents ensure that they feel safe with their job. Furthermore, 76.7 % of respondents say they have a favorable work environment though there is little outsider interference. While 95 % of respondents reported minor salary discrimination, 80 % of respondents confirmed that many workers find it difficult to save money from their earnings as well. As a result, they rely on loans to fulfill their basic needs. According to Rahman and Hossein (2019), there is a noticeable lack of satisfaction with salaries and other benefits in the tea sector of Sylhet. 65 % of respondents said that they aren't happy with their wages.

Table 2. Livelihood capital of the workers

		Frequency	Percentage
Job security	Yes	48	80
	No	12	20
Bank deposit	Yes	12	20
	No	48	80
Working environment	Good	46	76.7
	Undecided	4	6.7
	Bad	10	16.7

Discrimination in wages	Yes	3	5
	No	57	95
Satisfaction towards earning	Yes	12	20.0
	Bearable	9	15
	No	39	65

Livelihood assessment of tea workers

The living arrangements, patterns of land ownership, political affiliations, and access to various rights of tea workers are indicators of their situations. Approximately 60% of respondents live in semi-pucca houses which is better compared to other areas as they live in kacha houses (Pal and Hussain 2016). But still, they don't have a suitable housing structure. 65 % of respondents have a 24 ft*12 ft land holding pattern. Most tea workers (61.7 %) are not aware of the concept of " migration for better work ". A general lack of interest in politics is seen as 86.7 % of respondents are not involved in political activities. However, in some areas, there

is a little bit increase in political involvement. (Fatema et al. 2019). This lack of interest in politics has consequences, as shown by the fact that 70 % of respondents think trade unions don't properly represent their interests, and 40 % of respondents (table 3) claim to know very little about fundamental human rights. Tea workers are aware of this, but they frequently feel helpless to face problems like discrimination, which is demonstrated by differences in blanket distribution in the cold. While tea gardens often have rationing facilities, they are generally of very poor quality (Dey 2017) and are sometimes hindered, resulting in distribution inequalities (Rahman and Hossen 2019).

Table 3. Livelihood assessment of the workers

		Frequency	Percentage
Housing structure	Kacha	22	36.7
	Pucca	2	3.3
	Semi pucca	36	60
Land holding pattern	10'*8'	2	3.3
	12'*10'	3	5
	14'*7'	5	8.3
	15'*8'	4	6.7
	16'*8'	2	3.3
	24'*12'	39	65
	24'*8'	3	5
Migration of family members for work	40'*24'	2	3.3
	Same district	37	61.7
	Other district	4	6.7
Inclusion in politics	No migration	19	31.7
	Yes	8	13.3
	No	52	86.7
Knowledge about human rights	Yes	23	38.3
	Undecided	13	21.7
	No	24	40
Trade unions playing their role properly	Yes	18	30
	No	42	70

Homestead practices performed by the workers

Workers do not only invest their time at the main workplace; they are also involved in homestead activities. The Cucurbitaceae family comprises the majority of crops cultivated here, including Lau (Figure 3). After that Amaranthaceae family vegetables are mostly grown like data shak and lal shak. Though there aren't a lot of fruit trees in the household, some are noticeable (Saha et al.2017). Kamruzzaman et al. (2015) said that the low rates of agriculture in this area are caused by the lack of agricultural land, a shortage of water, and difficulties in keeping

livestock away from crops. Still, it is observed that they don't efficiently use their household areas. According to Saha et al. (2017), workers from other tea estates plant small amounts of vegetables for selling, they also grow vegetables for both selling and household consumption. But the amount of selling percentage was below average. So, there should be a little focus on crop management. Most of the local seeds are exchanged among community members for horticultural purposes. Manuring is the primary method to fulfill nutritional requirements (Table 4), although a few are concerned with nutritional balance and they mainly use fertilizer obtained from nearby markets.

Table 4. Homestead practices performed by workers

Name of the Vegetable	Frequency	Purpose of cultivation	Source of plant nutrients
Lau	12	Selling and Family purpose	Manure
Sheem	4	Family purpose	Manure
Kochu	2	Family purpose	Manure
Data Shak	5	Family purpose	Manure
Lal Shak	7	Selling purpose	Manure
Begun	1	Family purpose	Manure
Shosha	2	Family purpose	Manure
Puishak	2	Family purpose	Manure

Homestead practices performed by workers

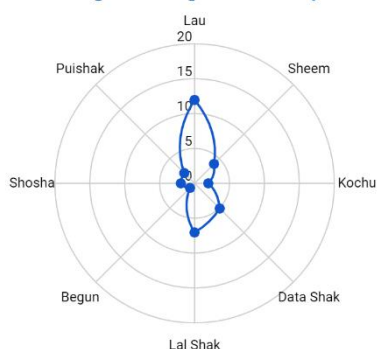


Figure 3. Frequency of vegetables grown around the households by the workers.

Livestock farming

The local communities' chance to obtain enough nutrition depends significantly on the farming of livestock. A substantial amount of participants are involved in cow grazing, mostly to produce milk for both selling and family purposes (Table 5). However, many individuals find it challenging to continue even a basic level of animal husbandry because of limitations such as land scarcity and limited resources.

Table 5. List of livestock farming done by workers

Name of the animal	Frequency	Purpose of farming
Cow	25	Selling and Family purpose
Goat	11	Selling and Family purpose
Hen	15	Family purpose
Duck	9	Family purpose

Problems faced by tea workers

The tea workers of Doldoli encounter several noteworthy problems, with the main issue being low wages, as per 30% (Figure 4) of respondents. Considering second rank (Table 6), 23.3% of the respondents complained about the scarcity of water for daily uses and agricultural purposes. Additional noteworthy problems include the lack of alternative working options and inadequate areas for cultivation, contributing to inadequate livelihood improvement (Kamruzzaman et al. 2015).

Table 6. Problems faced by tea workers

Type of problems	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Biasness in relief	4	6.7	6
Issues with water	14	23.3	2
Low wages	18	30	1
No alternate workplace	6	10	4
No issues	2	3.3	8
No space to grow crops	7	11.7	3
Poor transportation	5	8.3	5
Sanitation problem	4	6.7	7

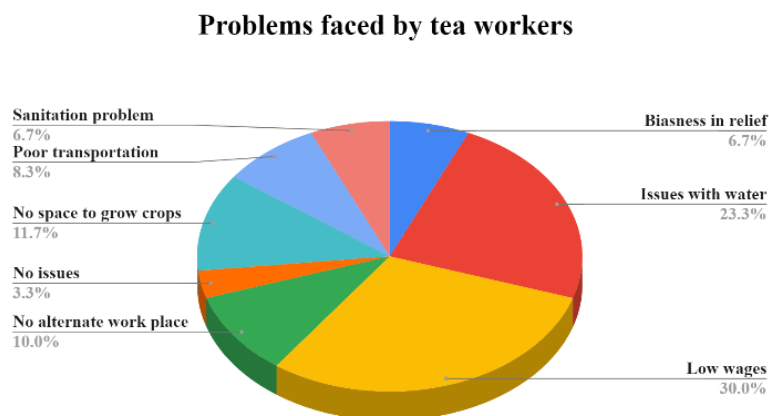


Figure 4. Problems faced by tea workers

Possible solutions to the problems according to tea workers

They seem to be hopeless with these issues since they lack the necessary abilities to solve problems. When prompted for recommendations 36% favor increasing wages (Figure5), while 27% place greater emphasis on making sure there is a sufficient supply and management of water. Further suggested remedies include expanding opportunities for employment and improving infrastructure, sanitation, and also exercising strong leadership. These procedures would be made possible by implementing labor regulations effectively in the area, as recommended by Ahmed et al. (2015). According to Sabuj (2016), improving communication media facilities can improve socioeconomic conditions, whereas Roy and Sattar (2015) suggested that non-government organizations (NGOs) may establish secondary schools for further education. The socioeconomic condition of this estate can be improved by all these methods.

Possible solutions to the problems according to tea workers

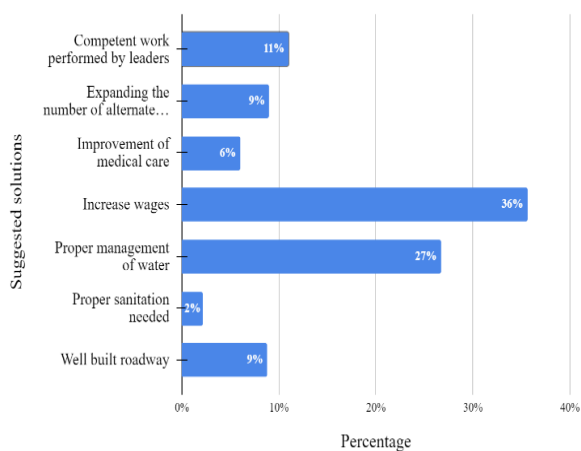


Figure 5. Possible solutions to the problems according to tea workers

CONCLUSION

It is widely known that tea workers contribute significantly to Bangladesh's GDP. They are significant to the economy, even though their socioeconomic level is still below average. Research studies show that illiteracy serves a significant role in this problem by keeping people from understanding human rights. Their low level of living is made more severe by their low wages. Their confidence and ability to stand up for their fundamental rights have been weakened by the ongoing pressure they survive. To overcome these obstacles, both government and non-governmental organizations are required to take some kind of actions. To enhance their living and working circumstances, these could involve setting up mobile schools, improving communication networks, extending healthcare services, or setting up extension programs.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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