

that there was a big gap between demand and supply from within the state. The Government, therefore, permitted the recruitment of some 11,000 labourers in 1955. By about 1959, recruitment from outside Assam had been reduced to almost negligible proportions, and in 1960, recruitment from outside was discontinued.

2. Economic Activities in a Tea Plantation

In a tea plantation there are broadly two types of activities; (1) activities connected with the growing and collection of tea leaves, and (2) those connected with the processing of tea leaves.

The activities connected with the growing of tea leaves are generally undertaken by male labourers.

Collection or plucking is generally better suited to the female labourers. It is an important operation, because the quality of manufactured tea depends upon the care and attention with which the plucking is done. The accepted formula for normal plucking is "two leaves and a bud." Anything less than this is considered as "fine plucking" and the inclusion of more leaves as "coarse plucking." In Assam, in most of the districts, the bushes are usually plucked once every 7 or 8 days during the season. The season here usually extends from February/March to October/November.

Processing is done in the factory. The operations include withering, twisting, cutting, fermenting, drying, and sorting. Barring few operations, the factory labourers are unskilled ones.

Besides these regular phases of work directly connected with the growing and processing of tea leaves, there are a good number of essential services in the plantation that may or may not be directly related with the production. Each labour line (residential cluster) has one *chowkidar* who works as the head-man, each establishment (office, factory, hospital, bungalows of managerial staff etc.) has a *chowkidar* who works as a caretaker; there are *sardars* who are gangleaders and supervise the labour force in work; there are drivers, carpenters, and people for preparing and repairing fences in the garden; and some labourers are engaged in distributing drinking water and raw tea-liquor to the labour force actively engaged

in the outdoor work connected with growing and plucking of tea leaf. Further, there are sweepers, peons, bearers, etc. in different units of the plantation.

3. Recruitment of Labour

The labourers in a teagarden are classified into a number of categories depending on various criteria, e.g., age, sex, resident/non-resident status, and nature of appointment. Broadly the following categories may be noted:

Men (*mota*) – Age of this group ranges from 18 years to 60 years;

Women (*maiki*) – Age range is the same with that of men;

Children – Age of this group ranges from 14 years up to 18 years. A male child is locally called as *chukra*, and a female child *chukri*.

On the basis of the terms of appointment we have "permanent" and "temporary" (*faltu*) categories. Besides, in some plantation different terms are used to indicate the resident/non-resident status of the worker. Thus permanent *faltu* means a labourer appointed permanently but not resident of the labour lines in the plantation. Minimum wages vary with age and sex, whereas the fringe and social security benefits vary with the nature of appointment. During the time of investigation (June–July 1982) the minimum wage rates (per day) were as follows:

Men: Rs. 8.90; Women: Rs. 8.72; Children: Rs. 4.41.

In plucking, however, after a minimum prescribed amount is plucked, a worker gets proportional extra wages for the additional amount of leaves collected.

Benefits, other than the wages that are provided to the labourers include mainly the following:

1. Rent-free accommodation
2. Provision of paddy land subject to availability
3. Contributory provident fund
4. Free medical attention
5. Leave with wages
6. Provision of firewood
7. Subsidized ration and free tea leaf
8. Free cinema shows