

## *Assam tea workers get a fourth of 'living wage': study*

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Planters' organisations and a labour union pick holes in the report by Nairobi-headquartered Oxfam and IIT-Bombay

A study by Oxfam India, a confederation of 20 independent charitable organisations headquartered in Kenya's capital Nairobi, and Indian Institute of Technology Bombay has said that tea plantation workers in Assam get less than a fourth of a proposed 'living wage' of ₹884.

It also said tea labourers in Assam did not get the entire amount of ₹205 (enhanced from ₹167 when the study was conducted) as daily wage, which was the lowest with respect to the daily wages of ₹403, ₹349 and ₹333 in Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Living wage, the Oxfam India report titled "In defence of living wages for tea plantation workers: Evidence from Assam" said, was in relation to the International Labour Organisation's concept of 'decent work' and 'quality of life'.

The report, based on interviews with 5,000 tea workers across seven districts of Assam, was done jointly with Rahul Suresh Sapkal of IIT-Bombay's Centre for Policy Studies.

"The study finds a stark gap between the current wages that tea workers receive vis-à-vis the living wage that has been calculated. We appeal to the government and tea industry to consider an upward revision of the wages to improve the lives of the tea workers," Oxfam India's CEO Amitabh Behar said.

According to the report, women plantation workers earn 80% of the average ₹4,672 each of their male counterparts earn a month. About 39% are permanent workers and 61% are temporary workers when social security and other provisions under the Plantation Labour Act are taken into consideration.

"Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, only 7% women workers reported access to maternity leave and a mere 2% were able to access the facility for children's education offered by their employers," said the study.

During the entire duration of the 2020 lockdown, only 10% of the respondents had worked. While women were not able to work for an average of 45 days during the lockdown, men lost 33 days of work.

## Contentious finding

The study said the employers deducted an average of ₹778 from the wages of a plantation worker per month. What the worker actually received was ₹160-180 per day. The deductions were on account of provident fund, membership fee of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) and other heads.

Oxfam India also said prior to the increase in daily wage by ₹38 two months ago, the ₹167 a tea worker in Brahmaputra Valley received was inclusive of cash and non-cash benefits. The pre-hike wage in southern Assam's Barak Valley was ₹145.

“This is not factual. When you take non-cash benefits such as housing, electricity, firewood and healthcare, the total wage along with ₹205 in cash works out to an average of ₹390 in the Brahmaputra Valley,” said Bidyananda Borkakoty, adviser of North Eastern Tea Association.

The Assam Tea Planters' Association too refuted the study findings.

“We do deduct membership charge but it is ₹100 annually. The non-cash benefits of each plantation worker vary from ₹150-200,” ACMS leader Lakheswar Tanti told *The Hindu*.

Assam tea of mass consumption grade competes primarily with tea exported by Kenya and Sri Lanka. According to Oxfam, tea estates in these countries offer accommodation of poor quality and basic amenities.

The daily wage of a tea plantation worker in Kenya and Sri Lanka works out to \$5 and \$3.6 compared to \$2.6 in Assam.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/assam-tea-workers-get-a-fourth-of-living-wage-study/article35315619.ece>