



What Oxfam India's Study Reveals About Assam's Tea Workers

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Incidence of contractualisation in the tea plantation sector in Assam is growing, the study noted.

Guwahati: Only 39 percent of Assam's tea garden workers are permanent while 61 percent are contractual labourers, a study by Oxfam India said.

“There exists a growing incidence of contractualisation in the tea plantation sector in Assam. Only 39 percent of workers can be considered as permanent workers, while the remaining 61 percent are temporary workers when social security and other mandated provisions under the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) are taken into consideration,” the report titled “In Defense of Living Wages for Tea Plantation Workers: Evidence from Assam” observed.

Key observations in the Oxfam India study

As per the study, a tea worker's average family income per month is Rs 4,774 (without deductions) while the average expenditure on food consumption is Rs 1,854 and non-food expenditure is Rs 3,895. The average deduction by the employer is Rs 778 which varies across tea estates. Therefore, after deductions, the in-hand income of a tea worker is around Rs 3,996 per month with variations across districts.

The workers are entitled to get Rs 167 per day which is inclusive of both cash and non-cash benefits, but their wages range between Rs 160 to Rs 180 per day, the study noted.

The study estimates that for tea workers to have a dignified life, their compensation should include Rs 285 per day as expenditure on food items (considering 4 members in family) and Rs 599 per day as expenditure on non-food items, both essential and non-essential utilities. Therefore, their living wage should be Rs 884 per day, the study concludes.

The report also observed that during the Covid-induced nationwide lockdown, only 10 percent of the respondents worked. Women were more severely impacted by the lockdown and were not able to work for 45 days on an average, while for men the duration was 33 days.

Research methodology

The study has been conducted jointly by Oxfam India and Dr. Rahul Suresh Sapkal, Assistant Professor, Centre for Policy Studies, IIT Bombay and the research is based on a primary survey which included 5,000 tea plantation workers spread across seven districts – Biswanath, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Lakhimpur, Tezpur, Golaghat and Sivasagar – in Upper Assam during the period of October to December last year.

“The study is the voice of 5,000 tea workers and we believe that the findings will make all stakeholders in tea sector to work for their welfare. The study finds a stark gap between the current wages that tea workers receive vis a vis the living wages 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,” Amitabh Behar, CEO Oxfam India said.

Tea workers’ wages and Assam’s politics

Ahead of Assam’s 2021 Assembly elections, the BJP-led government promised a wage hike to the tea labourers. The government then raised the wage by Rs 50 but withdrew the hike following a lawsuit at the Gauhati High Court by the tea estate owners. Assam government, instead, announced the setting up of a new committee for fixing the minimum wage of the tea workers.

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