

**The Role of the Tea Industry in the Growth of West Bengal**  
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## **Introduction**

According to existing literature, tea was discovered around 2700 B.C. by a Chinese Emperor Shen Nung. Engaging approximately 6 - 7 crores of employees (especially women) for different purposes like production, processing, packaging, distribution etc., India becomes one of the largest tea producer countries in the world. In West Bengal, the source of livelihood of almost all the people in the northern two districts (Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling) directly or indirectly depends on the tea plantation. (Paul, 2016). Tea is now being produced in many countries, and consumed by a large number of people. Based on different ecological and sociological settings, there are varieties of tea, and different ways of preparation and consuming it. In England, tea has not been cultivated like India. Yet a tea culture has been grown in England since the time of King Charles II, which fit in with their wishes or needs rather than the ceremonial tea of the Chinese and Japanese traditions. This English tea culture was afterwards universally accepted as a standard (Chakrabarti, 2022).

The popularization of tea was inexorably associated with a set of changes in both rural and urban areas of India that had occurred systematically and gradually. Such changes may well be attributed with the urbanization, administrative, agro-commercial and industrial developments as a whole (Roshan, 2012).

### **Economic Contribution of Tea Industry to West Bengal**

After Assam, West Bengal is the country's second largest tea grower. The tea gardens in West Bengal are typically located in the hilly areas of the state, which provide the ideal climate and soil conditions for tea cultivation. Tea Plantation industry plays a significant role in the economy of West Bengal and is the main employment-generating industry in the northern region of West Bengal, employing 2,62,426 permanent tea workers across all tea estates. The tea gardens in West Bengal are typically managed by large tea companies or individual owners. Women make up half of the total tea workers engaged in the tea plantation industry in the state. Primarily, Adivasis (scheduled tribes) from Chhotanagpur and Santhal-Parganas from Bihar work in the tea plantations. Nepalis make up the remaining labour force. Family-based

recruitment was used to hire employees in the beginning, which contributed to their permanent settlement in and around the plantations (Anand & Sengupta, 2023).

Government initiatives supporting tea exports, improvements in logistics, advancements in packaging technology and impetus for cross border e-commerce have further enhanced India's standing in the global tea market. (Lal., 2016). Villages become self-sufficient, as owners of small land holdings too are able to raise tea plants on their fields. There is an existence of mixed farming in the region as the small growers also practice paddy cultivation in low-lying areas. The female workforce in the Small Tea Plantations is an added advantage to the family income of workers.

With the increase in the production of green leaf in the state, manufacturing facilities like Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs) have been set up to help processing the green leaf in the tea cluster. There are 167 BLFs in West Bengal with average employment ranges between 20-25 workers in the processing, packaging and a sizable numbers of managerial staff employed in each of these BLFs and the small growers producing nearly 100 million kg, which is around 35 per cent of the total made tea production of the state. Many new business opportunities and services like- supply of garden implements, transportation of green leaf and retailed outlets of agro chemical and manures, leaf agents, essential day-to-day needs, etc. also provide employment to several workers in the region (Biswas, 2015).

### **Social and Cultural Impact of tea Industry in West Bengal**

Women constitute over 50 per cent of the workforce in the tea industry in India, which is the second largest producer of tea in the world. Despite their significant share, women are forced to migrate from these areas due to poor working conditions and “no tangible improvement in wages, food security, housing conditions, and security for children or at old age”. The study based on a tea estate notes that women are mostly single earners of the household as their men are usually engaged in works such as carpentry and other services which are not regular in nature. (Rasaily, 2018)

The digitization of wages significantly impacts income control, savings accumulation, and financial inclusion of tea garden laborers. Even though the average monthly salary of these laborers is relatively low, falling below 6,000, they can still save a modest portion of their

earnings. In the West Bengal areas of Tarai and Dooars, many tea gardens still lack computerized salary payment systems. After resolving these issues, the management of tea gardens may accept wage digitization, which could change workers' financial circumstances. Additionally, wage digitalization might reach unorganized, semi-organized, and organized sectors in India, where cash is still the primary means of wage payment, benefiting payers as well as earners (Ansari & Jamaluddeen, 2023).

### **Conclusion**

West Bengal is the second-largest tea-producing state in India, contributing around 23% of the country's total tea output (West Bengal PSC Notes, n.d.). The tea gardens in the state provide employment to thousands of workers and remain a significant source of livelihood for the local population (Intueri Global, 2019). However, the working and living conditions of the workers in most tea gardens are “deplorable and poor” and have “resulted in forced migration, malnourishment and even death in many cases”. The government has “failed to provide any meaningful support or alternative to resume work in closed tea gardens” (Rai, 2024). Despite the challenges, the tea industry remains central to the economy and social structure of West Bengal, sustaining communities and small businesses dependent on tea cultivation, processing, and distribution (Chatterjee, 2019).

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