

Webinar 18th Edition: Unearthing Challenges Faced by Plantation Workers in Cotton, Tea, Sugarcane and Tobacco Farming

Panelist Profile:

Datta Kumar Darne is a large farmer from Yavatmal in Maharashtra. His family owns around 45 acres of land and primarily cultivates Cotton, Soybean, Chana and Tuar on their fields. He faced issues related to selling of cotton during the lockdown and will be speaking on market price and procurement related issues.

Jeevan Dasu Ade owns around 4 acres of land and has been primarily cultivating Cotton and Tear on his land. As a medium holder, he does face issues because of the online systems being introduced in procurement. He feels that most of the government schemes are going to similar set of large farmers while small and medium farmers are at loss.

Gangabishan Tharve is an activist associated with Shetkari Sangharsh Samiti and has been working to collectivise agricultural workers for last 25 years in Beed, Maharashtra. He is also a farmer and cultivates around 4 acres of land.

Sonia Tanti is the Secretary of Jorhat District Unit of All Adivasi Women Association of Assam. She is actively organising women labourers in Assam for long and herself belongs to a Adivasi community. For last 3-4 years she is working in a read garden and also works for organising workers. She is also the central committee member of the AAWAA.

Hosur Kumar is a farmer from Mysore district and the President of the Mysore District Farmers Forum.

Ramaiah Gowda is a tobacco farmer from Mysore District.

Chandan Kumar is associated with Rashtriya Hamal Panchayat, a national trade union which works with informal workers. He is the National Coordinator of the Working Peoples' Charter, a coalition of over 150 workers collectives organising informal workers across India. He is a member of National Minimum Wage Advisory Board (a statutory committee of Government of India) and NHRC Core Group on Bonded Labour. He has been part of numerous labour policy formulation, such as construction workers, bonded labour, migrant workers, domestic workers, at state and centre level. He is part of Social Justice Cluster of Asia Europe Peoples Forum, and work closely with International Trade Union Movement.

Stephen Ekka is the Director of Pajhra, an indigenous organisation working for the tea workers in Assam. Pajhra is an organisation that works largely with the tea plantation workers and also works with AAWAA.

Dr. Nayantara Nayak, is a Professor & In Charge Director Centre for Multi Disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad.

Introduction

Mr. Tom Thomas: The 18th edition of COVID19 Voices of the Margins series is brought together by Praxis and PIC that entails on Unearthing Challenges Faced by Plantation Workers in Cotton, Tea, Sugarcane and Tobacco Farming. Since last 17 webinars, we have tried to bring out the voices from the margins through

dialogue ranging from De-notified Tribes, sex workers, adolescent girl child, and people from North-East to unorganised labourers working in different sectors. This webinar consists of range panellists of farmers, activists and supporters. Plantation and its workers have a story to itself since Colonial times in the form of Brown-sahibs to huge land-gaps to workers exploitation. When it comes to this particular Unlock1:0 in the present time, the work has begun; the workers are on the forefront who are bearing the brunt of the pandemic. Now, the entire above mentioned plantation has started working in full-swing and the workers both the regular and contractual are back in full-swing. As we know this is the peak of the community transmission, the workers will be facing more hardships due to that.

Panel discussion

Panelist 1 Duttakumar Darne: I am Duttakumar Vasudev Darne from Yavatmal. I have 25 acres of farmlands and I have been engaged in farming for the last twenty years. From the Covid lockdown on 22 March, our farming activities ceased and we have been facing difficulty. All the Rabi and Kharif harvests, mainly cotton, have all been rotting for the last 2 months. We have been trying to sell these in private markets. We have lost around 1500 per quintal on cotton.

We are hoping for some form of compensation from the Government for this. Largely for the difference in the rates at which we have sold the cotton to private entities compared to what the standard market rates should be. Those who have 20 to 25 acres of land have had to sell about 50 to 70 quintals of cotton in the private market and farmers on average have lost Rs. 40 to 45000.

The other issue we have is with agricultural labour. We used to get migrant labourers in previous years and now because of the lockdown and social distancing this is not possible. We also have an issue with accessing fertilisers and the soil rejuvenation is getting affected by this. This will impact the next crop too. We grow chana and dhuli (pulse) in the next cycle (after cotton). In the private markets we have to sell these at huge losses (for Rs 5000). What should be sold for Rs. 48 to 50 is being sold at Rs 36 in private markets. The large farmers are losing close to 2.5 to 3.25 lakhs each during this period.

We urgently demand compensation towards losses amidst lock down, we don't know how to deal with labour shortage issues and related losses and the police and health department will stop them and this question also needs help - how are we to grow and harvest. We had to sell our produce in open market on low rates and we have pay for seeds, labour, fertiliser, tractors etc and will not be able to save anything. We need to have better god owns and there are affiliated banks but we can't get loans and this is huge problem too. These are all big questions

Panelist 2 Jeevan Dasu Ade: Since I was not able to do the online formalities, I have lost 1000 rupees per quintal on cotton on an average. Not only me, but most of the small land holding farmers have been going through lots of issues due to the lock down amidst COVID-19. On the one hand there is no support from Govt. end, and on the other, there are no labourers available. Hardships of small land holding farmers are not being addressed by any Govt. body. We are experiencing a sort of discrimination as compared to large land holding farmers. Local agricultural officers are offering assistance to big farmers only. Officers should come to Taluka places twice or thrice in a week and solve problems of small farmers. Due to this lockdown we have been facing the dual burden i.e. financial crisis as well as carrying out agricultural activities. Issue of small and holding farmers are different than that of big land holding farmers, we are not able to fix rates of our land produce. We demand that, Govt should address our problem at the earliest.

Panelist 3 Gangabishan Tharve: Beed is one of the famous places for sugarcane workers. The sugar lobby is simply dependent on beed workers. The workers take advance in November and they migrate to different areas to work for cutting of sugarcane. During lockdown these workers were not supported anyway. They were not allowed inside village. We had to intervene the sugarcane factory which should have supported did not support at all. All these workers have their children and elderly at home. They are working at factories. Ideally factories should take responsibility but they don't. The relief measure by state which is to be obtained through bank is a difficult task. There is no ease of facilitation there. The debt waiver has been given. Cooperative banks have received amount but still the crop loans have not been disbursed. The farmers who have paid regularly have not been given eligible loan of rupees 50000.

Last year Maharashtra Govt. in Marathwada region offered insurance, but this year no company has offered insurance scheme in this area. All the promises of insurance are hollow. This region is not benefitted out of it and hence we protest. The fertilizer and seeds are in shortage. The farmer had to file writ in court to make the harvested cotton being procured on sold. It was only after intervention of Aurangabad HC it became possible. So demands are there for crop loan, debt waiver, and procurement. We have sold gold and other form of jewellery to do the sowing due to lack of crop loans. Whatever we have borrowed from money lenders can only be returned once the Govt. helps with loans.

Panelist 4 Sonia Tanti: I am from Johrat district Assam. namaste & johar to all. During the lockdown, the tea workers faced difficult times. What the rules were imposed by the govt we have to follow. These are challenging times. We were already facing challenging times and the lockdown brought more challenges. Still the daily is Rs. 167 and it has been raised to 350 which have been demanded by the tea workers. The tea workers are not provided with basic facilities like drinking water and basic amenities at the work place for the tea workers here. we got in touch with the NGO and ensure the arrangement of drinking water for us. Still it's a big challenge for us. Als , lack of toilets is a challenge.

There is a need of medical professional for the tea workers. Only pharmacist and helper is there. Ambulance is needed. Also the basic things that are required in ambulance is needed. No awareness on this deadly virus has been imparted to the tea workers by the workers. Also we don't have a proper crèche for children here. we know what are the facilities a crèche should have. We are connected with a Ngo with the help of which we arranged some ration and distributed people. I also talked to the panchayat and the MLA and made efforts to arrange ration for the needy. We could provide very little to the workers. I understand the lockdown was required but work is also required. How people will survive? As per the Govt. rules, some workers were provided and an amount Rs. 500 but not all the people got the money. Children are studying through online education but the question is whether the children in tea gardens have access to smart phones to study? In such times, the Govt. should act about the daily wages and the plantation act should be implemented and this will give the tea garden workers the rights they should have. No awareness on this deadly virus has been imparted to the tea workers by the owners. Government should look after the issues of tea plantation workers and understand their need and also establish the legal procedure to ensure their safety and security.

Panelist 5 Hosur Kumar:

During the lockdown there has been less availability of transport and as a result have incurred more cost. They could also not procure the manure due to lockdown. Since most of the labourers are from within the village there has been not much of an issue of labour scarcity. But the overall crop has been less compared to the previous year that is less than 30% sales. The previous crop, there has been not many sales. Those who have sold it have sold it at extraordinarily little price.

Panelist 6 Ramaiah Gowda:

They have invested heavily in the crop and no return yet. There has been no help from the government. 1kg costs 100-110 rupees. When there is the tobacco board why the middle men are involved?

Panelist 7 Chandan Kumar: I have been hearing the entire panel. I have some experience with sugarcane workers. The question that is before us to end the AMPMC law that will impact the agriculture support system, how the Govt. is adopting mechanisms for that? Do they now want to open the market?

The small workers, traders and all those people involved in this will be impacted. Another issue is the companies will have the gains and they will get rebate in MSMes. This will create a big harm to many in this sector. Many small farmers will be impacted. Many will be who are into this chain will be unemployed.

Second point where reverse migration is taking place with respect to rural India MNREGA does not have strength at the moment to provide working opportunities for everyone. The migrants who are returning back and the reverse migration is already started. I was talking to a group of farmers and shared how it is creating the chaos in the village. Also the quarantine centres are being closed by the govt., of Bihar. I feel that when I talk about sugar cane farmers cotton farmers we need to build idea about agriculture cooperatives. When we discuss this as an idea what could be the possible issues need to be discussed is the question. We also need to think if we could build a co-operative beyond caste, class and religious issues. We should think of how we could build a stronger economy in the village through collective initiation.

There are some cases where the tea gardens have been closed. Also the employers threaten to shut the gardens when the workers demanded their rights. I want to start the discussion whether Can there be a process of trade unions of safe tea garden and closed tea gardens? I would also like to raise the question if we could negotiate and discuss the issue of tea plantation workers with the Tea Boards or Association? In the present situation, the policies are being made and one policy and one market, it will be difficult to achieve the said agendas. So, wherever we notice a economy based out of cash crop, we need to think of the workers and their situation with regard to village economy. These questions should be revisited and need to be done

Panelist 7 Stephen Ekka: Sonia (one of the previous panellist) has already spoken about issues with regard to water, health, sanitation faced by the workers, but apart from that, I would specifically like to talk about the impact of this pandemic situation on them. In the initial days of the lockdown, there was a certain sense of awareness and sincerity among the workers. The Assam Govt. was the one who reopened the tea industry first during the lockdown. AAWA and AASAA have opposed their decision. Now, people have forgotten the gravity of the situation and they now think that everything is fine and normal. Especially young boys or men who have been returning from the metro cities, there is a risk of community transmission in the tea gardens through them. And as we all understand the poor living condition of the tea plantation workers where 5-6 people are out up in maximum 2 rooms, the situation can go really worse in that situation. There is water crisis in the area and people have forgotten about social distancing altogether. So, there is a very high risk of spreading the virus among the plantation workers. Though the Tea estates have promised to provide quarantine facilities for the workers in some areas but that is not sufficient.

I also want to draw attention of everyone to an issue i.e. tea plantation is one sector where unionisation is allowed and there is the biggest union in Asia of the tea plantation workers. But people are in fear to join the union though all the labourers working in tea gardens are a part of that union which completely functions by the management in their favour. The wage is not increased yet because of this reason and it

is still 84 rupees. The women and student associations started demanding for the increase of wage in 2014 and the hike was of 47 rupees was granted which previously was just 1 or 2 rupees. The daily wage of the plantation workers are below the minimum wage than of any labourer in other sector. Unionisation is the key to solve this problem.

Another issue is, no one can organise any meeting inside the tea gardens, be it a NGO or any association. I think this is the violation of their basic human rights. Though people say that workers can organise meetings but there are informants or guards who inform the management of any such gathering. This colonial setup is prevailed in the tea gardens till today.

A lot of issues have been solved but still there are existing issues that should be looked after. There is a lack in implementing rules and law in the tea gardens by the Government though there are members of panchayat, parliament etc. MNREGA does not work there. No housing quarters for the workers apart from a handful of them who could avail Govt.'s Awaas Yojna. These are very critical issues that need to be solved soon and tea plantation workers should be treated like citizens of this country. Otherwise, they are nothing but just voters. Many of them did not receive ration as they did not have ration cards. Some people received less than 1000 as the distributor kept 200-250 for his own share. The other issue is banking system. Jan Dhan is not working in their favour. Many of them have opened accounts in banks to avail the money but they do not get the promised money because of KYC or any other issue. So, tea plantation workers are not able to get any relief from the Govt. announced packages or programme.

There is another affair beyond pandemic that affect the workers most all the time is education. Primary schools are there for the children in tea gardens. Most of them are Govt. sponsored but a large number is still not under the management. Education is not provided. A large section drops out from the school. Workers have their own tribal language which is not used as a medium of education as state language is preferred. Education in mother tongue was demanded by many organisations but, it was not considered. Due to this reason we notice a high number of drop outs. Plantation Labour Act should have been implemented for the workers. Now Labour Code is going to replace the Plantation Labour Act and we are not sure of the future of the workers. When wage, housing, working condition still remained as critical issues of the workers, they face issues with toilet, health and water every day. Women walk miles to release themselves in such condition.

Panelist 8 Dr. Nayantara Nayak:

I would want to talk about the agricultural workers of Karnataka and India. As I understand the season of cropping is over since the lockdown is announced. Tobacco and other crops are harvested during January- February and from March it is off season. For cigarette tobacco, the season is also ended during this time. In Karnataka, for the cultivation a lot of migrant labourers from Andhra Pradesh is needed. Most of them go back during August or September. For beedi and FCB tobacco, the migrant workers are not needed. In FCB, the loss is not much. But I feel the traders would face trouble as the tobacco need to be processed and wherever they send it to such as Gujarat or West Bengal, as transportation was a huge issue. If they do not have any good storage system, they might face loss due to that. As Govt. allowed all the agricultural work after 15 days, Karnataka has also started with the processing of beedi tobacco as it cannot happen in the monsoon due to the moist. ITC and CTRI provide the seedlings to the farmers that directly can be planted. These operations are still going as I could know after speaking to the directors. Crop is on the field in Karnataka now.

Question & Answer session

For Assam panelists: Are the government schemes really reaching the tea plantation workers, especially the temporary workers?

Answer: Ramaiah Gowda - During the lockdown there has been less availability of transport and as a result has incurred more cost. They could also not procure the manure due to lockdown. Apart from tobacco, they also grow vegetables to sell. In this case the investment to this sort of farming is more but customers are not paying enough money. Government definitely should look into this matter.

Question: What is the livelihood status of sugar cane workers now who returned home? What about the role of MNREGA in providing employment and what are the issues with that?

Are the government schemes really reaching the tea plantation workers, especially the temporary workers?

Answer: Sonia – Some sort of help in the form of relief has reached to people but at the same time many of the workers did not receive anything yet. People who own ration cards, Govt. provides free rice to only them as they have declared. Many of them could not access to free ration because of this reason too. During complete lockdown, people got ration after 22 days and they had to travel for 3 km to Panchayat office to avail the promised ration. Who do not have ration cards, they got 1000 rupees. Sometimes, some people could avail both money and ration. We had to enquire to the matter to solve the problem. Not everybody got that 500 in Jan Dhan Account.

Has any support provided by tobacco board or the companies during the lockdown?

Are tobacco farmers willing/considering any alternative livelihood?

What is the state of tea industry of migrant workers? Are there any initiatives by the tea board to alleviate the situation?

Answer by Ramaiah Gowda: There has been no help by the government Last year the tobacco harvest was bad and incurred loss and as a result the farmers decided not to cultivate the crop. They farmers cooperation conducted a meeting with the District Collector and the MLA's of Mysore and requested for compensation but there was no response.

Question: Is it any association are active in the tea plantation and what about their role during lockdown? working hours are increased or still 8hour these tea workers are working?

Answer: Sonia – During lockdown, the orders were to open the tea gardens. I also thought during the pandemic how this can be allowed. We talked with Dc and put some mechanisms in place Also, during this weather, things like wearing masks and social distancing is not being followed. Those who went to work were provided medical treatment and also put into quarantine of 14 days. Also there is a lack of awareness among the tea garden workers about the health risks of this pandemic. The working hours are still 8 hours. We also have been hearing a lot of news about working hours to be 12 hours. No idea how true is the news. But in reality we are working for 8 hours only as of now.

Conclusion:

I would like to talk with regard to these 3/4 plantation sector that are discussed already. All of these are industry led crops and large industries that are pushing the market. When it about owns the supply chain, branding is absent.

Secondly, if we look into the farmers we should talk beyond in terms of cash crops as there is a high demand of food crops in market. So, we need to come with a balance where one can produce both cash

crop and food crops as well to engage with the market. Going for food crop completely creates a dilemma for a farmer at this juncture.

Third point is about the demand of decentralisation of the procurement system. But just to reiterate, it is not that the present system is insufficient, we need to strengthen the current system.

Fourth, we need to go about the idea of protection of various identities such as landless farmers, Dalit, Adivasi farmers or women farmers. Now with the reverse migration the entire focus is on NREGA. We need to look beyond these policies and think of a cooperative system.