



Research Paper

## History of Tea Plantation Industry in Kerala

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### Abstract

India is the second largest tea producing country in the world. This industry give regular and permanent work for around 1.3 million men and women and provide temporary employment to even more people. The cultivation of tea is concentrated in south India and North India. Amongst these states the four major tea producing states are Assam, West Bengal, Tamilnadu and Kerala. Tea is grown in Kerala in the districts of Idukki, Wayanad, Pathanamthitta, Thiruvananthapuram, Malappuram and Palakkad. Amongst these districts Idukki is the hub of tea production. Women constitute over 50% of the tea plantations. The present study explains the history of tea industry in Kerala.

**Key words:** Plantation, women workers, welfare measures, employment

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Agriculture has been the oldest form of activity practiced by people in the civilized world. There are still certain parts of globe, where agriculture is predominantly influential in determining wellbeing of the people. India is also such a country, where about 70 per cent of the labour force is employed in the agriculture sector. Plantation is a part of agriculture and it directly employs more than 2 million workers in the country. Plantation plays a very crucial role in the export of agricultural produce. Plantations are farms specializing in cash crops usually mainly planting a single crop, with perhaps ancillary areas for vegetables for eating and so on. Plantations, centered on a plantation house, grow crops including cotton, cannabis, coffee, tea, cocoa, sugar cane, opium, sisal, oil seeds, oil palms, fruits, rubber, trees and forest trees. Protectionist policies and natural comparative advantage have sometimes contributed to determining where plantations are located. In modern use, the term usually refers only to large scale estates. Some of the problems with plantations come from the fact that most are monocultures that is there is only one kind of crop that is grown there. This makes them vulnerable to pests. Among the earliest examples of plantations were the latifundia of the Roman Empire. They produced large quantities of wine and olive oil for export.

With nearly half the plantation area in the country and a major interest in all the four crops-tea, coffee, rubber and Cardamom. Kerala is undoubtedly India's most important plantation state. These plantations ensure a better return to growers, higher revenue to the Government, improved income to workers and above all the overall development of the Kerala economy. Among the various categories under the non-food grain sector, plantation crops have recorded the maximum growth in area during the period 1976-'77 to 1995-'96 as revealed by the enormous increase in their area index from 95.04 to 181.26.' Plantations are agro-industrial undertakings regularly employing a large number of workers and are mainly concerned with production for commercial purposes. With one third of Kerala's State Domestic Product (SDP) coming from the agricultural sector, the role of plantation crops in its agricultural economy may be viewed in terms of

- Share in cultivated area;
- Contribution to state agricultural income
- Share of foreign exchange earnings
- Contribution to the state's tax revenue
- Employment potential

### Types of Plantation

Here are some common types of crops that are used in plantation agriculture.

❖ *Coffee plantation:* Coffee plantation has a huge demand in both national and international markets. The warm climate of India serves as the ideal farming condition for this crop. This is why coffee plantation in India is practiced on a large scale. States like Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala are the leading producers of coffee.

❖ *Tea plantation:* India is the one of the largest tea producers and exporters in the world. It exports a significant amount of tea annually. Tea plantation farming in India is a great venture to get started as this commodity has a huge demand across the globe. The east most states of India like Assam and west Bengal are the best areas for this crops. However, tea plantations are also seen in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Himachal Pradesh.

❖ *Rubber plantation:* Rubber plantations in India are an important agriculture activity, contributing significantly to the country's rubber production. Rubber cultivation in India is primarily concentrated in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, as well as some parts of North eastern states like Tripura and Assam.

❖ *Palm oil plantation:* India states like Telangana, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka are perfect for palm oil plantations as the tropical climate of these regions is perfect for the cultivation of this crop.

❖ *Fruit plantation:* Fruit plantation is one type of plantation farming that can be performed in almost all regions. Farmers can grow fruits according to the climate conditions of that area. For example, the hilly areas like Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir for the cultivation of fruits like apples, oranges, pineapples, and many more.

### **General Characteristics of Plantation Industry**

- *Monoculture* – plantation crops are typically grown as monocultures, meaning a single crop is grown on a large scale over a wide area. This uniformity can simplify management and increase but also makes the crop more susceptible to diseases and pests.
- *High-value cash crops* – plantation crops are generally high-value cash crops. They are commercially grown primarily for sale, not for local consumption.
- *Specific climate requirement* – plantation crops often require specific climate conditions. Most are grown in tropical or subtropical regions, as these crops usually require a warm and humid climate.
- *Labour intensive* – plantation crops are labour intensive. They often require a significant amount of manual labour for planting, caring for the crops, and harvesting. This labour need often provides employment opportunities for many people, especially in developing regions.
- *Capital intensive* – The cultivation of plantation crops requires substantial investment. This is due to the need for large areas, high-quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and in many cases, advanced machinery for planting and harvesting.
- *Long gestation period* – many plantation crops have a long gestation period. For instance, a rubber tree, after being planted, may take up to seven years to mature and become ready for latex tapping.
- *Processing Requirement* – Most plantation crops need to be processed before they can be used or consumed. For example, coffee beans must be dried, roasted and ground before being used to make coffee.
- *Large scale production* – As the term 'plantation' suggests, these crops are usually grown on a large scale. This large scale production is often associated with the commercial purpose of these crops.
- *Export Oriented* – Since plantation crops are high value cash crops, they are often grown for the international market. Thus, they play a vital role in the export earnings of many countries.
- *Sensitive to market fluctuations* – This price of plantation crops on the international market can fluctuate widely, affecting the income of farmers and nations that depend heavily on these crops.

### **Tea Plantation**

India is one of the largest tea producers in the world, although over 70 percent of its tea is consumed within India itself. A number of renowned teas, such as [Assam](#) and [Darjeeling](#), also grow exclusively in India. The Indian tea industry has grown to own many global tea brands and has evolved into one of the most technologically equipped tea industries in the world. Tea production, certification, exportation and all facets of the tea trade in India are controlled by the [Tea Board of India](#). From its legendary origins to modern processing techniques, tea production in India delicately weaves together cultural heritage, economic prowess, and technological advancement.

### **History of Tea in India**

The [British East India Company](#) began large-scale production of tea in [Assam](#), India, in the early 1820s. The first tea crops were of a variety traditionally brewed by the [Singpho people](#). In 1826, the British East India Company took over the region from the Ahom kings through the [Yandaboo Treaty](#). In 1837, the first English tea garden was established at Chabua in Upper Assam; in 1840, the Assam Tea Company was established, and it began the commercial production of tea in the region. Beginning in the 1850s, the tea industry rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracts of land for tea plantations. By the turn of the century, Assam became the leading tea-producing region in the world. Tea became widely grown as a cash crop and a monocrop; scholars have argued that, as such, tea was a means for the British to expand their empire, transforming

subsistence farmers into cash croppers, their self-sufficiency into market dependence, and earning profits on their labor.

In India, the semi-medicinal use of tea brew was noted in 1662 by Mendelslo: At our ordinary meetings every day we took only thuy, which is commonly used all over the Indies, not only among those of the country, but also among the Dutch and the English, who take it as a drug that cleanses the stomach, and digests the superfluous humours, by a temperate heat particular thereto. —Indian Food A Historical Companion by Achaya K. T.. In 1689, Ovington records that tea was taken by the Banias in Surat without sugar, or mixed with a small number of conserved lemons and that tea with some spices added was used against headache, gravel and gripe. The tea leaves for such use may have come from China. In pre-colonial times in South Asia, tea was used for medicinal purposes and would grow wild; the practice of drinking tea daily and having it be an aspect of social status was entirely a British colonial concept.

While experimenting to introduce tea in India, British colonizers noticed that tea plants with thicker leaves also grew in Assam, and these, when planted in India, responded very well. The same plants had long been cultivated by the Singpho tribe of Assam, and chests of tea supplied by the tribal ruler Ningroola. The Assamese and Chinese varieties have been regarded in the past as different related species, but are now usually classified by botanists as the same species, Camellia sinensis.

The introduction of Chinese tea plants, different from Indian tea, to India is commonly credited to Robert Fortune, who spent about two and a half years, from 1848 to 1851, in China working on behalf of the Royal Horticultural Society of London. Fortune employed many different means to steal tea plants and seedlings, which were regarded as the property of the Chinese empire. He also used Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward's portable Wardian cases to sustain the plants. Using these small greenhouses, Fortune introduced 20,000 tea plants and seedlings to the Darjeeling region of India, on steep slopes in the foothills of the Himalayas, with the acid soil liked by Camellia plants. He also brought a group of trained Chinese tea workers who would facilitate the production of tea leaves. Except for a few plants that survived in established Indian gardens, most of the Chinese tea plants Fortune introduced to India perished. The technology and knowledge that was brought over from China was instrumental in the later flourishing of the Indian tea industry using Chinese varieties, especially Darjeeling tea, which continues to use Chinese strains.

The colonial tea industry was founded on indentured laborers. The British kidnapped these laborers and forced them to work on the tea plantations for little or no pay, a practice which earned them the name “coolie catchers”. This especially impacted women, as tea cutting was seen as “women’s work” though they received less pay despite being coerced into producing more. Writer Mulk Raj Anand described the British tea industry as: “The hunger, the sweat and the despair of a million Indians!”

From the first, Indian-grown tea proved extremely popular in Britain, both for its greater strength, and as a colonial product of the empire. Tea had been a high-status drink when first introduced, but had steadily fallen in price and increased in popularity among the working class. The Temperance movement massively promoted tea drinking, from the early 19thC on, as an alternative to beer – water being of dubious quality, but the complete boiling necessary for tea rendering it safe. Many men in particular found China tea insipid, and the greater strength and lower price of Indian teas appealed greatly. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, big brands such as Lyons, Liptons and Mazawattee dominated the market. Tea was the dominant drink for all classes during the Victorian era, with working-class families often doing without other foods in order to afford it. This meant the potential market for Indian teas was vast. Indian tea (effectively including Ceylon tea from Sri Lanka) soon came to be the “norm”, with Chinese tea a minority taste. Until the 1970s and the rise of instant coffee, Indian tea had almost sole command of the hot drinks market. Its rivals were cocoa, coffee and savory drinks such as Bovril and Oxo. In recent decades, Asian tea has lost much ground in the cheaper end of European markets to tea from Africa, especially Kenyan tea.

### **Modern Tea Industry**

India's tea industry is the fourth largest in the world, producing \$709,000,000 worth of tea. As of 2013 the consumption of green tea in India was growing by over 50% a year. The major tea-producing states in India are: Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Sikkim, Nagaland, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Mizoram and Megh-alaya. The expansion of the tea industry since the early 2000s has come at enormous cost to the local communities, farmers, and the land. Corporations like Tetley, Typhoo, Camellia, TATA, Unilever, Taj, and others have been buying out small tea growers and family-run farms. Their tea production has followed Green Revolution methods, putting growth and profit over the lives of cultivators and the health of the soil. The term “neoliberal corporatization” has been used to describe these methods. Although by the 1980s, tea farms and most of the agricultural land was owned by Indians who took over the British plantations post-independence, Western and Green Revolution influences shifted the tea industry from smaller farms to large corporations. Indian-owned tea corporations are supported by the World Bank and the IMF.

India's tea industry is a lucrative business, and there is especially a global demand for Assam black tea. The present-day tea industry in India is growing increasingly dominated by corporations to meet global demands. Tea is of greater significance to Kerala because of the high land productivity, relative to other crops, export earnings and employment in rural and backward areas. Much of the world's tea is harvested on plantations called "estates" or "gardens". Many of these have ski-tow-like ropeways and chutes that are used to carry leaves to where the leaves are processed. The tea industry is a labour-intensive business driven by thousands of peasants who pluck and dry the leaves are paid very little- often less than \$1 a day- but usually live in free housing in crude dormitories on the estate where they work, and they are given free medical care and education.

Tea bushes are grown from cutting or seeds. They take about four years to mature. When they are six to 18 months old they are planted in the plantation and when they get a little bigger they replanted into their permanent spot in a row at the plantation about four feet apart. About 3000 plants grow in hectare of land. Tea grows best on sloping terrain. Tea plants on mountains and hills rest on carefully constructed terraces that trap water and prevent erosion. Sometimes trees are planted for shade and windbreaks. Plants grow in low regions are ready to harvest after three years. Plants grow in high regions are ready to harvest after five years.

➤ **About:**

Tea is a beverage made from the *Camellia sinensis* plant. It is the world's most consumed drink, after water.

➤ **Origin:**

It is believed that tea originated in northeast India, north Myanmar and southwest China, but the exact place where the plant first grew is not known. There is evidence that tea was consumed in China 5,000 years ago.

➤ **Growth Conditions**

- a) **Climate:** Tea is a tropical and sub-tropical plant and grows well in hot and humid climates.
- b) **Temperature:** The ideal temperature for its growth is 20°-30°C and temperatures above 35°C and below 10°C are harmful for the bush.
- c) **Rainfall:** It requires 150-300 cm annual rainfall which should be well distributed throughout the year.
- d) **Soil:** The most suitable soil for tea cultivation is slightly acidic soil (without calcium) with porous sub-soil which permits a free percolation of water.

➤ **Significance**

The tea industry being one of the most important cash crops is a main source of income and export revenues for some of the poorest countries and, as a labor-intensive sector, provides jobs, especially in remote and economically disadvantaged areas.

Tea production and processing contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including reduction of extreme poverty (Goal 1), the fight against hunger (Goal 2), the empowerment of women (Goal 5) and the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (Goal 15). It also has cultural significance in many societies.

➤ **Health benefits:**

Tea consumption can bring health benefits and wellness due to the beverage's anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and weight loss effects.

➤ **International Tea Day:**

It is observed on 21st May every year after it was designated by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2019.

**Area**

Among all the tea producing countries of the world, India has the largest acreage under the crop. Major tea growing regions are located in Assam and West Bengal in North India and Tamil Nadu and Kerala in South India. The total area under the crop is 4, 30,888 hectares of which South India accounts for 85,100 hectares which constitutes 20 per cent. In South India tea is mainly grown in Nilgiris, Anamallais, and Kannan Devan Hills and over the slopes of mountains stretching down to the plains of Kerala. Table. 1 shows the State-wise distribution of tea planted areas in the South.

**Table.1 Tea Plantation Areas in the South (in hectares)**

State	Area	Percentage
Tamil Nadu	48,429	57
Kerala	34,656	41
Karnataka	2,015	2
TOTAL	85,100	100

Source: UPASI, *op. cit.*

The table shows clearly that, of the three South Indian states, tea is concentrated in Tamil Nadu followed by Kerala and Karnataka. Between 1950 and 1995, tea acreage went up by 5.5 per cent in Kerala, that is, from 32,849 hectares to 34,656 hectares.

### **Production**

Between 1950 and 1995, tea output in Kerala went up from 22,298 tonnes to 64,794 tonnes, an increase of 191 per cent.' Although tea production in the state has increased over the years, it has been at a lower rate. As a result, share of Kerala in the South Indian tea market has shrunk.

### **Productivity**

Between 1950 and 1995, there was an increase in yield from 900 to 1880 kg/hectare." In spite of the marked improvement in productivity in Kerala, it is still substantially lower than that in Tamil Nadu. Partly this could be attributed to agronomical factors such as soil erosion, heavy monsoon, periodic drought and frost.

### **Structure of Tea Plantations**

Most of the tea plantations in Kerala are in Idukki district. Cultivation of tea is carried on by large and small growers. Although there are thousands of tea estates in India with a number of small growers, over the year's tea plantations have emerged as a corporatized activity

### **Women Workers in Tea Plantation Industry**

A majority of the workers in the plantation sector are women. The tea industry in India heavily relies on the contribution of women who constitute over fifty percent of the workforce. Historically, women have played pivotal roles in Indian tea production, primarily as pickers and farmers. Despite enduring exploitation during the colonial era, characterized by low wages, long hours, and inadequate facilities, these women have displayed remarkable resilience. They are mostly entrusted with particular set of work mostly plucking and pruning which are tagged as requiring feminine attributes and skills. This also shows how women were given the crucial, labor-intensive task of plucking tea leaves based on their 'nimble fingers'. In India plantation is one of such industry where women's employment has been steady increasing. Women workers used to get lesser wages than men workers. Being women they face many problems as workers.

In Kerala, as the premier agro-asset, tea industry is female labor-intensive and occupies an important place among the plantations as one of the largest organized employers of women. It gives round the year employment to more than one lakh workers.

### **Welfare Schemes and Industrial Relations**

"Work-safe, productive and environmentally sound-is the key to economic and social progress everywhere." The wages and employment conditions determined by labour market profoundly affect the quality of life of workers and their families. Nearly all Governments set workplace standards, such as minimum wages and special protections for working women and minorities. But needy workers are rarely covered by welfare measures. Health and safety standards can improve workers' welfare, but compliance increases when it is monitored by labour unions or other organizations.

### **Role of Welfare Schemes for Women Workers**

In the case of women workers, welfare measures have a decisive role to play. Women workers contribute to the development of national economy. Women, apart from their work, usually spend more than 10-12 hours per day for childcare, household chores as well as collection of fuel, fodder, water etc. Women workers supplement the incomes of poor households. They have to face many problems due to family responsibilities, limited mobility and social restrictions.

"In almost every country woman are responsible for a disproportionate share of work within the household. Some division of labour between men and women flows from the dominant role of women in childbearing. But such a division becomes more and more inefficient as development and technological change result in longer working hours for women, fewer children, and a higher premium on skills.

Some degree of gender specific 'division of labour' exists in the society. The greater part of the domestic work is performed by women and girls compared to their male counterparts. Their workload becomes much heavier if they belong to the poorer strata and their contribution to directly productive activities is a necessity, "Time budgets collected in different Asian villages clearly indicate that women work longer hours per day than do their men." Thus, women play the double role of bearing the burden of the household work and job outside the family as a bread winner. Therefore, the existence of supportive services and welfare measures is important in the case of women workers.

### **Welfare Measures in Plantations**

Due to certain historical and geographical factors, the plantation industry was obliged in early times to provide accommodation to its employees. The plantations are not grown in the neighborhood of an already populated area. Workforce was not available locally for opening out virgin lands for cultivation, except the aborigines as tribal settlements. Therefore, labour had to be imported from villages in plains. The labour recruited in this manner had to be housed by the planters.

In the early days of plantation development, the only means of approach was on foot or horseback or with bullock carts. The planters had faced difficulty in moving up with the newly recruited workforce from the plains. They had to provide shelter for themselves and their workforce. Hence the provision of accommodation for imported workforce became a necessity at the inception of the plantation industry.

Facilities for protection of the health of workers, education of their children and supply of food and clothes to them were also required. Housing, medical aid, water supply and sanitation facilities were to be included for this.

### **Legislative Enactment on Labour Welfare in Plantations**

Before independence, the only specific legislative enactment covering plantations was the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act, 1932. It was intended to regulate employment of labour in the tea gardens of Assam. Though Workman's Compensation Act, 1923, was applied to plantation workers, it did not confer any substantial benefit on them as accidents were recurrent in plantations. The Payment of Wages Act, 1936, though applied to plantations, was concerned with the mode of payment of wages only. The Labour Investigation Committee (Rege Committee) noted that the conditions of life and employment on plantations were different from those in other industries and recommended the creation of 21 Plantations Labour Code (PLC). The Plantations Labour Act (PLA) 1951, was enacted on the recommendations of the Committee.

### **The Plantations Labour Act, 1951**

The conditions of plantation workers are statutorily governed by the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, as also a host of other labour enactments. This Act is a Central legislation administered by State Governments through rules framed by them. The Plantations Labour Act covers both conditions of work and living in plantations. Provisions in the Plantations Labour Act are the following.

**Table 2: Provisions in the Plantations Labour Act**

<i>Condition of work</i>	<i>Condition of Living</i>
Duration of work	Housing
Weekly rest days	Medical care
Employment of women and children	Creche
Annual and sickness leave	Canteen
Overtime	Education of children
	Protective clothing
	Conservancy
	Drinking water
	Recreational facilities

### **Other Legislations**

In addition to the Plantations Labour Act, 1951, conditions of work are covered by a number of other legislations. They can be divided into five categories.

**Table 3: Legislations**

Wage-related	The Minimum Wages Act, 1948.
	The Payment of Wages Act, 1936.
	The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.
	The Payment of Bonus Act, 1965.
Job security-related	The Industrial Disputes Act, 1967.
	The Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946.
Employment injury or death-related	The Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923
Social security-related	The Employee's Provident Funds and miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952.
	The Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972
Miscellaneous	The Factories Act, 1948
	The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961
	The Kerala Industrial Establishment (National and Festival Holidays) Act, 1958.
	The Kerala Payment of Subsistence Allowance Act, 1972.
	The Kerala Labour Welfare Fund Act, 1965.

Thus, a host of statutory legislations besides the specific Plantations Labour Act, regulate conditions of work as well as life of plantation workers.

### **Other Statutory Benefits**

Apart from the provisions of Plantations Labour Act, all labour enactments applicable to industrial workers are also applicable to plantation labour force.

- *Maternity Benefits*

The Royal Commission on labour had recommended that maternity benefits should be provided to women workers in plantations by legislation. A woman worker is entitled to maternity benefit for a total period of twelve weeks' wages-not exceeding six weeks' wages prior to delivery and the balance after delivery. To be eligible for this benefit, a woman has to put in a qualifying service of 80 days of work in the preceding 12 months from the date of her expected delivery.

➤ *Provident Fund*

Both the employer and the worker have to contribute at the rate of 10 per cent of the wages. The accumulations to the credit of an employee can be withdrawn at the time of superannuation.

➤ *Gratuity*

The employer has to pay 1.5 days' wages for every completed years of service at the rate of last drawn wages, subject to a monetary ceiling of Rs. 50,000/-.

➤ *Bonus*

Payment of bonus is governed by the provision of Payment of Bonus Act, 1965. Under the Act, minimum of bonus is 5.33 per cent which is payable irrespective of whether or not the employer has any allocable surplus in the relevant year, and the maximum is 20 per cent. An employee is eligible for bonus, provided he has put in 30 days' attendance in the relevant accounting year and he is employed on a salary or wage not exceeding Rs. 2,500/- per month. However, for the purpose of calculation of bonus, the salary is deemed to be Rs. 16001- per month on which only the percentage of bonus is payable.

## CONCLUSION

Plantations are economic entities connected historically with certain crops. A plantation crop normally is a monoculture and includes growing of variety of products like Tea, Coffee, Rubber, Pepper & other spices etc. The bulk production of tea (80 per cent) is accounted by the corporate sector or by large estates' The plantations are located in remote areas and were sparsely populated during the colonial period. As a result, families were employed rather than individuals, thus absorbing women in the labour force. This work force does not possess any skills other than plucking leaf and the workers are mostly landless.

Due to unsatisfactory implementation of protective legislative provisions concerning women workers, there still remains a yawning gap between the provisions and the facilities actually made available to them. Women workers are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-à-vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services, etc. Several factors responsible for their plight are, indifferent attitude of the employers towards women workers, their weak bargaining power and in many cases the women workers themselves being unaware of their rights. Women workers have all along been an integral part of the labour force engaged in the Plantation Industry in India. A majority of the plantations labourers are women workers. Owing to the very fact that soft hands and nimble fingers are suited especially for tea leave plucking and picking of coffee seeds, women workers dominate the employment scene in these Plantations.

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