Kenya   Woes of Tea Plantation Workers

Indian tea plantation companies often cite Kenya as competitor in the world market and demand more concessions and 'liberal' labour laws in order to compete with Kenyan tea exports. The Indian tea sector is dominated by the multinational Unilever which controls 80% of tea produced in India. The same Unilever owns tea plantation in Kericho County in Kenya. It has the largest tea estate with 8700 hectares, 5500 permanent workers and several thousand seasonal workers. It is being argued that Kenyan tea is cheaper than that of India due to use of 'domestic labour' (referring to seasonal workers) and 'quality plucking' (referring to mechanized plucking). The Indian tea companies demand similar conditions as in Kenya.

Kenyan tea plantations are owned by British corporate giants, including Unilever and Finley. As in the other former colonial countries, tea plantation companies started in Kenya under British rule. Other British companies like Brooke Bond and Lipton entered Kenya in 1970s. During the British rule, workers were brought to the Kenyan plantations from oppressed tribes in Kenya, as well as from Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi and subjected to inhuman oppression. Today Kenya is the largest exporter, making 25 per cent of world's tea exports.

There are small farmers who grow tea plants on their land. Small scale plantations use traditional methods of plucking and maintenance of plantations. So they cannot compete with big companies on prices. According to a UN-FAO report, 50% of the small holder farmers live below poverty line. Altogether – tea workers, small farmers, small factory owners and workers – ten per cent of the Kenyan population, around 5 million people depend upon tea industry.

The same colonial period's forms of exploitation continue with impunity. Child labour along with casual labour without job security and underpayment are prevalent. Permanent worker in Unilever's plantation can make 515 shillings a day, barely sufficient for daily expenses. Manual plucking workers get 16 shillings per kilo of plucked tea leaves. To take home 515 shillings, she or he will have to pluck a back breaking average of 32 kilos.

Four workers are assigned to each plucking machine. Two operate the machine, while another carries the tea leaves to weighing station and the fourth sorts the plucked leaves. They get minimum payment only when they reached the target set by the supervisor. In Unilever's plantation, the supervisors called clerks wears police type uniforms and ride bikes to drive the workers to achieve daily targets.

The workers live in two types of 'houses' in plantations. The bachelors' quarters have one room, while the others have two rooms. Several houses have to share a toilet. Most of the single room houses were allotted to seasonal workers, who must quit them after the season is over. One or two families lived in the two room houses. This housing reminds one of the harsh accommodation provided for tea plantation workers in India and Sri Lankha.

Tea companies run schools and hospitals, with school fees deducted from worker's pay. Most of the children of workers drop out from school because families cannot afford it, and the children must work for a living.

In 2016, workers demanded pay increase of more than 30 per cent; but the labour court granted only 16%. In 2017 when workers went on strike for better wages, the Unilever and Finley refused to negotiate with the workers and armed forces shot at striking workers killing one. About 336 workers were sacked.

This experience shows that plantation managements acts hands in glove with the Kenyan state to suppress the workers and the necessity if unity of tea plantation workers to fight the predatory global corporations that exploit their labour.

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