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Global Geopolitics and Local Modernities: Tea, Trade and the Lives of Plantation Workers

Aparna Sinha*

Abstract

Global geopolitics is about who controls what, where, and why, and how that shapes the future of the world order. However, from a sociological lens, it is not just about how states and leaders think, but also how it filters down into the lives of ordinary people. Global geopolitics often reinforces a core-periphery structure. (World System Theory, I Wallenstein). For instance, Plantation workers are part of this periphery—their hard labor sustains global consumption, but they remain economically and socially marginalized. The idea of Local modernities refers to how marginalized communities engage with, reinterpret, and recreate the promises and contradictions of modern life in their own specific contexts. Modernity promised industrial progress and upward mobility, but for plantation workers, it often translates into exploitation, displacement, and climate-induced vulnerabilities. Tea has long been more than a beverage. It is a commodity deeply entangled with empire, global trade, and shifting geopolitics. In the Dooars region of West Bengal, tea plantations continue to serve as sites where the Global political economy intersects with social lives. This paper examines how plantation workers – descendants of communities displaced and marginalized during colonial times—negotiate their everyday existence in the context of global market fluctuations, climate change, and the ongoing restructuring of the tea industry. Drawing on Sociological perspectives, the paper highlights three interlinked dimensions: First, the global geopolitics of Tea trade, including liberalization policies, corporate consolidation, and international price volatility, which directly shape wages, labour relations, and the survival of estates. Second, the ecological crisis, as climate change alters rainfall patterns and productivity, deepens the vulnerability of workers whose livelihoods are already precarious. Third, the lived experiences of workers themselves, particularly how they fashion local modernities through aspirations for education, gendered roles within families, collective resistance, and reimagining of dignity and mobility. This paper examines the intersection of global geopolitics and Local modernities through the case of Tea Plantation Workers, particularly in the Dooars region of West Bengal.

Keywords: *Local Modernities, Tea Plantation workers, Global Geopolitics.*

Aparna Sinha is an Independent Researcher, Cooch Bihar, West Bengal, INDIA.

Tea has long been more than a beverage- It is a commodity deeply enmeshed with global trade, empire, and shifting geopolitics. Tea embodies the contradictions of modernity: a symbol of refinement and leisure in consumer societies while simultaneously representing hardships, exploitations, and resilience in the lives of plantation workers. Emerging as a luxury good in early modern Europe, tea rapidly became central to the colonial economy, especially under British imperialism, which established plantation systems in India, Sri Lanka, and Africa (Wallerstein, 1974). As a commodity, tea represents the classic case of what Sociologists call "a colonial commodity chain" (Wallerstein, 1974). Its production was shaped in the colonies, while its consumption defined elite lifestyles in the metropoles. The tea trade linked Asia, Africa, and Europe, contributing to the Boston Tea Party, showing how a simple beverage can be entangled with the question of sovereignty, empire, and resistance. In the contemporary era, tea remains central to global value chains, involving multinational corporations such as Tata, Unilever, etc., international auction systems, and certification regimes such as Fairtrade, Rainforest Alliance, and Trustea (Besky, 2014).

However, Tea plantation relied on indentured, coercive, and migrant labour, creating social hierarchies and patterns of unfree labour that persist even today (Desai, 1986). Sociologically, tea represents the material and symbolic face of modernity: while it became a marker of civility, leisure, and industrial progress in the West, its production relied on precarious, semi-feudal labour structures in colonies like the Dooars (Wallerstein, 1974). The rise of tea plantations in India during the 19th century coincided with the spread of European modernity, where the British Empire sought to modernize production through scientific agriculture, disciplined labour, and global markets (Desai, 1986). Tea workers faced the dilemma of modern development and livelihood insecurity. They remained marked by economic vulnerability, limited social mobility, and exposure to climate change (Das & Mondal, 2020). This contradiction exposes what Sociologists call the "dual face of modernity" or "peripheral modernity" (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Thus, tea remains a potent symbol of how global and local processes intertwine. The geopolitics of tea trade from colonial conquest to climate governance continues to shape the structures within which plantation workers live and labour. Yet within these structures, workers cultivate their own local modernities marked by aspiration, resilience and resistance. This paper seeks to understand how the global geopolitics of tea- rooted in colonial trade, global markets and neoliberal restructuring- interacts with the everyday lives and aspirations of plantation workers in the Dooars region of North Bengal. It argues that plantation labourers are not passive recipients of global change; rather, they actively negotiate their own forms of modernity amidst structural constraints.

The story of tea, trade and plantation life in the Dooars is ultimately about how global powers shape local existence and how local actors respond with resilience and creativity. The lived experiences of plantation workers reveal a more complex reality, one where modernity is not

merely imported but constructed from below. Understanding the lives of plantation workers in the tea gardens of North Bengal and North East India requires a multidisciplinary approach that connects global structures with local realities. These sections draw upon the insights of Max Weber (1978), Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), A.R. Desai (1986) and S.N. Eisenstadt (2000).

While Wallerstein situates it within global capitalism, Weber explains the rationalized organization of plantation life and its moral implications; and while A.R. Desai exposes the class and labour dimensions of colonial exploitation, Eisenstadt reveals how workers create local modernities amid global pressures. This theoretical synthesis allows us to see tea gardens not merely as economic sites but as arenas of negotiations- where global geopolitics, local modernities and human agency intertwine.

A Brief Socio-economic History of Tea Plantation Workers in North Bengal and Northeast India

The socio-economic history of tea plantation workers in North Bengal and Northeast India is defined by migrant labours, colonial exploitation and persistent poverty. Workers were initially recruited from central India under contract, indentured system or coercive means by the Britishers in the mid-1880s leading to mass migrations primarily from the Chota Nagpur region of Central India, to work in Assam and North Bengal. (Behal, 2014; Guha, 1977; Singh, V.P. 2005). The migration of tribal labours into colonial plantations was a result of capitalist penetration into rural India creating a dependent and exploited working class to serve imperial needs. (Desai, 1948) This explains A.R. Desai's framework which highlights how these workers become part of an industrial labour force without industrial rights, subjected to control, surveillance and economic dependence. (Desai, 1948) Their social reproduction through housing, rations and health care provided by the management reinforced a paternalistic dependency that prevails even today. (Bhowmik, 1991). The early labour force lived under exploitative and humiliating conditions, described as "slave like" with minimal respect for individual life. (Guha, 1977) They frequently endured poor living conditions with inadequate health facilities and lack of basic amenities. The majority of the workers working on the plantations in the Northeast are third or fourth generation migrants. (Besky, 2014) The wages they received are among the lowest in the world despite the fact that the industry is global in nature and has quiet capital-intensive operations. The industry has maintained a feudal/semi-feudal structure in its pre-marketing production phase so as to maximize its profits. (Bhowmik, 1991). Women consistently formed a majority of the workforce as tea-pluckers who worked six days a week from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. with an hour for lunch in between since the industry's inception but were solely under precarious conditions as they received lower wages than men for the same work. (Chakraborty, 2018). Men mainly work as supervisors, carrying out weeding and spraying or work in the tea factory. Tea workers' wages are set by tripartite negotiations between the government, employer associations and trade unions. (Roy,

2007). Despite labour laws, women were often denied maternity and other related benefits they are entitled to. The social status of the plantation workers has ensured that their plight has continuously been ignored for generations. They have very low literacy rates and non-availability of any other livelihood in the region ensures that the children of the plantation workers are left with no other options than to work on the plantations under appalling conditions. There is no escape from the vicious circle of the highest level of exploitation. The vicious circle of poverty proposed by Ragnur Nurkse, explains this well. (1953) Poverty sustains itself through low income, low savings and low productivity. Among the tea plantation workers in North Bengal, this cycle is visible in their poor wages, limited education and lack of upward mobility. Sociologists expand this idea: Oscar Lewis's "Culture of Poverty" shows how poverty becomes a way of life (1966). Karl Marx (1867) highlights class exploitation by plantation owners: and Gunnar Myrdal's (1957) "Cumulative Causation" explain how poor health, education and inequality reinforce each other. In essence: the vicious circle of poverty among tea workers is not just economic but is social, structural and global. The plantation workers do not enjoy even the basic amenities like safe drinking water and often workers suffer from diarrhoea, cholera and other water borne diseases. Malaria and tuberculosis are also rampant. The infant mortality rate is much higher than the national average. (Bhowmick & Sarkar, 2016).

Tea had become a global commodity linking Assam, and North Bengal directly to the British and world markets by the early 20th century. Imanuel Wallerstein's World System Theory (1974) provides a global lens for understanding how tea plantation emerged within the larger capitalist world system. According to Wallerstein the world is organized into core, semi-periphery and periphery. The tea gardens of colonial India, especially in the North Bengal and Assam functioned as the peripheral economies, supplying raw materials to imperial centres like Britain. The British East India Company and later colonial capitalists integrated Indian tea into the global commodity chains. The region was turned as a site of resource extraction and cheap labour. Wallerstein's theory thus helps explain how geopolitics and economic dependency shape local economies. The profits of planters depended on maintaining low wages and high output resulting persistent exploitation. However, this period saw the beginnings of labour resistance. Political awareness started growing among the plantation workers which reflected through small strikes, petitions and protests. The consciousness of workers expanded from local grievances to broader demands for dignity and rights. These early mobilizations laid the foundations for collective identity and later trade union movements despite limited success. Socially plantation workers developed what can be termed as local modernities- ways of life shaped by industrial discipline yet rooted in indigenous traditions. The plantation while a site of exploitation also became a laboratory of new social relations, gender roles and political awareness.

Post Independence, the Indian state inherited the structural inequalities of the plantation system. Despite the end of the colonial rule plantation workers in North Bengal and Northeast India faced persistent exploitation, low wages and poor living conditions. (Roy, 2007). The Plantation Labour Act of 1951 was enacted recognizing the poor living standards of workers which mandated housing, medical facilities, schools and sanitation for all plantation labourers. However, due to weak implementation, planters continued to dominate economic and social life (Bhowmik, 1991). Trade unions gained prominence during this period, particularly in Assam, Darjeeling and the Dooars. Unions affiliated with national political parties like the Congress and the CPI became crucial in negotiating wages and welfare (Roy 2007). Despite this advance, implementation was often lax. Plantation owners were largely responsible for enforcement and government oversight was weak. As such workers especially vulnerable groups like tribal women were often deprived of their statutory benefits, including maternity benefits and proper sanitation. For decades plantation wages remained among the lowest in India's organized sector.

The late 20th century introduced a new phase of uncertainty. Economic liberalization in India exposed the tea industry to global competition, particularly from emerging producers in Kenya, Sri Lanka and China. By the early 2000s, changes in the global market and rise in the production costs pushed many tea plantations in North Bengal and Northeast into an economic crisis. This led to many tea gardens being abandoned or locked out leaving workers without jobs, homes and a means of survival. Reports of starvation and malnutrition deaths particularly between 2004 and 2009 emerged in the most effected tea gardens. Despite various welfare schemes like the nation Food Security Act by the government to help curb deaths, there remained issues of low wages, unpaid dues and poor living condition persisted. Even in the running plantations the situation was precarious. In 2018, the daily wage in North Bengal tea gardens was still lower than the rate of unskilled workers in MGNREGA schemes. Workers suffered from massive unpaid dues, including provident funds, gratuity and wages. Studies suggests that these schemes often benefited estate owners though more than the workers, as they failed to address deep-rooted inequalities. Climate change emerged as a new geopolitical and livelihood crisis for plantation region. Erratic monsoons, soil degradation and post-infestation have affected both the quality and quantity of tea. Declining yields have intensified economic stress, leading to wage delays and estate closures (Das and Mondal 2020).

Despite these challenges plantation communities continued to demonstrate perseverance. The socio-economic pattern of this period was characterized by economic precarity and adaptive resilience. Workers diversified their livelihoods through small business, seasonal migration, and alternative employment, reshaping plantation life in creative ways. Workers began organizing themselves into unions and associations to demand fair wages, better working conditions and housing facilities. Unions such as the Indian Tea Association Workers' Union, CITU and INTUC-

affiliated unions played major roles played major roles. Strikes, protests and collective bargaining helped them achieve incremental improvements in wages, rations and social security. Younger generations pursue education, digital literacy and urban employment seeking to break the cycle of dependency. Gradually, education emerged as a pathway to liberation fostering social awareness encouraging workers to understand labour rights, gender equality and civic participation. Women assumed leadership roles in unions and NGO campaigning for gender justice, fair wages and environmental protection (Besky 2020). Despite facing double marginalization- as workers and as women they gradually asserted their rights. The formation of self-help groups, women's wings in unions and literacy programmes created new spaces for female empowerment. Their increasing visibility and leadership have reshaped the social dynamics with plantation communities.

The history of plantation workers is not only a story of oppression but also one of resilience and transformation. Through collective struggles, cultural continuity, education, political awareness and external support, they have managed to challenge the structures that perpetuated their precarity. While challenges persist, the workers' continuous pursuit of dignity and justice reflects a deep sociological truth: that even within structural constraints, human agency thrives.

Global Geopolitics of Tea Gardens of North Bengal

North Bengal has about 450 tea gardens spread out in the Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars region that are registered as sellers in the Siliguri Tea Auction Centre. The cultivation in North Bengal began about 120 to 150 years ago in the Dooars region during the colonial British raj period. The British cultivated tea for the global market setting up a system of large plantation estates that relied on indentured labourers from neighbouring countries and beyond. The British empires' investment in Indian tea was driven by the driven by the desires to reduce economic dependence on China and to strengthen its trade balance through plantation capitalism. The establishment of the tea gardens in North Bengel linked local labour system to world capitalist economy- a process Wallerstein (1974) describes incorporation into the 'Modern World System'. The labour force, largely drawn from tribal and marginalized communities of central India, became the human foundation of this global enterprise.

The global geopolitics of tea gardens in North Bengal revolve around the region's historic, economic and social vulnerability to international market force. India inherited both the infrastructure and inequalities of the plantation economy in the post-colonial era. During the cold war, tea remained a crucial export commodity, especially to markets in the USSR, the UK and later the middle east. North Bengal's plantation thus became sites where global trade policies, foreign exchange regimes and labour relations intersected. However, in the 1990s the global geopolitics profoundly impacted North Bengal's tea gardens, a region already facing deep seated colonial era dependencies. The shift to a liberalized economy coincided with a downturn in the global tea market which led to severe socio-economic crisis in the region's plantation industry. Indian tea was exposed then to

increased international competition after the introduction of New Economic Policy, in 1991. This fundamentally altered the market dynamics for North Bengal's tea gardens. In an attempt to stay competitive and minimize losses, some planters reportedly resorted to blending Indian tea with cheaper lower quality tea from neighbouring countries. The original Indian tea brand was devalued by this practice and as such demand got reduced. Aggressive cost-cutting strategies got implemented with falling global prices, to increase profitability. With the declining global prices and shrinking profit margins, many garden owners in the region of North Bengal implemented a cost minimizing strategy by cutting worker wages and benefits. This led to irregular wage payments, non-payment of provident fund dues and denial of basic provisions like rations and medical care. Ultimately many plantations became financially unviable. Owners, including some who had recently acquired gardens, abandoned them without notice, leaving the workers without income or their legal dues. This led to closure of tea gardens which resulted in widespread unemployment and a humanitarian disaster for the dependent tribal communities leading to starvation, malnutrition and poverty.

As per estimate, more than 50 gardens were closed between the year 2000-2007 (in the Dooars region and many more throughout North Bengal), directly affecting large sections of tea garden workers. (IJFMR). As the state struggled to address the humanitarian crisis, the region's geopolitics shifted to a micro-level. The focus moved from international markets to local issues of survival, as workers grappled with the consequences of economic marginalization. As per another study, "workers in many cases were not paid even sanctioned wages, provident funds. The industry in North Bengal has been facing turbulence since 2001 onwards. (sryahwa publications +1). As for instance, there has been prolonged worker discontent in the Darjeeling Hills linking labour unrest in tea gardens with the region's identity politics (the movement for a separate state of Gorkhaland). In the Dooars region, many workers are from the Adivasi communities and livelihood vulnerabilities for these groups has increased because of garden closures or reduction in workforce.

The crisis fuelled new conflicts over land use. The decline of traditional tea estates led to a rise in small holder tea farming and questions emerged about land title deeds, small growers. This was another dimension in which land use and diversion of tea gardens land affected workers and communities whose livelihoods depend on the gardens. In west Bengal the state government changed policy (2019 and after) to allow tea garden land to be used not solely for tea cultivation but for allied activities such as tourisms, hotels etc. and higher commercial use. For example: "This land was given o them on the condition that it be used for tea cultivation…...In 2019… the government allowed 15% of the land on leasehold for tourism…...By increasing this limit to 30%.....the government has given rise to fear……this would further make the situation difficult for tea garden workers…..." (The Indian Express).

In 2024 the tea garden bodies in North Bengal opposed the expansion of an eco-sensitive zone (esz) around in wild life sanctuary, arguing that the expansion would restrict their land use and hamper tea-tourism development (The times of India).

These land policy shifts are deeply tied to regional geopolitics: tea garden lands are often often inhabited by indigenous/ traditional communities (Nepali speaking Gorkhas, Raj Banshi's, Rabhas etc.). Changing land use threatens their rights, identity and livelihoods. Thus, geopolitics here includes not only international trade but intrastate/ethnic/regional dynamics: how policy decisions, land rights and community identity interplay within the tea sector.

Environmental/climate induced risk is a further dimension, which has geopolitical implication (global climate change-local production disruption-effect on trade and livelihoods. Further, the intense use of chemical pesticides in surviving gardens contributed to environmental pollution. For north Bengal, erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, shorter growing seasons are affecting yields and tea quality (Down to Earth+1). For example, pests like looper caterpillars are increasing because of warmer winters and dry spells leading to yield losses of 10-25% in some gardens in the Dooars (Sikkim Express). Many tea bushes are aging, replacing them or investing in better planting requires capitals but margins are shrinking. (Down to Earth+1).

The tea industry, deeply embedded in the cultural and economic fabric of India, is highly dependent on environmental stability. Environmental changes such as climate variability, deforestation and soil degradation affect tea plantation sustainability, particularly in the North Bengal region. It also explores how these ecological shifts intersect with global geopolitics, influencing trade, labour and regional development. By adopting a sociological lens, the study reveals that environmental crisis in tea producing region is not merely ecological but are also geopolitical and social in nature. Tea cultivation demands specific climatic and geographical condition- moderate temperatures (20-30 degree centigrade), high humidity, well-distributed rainfall (150-300 cm annually), and acidic soil with good drainage. The foothills of Eastern Himalayas, including the Dooars and Terrai regions of North Bengal, offer these optimal conditions. However, over the last two decades, tea producing areas have experienced rising temperatures, erratic monsoons, prolonged dry spells and unpredictable pests' infestations (Ahmed, 2020). These environmental shifts have directly affected tea yields, flavour quality and the economic stability of tea gardens. Deforestation and monoculture plantation practices have further degraded the ecological balance. The loss of biodiversity and over dependence on chemical fertilizers have created a cycle of ecological vulnerability that undermines the sustainability of tea gardens. In North Bengal, environmental degradation interacts with local geopolitical tensions. The region's proximity to Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal makes it strategically sensitive. Deforestation has also increased flood risks, affecting tea gardens located in low-lying areas. Soil erosion has reduced the quality of plantation land, forcing tea companies to expand into forested or tribal lands leading

to land-use conflicts and displacement. The environmental crisis in tea plantation disproportionately affects labourers- most of whom belong to tribal or minority communities. Garden closures due to climate impacts have led to large scale unemployment and migration particularly among Adivasis and Nepali workers in North Bengal (Besky,2014). From a sociological perspective, this reflects what can be termed as "ecological marginalization", where environmental degradation exacerbates pre-existing social inequalities. Women workers, who constitutes a major portion of the tea labour force, are doubly burdened as they face both economic precarity and domestic responsibilities intensified y environmental stress. Thus, the environment becomes a site of class and power struggle, linking local labour conditions to global market dynamics.

The global tea industry operates within a framework of neo-colonial environmental governance. Western countries, as major consumers, dictate environmental standards and sustainability norms. While these norms aim to protect ecosystems, they often impose costly certification processes that small and medium tea estates in North Bengal struggle to afford (Bose, 2019). Thus, the environmental challenges confronting tea plantations in North Bengal are inseparable from the geopolitics of global trade. Climate change not only affects tea yields but also restructures international power relations, trade dependencies and local labour dynamics. The intersection of environment, economy and geopolitics reveals the deeply interconnected nature of global modernity.

Further the global premium market (e.g. for Darjeeling teas) brings its own geopolitical challenges such as brand origins/ tagging/ competitions from neighbouring countries, geographic indication issues. The struggle to maintain premium prices is influenced by global trade flows, bilateral trade agreement (Nepal-India free trade) and the marketing power of global buyers. For north Bengal gardens being able to access premium markets (and not just low-cost bulks) becomes a strategic factor in their viability.

Thus, the "global geopolitics" means not only big international players, but also how policy trade, climate, land coverage to shape livelihood at the grounds. Globalization and trade liberalization exposed North Bengal tea gardens to competition and lowered margins which put workers at risks. Land use and policy shifts such as tourism, commercialization, ESZ restriction affect the plantation economy and thus the socio-economic stability of labour force. Climate change and environmental risk acts as both a local production shock and global challenge- feeding into value chains, cost pressures, job security. The macro geopolitical decisions such as trade, labour laws, land diversions impacted the regional and ethnic identities comprising the Adivasis (Santhal, Oraon, Mundas), Nepalis (Gorkhas), Rajbanshis, Bengalis and others of the districts of North Bengal such as Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Darjeeling, Coochbbehar and parts of North Dinajpur. These decisions have repeatedly reshaped the livelihoods, identity and mobility of these minorities. These

communities remain caught between global market logics and national security priorities, struggling to assert local agency and identity in an increasingly globalized borderland.

Ecological Aspects of Tea Garden Settings in Dooars Region

The Dooars region represents one of India's most ecologically rich yet environmentally fragile landscapes. (Ghosh, 2017). The fascinating region located at the foothills of Eastern Himalayas forms the gateway between India and Bhutan. It is a place of immense natural beauty, rich biodiversity and socio-economic importance, especially known for its tea gardens, forests and rivers. The region stretches across the Northern part of West Bengal and the adjoining areas of Assam. In West Bengal it mainly covers the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and parts of Coochbehar. It lies between the Teesta River in the west and the Sankosh river in the east, forming a corridor between the plains of West Bengal and the hills of Bhutan and Sikkim (Bose, 2015). The tea industry, which expands here under British colonial rule in the late 19th century, has profoundly shaped the region's ecology, transforming natural forests into highly managed monocultures. (Behal, 2014; Guha, 1999).

As the region was originally covered with dense sal forest, it underwent massive deforestation to pave the way for tea plantation, which altered the local biodiversity and soil composition. (Guha, 1999). Plantation agriculture imposed a monocultural landscape dominated by tea bushes, interspersed with shade trees such as Albizia and Acacia. Though these provide some ecological cover, they however cannot replicate the biodiversity of the original forest ecosystem. (Bandyopadhyay, 2016) This ecological simplification reduced wildlife habitats and affected species such as elephants, leopards and diverse bird populations. A common ecological consequence of this transformation is the Human-wildlife conflict due to elephant raids on labour lines. (Sukumar, 2003; Ghosh, 2017). The Dooars enjoys a humid subtropical climate with heavy monsoon rainfall. (Bose, 2015) Tea thrives in this environment, yet excessive rain, deforestation and soil erosion have declined the soil fertility. The plantation relies heavily on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, leading to soil acidification and contamination of local water sources such as the Jaldhaka, Torsa and Raidak rivers. Seasonal flooding further destabilizes garden infrastructure and labour settlements. Recent studies (Das and Mondal 2020) have shown erratic rainfall and temperature changes directly affecting tea yield and quality, linking the region's ecology to global climate variability. (IPCC, 2021)

Tea gardens in the Dooars are not only agricultural spaces but also social eco-systems. (Besky, 2014). Human settlement plans in the Dooars region have largely developed in response to its geography, ecology and tea-based economy. The region's fertile plains, rich forests and river systems attracted both indigenous tribes and migrant populations over time. Early settlements were primarily rural and scattered, located near forests and rivers for access to resources. With the establishment of tea plantations during the British colonial period, planned settlements emerged

around tea estates, including labour line (worker quarters), managerial bungalows, and administrative units. These settlements were organized to support plantation activities and were often isolated from nearby villages. Post-independence, government planning focused on rural development, forest conservation and rehabilitation of displaced communities leading to semi-urban growth centres. Today human settlement in Dooars reflect a mix of planned plantation settlements, traditional tribal villages and expanding semi-urban toens, shaped by tea, tourism and forest-based livelihoods.

In the recent years, ecological concerns have prompted initiatives for eco-friendly tea cultivation. Some estates have adopted organic farming, composting and integrated pest management. The ecologically rich and diverse environment of the Dooars region supports extensive tea cultivation. The region offers ideal condition for growing camellia sinensis with characteristics of humid sub-tropical climate heavy monsoon rainfall, fertile alluvial and loamy soils and moderate altitudes. Rapid tea leaf growth is prompted by the region's consistent rainfall and humidity and the slightly acidic soil enhances the strength and color of tea. However, the ecological setting of tea gardens in the Dooars is deeply influenced by complex environmental factors. The surrounding forests, rivers such as the Teesta, Torsha and Jaldhaka and the proximity to protected areas like Gorumara and Jaldapara wildlife sanctuaries create a unique biodiversity corridor where tea plantation act as a buffer zone between human settlements and natural habitats. Shade trees like Albizia and Acacia not only regulate micro climate but also sustain avian and insect biodiversity. Yet deforestation for tea expansion, excessive use of fertilizers and continuous monocropping have led to soil degradation, erosion and habitat fragmentation, especially disrupting elephant corridors. Climate change have further intensified ecological stress by altering rainfall patterns, causing droughts, and pests outbreaks. In response, some estates have adopted sustainable practices such as organic farming, rainwater harvesting, composting agroforestry to restore soil fertility and maintain ecological balance. The interdependence between the natural environment and the livelihoods of tea-garden workers adds a sociological dimension to the regio's ecology, as their daily survival is closely tied to the health of the surrounding ecosystem. Thus, the ecological aspect of tea garden setting in the Dooars region reflect a delicate balance between environmental richness, economic activity and human adaptation, underscoring the urgent need for sustainable and climate-resilient practices to protect both the land and the people who depend on it.

Local Modernity and Tea Garden workers: A Case Study of a Tea Garden in the Dooars Region

As per various studies and observation, the tea industry in India has been going through major crisis over the past few decades. The crisis has severely impacted the Dooars region at the utmost. The Dooars region stretching across the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in northern

West Bengal, is one of the oldest and most prominent tea-producing zones. The lush green tea gardens of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar Districts once symbolized prosperity, colonial modernity and global trade integration. However, since the late 1990s, the tea industry in the Dooars has faced a prolonged crisis marked by fluctuating market prices, declining productivity, labour unrest and environmental instability. This crisis has had far- reaching impacts on the socio-economic and ecological landscape of the region. The collapse of the tea garden economies has not only disrupted livelihoods but also exposed the deep structural inequalities that have historically defined plantation life. The most devastating effect of the tea crisis are borne by the plantation workers- predominantly Adivasis and Nepali communities brought tot the region during the colonial period. Studies have reported that in the close or abandoned tea gardens, workers were deprived basic needs like food, healthcare and education (Raman, 2016). The withdrawal of the Plantation Labour Act's welfare provisions further worsened living conditions. Malnutrition and hunger-related deaths were reported from several gardens in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts, revealing the humanitarian dimension of the crisis (Bhowmick & Sarkar, 2016). Women workers who constitute nearly 60% of the labour force, suffered double burdens: economic marginalization in the work force and unpaid domestic labour in crisis-ridden households.

Despite the severe socio-economic crisis that has gripped the tea industry in the Dooars region, tea garden workers and their workers have shown remarkable resilience. While the closure and decline of tea estates have led to unemployment, hunger and social insecurity, workers have developed multiple coping mechanisms- ranging from livelihood diversification and collective mobilization to migration and informal economic activities. After garden closures, many workers, many households turned to alternative forms of income generation such as daily wage labour in nearby towns, small-scale farming, animal rearing and collection of forest products. (Bhowmick and Sarkar, 2016). Labour migration has emerged as another key coping mechanisms though it led to social costs such as family separation, increased burden on women and vulnerability to exploitation in urban informal sectors. Various worker's organizations like the Akhil Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Sangh, etc have been active in demanding wage revisions, implementation of the Plantation Labour Act, and reopening of closed gardens. Some groups have organized community-based co-operatives to restart production in abandoned tea estates on a self-managed basis. For example, in certain gardens like the Dekhlapara Tea Estate, workers have collectively cultivated vegetables and maize in parts of abandoned estate to meet subsistence needs (Bhadra, 2019). These acts of collective self-organization indicate an emerging form of grassroot modernity, where traditional solidarity merges with self-reliant development strategies. Women, who make up the majority of tea plantation labourers, have emerged as central figures in sustaining households during the crisis. They have diversified household incomes through small trading, self-help groups and participation in rural credit networks (Chakraborty, 2018). Amid hardship, workers have also

found resilience in their cultural identity and collective memory. Community gatherings, dances and various festivals served as spaces of emotional renewal and solidarity. In some gardens, younger generations are engaging in education and skill development as pathways out of plantation economy. Government and NGO vocational programmes have trained youth in hospitality, IT, and healthcare, enabling upward mobility. (Ghosh, 2022).

The story of modernity in the Dooars tea region can be examined through several sociological lenses that altogether reveal the complex intersections of global capitalism, local adaptation and communication-based change. Immanuel Wallerstein's Worls Systems Theory situates the Dooars within the periphery of the global capitalist economy. The tea plantations, established during the colonial period, became nodes of export-oriented production, linking local labour to global markets. The workers mostly Adivasi migrants were integrated into a dependent structure, where profits flows outwards while poverty and labour exploitation persisted locally. This shows a form of dependent modernity where industrial progress serves global capital rather than local upliftment.

Smuel N Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernity moves beyond Wallerstein's structural view by focusing on how local societies reinterpret global modernity. In the Dooars, modernity was not merely imposed; it was selectively internalized. Workers combined traditional forms of solidarity, kinship and ritual with new experiences of industrial labour, education and union politics. Thus, the tea gardens reflect a hybrid modernity- a unique blend of global economic logic and indigenous social forms. Eisenstadt helps us see that the Dooars' modernity is neither purely western, nor traditional, but a plural evolving local version.

Daniel Lerner's theory of modernization (from The Passing of Traditional Society, 1958) highlights the role of medial, urbanization and empathy in fostering modern attitudes. While Lerner's model was largely linear and Western-biased, his emphasis on communication and social change is relevant to the Dooars context. The spread of education, migration to nearby towns, exposure to media and worker's participation in collective organisation all foster new aspirations and world-views among tea garden laboures- signal of emerging modern consciousness.

Wilbur Schramm, often called the father of development communication, complements this by explaining how communication act as a bridge between traditional and modern societies. In the Dooars initiatives like workers' literacy drives, local radio programmes and NGO interventions act as communication channels that introduce ideas of health, rights
and gender equality. Through such processes, modernity becomes not only economic transformation but also a communicative and participatory one- negotiation between old and new value systems.

Thus, the modernity experienced by tea garden workers in the Dooars is both global and local, economic and cultural, imposed and self-shaped. It is a local modernity from below where

marginalized communities continuously reshape global modern forces to fit their everyday realities, identities and aspirations. Local modernity: a concept used in Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural studies to describe how modernity- usually associated with western ideas of progress, development and globalization- is adapted, reinterpreted and reshaped in different local contexts. It refers to how the concepts and practices of modernity are shaped and expressed within specific geographical and cultural contexts, rather than being a uniform, globally imposed phenomenon. It involves the negotiation between global influences like mass media and trade and local traditions, practices and social structures. Thus, local modernity is the unique way in which people in different regions experience and construct modern life. Rather than simply copying western models of modernity (like industrialization, urbanization or consumer culture), local societies blend modern influences with their own traditions, cultures and histories.

The Nagrakata Tea Estate, located in the western part of the Dooars in Jalpaiguri district, offers a compelling example of how modernization unfold in a localized, uneven and negotiated way. Nagrakata was among the first organized tea estates in the western Dooars, established during the British colonial period in the 19th century. It employs predominantly Adivasi workforce: descendants of Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribe brought from Chot Nagpur during the colonial times. This case study examines how the tea garden workers of Nagrakata are experiencing and shaping “local modernity” – a process where traditional social structures interact with modern education, media, politics and environmental consciousness. Drawing on Eisenstadt’s (2000) concepts of multiple modernities and integrating insights from Daniel Lerner (1958) and Wilbur Schramm (1964), the study explores how these communities reinterpret modern life while negotiating with structural inequalities and economic crisis.

The Nagrakata Tea Estate covers approximately 1000 hectares and employs around 2200 workers. Like many other gardens in the Dooars, it has faced economic fluctuations: falling tea prices, erratic rainfall and rising production costs. Workers receive low and irregular wages, and housing and healthcare remain inadequate despite the Plantation Labour Act’s provisions. However, over the last two decades, the area has witnessed major socio-cultural transformations: growing literacy, expansion of digital media, new political mobilization and diversified livelihoods. These developments show how ‘modernity from below” is emerging in a one static plantation economy. One of the most visible signs of modernization on Nagrakata is the expansion of education. Earlier generations workers rarely completed primary schooling, but today children, especially girls, attend secondary schools and even colleges. For example, a youth from the estate becomes the first woman to be graduated in 2021, now teaching in a private school in Nagrakata town. Her story symbolizes a shift in aspirations from intergenerational plantation labour to professional and educational mobility. This aligns Lerner’s argument that modernization begins when people develop empathy: the capacity to imagine alternative futures. Education in this context,

is not merely a skill but a cultural bridge between tradition and new life possibilities. Parents now actively invest in their children's education, seeing it as a path out of plantation dependency.

Further, the diffusion of mobile phones and social media has profoundly altered social life in Nagrakata. Almost every household now has at least one smartphone, allowing workers to stay updated on local news, government schemes and employment opportunities. WhatsApp groups circulate information about wages, union activities and even health awareness programs. Young workers watch YouTube tutorials, music videos and news from across India. Wilbur Schramm viewed mass media as a "multiplier" of modernization, helping people participate in the national imagination. Media access has further fostered political awareness and identity consciousness. During local elections, many workers use social media to express opinions: a significant shift from their earlier political silence under managerial control.

The Nagarkata Tea Estate like other tea estates has women constituting over 60% of the labour force. Traditionally confined to plantation works and domestic chores, women are now increasingly involved in Self-Help Groups, supported by the Government and NGO programs. These SHGs manage small savings schemes and engage in micro enterprises such as tailoring, mushroom cultivation and food processing. Through these activities, women gain both economic autonomy and social confidence. These gendered empowerments reflect a form of local modernity: one not dependent on urban employment but built within community structures. It mirrors what Eisenstadt describes as plural pathways of modernity, where local cultures reinterpret modernization within their own moral frameworks.

The Nagrakata Tea Estate has been a centre of trade union activity and political mobilization. Workers' organization such as the Progressive Tea Workers Union and Chah Mazdoor Sabha regularly negotiate for wage revisions and better housing. Younger leaders use digital platforms to organize meetings and campaigns, showing how technology intersects with democratic participation. Workers are now more vocal about rights under welfare schemes FAWLOI (Financial Assistance to Workers of Locked-out Tea Gardens) and MNREGA. This represents what sociologists call collective modernization: when groups develop shaed political consciousness, citizenships and voice within structures of power.

Migration has also introduced hybrid form of modernity. Many young men from Nagrakata migrate seasonally to larger cities all over the country for construction and service jobs. They return with new experiences, fashion and exposure to new lifestyles. These return migrants influence young youths by introducing new values such as consumerism, gender equality and self-reliance- while still participating in in traditional festivals. Such hybridity exemplifies. Eisenstadt's idea of "multiple modernities": that each society combines global influences with local continuities to create its own modern path.

Climate change and erratic rainfall have affected Nagrakata Tea production, reducing yields and causing soil degradation. In response, some young workers and NGOs have begun experimenting with organic farming and small-scale vegetable cultivation within or near the estate. Environmental awareness programs conducted by NGOs like Dooars EcoLife have encouraged tree planting and waste management practices. This reflects a form of reflexive modernity (Beck, 1992), where communities began to recognize and respond to the ecological risks produced by industrial modernity itself.

The Nagrakata Tea Estates exemplifies how modernization in the Dooars is contextual, plurals and bottom-up. It is not driven by external industrial development alone but by the everyday agency of workers who adapt to new ideas while preserving their identity. Thus, Nagrakata's workers represents a unique model of "Vernacular Modernity" where global processes like education, media and mobility are reinterpreted through the cultural idioms of tribal and plantation life.

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