

# Family Labour in Small Holding Plantation Sector: A Study with Special Focus on Women and Children in Selected Areas of South India

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**V.V. Giri National Labour Institute**



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# Content

Preface	v
Acknowledgement	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review, Rationale, Objective and Methodology	12
Chapter 3: Wages and Working Conditions of Small Tea and Coffee Growers	24
Chapter 4: Conclusions and Findings	43
References	47



## Preface

This study is contextualised among the small holding plantation sector in South India with special reference to the small tea growers in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu and the coffee growers of the Coorg district of Karnataka. The study seeks to explore the concept of family labour as elucidated through the engagement of the family in production of crops such as tea and coffee. Aspects of gender relations, dynamics within family and the field elucidate the nuances that are intertwined in understanding the economies of production. The small grower sector is emerging as a significant contributor to production of cash crops not just globally but in India also. It is within these changing structural realms of the industry, this study holds relevance since it examines the contemporary social and economic aspects that surmount the small growers.

One of the pressing concerns for the growers is on the one hand increasing costs of production and on the other shortage of labour as a factor of production. It is with this broad macroeconomic context that this study examines the nature of arrangements of labour. Using variables such as wages, production and profits, labour and gender relations this study clearly illustrates that despite a clear engagement of women as family and unpaid labour, and a decline of children in family labour due to various pro-active state policies; land ownership, memberships across associations are clearly dominated by the male growers. There is also a clear pattern that the present growers apart from working on their own farms are engaged in waged labour to supplement their household income. Importantly, there is also a tendency that the land use patterns are changing with the younger generation of farmers' children choosing to migrate out to nearby towns and cities for other employment opportunities.

Given such changing landscape it is imperative that a more extensive study across plantation crops and regions are required to be initiated by respective government organisations to highlight the trends and enable policy measures. This study will be of immense benefits to researchers, policy makers and activists working on the plantation sector in South India.



**Dr. H. Srinivas**  
Director General

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**Kingshuk Sarkar**

## Chapter I

# Introduction

Plantation, a part of agriculture, retains an important role in the economy of India. A plantation crop normally is mono-culture and includes growing of a variety of products like tea, coffee, rubber, pepper and other spices. In a larger coverage, spices also include products such as chilies, cinnamon and other products<sup>1</sup>. The total value of these crops including pepper forms nearly 2 percent of India's total agricultural GDP<sup>2</sup>. Due to its labour intensive nature, it is an important source of rural employment for men and women in South India<sup>3</sup>.

South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are home to such plantation crops. These have historically been internationally traded commodities. Free trade economy, weak market regulations, stiff competition between the producing countries result in price fluctuations. Such factors along with increasing costs of production affect the livelihood of millions of workers and producers particularly the smaller growers. It increases their precariousness and vulnerability. Measures of reducing cost of production include engaging cheap labour by employing children and women amidst a range of contractual arrangements of labour. The small holding plantations especially the small and marginal farmers are continually surmounted with market volatility and trade fluctuations. Labour shortage appears to be a pressing problem leading them to adopt various measures to retain workers for cultivation and production of cash crops.

The object of this study is to understand the various nuances that confront the small holding plantation sector in South India with regard to the nature and extent of engagement of 'family' as part of employment; gender relations/ dynamics in family and field; factors for higher participation of women and children in family labour; measures for retaining labour in the context of changing conditions of employment and economic relations; and the cyclical economic crisis in plantation economy. The study would also seek to explore the extent of social protection measures and organizing labour in this sector. Also the contribution and challenges faced by the small holding sector in commodity trade would be examined.

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Task Force on Plantation Sector, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI, 2006. Viewed from <http://commerce.nic.in/publications/PlantationReport.pdf?id=12>, accessed on 07.06.2011.

<sup>2</sup> Plantations: An Overview, Outlook, 24 March, 2008, page 55

<sup>3</sup> Report, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, op.cit, p 20.

## Background and Context

Cash or plantation crops are produced both by the estate sector and the indigenous small holder sector. The Report on the Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India, 1949 defines the small holding as “a holding on which plantation crops are grown by a cultivator and his family with the help of occasional outside labour” (Tharakan, 1998). In South India with the advent of plantations and European presence, ‘proprietary planters’ got established as small holders who were solely Europeans. Slowly with the penetration of tea as ‘profitable crop’ and the preference for tea companies such European proprietary planters got phased out. However, there were indigenous farmers as small holders who took up cultivation of plantation crops, initially coffee. Upendranadh’s (2010) study mentions that among the 2, 20,825 coffee holdings in the country during 2007–2008, 218,116 (98.8%) holdings belonged to small farmers with less than 10 hectares of land. These accounted for about 75% of the total coffee area within which, holdings less than 2 hectares accounted for 80.9 per cent (Upendranadh, 2010). As estimated by the Tea Board of India from the total tea production of 980.82 million kgs in 2008, 257.46 million kgs i.e. 26.25 percent was produced from the small holder sector and 99 percent of tea producers in South India are small holders (Hayami and Damodaran, 2004). In 2007, in the entire country, there were 1, 57,504 small growers (area less than 10.12 hectares) and 1,686 big growers (having more than 10.12 hectares of land) in tea production from the total number of 1, 59,190 growers. The Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, for example, holds the larger share in tea production from the small holder sector. Most of the cardamom plantations are owned by big land holding farmers while about 90 percent of pepper plantations are owned by small growers (Rajasenan, 2010). In Kerala with its progressive land reforms policy exempted all plantation crops from land ceiling. This along with other factors led to the increase in the area under small holdings from 34 percent in 1946 to 90 percent in 1995-1996.

The abolition of slave labour created the possibility of labour in southern plantations. This slave labour belonged largely from the low castes given the feudal and rigid caste structure. The major slave castes during the latter part of 19<sup>th</sup> century were *Pallar*, *Pariayar*, *Cherumar*, *Malar*, *Holeyar* and others while the landowning castes included the Brahmanar, Vellar, Reddy, Kapu etc from the Madras Presidency and the Nairs and Syrian Christians in Thiruvithamkur (Travancore). Plantation labour especially in the estate sector comprised of various *adivasis* like the *Kanikkar* and *Muthuvar* of Thiruvithamkur, *Badagar* and *Thodar* of Nilagiri and the *Naicker*, *Paniyar* and *Kurumbar* of Wayanad. It is said that the Kanan

Devan Hills Plantations (KDHP) was established by completely banishing the *Muthuvar* tribe (Raman, 2002). Many scholars observed that with the penetration of the European capital economy vis-à-vis plantations “destroyed the social fabric of this region” and “dispossessed these *adivasis* of their communal property”. Outbreaks of famine, pestilence apart from factors like caste discrimination pushed the depressed castes from various parts of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Konkan coast to work in plantations. The major Labour Catchment Areas (LCAs) through the *kangani* system of labour recruitment in plantations were from Salem, Madurai, Ramanad, Tirunalveli, Tiruchirappalli, Tanjavur and Coimbatore. Recent studies show that there is a change in the social composition of workforce with in-migration from far eastern areas like Assam, West Bengal and Bihar.

The small holder sector typically comprises of farms growing plantation crops together with other crops in small holdings ranging from half a hectare to three hectares of farm land. Such farms “rely mainly on family labour which gets supplemented by casual labour during harvesting season” (Hayami and Damodaran, 2004). Family labour is one of the salient features of the small holder sector. As stated earlier, small holding by definition meant the engagement of the cultivator and his family in cultivation of any plantation crop with occasional outside labour.

Engagements of ‘outside labour’ for production are found to be common in the small holder sector. Most of the cardamom plantations in Kerala hire contract labour from Kambam area of Theni district of Tamil Nadu and that these workers are not given any social security or other benefits (Rajaseenan, 2010). Upendranadh’s study notes that despite increase in the labour force in the case of the Kodagu district from 197,550 in 2001- 02 to 254,001 in 2007-08 (Upendranadh, 2010), both the small holder and the estate sector continue to experience severe labour shortages for coffee cultivation and production. These plantation crops are highly labour intensive but labour requirements for coffee unlike tea are seasonal.

The farmers face difficulties in retaining labour due to high cost of production especially wages. There is also a marked absence of the young generation of labour given better access to education and other vocational opportunities and their absolute disinterest to work as plantation labour. Rajaseenan’s (2010) study has shown that MGNREGA has also acted as a deterring factor in discouraging migration from neighbouring states. There were requests from the farmers to engage women in employment through the MGNREGA during the off season period as it was hampering availability of labour in the plantations (Rajaseenan, 2010). Boom in the construction sector in Tamil Nadu has also hampered labour availability.

Currently in-migration is being encouraged from states like Assam and Bihar. These again pose serious problems like language barrier, acclimatization for the migrant workers and increase in training costs, decline in productivity as producers' concern (Upendranadh, 2010). This aspect is a key area of concern for the present study.

It is an established fact that workers in the estate plantation sector are more organized than the small holding sector. Given the nature of employment and the engagement of family labour it is found that there is less influence of trade union activity in such plantation pockets where workers unlike the estate sector are not a resident labour force. The small holders as such are in the process of organizing themselves in order to improve their own bargaining capacity for remunerative prices. But across the small holder sector Rajasenan's study notes that workers in the spice sector are found to be more organised than in the rubber plantations although conditions of work are worse off in this sector (Rajasenan, 2010). Much more exploration is required in order to understand the degree of unionisation of workers in the small holding sector.

### **Status of Small Growers in Nilgiris and Coorg**

Small Tea Growers account for 76 percent of the tea produced in the Nilgiris. Small growers sell 'green leaf' to Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs), which are independently owned. After processing (converting the 'green leaf' into 'made tea'), BLFs sell the 'made tea' through regularly scheduled auctions in Coonoor, Coimbatore and Cochin. In Nilgiris two manufacturing processes are applicable for green leaf - Orthodox and CTC.

Small holder cultivation in the Nilgiris intensified from about the mid-1990s. A survey in 2001 indicates that 86 per cent of the smallholders in Nilgiris produced only tea. The increase in smallholder cultivation was responsible for increasing the total land under tea cultivation from 26237ha in 1990 to 60427ha in 2000. Currently about 60000 small holders in Nilgiris contribute to about 40 per cent of total South Indian tea production (Jeff Neilson and Bill Pritchard, 2009).

The major stakeholders in the Nilgiri tea value chain include, STGs (primary suppliers of green leaf - approximately more than three-fourth of production), BLFs, brokers, auctioneers, buying agents, blenders, wholesalers, distributors, exporters and retailers. Smallholders typically sell their green leaf through four possible avenues of primary sale. These are: A) indirect through middlemen/leaf agents/collectors; B) direct sale through a Stand-alone privately-owned processing units (known as Bought Leaf Factories in India and usually a small/medium enterprise)

C). through Integrated plantation units (large tea gardens or tea estates plantations) and D) Cooperative / collectively-owned units with smallholder participation.

The emergence of small tea growers and Bought Leaf Factories, which create new paradigm in tea industry by putting forward low cost of production in terms of workforce and technology, is one of the major changes in the recent history of the tea industry in India. The STGs are both economically and socially vulnerable and it is imperative that while they are striving to increase the production of tea, there needs to be a consideration about their socio-economic conditions.

The Small Tea Grower is a multiplying community in this sector. Earlier, the STGs were mostly families with small land holdings managing the tea plantations, taking care of all activities. Some of the larger STGs hire labour to work for them in the plantations. This brings with it organisational elements of both social and economic nature. The potential of the STGs to impact the economy and the social well-being of tea growers is enormous.

To understand the quality of life of the STGs, it is essential to understand the social and the economic aspects that affect them. The socio-economic aspects are witnessed at the micro level – labour related and family related, the meso level – organization related or the macro level – at the sector level (Dhanakumar, 2008, 2009; Thapa, 2014). At the micro level – the premise of standards and quality of life is set and determined. The economic aspects would be the size of the land holdings, assets they have and the amenities they have. Whether the labour is able to achieve a decent living can be quantified by understanding the assets and the amenities. At the organization level, how an STG provides amenities to the labourers who work for them is an essential component. This not only involves a cost dimension but reflects their economic capability to spend on their labour. At the family level – the family aspects impact how a STG functions and leads his/her life. The family type, size and the number of dependents are an indication of economic well-being again. This also helps to understand the support they receive from their family members. Along with these factors, demographic aspects like age, gender and marital status also play a role. The social situation of a STG is perceptual in nature. It is how they view their quality of living –the work conditions they work in, the facilities they can avail; the educational facilities for their children, the health care facilities and also the satisfaction they experience being a STG. The macro level perspective can be gained by understating the micro and the meso levels.

The STGs are affected by various socio-economic aspects. While these aspects may not have a direct impact on the price of tea, which is driven by market forces, it reflects how they are doing as a community and whether this community needs some support for their livelihood? This is the 'humane element' that is being explored in the study.

To understand how the STGs are doing economically, in terms of their standard of living, the income they have and the expenditure they incur, the assets they have acquired and the amenities they have; reflects their social and economic well-being. There are STGs for whom growing tea is the only source of income. They fare differently from the STGs who also grow vegetables or other crops or are even engaged in other vocational activities. In such a scenario, the question that needs to be answered is whether the grower is able to meet his/her monthly expenses, based on their income? The medical facilities available to STGs make a difference to their quality of life, as stressed upon by most respondents. Labour is a major issue with labour scarcity forcing some STGs to pay really high wages and at times the difference is evident between the clusters. An attempt has also been made to capture how they perceive their life and well-being, the facilities they have and how they feel they are doing and whether they are satisfied. This has been done in the study through some perceptual questions which when seen in combination with their economic conditions, give us a more holistic picture of their reality and the day to day challenges that the STGs face.

Tea plantation provides employment to more than a million workers who comprise immigrant workers and their descendants. For example, the workers in the tea gardens of Tamil Nadu are not original residents of the region but are migrants from Karnataka and other nearby states. The labourers of Assam and West Bengal are people who migrated from Central India and Nepal. These workers have over the years settled down in the gardens and now have little or no contact with their place of origin. Earlier policy makers and researchers assumed that tea could be grown economically and efficiently only on large-scale plantations, whereas later studies tend to suggest that no obvious economies of scale exist to give superiority to large estates over smaller ones.

This analysis further indicates that the location along with other inputs are significant parameters in determining optimum size of an estate and its productivity level. Here it may be suggested that small estates can be more efficient if given proper institutional support. The Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA), which was established as a parasol agency in the early 1960s, has indicated technical assistance and guidelines for producing, processing, marketing and financing small holdings of tea.

The KTDA is recognized internationally as one doing the most successful small holder operation in tea producing countries. The Tea Small Holdings Development Authority (TSHDA) of Sri Lanka is role modeled on the lines of KTDA (Mendis, 1991). The Keynan and Sri Lankan experience have repercussions on the Nilgiris and Coorg small plantations.

Size of individual holdings is the determining factor in the choice of labour force. According to estimates, households solely depending on family labour were 9.37 per cent in the Nilgiris and 5.41 per cent in Sri Lanka. The small tea holdings, up to of 0.25 hectares, used adult family members for all the plucking of tea leaves, which is done only four to five times in a month. In a few cases the elderly persons and children also participated in this work, particularly in the Nilgiris. An average of 50 to 60 kilograms of tea leaves can be plucked from a well-maintained VP tea plot of 0.25 hectares in a week (every six or seven days' cycle).

Moreover, the use of family labour for cultivation depends on a multitude of factors such as size of the family, its age structure, sex composition, level of education of the family members, etc. The farm holders have diversified the earning sources in TRLE (Immunization Programme) in Sri Lanka. They engage in a range of activities beyond their primary occupation to supplement the income. The tree crops like coconut, arecanut, jack fruit and spices like pepper and cloves are grown in their field, and this gives substantial income to them. But this is not the case in Nilgiris as revealed during fieldwork. The soil conditions and climate are not suitable for such crops in Nilgiris. Cultivation of broccoli, cauliflower and carrots were reported in this region of course miniscule. Therefore, the family members of small tea holders with one cent of tea land in Nilgiris generally seek outside jobs for their survival in addition to tending to their own tea farms.

Thus, low levels of production, low income from this production and no supplementary income from the tea land are the major problems of the Nilgiris farmers, unlike their counterparts in Sri Lanka. The small holdings of tea with less than 0.25 hectares (1200 tea bushes) do not accommodate hired labour in any substantial scale in Nilgiris. The distribution of family labour supplemented by hired labour is influenced by a complex set of factors. The combination of family cum hired labour constitutes 78.13 per cent in Nilgiris and it is only 24.32 per cent for smallholdings of tea in Sri Lanka. In this category the family members along with hired labour do the plucking of tea leaves. Hired labour is also widely used for the application of fertilizers and pruning, which is considered as a skilled job to be done by trained males. This tendency is found in both the countries. It should be noted that the involvement of family labour is confined to estates with less than one hectare of tea land in Sri Lanka and up to 2 hectares in the Nilgiris.

The available literature tends to indicate that most of the small holdings rely, to a significant extent, on hired labour particularly in Sri Lanka. The hired labour involved in Sri Lanka is 70.27 per cent while it is only 12.50 per cent of the total labour force in small holdings in Nilgiris. As the fieldwork revealed, the holdings with above 2 hectares exclusively used hired labour in Nilgiris, but in case of Sri Lanka this trend is applicable even from 0.25 hectares onwards.

The gender based division of labour follows the pattern of large-scale tea estates. The females do the plucking of tea leaves, while the males are involved in sundry work. It has been observed that small tea holders show a strong preference for male labour while hiring labour. The demand for hired labour for weeding is determined to a significant extent by the farm-gate price of green leaves. When farm -gate price is lower, the demand for hired labour for weeding tends to be low. It appears that when prices of green leaves drop, the first cut in the farm budget is made on hiring labour for weeding. This situation is observed often in both the countries. As we mentioned earlier, apart from the size of small tea holdings, the engagement of family members in outside jobs is also a major reason to seek hired labour. The family members of the small tea holdings, who are engaged in outside work are willing to act only as farm managers.

Another factor that influences the demand for hired labour is the wage rate. The relationship between the wage rate and demand for hired labour tends to be on the basis of factors such as price variations of green leaf in the sector. The average market price of one kilogram of green tea leaves varied between Rs. 5 to Rs. 7 in Nilgiris, while it varied between Rs. 12.05 to Rs. 13.25 (Indian rupees) in Sri Lanka.

Insights from the field reiterated that there are two types of wage rates exist in the district of Nilgiris. One is determined on the basis of amount of tea leaves plucked by the hired workers (piece-rate) and the other is based on the time spent in the field by them (time-rate). The hired workers who pluck 25 to 30 kilograms of green leaves are supposed to get a wage of Rs. 50 per day and the workers who pluck between 8.30 a.m. and to 5.00 p.m. are given Rs. 70 in Nilgiris. In contrast, the hired tea pluckers are paid Rs. 200 to Rs. 225 per day (six to seven hours of work from 7.30 am in general) in Sri Lanka which is equivalent to Rs.102.50 to Rs. 115.25 in Indian Rupees.

The wage rate for the hired tea workers is less when compared to the existing wages in other sectors in the district of Nilgiris. The workers involved in plucking of tea do not need any training. Moreover, availability of jobs other than tea plucking is very rare. Therefore, the opportunity in the

small tea holding is the only viable employment left for the hired workers though it is low paid in Nilgiris. The persons who have '1200 tea bushes of small tea holdings in Nilgiris also use hired workers. They seek jobs in other small tea holdings, because they do not get substantial income from their own property.

The demand for hired labour is also linked to the availability of credit facilities and the access of the small tea holders to such facilities. Often, those small holders who depend almost entirely on income from their tea holdings tend to maximize the input of family labour. Thus, for these farmers who do not have adequate resources of their own, credit may be a critical constraint to seek hired labour. Most of the small tea holders having two acres or less of land fall into this category of credit constrained farmers, and activities other than plucking are relatively kept at low ebb. In general, lack of easy access to institutional credit discourages hiring of labour, and this is true in the case of a considerable number of small tea holdings in both the countries.

As mentioned above the educated persons in the family of small tea holders in both the countries go outside the tea sector for better employment. Therefore, the reluctance of younger generation for the manual work or petty jobs in small tea holdings will be major future obstacle faced in these countries. It is also worthwhile to mention that a considerable number of the children of Nilgiris workers who studied up to secondary education seek employment in other sectors such as garment factories in Erode, Tirupur and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu.

It is obvious that the educated children of tea workers are aware of potential future prospects and are able to make their choice. Given the treatment of the society towards the working class children, they do not like to be identified as plantation workers. Further, the parents take great trouble in educating their children. In the absence of facilities for tertiary education in the locality, the parents in Sri Lanka send their children to cities like Matara and Colombo with a view to provide higher education. The supply of hired labour is mainly from the large-scale tea estates and there are workers residing permanently in some of the small tea holdings with more than 5 hectares, in the case of Sri Lanka. However, in Nilgiris the hired workers are largely from the colonies in the vicinity of small tea holdings. In the case of Nilgiris, most of the small holders' recruit hired labour from the colonies. There are around 250 colonies each consisting of around 300 families that supply labour for the tea sector. There is no apparent shortage for hired labour in South India. The large-scale plantations hold the resident labour in the estates. Some of the small farm holders also possess resident labour in their estates. The South Indian small holders do not face labour 'shortage due to regular supply of labour from

the adjoining villages. The Sri Lankan repatriates, settled in this region, further supplement the labour market.

The parents want to see their children employed in the government sector. This has reduced the scope of expansion of the land under tea cultivation although wealthy people acquire lot of land for various commercial purposes. Vast areas of cultivable tea land remain unfilled.

Thus, it is clear that the unavailability of substantial amount of well paid jobs is the 'push factor', which leads the workers to take the low paid jobs in the small tea gardens in Nilgiris, whereas, availability of comparatively better paid jobs in the small tea holdings is the 'pull factor', which attracts the labour from large-scale estates to the small tea holdings in the tea region of low elevation in Sri Lanka.

As far as the Nilgiris is concerned, a large number of hired workers are the repatriates of Sri Lankan Tamils residing in the colonies. The small tea holders prefer generally the repatriates who had enough training in the tea estates of Sri Lanka. However, a considerable number of repatriates, engaged in TANTEA are unable to provide labour supply to the small tea holders, whereas other repatriates who reside in the colonies are the potential suppliers of hired labour for the small tea holders in this district. Interestingly, the supply-line of hired labour for the small tea holdings from the indigenous Indians remains active in Nilgiris, irrespective of the availability of migrates from Sri Lanka. Though the hired labourers have enough exposure in tea cultivation, they have not been able to become owners of small tea estates. Economic mobility in terms of ownership of small tea holdings is absent in both the countries.

The discussion so far shows that the requirement of labour for small tea holdings depends on the size of tea land. The small tea holdings with extension of less than one hectare generally manage the tasks with both the family and hired labourers. However, the tea holdings with more than one-hectare need hired labour. Comparatively the expectation of hired labour is higher in TRLE in Sri Lanka than in the district of Nilgiris in South India. Hired labourers for small tea holdings come largely from resident workers of the large-scale tea estates both in Sri Lanka and Nilgiris. In addition, potential labourers also come from small tea holdings as well. In Nilgiris, colonies neighboring the smallholdings also supply hired labour.

This study examining family labour in the small holding plantation sector in South India emerged out of the need to explore the conditions in which work is organized in contemporary labour market situations marked by stiff competition, spells of labour shortage/s, unremunerative prices and disinterest among the younger generation to engage in tea cultivation

and production (Sumitha S, 2010). Nevertheless, with increases support systems from the Commodity Boards such as the Tea Board of India, Coffee Board of India under the aegis of Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI there has been an upsurge in contribution to production from the small holder sector. Plantation, a part of agriculture as we all know, retains an important role in the economy of India. A plantation crop normally is mono-culture and includes growing of a variety of products like tea, coffee, rubber, pepper and other spices. In a larger coverage, spices also include products such as chilies, cinnamon and other products. The total value of these crops including pepper forms nearly 2 percent of India's total agricultural GDP. Due to its labour intensive nature, it has remained an important source of rural employment.

The small holding plantations especially the small and marginal farmers are continually surmounted with market volatility and trade fluctuations. Labour shortage appears to be a pressing problem leading them to adopt various measures to retain workers for cultivation and production of cash crops. However, it is also important to understand whether farmers confront this as a crisis and if so, how do they mitigate?

Therefore, the overall objective of this study is to understand the various nuances that confront the small holding plantation sector particularly among the tea growers in Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu and the coffee farmers in Coorg, Karnataka. The study specifically attempts to examine the nature and extent of engagement of 'family' as part of employment; gender relations/ dynamics in family and field; factors for higher participation of women and children in family labour; measures for retaining labour in the context of changing conditions of employment and economic relations; and the cyclical economic crisis in plantation economy. More emphatically, the study tries to understand how or do farmers perceive labour shortages and its associated crises and how do they mitigate it. The study also seeks to explore the extent of social protection measures in this sector. Also the contribution and challenges faced by the small holding sector in commodity trade is examined.

By conducting fieldwork in the tea growing district of Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu and in-depth interviews with coffee farmers and coffee estate owners in Coorg, the researchers were also posed with emerging concerns of land, labour and productivity; given the changing topography of the region i.e. shifts in agrarian relations in consonance with the market economy. Interviews conducted with small tea growers and coffee farmers clearly reflected such shifts and more importantly the absence and disinterest of younger generation of farmers and producers in such labour intensive-non-remunerative commodity production.

## Chapter 2

# Literature Review, Rationale, Objective and Methodology

Employment of women and children in particular to work in plantations as family labour is historically evident through various studies on plantation literature in India (Bhadra, 1992; Chatterjee 2001; Das 1931; Das Gupta 1999; Raman, 1999). Employment of women in plantations was sought by the planters in order to “contain the male labour force” and to “ensure a steady reproduction of ‘cheap’ labour” as costs of recruitment were expensive. Setting up of ‘family units’ of single men and women; conducting ‘depot marriages’ were some of the coercive measures for recruiting men and women (Engels, 1993). It is an acknowledged fact that more than 50% of women work in the plantation sector and are indispensable for cultivation and its production. There are numerous studies examining the conditions of women’s labour in plantations. These however, are confined to the plantation estate sector. Issues on small growers’ and workers’ coping mechanisms in the small holding sector are however covered in studies like Nagraj and Vedavalli, 2004.

With the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act 1951, employment of children was checked to a certain extent in the plantation estate sector. However, despite the implementation of various legislations working and living conditions continue to be deplorable. In the case of the small holding plantation sector it deserves mention that children do comprise a significant component of labour as family/farm labour. Few significant factors can be linked to their labour engagements, mainly the spirally costs of production, inability to pay wages to workers (Nagraj and Vedavalli, 2004) and shortage of workers from the neighbouring districts and work being agricultural in nature. Nagraj and Vedavalli’s (2004) study notes that “the land holders try to carry out the task all by themselves with the available household labour”. Non-remunerative commodity prices are another important factor for curtailing cost of production.

Children work as a part of family labour in different agricultural and home-based work. Several sources indicate that children may still be working on small holding plantations in the informal sector, particularly in the poorest sections where schools are either non-existent or seriously inadequate. Children work on the small holding farms of their families’ mostly as unpaid labour and during the peak season they work full time. This often leads to children dropping out of school as they cannot catch up with the lessons missed during the peak season. They are likely to become full-time

workers. In agriculture, children also work as tied workers where entire families provide services to their master. They do not get any payment as their master regards their work as a payment of the interest on the loans they received (Gathia, J, 2000). In areas of intensive commercial cropping, the system of a piece-rate wage has emerged and the work is contracted out to a group of labourers including children. Children often migrate from less prosperous rural areas to more prosperous areas in search of work. This displacement of a large section of the population, especially the rural and tribal labour, is one of the major causes of child labour.

Besides poverty as an explanation for the existence of child labour, the occurrence of child labour can also be explained in social and cultural terms. A social explanation is that in Indian culture the roles of the majority of the working children are not separated from the roles of adults in their families. This means that the line of differentiation between the working and living conditions of adults and children in these families is blurred. Child labour can be explained in cultural terms by pointing out the importance of the socialization or training process that is connected to the work and the fact that child labourers are mostly children from the lower castes and tribal backgrounds. There is very less information on the factors that lead to their labour engagements and the effects thereafter.

There are few noteworthy studies on the post-crisis situation in the plantation industry covering aspects of workers' conditions, closed and abandoned tea gardens, starvation deaths and suicides by workers and farmers, alternative methods to run the plantations like 'contract farming' and 'formation of cooperatives' in South India, formation of 'Operating Managing Committees' (OMCs) in West Bengal, issue of land rights to workers and so on (CEC 2007; Hayami and Damodaran, 2004; Nair and Menon, 2007; PBKMS 2005). VVGNLI's Research Studies series (2004) had examined aspects of contractual arrangements of labour in the plantations and small holding sector in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka and Assam. These studies broadly focused on the central parameters of labour contracts for example tenure, wages, extra-wages, terms of work, non-pecuniary benefits etc. These studies also sought to examine the survival mechanisms adopted by workers in the tea sector amidst the working and living conditions and in the larger context of the global commodity crisis.

A review of these studies conducted especially in Tamil Nadu reflect especially for the case of the Bagadas that their shift in cultivation from agriculture to tea that has resulted in changing labour relations and displacement of male workers. This study has also captured the occupational history of the respondents working in both estate and small holder sector. The NRPPD Discussion paper series by CDS, Trivandrum

(2010) includes a study that has specifically examined the small holders in the coffee sector (Upendranadh, 2010). This study has examined the ways and means for economic viability and sustainability for this plantation crop. It has highlighted the importance of vertical integration of the small producers and has laid down key recommendations for sustainable livelihood of small farmers with the help of stakeholders of this industry. Another study under the NRPPD series has covered aspects of livelihood and employment of workers in rubber and spices plantations (Rajasenan, 2010). This study while examining the existence of a causal relationship between price and average daily employment in rubber plantation found various other factors affecting employment. This study however does not provide much insight into the livelihood and other aspects of the small holders particularly in spices plantations.

## **Small-Holding Plantation Crops in South India**

### *Production of Plantation Crops*

Among the various plantation crops, coffee is produced in an area of around 3.5 lakh hectares, pre-dominantly in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. As estimated (post-monsoon) in 2010-2011 by United Planters Association of South India (UPASI)<sup>4</sup>, 292,990 tonnes of coffee of both varieties Robusta and Arabica<sup>5</sup> were produced from South India. The share of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu are 70.7%, 21.3% and 6.9% respectively whereas the share of other regions is 1%<sup>6</sup>.

Tea along with coffee is yet another important plantation crop. South India produced 243.4 million kilograms of tea in year 2010, i.e. 25 percent of All India production (UPASI). Tea in Tamil Nadu is grown largely in the districts of Nilgiris and Coimbatore (NABARD 2006) whereas Idukki and Wayanad are the main tea growing districts in Kerala. Among spices, pepper and cardamom<sup>7</sup> are the significant plantation crops. In production, Kerala accounts for the highest followed by Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In the year 2006-2007, pepper production was 33950, 12000 and 4000 tonnes and cardamom 8545, 1725 and 965 tons respectively in each of these states<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.upasi.org/statistics-coffee.html>, Viewed on 28.04.2011.

<sup>5</sup> Arabica is grown on higher elevations between 3000 -6000 feet which Robusta is grown below 3000 feet.

<sup>6</sup> Chattopadhyay, Shatadru and John, Pramod, 'Bitter Beans, Coffee crisis and its impact in India', Koffie Coalitie, Partners in Change, 2007, <http://www.picindia.org/system/files/Bitter%20beans.pdf> viewed on 10/6/11

<sup>7</sup> The smaller variety of cardamom is grown in these areas and the larger variety are found in Sikkim and West Bengal.

<sup>8</sup> Spices Board of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Accessed on 28.05.2011

Coffee is largely grown as multi-crop with spices like pepper, cardamom, arcanut, citrus fruit bearing trees, vanilla etc. 60 percent of pepper is produced as an intercrop with coffee (Upendranadh, 2010: 31). At the All India level, the aggregate production of natural rubber from April '10 to Feb '11 was 807,550 tons, an increase of 3.4 % from the corresponding period of 2009-2010. The export of natural rubber too increased from 19,055 tons to 21,908 tons for the same period<sup>9</sup>. 81 % of total All India Area under Rubber is in the state of Kerala.

### *Small Holders in Production*

Such 'cash' or plantation crops are produced both by the estate sector and the indigenous small holder sector. The Report on the Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India, 1949, defines the small holding as "a holding on which plantation crops are grown by a cultivator and his family with the help of occasional outside labour" (Tharakan, 1998: 31). In South India, with the advent of plantations and European presence, 'proprietary planters' got established as small holders who were solely Europeans. Slowly with the penetration of tea as 'profitable crop' and the preference for tea companies such European proprietary planters got phased out (ibid). However, there were indigenous farmers as small holders who took up cultivation of plantation crops, initially coffee circa late 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid). Other plantation crops like rubber, spices and later tea became important plantation crops for trade.

Upendranadh's (2010) study mentions that among the 2, 20,825 coffee holdings in the country during 2007-2008, 218,116 (98.8%) holdings belonged to small farmers with less than 10 hectares of land. These accounted for about 75% of the total coffee area within which, holdings less than 2 hectares accounted for 80.9 per cent (Upendranadh, 2010: 9). As estimated by the Tea Board of India from the total tea production of 980.82 million kgs in 2008, 257.46 million kgs i.e. 26.25 percent was produced from the small holder sector<sup>10</sup> and 99 percent of tea producers in South India are small holders (Hayami and Damodaran, 2004: 3993). In 2007, All India there were 1, 57,504 small growers (area less than 10.12 hectares) and 1,686 big growers (having more than 10.12 hectares of land) in tea production from the total number of 1, 59,190 growers<sup>11</sup>. The Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, for example, holds the larger share in tea production from the small

<sup>9</sup> Rubber Board of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, <http://rubberboard.org.in/monstatsdisplay.asp?id=135>, accessed on 13.06.2011.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/stat/Production07.pdf>, Viewed on 24.05.2011. Small holders are those holding plantation areas upto 10.12 hectares of land.

<sup>11</sup> Tea Board of India, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, GOI, accessed on 22.03.2011

holder sector. Most of the cardamom plantations are owned by big land holding farmers while about 90 percent of pepper plantations are owned by small growers (Rajasenan, 2010). In Kerala with its progressive land reforms policy exempted all plantation crops from land ceiling. This along with other factors led to the increase in the area under small holdings from 34 percent in 1946 to 90 percent in 1995-1996 (ibid: 14).

## **Labour in Small Holding Plantation Sector**

### *Social Composition*

The abolition of slave labour created the possibility of labour in southern plantations. This slave labour belonged largely from the low castes given the feudal and rigid caste structure. The major slave castes during the latter part of 19<sup>th</sup> century were *Pallar*, *Pariayar*, *Cherumar*, *Malar*, *Holeyar* and others while the landowning castes included the Brahmanar, Vellar, Reddy, Kapu etc from the Madras Presidency and the Nairs and Syrian Christians in Thiruvithamkur (Travancore). Plantation labour especially in the estate sector comprised of various *adivasis* like the *Kanikkar* and *Muthuvar* of Thiruvithamkur, *Badagar* and *Thodar* of Nilagiri and the *Naicker*, *Paniyar* and *Kurumbar* of Wayanad. It is said that the Kanan Devan Hills Plantations (KDHP) was established by completely banishing the *Muthuvar* tribe (Raman 2002: 10). Many scholars observed that with the penetration of the European capital economy vis-à-vis plantations “destroyed the social fabric of this region” and “dispossessed these *adivasis* of their communal property”. Outbreaks of famine, pestilence apart from factors like caste discrimination pushed the depressed castes from various parts of Tamil Nadu, Bihar, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and Konkan coast to work in plantations. The major Labour Catchment Areas (LCAs) through the *kangani* system of labour recruitment in plantations were from Salem, Madurai, Ramanad, Tirunalveli, Tiruchirappalli, Tanjavur and Coimbatore (ibid: 10-13). Recent studies show that there is a change in the social composition of workforce with in-migration from far eastern areas like Assam, West Bengal and Bihar.

### *Size of Small Holders and Workforce*

The small holder sector typically comprises of farms growing plantation crops together with other crops in small holdings ranging from half a hectare to three hectares of farm land. Such farms “rely mainly on family labour which gets supplemented by casual labour during harvesting season” (Hayami and Damodaran, 2004). Family labour is one of the salient features of the small holder sector. As stated earlier, small holding by definition meant the engagement of the cultivator and

his family in cultivation of any plantation crop with occasional outside labour.

In the Nilgiri district, Tamil Nadu 69.5 percent of cultivable area is under tea and there are around 65,000 small holders, 80 percent of whom own land 2.5 acre in size. About 3 lakh families and 2 lakh workers are engaged in cultivation and production of tea in Nilgiris (Nagraj and Vedavalli 2004). The Nilgiri region comprise of tribal groups such as *Todas*, *Kotas*, *Bagadas*, *Kurumbas* and the *Irulas*. Of these the *Bagadas*, traditionally agriculturists engaged in potato cultivation, after the blight disease shifted to tea cultivation around 1980s. They are spread especially in Coonoor, Kotagiri and Kunda regions (ibid). The labour force in these farms are largely migrants from districts of Trichy, Salem, Tirunelveli, Coimbatore and Chengelpet; few from Kerala and Mysore (ibid). Data from Rajasenan's (2010) study on Kerala shows that there are a) 4, 82,068 number of small growers in pepper and 37,190 in cardamom plantations; 253720 estimated number of workers in pepper and 73,795 in cardamom of which women workers constitute 1,76,129 (69.4%) and 48,898 (66.3%) respectively (Rajasenan, 2010: 26).

### ***Labour Shortage***

Engagements of 'outside labour' for production are also found to be common in the small holder sector. Most of the cardamom plantations in Kerala hire contract labour from Kambam area of Theni district of Tamil Nadu (Rajasenan, 2010:13). Upendranadh's study notes that despite increase in the labour force in the case of the Kodagu district, Karnataka from 197,550 in 2001- 02 to 254,001 in 2007-08 (Upendranadh, 2010: 6), both the small holder and the estate sector<sup>12</sup> continue to experience severe labour shortages for coffee cultivation and production. These plantation crops are highly labour intensive but labour requirements for coffee unlike tea are seasonal.

The farmers face difficulties in retaining labour due to high cost of production especially wages. There is also a marked absence of the young generation of labour given better access to education and other vocational opportunities and their absolute disinterest to work as plantation labour. Rajasenan's (2010) study has shown that MGNREGA has also acted as a deterring factor in discouraging migration from neighbouring states. There were requests from the farmers to engage women in employment

<sup>12</sup> Here in coffee cultivation, plantations over 5 hectares are covered under the Plantation Labour Act 1951. Farm labour of the small holder sector is also given some social security benefits as permanent workers in order to retain them (C. Upendranadh, 2010, op.cit).

through the MGNREGA during the off season period as it was hampering availability of labour in the plantations (Rajasenan, 2010:19). Boom in the construction sector in Tamil Nadu has also hampered labour availability. Currently in-migration is being encouraged from states like Assam and Bihar. These again pose serious problems like language barrier, acclimatization for the migrant workers and increase in training costs, decline in productivity as producers' concern (Upendranadh, 2010). This aspect is a key area of concern for the present study.

### ***Organisation of Labour***

It is an established fact that workers in the estate plantation sector are more organized than the small holding sector. Given the nature of employment and the engagement of family labour it is found that there is less influence of trade union activity in such plantation pockets where workers unlike the estate sector are not a resident labour force. The small holders as such are in the process of organizing themselves in order to improve their own bargaining capacity for remunerative prices. But across the small holder sector Rajasenan's study notes that workers in the spice sector are found to be more organized than in the rubber plantations although conditions of work are worse off in this sector (Rajasenan, 2010). Much more exploration is required in order to understand the degree of unionization of workers in the small holding sector.

### **Women and Children in Employment**

#### ***Planters' Rationale for Family Labour***

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### ***Child Labour***

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Besides poverty as an explanation for the existence of child labour, the occurrence of child labour can also be explained in social and cultural terms. A social explanation is that in Indian culture the roles of the majority of the working children are not separated from the roles of adults in their families. This means that the line of differentiation between the working and living conditions of adults and children in these families is blurred. Child labour

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<sup>13</sup> US Department of Labor (1997): *By the Sweat and Toil of Children (Volume IV), Consumer Labels and Child Labor*. US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, Washington, USA.

can be explained in cultural terms by pointing out the importance of the socialization or training process that is connected to the work and the fact that child labourers are mostly children from the lower castes and tribal backgrounds (Dak, 2002). There is very less information on the factors that lead to their labour engagements and the effects thereafter.

### *Studies on Crisis and Post -Crisis Periods of Plantation Economy*

There are few noteworthy studies on the crisis and post-crisis situation in the plantation industry covering aspects of workers' conditions, closed and abandoned tea gardens, starvation deaths and suicides by workers and farmers, alternative methods to run the plantations like 'contract farming' and 'formation of cooperatives' in South India, formation of 'Operating Managing Committees' (OMCs) in West Bengal, issue of land rights to workers and so on (CEC 2007; Hayami and Damodaran, 2004; Nair and Menon 2007; PBKMS 2005). VVGNLI's Research Studies series (2004) had examined aspects of contractual arrangements of labour in the plantations and small holding sector in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka and Assam (2004). These studies broadly focused on the central parameters of labour contracts for example tenure, wages, extra-wages, terms of work, non-pecuniary benefits etc. These studies also sought to examine the survival mechanisms adopted by workers in the tea sector amidst the working and living conditions and in the larger context of the global commodity crisis.

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<sup>14</sup> For details please see p 131 in K. Nagraj and L. Vedavalli 2004, op.cit

provide much insight into the livelihood and other aspects of the small holders particularly in spices plantations.

### **Rationale of the Present Study**

The fragmentation of the estate sector as a manifestation of the crisis in the plantation economy has resulted in the mushrooming of the small holder sector. The small holder sector is emerging as suitable and economically viable alternative to cultivation of commodity crops. Although the plantation economy in South India is largely from the small holder sector there is sporadic information on the various dimensions of labour in this region. Labour studies in India are mostly situated in the plantation estate sector. The above literature survey on small holding plantation sector reflects that issues around women and children's employment have not been addressed. Moreover such studies have tended to examine workers in the estate sector as compared with workers in the small holding sector. There is a paucity of literature on factors that trigger conditions for women and children to be employed as family labour. Another key area of concern is whether labour shortage per se is a reason for engaging family labour. How do the small holders mitigate such crisis of labour shortage; how do women and children view family labour; and most importantly, what are the repercussions vis-à-vis gender dynamics; children's education and aspirations are some of the key research questions in this study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To understand the nature and extent of engagement of 'family' including women and children as part of employment in the small holding sector and economic implications thereof
2. To study what are the social, economic and cultural contexts and factors that lead to the more involvement of family labour, especially women and children in small holding sector
3. To examine gender dynamics of family labour in the small holding sector
4. To examine how does involvement in family labour affect children in their education, skill development and aspirations
5. To understand how has family labour been perceived by women and children and whether it reproduces/reinforces any specific social relations
6. To explore the extent of social protection measures and organising efforts in this sector
7. To examine the evolution, contribution and challenges faced by the small holders/growers/producers in commodity trade

## **Methodology**

### **Area of the Study**

This study is conducted in one of the major tea growing districts in Tamil Nadu – Nilgiris and some preliminary observations are made from the coffee growers in Coorg in Karnataka. These areas have been specifically chosen as they lie in a geographical continuum and have a history of small holding cultivation of ‘commercial’ plantation crops<sup>15</sup>.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study examines the conditions of producers, workers and their families in small-holding plantation sector particularly in Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu to a certain extent amongst the coffee farmers of Coorg in Karnataka. In-depth interviews, interview of key informants and focus Group Discussions are some of the techniques were used for this study along with observation method. There were 50 respondents in Nilgiris and selected few respondents in Coorg. This study will help to understand various dimensions of labour not just from the workers’ perspective but also from the producers’ perspective the ways and means to adapt to the changing nature of labour market economy and to understand the trade-offs women in particular have to make for their families’ survival. It would also reflect the challenges faced by the small holders in commodity trade.

Secondary data is examined from various government, non-government agencies, small holder associations etc on labour force, production, commodity price and export/import of various crops under small holders. A review of secondary literature corroborates this study. Primary Data will be collected through various stages with the help of local field investigators using the above mentioned research methods. Both qualitative and quantitative data will be generated and analysed for this study.

Other methods that were adopted included interview of key informants and observation method. Key informants include local/village leaders, *panchayat* members, trade union leaders, officials from the various government bodies like the Coffee Board of India, Tea Board of India, Spices Board of India, UPASI, and other Small Holder Associations, cooperatives, bought-leaf factory owners, agents etc.

### **Universe of the Study**

The primary reference unit will be the household. Households cultivating plantation crops in small holdings less than 2 hectares of land will be the unit of study. The key respondents will be women and children.

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<sup>15</sup> See C. Upendranath (2010), op.cit; Ravi Raman (2002), op.cit; P.K. Michael Tharakan (1998) op.cit.

## **Research Design**

The study would adopt an exploratory research design. Some of the methods for primary data collection would be a) Village-level inquiry through house-listing b) case studies by conducting in-depth interviews and d) interview of key informants e) Focus Group Discussions and Observation method would also be used.

Sample size and selection of area will be determined during the preliminary visit by a) mapping out the distribution of small holders having less than 2 hectares of land in each geographical region; b) Two villages from each district will be selected keeping in mind the heterogeneity of social composition of the population, and the location of the villages; one, having greater accessibility to road, transport, market and other facilities and the other located situated in a remote place. There are four areas where field work was carried out in Nilgiris namely Kotagiri, Coonoor, Ooty and Gudulur. In Coorg district, field work was carried out in two areas namely Medikeri and Virajpet. Each area in two districts has 50 respondents. Village-level inquiry through house-listing in two select villages from each district will be conducted as a preliminary basis for selecting the households.

The selection of respondents would be made at various levels through 1) purposive random selection of small holders/producers/farmers 2) purposive random selection of workers (male and female) in such small holdings 3) purposive selection of children employed either as family labour or as worker. Since the respondents would include children, separate set of interview schedules would be prepared for each category of respondents for generating data. Children based on their ability to respond will be interviewed. Care would be taken to ensure that the responses are not influenced by the family elders. Other methods to be adopted would include interview of key informants and observation method. Key informants would include local/village leaders, panchayat members, trade union leaders, officials from the various government bodies like the Coffee Board of India, Tea Board of India, Spices Board of India, UPASI, and other small holder associations, cooperatives, bought-leaf factory owners, agents etc in all the three states.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The study is located at a geographical region therefore generalizations based on the study should be avoided. The study seeks to address few key research questions. Translation of qualitative data, accessibility to respondents, key informants, government officials, trade unions and other important stakeholders were some limitations to the study.

## Chapter 3

# Wages and Working Conditions of Small Tea and Coffee Growers

### i. Economics of Small Tea Growers in Nilgiris

Typical small tea growers in Nilgiris have an area of 5 acres or lower. Plucking cost is Rs 200 per day. Average plucking volume is 30 kgs on an average. Peak plucking season is from June to September. Shortage of water is an issue. Hired workers are used during the peak months. Rest of the year, they manage with family labour. Typical hours of working are from 10 in the morning to 5 in the evening with 1-hour lunch break in between.

A typical 1-acre land is divided into four sections. Average plucking days are approximately 7 days in a month. Assuming that 30 kgs are plucked in each day, total plucking volume in a month is 210kgs. Assuming an average price of Rs 20 per kg of green leaf, total revenue generated from sale of green leaves would be Rs 4200. Household members also work in other small plantations as hired labour. Assuming that they get 10 days of outside work in a month and wages being Rs 200 per day, earning from wages in a month would be Rs 2000. Total monthly household revenue would be approximately Rs 6000. Total annual revenue earnings in a year would be about Rs 75,000 approximately. On the expenditure side, cost of inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, water, seeds) would be around Rs 25,000 per annum. Cost of hired labour during peaking plucking months would be around Rs 20,000. Total per annum expenditure would be about Rs 45,000.

Thus, the income from 1-acre of small tea plantation is Rs 30,000 (Rs 75,000-Rs 45,000) per annum. Those who are having 5-acre land would earn about 1.5 lakhs in a year. This is not a very sizable profit by stretch of imagination. It's like supplementary income for the household and kind of secondary income in addition to other sources of livelihood.

### ii. Wages and Working Conditions of STGs in Coffee Plantations in Coorg

The economies of small coffee plantation in Coorg is somewhat similar to that of small tea plantation in Nilgiris. Two types of coffee are grown in the Coorg district that is both Arabica and Robusta. Average land-holdings of Coffee plantations are larger than that of small tea plantations. Average

land-holdings of small coffee producers is on average 5 acre. They do invariably use hired labour. Coffee is an annual crop. Coffee pickings are mainly a three-month affair annually. Rest of the year are maintenance activities. Hired labour is pre-dominantly used during picking season. However, all most all the coffee growers that were interviewed complained about the paucity of labour. Most of the hired workers are migrant workers. Arabica plants take 4 years to produce first crop. Robusta plants take 6 years to produce the first crops. Arabica plants remain productive up to 40-50 years whereas Robusta plants remain productive up to almost 100 years. Price wise Arabica fetches better value than Robusta. Cost of production of Arabica is higher than that of Robusta. The industry-wise standard prevailing daily wages for hired workers in Coorg is Rs 263. It is difficult to get workers at this wage rate. Sometimes coffee growers provide other incentives like housing, subsidized rations, medical facilities in addition to monetary wages to attract workers. Even though profit per acre of land in coffee plantation is higher than that of small tea plantations, volatility is also higher in coffee plantations as price fluctuations are higher in coffee trade. Tea plantations are year round engagements and basically are mono-culture whereas coffee is annual crop and it is interspersed with other plantation crops like pepper and cardamom. In that sense coffee is grown along with few other plantation crops supported by the same ecosystem. The combined profit from coffee and other plantation crops are in the range of 2 to 2.5 lakhs per 5-acre of land.

### **iii. Use of Family Labour and Gender Dimensions**

This section attempts to address few specific objectives particularly with regard to the extent of the use of family labour in the small grower segment of the tea sector and its gendered dimensions therein. Beginning with defining the term family labour, growers' perceptions around it across generations are particularly revealing. Importantly, women's role in cultivation and tea economy is worth examining as their work participation gets subsumed as contributing to family income and economy with a relative absence of participation in paid labour. Krishnaraj and Kanchi (2008) argue that the labour power is produced within the family in a 'framework of personal relations dictated by kinship and conjugal ties' and in a 'non-contractual form' (Krishnaraj and Kanchi, 2008: 29). Thus women's work as farmers is seen as part of domestic responsibility.

#### **Who is a small holder and what is family labour?**

A small holding as defined by the Report on the Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India, 1949 is "a holding on which plantation

crops are grown by a cultivator and his family with the help of occasional outside labour” (Tharakan, 1998: 31). According to the Tea Board of India (TBI), small holders are those who are holding plantation areas up to 10.12 hectares while the NIC (2008) classification of ‘tea growers’ shows growers holding land up to 10 hectares. For this study, the TBI classification is used. As was observed from the visits to the small tea growers in Nilgiris and coffee farmers in Coorg, engagement of family labour (read women) was common particularly in smaller sized holdings in the case of both tea and coffee. In the case of the latter, even in farm size as large as 5 acres, women family members were engaged in cultivation.

Nevertheless, the size of land holdings appears as a significant factor in determining the presence or an absence of family and or hired labour. According to one male respondent, aged 42 from Kaarukapalli village, Gudalur block mentioned that six years ago child labour also existed in the farms but now it is no longer practiced. Discussions revealed that there had been pro-active state interventions for its prevention and abolishment under the Child Labour Act (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986. The TBI statistics (table 1) provides the current distribution of small holders in south India across the tea cultivating regions in terms of acreage and number of bought leaf factories. Nilgiris is the only region in Tamil Nadu where there are small growers. They are 45,139 small tea growers in number cultivating tea in 32, 815.56 hectares of land. In Tamil Nadu 52.5 percent of total area under tea is cultivated by the small growers. As registered under the TBI there are 199 self-help groups with 9960 members cultivating tea under 6719.6 hectares of land. According to the TBI there are also 168 bought leaf factories in the Nilgiris.

**Table 1: Statistics on South Indian Tea Industry (As on 15-06-2017)**

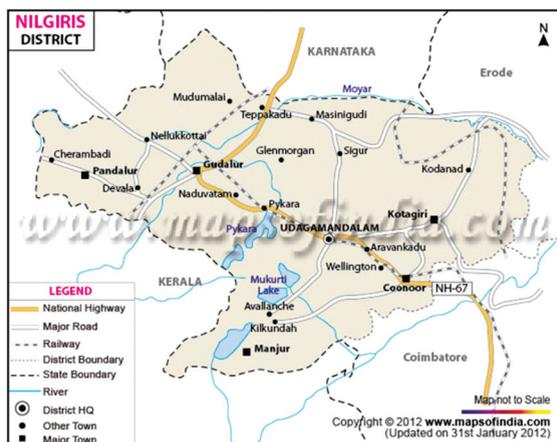
State	District	No. & area under tea (ha)						SHG			Factory (Nos)	
		No. of Big Gardens	Tea Area (ha)	No. of Small Growers Enumerated (E)	Tea Area (ha) (E)	Total No. of Growers Enumerated	Total Tea Area (ha)	Nos	Members	Area (ha)	EF	BLF
Tamil Nadu	Coimbatore	34	11698.98	4	1.45	38	11700.43	0	0	0	24	0
	Kanyakumari	3	235.37	0	0	3	235.37	0	0	0	2	0
	Nilgiris	93	15997.57	45139	32815.56	45232	48813.13	199	9906	6719.6	46	168
	Theni	3	978	0	0	3	978	0	0	0	2	0
	Tirunelveli	3	803.77	0	0	3	803.77	0	0	0	3	0
	<b>Total</b>		<b>136</b>	<b>29713.69</b>	<b>45143</b>	<b>32817.01</b>	<b>45279</b>	<b>62530.7</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>9906</b>	<b>6719.6</b>	<b>77</b>

Kerala	Idukki	56	22034.77	4764	2998.84	4820	25033.61	26	1011	650.74	43	6
	Kollam	2	548.71	0	0	2	548.71	0	0	0	1	0
	Palakkad	4	777.89	0	0	4	777.89	0	0	0	4	0
	Trissur	1	529.76	0	0	1	529.76	0	0	0	1	0
	Trivandrum	4	835.19	0	0	4	835.19	0	0	0	1	0
	Wayanad	24	6228.68	2609	1913.91	2633	8142.59	7	173	123.88	11	4
	<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>30955</b>	<b>7373</b>	<b>4912.75</b>	<b>7464</b>	<b>35867.75</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>1184</b>	<b>774.62</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>10</b>
Karnataka	Chikmagalur	16	1519.32	0	0	0	1519.32	0	0	0	7	1
	Coorg	2	300.82	0	0	0	300.82	0	0	0	1	0
	Hassan	1	396	0	0	0	396	0	0	0	1	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>2216.14</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2216.14</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>
South India		<b>246</b>	<b>62884.83</b>	<b>52516</b>	<b>37729.76</b>	<b>52743</b>	<b>100614.6</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>11090</b>	<b>7494.2</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>179</b>

Source: Office of the Tea Board of India, Coonoor, June 2017

### Profile of STGs in Nilgiris

An STG organizer based in Kotagiri mentioned that there are about 60,000 STGs in Nilgiris district. Almost 70-80 percent of them have land holdings between 0.5 acre to 1 acre and 400-500 STGs have land area above 10 acres. He also mentioned that small holders with 0.5- 1 acre of land only engage family labour for tea cultivation whereas those with landholdings of between 1-4 acres involve both family and outside hired labour with 1-2 workers. And earlier, children were engaged in labouring in the farms but nowadays most of the family members do not engage or wish to engage their children in farm labour<sup>16</sup>. Gudalur block, Kotagiri and villages near Avalanche were some of the sites where field work was conducted (see Nilgiris district map for details).



<sup>16</sup> Fieldwork, Kotagiri, December, 2016

### **Profile of select respondents, Nilgiris**

From the 50 respondents interviewed, 34 were male and 16 female respondents respectively. Out of the 16 female respondents, 1 had primary education, 4 had completed secondary level, 1 senior secondary, 7 were graduates and 3 were not literate. The educational status of male respondents were 2 with primary education, 17 had completed secondary level, 2 senior secondary, 6 were graduates and 3 were not literate. In terms of educational attainments, there is a less gendered difference as such between the select respondents. Importantly, the respondents were mainly represented by the Badaga community followed by Sri Lankan expatriates and then the Malayalees. Only 2 respondents belonged to the Scheduled caste community and 10 from the OBC. Growers stated that earlier education was less prioritized and job opportunities were scarce, so all the family members toiled in the farms. But now children of the present generation are refusing to farm as well as prefer going out to adjoining towns and cities in search of employment.

### **Patterns of land ownership**

None of the respondents had farm size less than an acre. Majority, i.e. 30 male respondents and 11 female respondents had land holdings of 1-3 acres. There were 3 male respondents with 3-5 acres and only 5 male respondents had holdings above 5 acres. Women tea growers were mostly situated with average land holdings of 1-3 acres in the sample studied. None had holdings above 3 acres. 50 percent of both male and female respondents had bought the land themselves while only 20 percent had ancestral land among the male respondents and only one from the female respondents had ancestral land. 53 percent of the male respondents and 18 percent of female respondents were cultivating tea for over 21 years. Approximately over 85 percent of male respondents and 63 percent of female respondents were cultivating tea for over 11 years. And importantly 76 percent of the male respondents' spouses were working on their family farms from the sample studied. One could establish that women like men are mostly engaged in almost all activities of cultivation like clearing/cleaning and overall maintenance of the garden but the task of tea leaf plucking was majorly done by women both as farmers and as workers.

### **Social Composition**

The Nilgiris district comprises of the Upper and Lower Nilgiris. In the Upper Nilgiris tea was cultivated since over almost four decades mostly by the Badaga community. But the recent issues facing tea production is

that the present generation of this community is not interested to labour and have largely moved to places such as Coimbatore and Tirupur for employment and business opportunities. As pointed out by a BLF owner<sup>17</sup>, the Badaga community has a stronghold in lobbying with the TBI as they are more educated, have community cooperation and more over are politically very strong in this region. In the Lower Nilgiris, in Gudalur region, the populace mainly comprises of the tribal along with the Sri Lankan Repatriates. More importantly this area comprises of the Primitive Tribal Groups as classified under the Census of India. They are the Kattu Naickans, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans and the Todas. There is also a considerable settlement of natives from the adjoining states such as Kerala and Karnataka in this region and engaged in tea cultivation. In the Gudalur block, there are remote villages such as Pandalur, 60 kms from Gudalur and located in interior forest areas like Yellamaria and Gandhinagar villages in this block where the communities are engaged in tea cultivation.

It is interesting to place the topography in this context where there is clear segregation of hamlets according to the community/caste groups. For instance, in a landscape around Ooty/Kotagiri, clusters of houses of Badaga community are interspersed by farm lands with another community of the Sri Lankan expatriates live at a distance. As informed during group discussions<sup>18</sup>, there are about 50,000-60,000 Sri Lankan repatriates living in this region along with natives from the adjoining states of Kerala and Karnataka. Such social segregation reflecting caste/community status is visible through residential segregation in the Nilgiris region.

### **Land holdings in Kotagiri**

As mentioned all the small tea growers in Kotagiri were from the Badaga community. It is important to note that the small tea growers own land holdings size between 1-3 acres and ownership here is patrilineal. This community has been cultivating tea for few decades in Tamil Nadu and as mentioned earlier there is a distinct community/caste based residential segregation in this region. None of the women small tea growers excluding one, responded that the farm land was either in their name or a joint property. From the 25 respondents of Kotagiri region, all the respondents reported that both of them farm their lands while the ownership rests with the male counterparts. Tea growers in Nilgiris have been cultivating tea in some cases for as long as 40 years.

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<sup>17</sup> Discussions with a BLF owner, December 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Fieldwork, Kotagiri, December 2016

## **Contentions around Land in Gudalur**

An important aspect here is the status of land specifically in Gudalur block of Nilgiris. Tea and other crops are largely cultivated in areas which are under the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryoywari) Act, 1969 adjoining the forest reserves of this region. One of the small growers from Gudalur pointed out that because of the forest reserve area no new bought leaf factories can be established in this region thus hampering access to sale of green leaf and remunerative price<sup>19</sup>. In a place called Durumagiri, 5 kms from Gudalur stays a family of Sri Lankan expatriates. Vajiayee, 45 year old is a graduate and a small tea grower. His father came from Sri Lanka in 1970 and acquired some two acres of land under Section 17 which is an occupied government land. Most people in this area have occupied such land which is under the department of forest, Government of Tamil Nadu. Along with his wife he farms the land with occasional help of outside waged labour. They are mostly Tamilian or Malayali women who are paid Rs 180/- per day he says. He also goes for paid work in other farms where he is paid Rs 400/- per day. With respect to future, he mentioned that once his children complete their education he plans to move outside and moreover sell this farm land<sup>20</sup>. It is however not clear how such transactions are made possible in encroached government land. Such responses of moving out from the village were noticeable in cases where the growers were of an older generation with children pursuing higher education. The story was almost similar for Mallai, aged 47 who feels that he will work in his farm and as waged labour as long as he can. His father too came from Sri Lanka. He has studied upto primary education. His children now are graduates<sup>21</sup>.

## **Labour and system of wage payment**

### *Labour shortage*

Only six male respondents reported labour shortage however their experiences were not as adverse as compared with the coffee growers in the Coorg, another site of study. Most of the tea growers as the narratives illustrate did manage with family labour that includes work on farms by both the spouses and occasionally interspersed with hired labour mainly women labour again. The small tea growers in Nilgiris do engage in hiring of outside labour. However, the Badaga community for instance, cultivates themselves their own land that ranges from 1-2

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<sup>19</sup> Fieldwork, Apukodu village, June 2017

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview, Gudalur, January 2017

<sup>21</sup> Personal interview, Gudalur, January 2017

acres in size. Most of this land is ancestral property and they have been cultivating tea for over few decades. According to an organizer of small producers, only 2-3 percent of the Badagas hire outside labour. The main tea plucking season is between June-September and for the remaining of six months they are engaged in giving inputs for maintenance to their land including use of pesticides<sup>22</sup>. This is also a period when they require paid labour.

On the question of labour shortage, from the field visits to both Nilgiris and Coorg it was found that amongst the coffee growers of Coorg labour shortage was more acute, prominent and therefore wages were high. Discussions with coffee growers in pockets of Coorg verified that labour shortage was acute in this region. Requirement of labour was substantiated by migrant labour mainly since the last 3-4 years from Assam, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar. They comprise almost 50 percent of the workforce in Coorg. The large coffee growers also mentioned that these workers are provided housing, electricity, water supply, firewood and other amenities<sup>23</sup>.

### *Labour and the system of wage payment*

Earlier labour was sought from the bordering states of Karnataka such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu for coffee cultivation. Now they no longer migrate for work. There are labour lines in these areas as according to this coffee grower the landholding is large almost 50 acres of land, a parental property. The wages paid to workers vary from Rs 250- 500/- while the task given per worker is 150 kilograms per day @ Rs 400/-. The coffee grower argues that they are paying more than the wages i.e. Rs 260/- under the Plantation Labour Act 1951 because of labour shortage. Earlier they were paying the local labour Rs 150/- per day and now they have started demanding wages at par with migrant labour<sup>24</sup>. Altaf, another small coffee grower who owns 5 ½ acres of land grows pepper along with coffee. He hires 9 workers during the season and he himself works in the field. He says that the coffee beans have to be safeguarded. So he himself does the job of a watchman in his own farm. He does acknowledge that if there is a good harvest then from 5 acres land he can easily profit about Rs 3 lakhs or else on an average profit is Rs 30,000/- per acre. He is not a member of any association<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Discussion at Kotagiri, December 2016

<sup>23</sup> Group discussions with coffee growers in Madakeri, December 2016

<sup>24</sup> Interview with coffee growers in Vijaypet, Coorg, December 2016

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with a coffee grower, Madakeri, December 2016

Discussions with another large coffee grower, both husband and wife owns property of 60 acres where they have about 30 permanent labour threw some more insights<sup>26</sup>. They get contract labour to work in the farms who are either paid @ Rs 10 per tree or Rs 500/- per day. For pruning they bargain but nevertheless pay Rs 8 per tree. The grower mentioned that plucking in 10 acres of land can be completed in four days only if work is supervised. He says that both he and his wife supervise work. Earlier he practiced interpolating of both varieties of coffee - Arabica and Robusta. This grower couple categorically mentioned that there was no work culture amongst workers in coffee cultivation. Alcoholism is rampant and he is compelled to supply a local drink to workers as *bakshish*. It costs him Rs 54/- he says<sup>27</sup>. This aspect was however not highlighted in the case of the Nilgiris.

Nevertheless, in Nilgiris there is no fixed wage payment system or mechanism. In some parts like in Kotagiri wages are Rs 200/- per day for women and Rs 400/- for men for 30 kilograms of tea leaves plucked and Rs 5/- per kilogram as overtime. And in parts of Gudalur it varies from Rs 180- Rs 450/- with Rs 3/- per kilogram of tea leaves plucked as overtime. A 42-year-old small tea grower in Karukapalli village near Gudalur owning 3 acres of farmland cultivates vegetables apart from tea. He says that he uses outside labour (wages Rs 200 for women and Rs 350 for men) but does not trust the tea workers as also the profits of the tea are negligible. What he perhaps meant was that he is unable to bestow trust on them to increase the productivity (read profitability) of tea cultivation. His annual income is approximately Rs 1.5 lakhs<sup>28</sup>. Although plucking continues throughout the year it is also dependent on other external factors such as quantum of rainfall. Less rainfall reduces the quantum of foliage in the tea bushes. In Conoor there is also a tremendous problem of water shortage as few growers complained. Workers also go out in search of work to places such as Coimbatore, Madurai and Tiruppur. Some places such as Kotagiri hire Sri Lankan Tamil labour as outside labour. Almost all households of small farmers engage family labour particularly women labour. They also work outside their own farm as waged labour. This points to the probability that small farm size/ lack of resources in form of ancestor property forces women to work as waged labour.

There are also few male small growers who also work as waged labour in others farms for supplementing their household income. The case of a 42-year-old small tea grower who cultivates along with his wife on his

<sup>26</sup> Interview at Madakeri, December 2016

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Personal interview, Fieldwork, January 2017

1.5 acre of land says that he may continue to farm as he has no other alternative. The future is uncertain he says. His daughter is married and his son is studying in class X. From tea he earns Rs 18,000/- per year and Rs 40,000/- from other crops. His annual income approximates to Rs 80,000/-. He does not hire outside labour instead he goes out for paid labour. He earns Rs 400/- per day and says that he hands over his earnings to his wife<sup>29</sup>. The burden or the pressure to cultivate and ensure production is highest for a woman as a 'wife' she has to run the household and moreover in the absence of her husband who goes out for paid labour has to manage cultivation alone.

The researchers faced limitations during fieldwork in Coorg to get access to women coffee growers and workers because of the harvest festival that was ongoing during the period of fieldwork. Therefore, a detailed account of the case of Nilgiris with respect to women small tea growers and workers is subsequently analyzed in this study.

### **Women as Small tea growers cum workers in Nilgiris**

It is important to understand whether and how women perceive their work in the family farms through few case narratives from parts of Gudalur and Kotagiri in the Nilgiri region. How are aspects such as work participation and decision making understood by these women farmers and workers? Lakshmi, aged 44 years, lives in Pandalur which is one of the backward areas in Gudalur taluk of Nilgiris district. She has been cultivating tea with her husband in their 0.5 acre of land. She has two sons who are married and stay separately. She and her husband labour outside their own farm for livelihood. She along earns Rs 4000- 6000 per month working in other farms outside which is at a distance of about 2 kms from her home. Their annual income amounts to Rs 90,000/- from all sources. They belong to the Scheduled caste community of Puners. She has been working in the farm since the age of 14 at her natal home (place called Kayunni) where they had an acre of land. She says she had to work even after marriage as this was the only source of livelihood. The land is in her husband's name and he manages the household finances as well. They are members of an STG association and pay a monthly membership fee of Rs 100/-. According to her their community is not facing any major issue with cultivating tea as they get subsidies from the TBI as well as training facilities from other departments<sup>30</sup>. Women like Laxmi's with their families have been cultivating tea for more than a decade in Tamil Nadu with the hope of a remunerative price and wages for paid labour. Sometimes they hire outside labour, who

<sup>29</sup> Personal interview, Fieldwork, January 2017

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview, Fieldwork, January 2017

are mainly women who are paid Rs 150 per day. Women labour is perhaps preferred as they are cheaper than their male counterparts. Last month<sup>31</sup> from the producer society they sold green leaves @ Rs 14.75 per kilogram while INDCO factory<sup>32</sup> rate is only Rs 10/- per kilogram<sup>33</sup>. Two decades earlier, these growers were cultivating pepper.

## **Gender and labour**

### *Gendered wage differences*

Two significant aspects can be drawn here when viewed with a gender lens. First, the predominance of significant gendered wage differences for labour. Women were earning only Rs 180-200/- while men were earning Rs 250-500/- per day. Such significant differences were found to exist across the Nilgiris and the arguments posed by the small farmers was that the men were also engaged as loaders which otherwise would be an additional cost for the farmers<sup>34</sup>. George Joseph, aged 52 years admits that there is a gender waged difference. Male workers are paid Rs 425/- day while the women are paid Rs 180/-. Meals are also provided to these workers. His wife does not farm in the fields as he hires labour and he himself works<sup>35</sup>. Second, participation of women small tea growers as paid labour outside their own farms was minimal particularly in areas around Gudalur unlike Kotagiri where the Bagada women were engaged in paid outside labour as well as farming in their own fields.

A group discussion in one of the small tea growers' society office in Appukodu village<sup>36</sup> in Nilgiris rationalized such differences in wage rates and payments as a) this has been the established norm or practice in the villages therefore socially acceptable; b) men also worked as loaders. The small tea growers here argued that for 200 kilograms of green leaves plucked, 6 bags would be required for loading purposes that would cost Rs 40-50 per bag. By paying men Rs 500/- they opined that they are getting the work done of loaders too. However, it was observed during fieldwork that women were also engaged in loading/carrying the sacks of tea leaves perhaps because of their inabilities to negotiate

<sup>31</sup> Fieldwork conducted in January 2017. The rates are of December 2016

<sup>32</sup> In 1962 the first Industrial Cooperative tea factory (Inco) was commissioned in Kundah, Nilgiris. This was proposed by the Plantation Inquiry Commission in 1956 essentially to avoid dependency on the BLFs and large estates for the sale of green leaf (Reddy and Bhowmik 1989).

<sup>33</sup> Fieldwork, December 2016

<sup>34</sup> The cost for loading/unloading was Rs 60/- per bag in the Nilgiris. Fieldwork, June 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Fieldwork, June 2017

<sup>36</sup> Group discussion, Appukodu village, June 2017

work conditions given their gendered locations. Women, also pluck the same amount as men and do the arduous work of pruning but are paid abysmally low wages.

### ***Prioritization and Decision making***

Among the Badaga community it was stated by male STGs during group discussions that the women are the key decision makers. But interestingly as a narrative highlights women were perhaps decision makers but the priorities in decision making are more towards favouring their homes and children particularly, and their own concerns and needs are sidelined regardless of having access to cash. However common or insignificant as it may seem, it is important to address such dimensions as women are the backbone of the tea economy.

Bimala, a 42-year-old woman contributes to tea cultivation in her family's one-acre farm along with her daily household chores and also working as paid labour outside her own farm. Only during the season time, she hires 1-2 labour. She mentioned that she never worked in the field before marriage and she started working after her children started going to school. She has studies till class IX. Her husband is a member of Vivekananda STG Association. There is no membership fee and membership is limited to men and widows in this association maybe a form of 'community' social security for the latter. From them the growers get Rs 20/- per kilogram for the first grade quality of tea leaf. She says,

*"I work hard and try to save Rs 90/- per week. All these savings are spent during the festival time. We need money for white washing, dresses/clothes for children and for purchase of household utensils..."<sup>37</sup>*

Sundari, a 70-year-old Badaga widow who is a member of the above association, has been living alone with her mentally-challenged son. Three other children are married and stay separately. She has been cultivating tea in her one-acre farm and during input time and for loading purposes she hires one labour only. She started working as tea grower since the age of fifteen at her natal home. She was married at the age of 23. Both her daughters helped her in the field. The elder since the age of 16 for six years until she got married and the younger since the age of 17-18 after completing her tenth standard worked in the field for 4-5 years until marriage. Her son works as a tailor after completing his class XI. He never worked in the farm she says. She lost her husband five years ago. During the season she says the costs to cultivation is Rs 2000-3000/- and she earns about Rs 3000-4000/- and during the off season

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<sup>37</sup> Personal interview, January 2017

her earnings are Rs 1000/- per month only<sup>38</sup>. However, the significant difference across two regions – Kotagir and Gudalur in most cases are the growers have land entitlements in the former and a sheer absence or insecurity in the latter.

Likewise, from among the five women respondents interviewed in Gudalur block they appear to have decision making capacity with respect to utilisation of income and earnings from tea cultivation as the case of one female respondent from Gudalur illustrates. But such decisions are layered in a manner in which women's work is subsumed and understood as a moral binding towards her family which she must conform.

*Bindu, aged 38 years is a tiny tea grower having land size of only 40 cents i.e. 2/5<sup>th</sup> of an acre of land. The land is in her husband's name. Both of them have been cultivating tea since the last 14 years. She never worked on the farm before marriage. She says that her children are studying in school and she will continue to farm to run the family. She does not want her children to face the same situation that they are facing. Her husband works in a school, earns Rs 4000/- but however does activities of loading particularly because of which she says that they do not need outside labour. She does all the other works of cultivation. She manages finance.*

This narrative clearly demonstrates how most women shoulder the economic responsibilities of running a household as unpaid labour that is socially construed as an extension of her domestic responsibilities. And allowing her to manage finances within the household may appear democratic but perhaps burdensome for her. They too are members of Dharmagiri Society. She feels that if they sell tea through this producer society then they save money on transportation cost that would otherwise be incurred, if sold directly to the bought leaf factory.

Here Duvvury's (1989) work becomes important in understanding this context when she argues that decline in women's work participation rate is in consonance with intensification of women's work in agriculture. She refers to Palmer (Palmer, 1978:7 cited in Whitehead, 1985) who concludes that increase in female family labour in most Asian countries demonstrate "the ability of patriarchal authority in the peasant households to extract more labour from family members". Moreover, although women may be consulted for agricultural decisions; but they do not have direct control over cash to demand expenditure on facilities that may reduce household work.

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<sup>38</sup> Personal interview, fieldwork January 2017

Like Bindu, there were many women who face similar situations of uncertainty. Another younger tea grower aged 23 years, has about an acre of land cultivates tea herself. She says that she works in the farm to run her family. She has studied till Class X and never worked in the farm before marriage. Her husband helps her in clearing and carrying the load during harvest time. He himself works as a 'coolie' in other farms she says. He earns Rs 200/- per day. During season they hire women labour for Rs 180/- per day with tea. Their earnings from tea cultivation is Rs 30,000/- per annum. Another family of small growers earn Rs 50,000/- from their 2 acres of cultivable land. They have been cultivating tea since the last two decades.

According to a 49-year-old women farmer, she does works of clearing/cutting, water supply, tea picking, spraying of pesticides etc. on this land. Her husband helps in farm activities. She also pointed out unlike the profitability of tea as pointed out in the earlier narrative, tea cultivation is getting economically unviable and there could be shifts in cultivation from tea to other crops that include pepper, araecnut, cardamom and coffee. Problems of water scarcity are common for farmers in this region because of which cultivation gets hampered. They too are finding it unproductive for the long run as their children pursuing higher education would choose not to farm in the fields. Responses also vary across generations. Particularly the elder generations of farmers are aware of the inability to continue farming as well as their children's disinterest in the tea business.

In one case of an STG, the 1.5-acre farm land was a joint property of both the husband and wife. Both of them farm but the husband informed that he takes decisions on matters of finance and cultivation. He is also the president of the Karkapalai Small Tea Growers Association and he points out that there are a number of problems apart from climatic, water and power supply there are no governmental subsidies for new plantations<sup>39</sup>. Elephant rampage is very high in this forest belt of Gudalur region that creates difficulties in farming activities. This has been an important concern of the farmers as well as the fact despite poor selling rate of green leaf; they are unable to convert from cultivating tea to other crops due to elephant attacks across villages in Gudalur block.

Unlike Gudalur, in Kotagiri the situation of women is gendered in terms of absence of land ownerships, although as argued by some male small tea growers, that Badaga women have greater decision making power. In the case of a small tea grower, aged 76 years and his wife aged 68 years both

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<sup>39</sup> Personal interview, fieldwork, January 2017

have been cultivating tea since the last 20 years. The land as both say is in the name of the male head of the household and who also manages the finance despite his age. In this case the wife said that she never worked earlier in her natal place in the farms<sup>40</sup>. Despite her age she contributes to the household economy as an extension of her domestic responsibility. And like many women who after marriage for the sustenance of the family started working in the field. Elderly women in Kotagiri were found to be engaged in cultivation and farming activities. Nirmala (aged 43 years) is single. She lives with her parents in a village in Kotagiri and farms their 2 acres of land since the last 7 years. She is not associated with any organisation for the sale of green leaf. Her family earn about Rs 40,000/- per annum from cultivation of tea and other crops. It is her father who manages the finances she says.

### **Price determination/Pricing of green leaf**

The green leaf that is plucked is mostly sold either to the Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs) or in few places through producer societies. There are various grades of the green leaf such as A grade, B+ and C. the price of each varies from Rs 22-17-14-15/-.<sup>41</sup> In the lean season the price increases to Rs 16-17/- for grade B+ variety an increase of Rs 2-3/- per kilogram as there is less production. The leaf agent decides the quality and rate of green tea and usually takes a commission of Rs 2/- per kilogram bought whereas through a society it is the quality that determines the price of green tea leaf. There are approximately 20,000-25,000 small tea growers in Nilgiris having about 16 functioning BLFs out of 28. There are about 160 BLF owners in both Upper and Lower Nilgiris mostly belonging from the Seths, Badagas and Tamilian communities as told by one of the BLF owners<sup>42</sup>. About 59 percent are organized with the government and 41 percent with the STG societies. The large factories particularly the estate factories have a capacity of producing 10,000 kilograms of tea. Currently in Nilgiris, there are two types of cooperatives functioning – cooperatives societies and co-operative industrial factories (Mansingh and Johnson, 2012: 24). There are 15 of the latter category and 2 of the former- INDCOSERVE and TEASERVE. INCOSERVE or the Tamil Nadu STG Industrial Co-operative Tea Factories' Federation Limited is a federation of INDCO co-operative factories where the state government has 51 percent stake and the small growers 49 percent. This is under the aegis of the state Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The INDCO

<sup>40</sup> Interviews conducted at Kotagiri, December 2016

<sup>41</sup> Rates as on 2<sup>nd</sup> week of December 2016. Interview with a local STG and organiser, Conoor.

<sup>42</sup> Personal interview, fieldwork, June 2017

factory provides a government subsidy of Rs 2/- .According to a BLF owner, there are also micro factories having a capacity of 1000 kilograms with a cap of 600-700 green leaf from about 50 acres of land<sup>43</sup>. Unlike that in Gudalur, in Kotagiri there is no specific association of small tea growers.

Most of the small coffee growers do have their own processing machinery. There are certain processing-units run by the cooperatives. Small coffee growers in Coorg have a strong association to manage day to day activities and long-term aspirations.

### **Producer societies**

There are a number of producer societies in Nilgiris district whose membership fees range from Rs 100 to Rs 1890/- per annum. Societies like Kayummi Small Tea Growers Society in Pandalur which is a very strong association followed by Dharmagiri STG Association, Yallamai STG Association and Gandhinagar STG Association and Karupalai Small Tea Growers Association (membership fees Rs 1890/-), are preferred over the leaf agents as they provide a better price and do not 'cheat' the small farmers. These growers are satisfied with the formations of such associations as they handle both price and inputs.

To illustrate, a STG society of Appukodu village has about a 100 members having 70 acres of land in total and the minimum land holdings range from 25 cents to 3 acres. There are only 10 members who own 3 acres of land and about 20 members have 25 cents of land. They produced about 20,000-30,000 kilograms per month of green leaf. During the peak season the society accepts only 1000 kilograms of green leaf and hence the farmers are forced to sell outside at a lower price. The price per kilogram of leaf ranges from Rs 10-11/- by the leaf agents to Rs 17/- from the producer society. An important aspect revealed by these farmers was that the leaf agents deduct weight (of green leaf) unlike the society who is a regular supplier to one of factories in that area and also provides timely payment to the producers. This society had also received institutional support from the TBI in 2010 a sum of Rs 5 lakhs for purchase of vehicle, manure, building of shed and creating a revolving fund of Rs 2 lakhs along with interest free subsidies. From the 100 farmers 10 are cultivating tea only in an average land holding of 50 cents i.e. half an acre. All the three farmers interviewed were in the age group of 45-53 years and were engaged in cultivating along with their wives on the farms with their children pursuing higher education. It can also be inferred that women labourers

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

are likely to get membership of associations with a low membership fee and two of them who have gone for membership with fee as high as Rs 1700/-; both of them were duped by agents. This points towards women being subject of subordination; in sense of their awareness she bears about her own labour product once again landing her up in cycle of discrimination.

In case of Coffee plantation, family labour is pre-dominantly used in preparatory and maintenance works. Coffee picking is mainly done by hired workers. There is an industry-wise daily wage rate (presently Rs 263) for coffee pickers. To attract workers in a general scenario characterized by shortage of labour, growers offer other non-monetary incentives.

### **Opinions around 'Profitability' of Tea**

George Joseph, aged 52 years owns seven acres of land in Gudalur. He presently earns Rs 40,000/- per annum from tea cultivation. He has been cultivating tea along with araccnut, coffee, and pepper since the last 25 years. He hires outside labour - three men and two more women workers, who labour in their neighbour's farm land. He points out that there is labour shortage during seasonal change. Perhaps as he owns a large farmland of 7 acres, he says that his eldest son is interested in this business as it is profitable. He is a member of Dharmagiri Chalivalli Small Traders Society Association having a membership fees of Rs 1700/- per annum. Under this association there are certain benefits like Diwali extra bonus, hospital money, and financial support and get a price fixation for green leaf. There are two companies that purchase green leaf - the INDCO government agency and the Dharmagiri Small Traders Society Association. He however argues that the former gives a better price for green leaf despite being a member of the latter. He is of the opinion that agents exploit the growers considerably but if the green leaf fetches a price of Rs 20/- per kilogram then tea business is profitable<sup>44</sup>.

With new plantation and subsidiary plan and minimum support price this commodity would fetch a much better gain he says. Similar view is being held by another 33-year-old small grower who also owns 7 acres of cultivable land used for both tea and pepper is also the Secretary of this association. Another STG who is also the President of another association, Gandhi Nagar STG Association has leased about 10 acres of land for cultivation of tea and other crops. He hires approximately 10 women labour from the neighbouring village. The average cost per acre

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<sup>44</sup> Personal interview, fieldwork, January 2017

of lease land is Rs 20,000/-. He however feels that since the business is not all that profitable he intends to start a business as a coffee broker<sup>45</sup> whereas a 65-year-old farmer, a retired school teacher earns an income of Rs 2400/- per month from the sale of green leaf. This farmer hires outside labour mainly the Sri Lankan Tamilian labour for cultivation who are paid Rs 180/- per day. He has two educated children. The eldest son is an MBA and daughter is married. He says that he will sell his land of 7 acres as his son is not interested to farm. Unlike the earlier two respondents, his social reality of aging and its associated inabilities to perhaps oversee farming activities push farmers to take the alternative route of selling their property and ensuring liquidity. Moreover, unfriendly market conditions, price fluctuations, increasing input costs, labour problems and climatic conditions worsened with water and power scarcity creates situations conducive enough for ageing farmers to quit farming activities.

Farmers of a society from Appukodu village as mentioned earlier were of the opinion that they are able to make profits only if they do not hire outside labour and do the work themselves. This in a way adds pressure on both the spouses to save labour costs for higher earnings. This could perhaps one of the significant reasons where women as old as 68 years were engaged in cultivation but in the garb of a social domestic responsibility. These farmers also shared that only 1-2 children will take up tea cultivation as most of them are pursuing higher education which is highlighted through some of the narratives. The future of the tea industry they say is bleak and will worsen after 4-5 years. They also informed that people were selling land for real estate and since the last five years there has been no new tea planting and moreover now families are living outside with their children and hence their land is lying unattended. The entire ethos of village culture and farming practices are changing with the new requirements of the populace particularly the younger generation. However, despite these visible changes the gendered notions are reproduced and subsumed in women's work.

### **Few observations**

The small tea grower sector is perhaps turning out to be one of the viable alternatives for the Indian tea economy. The extent of institutional support provided by the TBI over the last few decades is a proof in itself. Circumstances of the market, and larger tea economy the implications to the tiny and marginal farmers cum workers are of concern as they are not under any form of social security benefits unlike community-based efforts

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<sup>45</sup> Fieldwork, January, 2017

streamlined like that of the Badagas STG association that extend support to widows for instance.

There are few issues at stake here. First, if it is presumed that the Indian tea economy is prospering as it seems with the growth of the BLFs and the STGs not just in Nilgiris but across the tea cultivating zones of India there is a strong requirement of labour for production. All relevant indicators signifying the health of the tea industry in general are showing healthy trends. Consumption of tea and coffee both show a secular increasing trend. Area under tea is also showing increasing trend. However, labour is an area of concern in the sense that average deployment of labour did not show the desired increase corresponding to increase in area and production. That signifies the fact that productivity of labour showed substantial increase over the years. Use of family labour in small plantations further hide the deployment of labour since only incidences of wage labour are documented. In a context, where the younger generation are opting out of farming and workers' children are also refusing to engage tea cultivation and instead prefer any other form of employment, there will emerge a problem of labour shortage in the Nilgiris region as it now exists in the case of coffee in Coorg. Importantly, how will this labour shortage be addressed in the long run and what could be the other concerns of assimilation, adaptation into the cultural lives of the host populace that would transform the relations of production in such changed social contexts. As the literature reviewed particularly of studies of Upendranadh 2010; Rajasenan; 2010 corroborates such aspects. Raman's work (2002) on South Indian plantations has intensively examined the social composition and the relative marginalization nature of this particular section of the society. However, the questions here are of the small tea growers who are in a sense trapped in the lure for profitability of this commodity but are debarred from any kind of governmental social security aids particularly for labour. The case narratives have sought to provide a picture of the existing gender and social relations to production. It however necessitates a further examination of laying thread bear the nuances of what happens to women's labour and social security situation in such changing forms of production relations.

## Chapter 4

# Conclusions and Findings

Small tea growers/planters in Nilgiris and small coffee growers in Coorg are integral part of the plantation landscape of the Southern India since long. Major part of tea and coffee plantations are owned by small growers in these two regions. Also these two regions are hosting small growers since long and it is unlike recent growth in the number small growers in West Bengal and Assam. Small growers in these two regions are deeply entrenched within the overall plantation architecture and possess certain specific characteristics. First, use of family labour is very common. The basic activities are carried out by family members. Within the family, women play a very important part. They manage household activities and also contribute substantially to small plantations. Use of children as family labour has come down sharply since they attend schools. Women members need to bear dual responsibilities that is both households and activities in plantations. Second, hired labour is used during peak seasons. For small tea growers peak season is from June to September. Coffee is an annual crop and hired labour is mainly used during coffee harvesting time. Third, small plantation owners also work as wage labour in other neighbouring small plantations. It is like mutual exchange of labour among the small plantations. Fourth, small tea and coffee plantations depend on processing factories in their vicinities. Fifth, price realization is subject to market fluctuations and also depends on mode of primary disposal. Sixth, agro-climatic factors do play an important role. Water shortage is a huge issue in Nilgiris and creating impediments for the small tea plantations.

From the interactions with small tea and coffee growers in Nilgiris and Coorg, certain observations can be made. First, family labour constitutes the major labour deployment. Within the family, women carry the maximum responsibility since male members frequently look for employment outside. Use of child labour has declined since they now attend schools. Second, next generation is no longer interested to continue working in the plantation. After completing education, they desire to pursue other alternative options. This puts a question on the sustainability of small tea and coffee plantations in the long run. Further, this problem is accentuated by general shortage of workers in these two regions. Migrated workers from the Eastern part of the

country form the major chunk of plantations in Coorg as well as Nilgiris. General shortage of labour along with disinterest among the next generations to continue in plantations pose certain important questions with respect to future of small plantations in these two regions. Third, wages are low compared to prevailing wages in other occupations in the neighbourhood. Further, wage for female workers are lower than that of male workers. Male wage is almost double that of female wage. There are certain justifications for that like male workers carrying loads etc. but still such big differences in wages are not justified. In small coffee plantations in Coorg, certain other benefits like housing, rations are being provided to attract workers in plantations. Fourth, for small tea plantations, price realization for green tea leaves is a contentious issue. In case of disposal at cooperative factories, price realizations are higher compared to that in case of private bought leaf factories. In case of coffee, market price fluctuations are a problem for the small coffee growers. Fifth, small tea and coffee growers do not have any social security worth its name. Workers in this sector do not get the benefits under the Plantation Labour Act 1951. Wages are low. Thus, workers find it difficult to survive on wage income throughout the year. Sixth, for majority of small tea and coffee plantation workers, income from the plantation unit is not enough to fulfil livelihood needs. They need income from other sources to make both ends meet. They work as hired workers for neighbourhood small growers as and when needed. They grow other crops to earn supplementary income. They carry out animal husbandry for both self-consumption and selling out. Profit from small plantations being meagre, they explore other livelihood options to supplement their income. Small plantations as the only entity/occupation no longer guarantee enough for decent livelihood.

Though there are numerous small growers of tea and coffee, cooperatives in plantation activities still very rare. Cooperatives are more visible in case of processing factories. Formation of co-operatives would have helped these producers realize economies of scale and reduction in per unit of cost of production. Formation of cooperatives in plantation activities are eminently possible in the use of inputs and sharing of common resources. This will reduce cost of production and subsequent realization of greater profit. This may be one way to sustain small plantations in these two regions as very clearly the next generation is not interested to continue plantation activities in the future. Formation of collectives in the form of cooperatives may provide an alternative in this respect.

Use of family labour is prevalent in small plantations particularly with area of 1 acre or less. Adult women member plays an important role. Use of child labour has declined over the years. Children are being sent to school. They desire to look for alternative livelihood opportunities in future rather than continue with plantation activities. This trend is further reinforced by the fact that profit generated from plantation activities are meagre and not adequate to take care of basic needs of the family as a whole if the landholdings are less than 3-acre. Income from own small plantations are seen as supplementary income. Family work as hired labour in other small plantations in the vicinity and also pursue other livelihood options to further family income. Growing other plantation crops and food grains are some of the examples of such reinforcing activities.

Economies of small plantation activities reveal that holdings below 3-acre does not generate enough surplus to sustain such activities in the long run. In other words, those do not remain economically feasible options. There are large number of small growers in Nilgiris who have land which are tiny (below 1 acre). For them, small grower plantation activities can at best be a source of supplementary income rather than mainstay occupations. Economies of plantation is founded on the economies of scale. More so when the plucking cycles are long as it is prevalent in Nilgiris or other areas of southern plantations. Labour requirement is less as plucking cycles are longer. Thus, small growers are in a position to manage their activities mostly with family labour. This reduces cost of production to a certain extent. But at the same time, scale of activities remains low. Subsequently, profits remain low.

Wages for hired labour is locally determined. Wages in Coorg is higher than that of Nilgiris, though work availability is concentrated during the coffee harvesting season in Coorg. Compared to that, work availability spread all through the year in Nilgiris reaching peak during the monsoon period. There is substantial wage differential between male and female workers in Nilgiris. That male workers get higher wages because of certain additional activities apart from plucking green leaves does not justify the extent of gender gap in wages. This anomaly needs to be corrected at the earliest. Moreover, women workers have the additional responsibility of household activities in addition to work in their own plantations and work as hired labour. Wage labour in small tea and coffee plantations receive lower wages than their counterpart's in estate sector. Also, workers in small tea and coffee plantations do not get any welfare benefits under the Plantation Labour Act 1951 as small plantations are

not covered under the Act. They do not have access to any social security schemes also. These leave the workers in small plantations without any social safety net. Even if they work, earnings are inadequate. In Coorg, in small coffee plantations, there is a general shortage of labour but at the same time work availability is not uniform throughout the year. Workers, in addition to plantation work, search for other livelihood options to sustain themselves.

Those who own small plantations work in their own plantations as well as hired workers in other neighbourhood plantations. Securing a decent price for green leaves is an area of concern. There are some cooperative bought leaf factories in Nilgiris which usually ensure decent return on green leaves. However, price of green leaves is dependent on price realizations for made tea in auctions. Auction prices are subject to fluctuations. Small plantation owners have to live with such uncertainties to an extent. The State can play a role here by creating an eco-system of institutions which may provide minimum support price for green tea leaves producers. This is necessary since small growers are large in numbers and constitutes an important part of the local economy. They are there since long and are integral part of the socio-economic landscape. Because of certain developments, things are changing and the labour market in small plantations are passing through certain upheavals. Economies of small plantations are in the process of transitions. The market will take its own course. However, State may intervene in certain areas like ensuring minimum support price for green leaves, provision of social security for plantation workers, implementation of minimum wages along equal remuneration for male and female workers, integrating plantations with other crops and other livelihood options. Small planters/growers should also come forward to form cooperatives.

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