

**A STUDY ON THE HEALTH AND EDUCATIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN  
IN TEA PLANTATION AREAS**

*Minor Research Project*

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By

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## **Summary of the report**

Decades of the plantation history was the history of exploitation. During the 19th century, the plantations were started in Kerala. Most of the workers in the plantation sector were the migrant labour from Tamil Nadu and tribal region of Malabar. Since plantations are often located in an isolated area with very poor infrastructure, there is no much social control as in other parts of the society. The recruitment of workers in the plantation in early stage was on family basis. A major reason behind this was that the employers wanted permanent settlement of labour force in the tea plantation by which the availability of future labour force through reproduction could be made easy. This system of family employment still continues as a custom in tea plantation sector in Kerala. The members of the layams have very rare upward social mobility.

In the plantation sector, majority of the workers employed are uneducated and many of them are not aware of the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 and the various other legislations enacted for their welfare. The high rate illiteracy and the low level of awareness make them more vulnerable to the exploitation by the employers.

Kerala has the highest women participation in the plantation sector. The percentage of workers involved in this sector is mostly women. Majority of the workers are married. Here, there are no constraints of dowry or other formalities as existing in the mainstream of the society. Divorce and separation are very rare.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study is to make an in-depth investigation into the health and educational status of children of the tea plantation workers in Idukki district. This study gives special emphasis on children's rights and issues associated with it. The proposed study is based on the following main objectives:

- 1. To understand the health and educational status of children of tea plantation workers in the study areas.*

2. *To evaluate the living conditions of the children in tea plantation areas.*
3. *To examine the effective implementation of various Laws and Acts passed to facilitate the basic human rights of the children in the tea plantation sectors of the study areas.*
4. *To identify the human rights violations and issues of children in the tea plantation sectors and suggest policy solutions.*

### **General Observations on the life of Children in Bonakkadu Estate**

The plantation layams of Bonakkadu are not given electricity connection and the schools and health centers and anganwadies are given electricity connections very recently. This is a black hole in the widely acclaimed Kerala's development experience. Kerala has been boasted as a State with high literacy, high school enrolment ration, other health and demographic indicators. But there are some people and children who can't even dream for living in good houses with electricity, pure and safe drinking water, free from the fear of attack of wild animals, parents spend much time for rearing and caring them. For the poor and small children of Bonakkadu and Munnar, these are totally detached from them. Their small houses in layams have one kitchen, one bed room and very small hall. Many houses lack latrine facility and they need to construct it with their own money. The houses are in a much collapsed condition and at any time it may fall on them. In all houses of the layams, draining is very severe issue and children suffer from this badly.

For the last 20 years, the houses in the layams are not repaired or renovated. The government of Kerala or other NGOs is not giving any financial assistance to the renovation/repairing of the layams. Nutritious food is given to the pre-school children, pregnant and lactating women also. But in the Anganwadies there is staff to oversee the affairs of it. But only one helper to ensure that the nutritious food is distributed properly. In the health centers of government, there are no medicines/surgical items. Unlike in Munnar, in Bonakkadu, almost 95 percent of the people have BPL cards. They opined that the rationshop owner is coming from Vithura and the shops are opened very irregularly. At a maximum of 2-3 days, the ration shop may be opened in Bonakkadu. But the problems of non-access to transportation, better health centres, lack of electricity supply at homes, there

is no ayurveda hospital in the area and they face the threats of attack of wild animals, unemployment and poverty and other severe hardships and now some parents move to Vithura and take accommodation on rent basis.

But the problem is that when they claim their ration at Bonakkadu, the ration dealers deny it saying that they are living at Vithura. Vithura is the nearest junction to Bonakkadu and to reach Bonakkadu, we need to travel more than 21 KM through the forest. Even in the day light, we felt feared that for our entire journey from Bonakkadu forest check post to Bonakkadu Mahavir Plantations, not a single two wheeler came in the opposite direction. The Bonakkadu estate was closed in 2002. Since 1997-2000, very limited payment was given to the plantation workers and stopped making payment to the provident fund. Then 2000 to 2003, the salary of 36 months was not given. In 2002 for Onam days, they could not buy at least 1 kg of rice. They have no entertainment facility as they have no electricity to use television. From 1997 to 2014, not a single rupee is remitted to the provident fund. The plantation workers have no ownership right on the land and they have no financial capacity to buy land outside the plantation area as they have no provident fund and gratuity from the owner. There is a bus service from Bonakkadu estate to Trivandrum city only in the morning one or two times and in the late night around 10 PM. There are three layams; B, GB and Top. But bus service is there only up to B estate.

Children living in the EB and Top layams need to walk through the roads without street lights and facing the attacks of wild animals at any time especially in the early morning and in the night. So many students live in Vithura and many of them go to Tamil Nadu for their school education. Schools are there in the Bonakkadu with classes only up to 5th standard and after 5th they need to go out of Bonakkadu. Some of them live in the hostels at Vithura and in the city hostels. They need Rs.21 for a one way journey to Vithura from Bonakkadu estate and total Rs.42 to reach Vithura to consult a doctor of the government hospital. The total number of students is less than 15 in the school at Bonakkadu. In the school, there is one Head Master, one teacher, one peon and one helper. The school time is in between 9.30 to 1 PM after that the school will be closed. The staff of the school will be left in a bus at 1.30 from B layams. The students complained that they are not receiving the allowance properly. They say that some natives of the region qualified TTC but they are not preferred for even temporary post in the school. The teacher and the Head Master coming from other

faraway places come and prefer to go back to home in the afternoon. If the natives are preferred on temporary basis, this practice can be avoided.

The Mahavir Estate in Bonakkadu where hundreds of families are in the grip of acute starvation. They are not able to take care of our medical needs or send children to school. Many permanent employees of the estate had left Bonakkadu for other places in search of jobs. They have no money even to buy ration. There was an incidence that a woman had to give birth to her child at the tea estate quarters as the family did not have Rs. 1,500 to take her to hospital. Situated 26 km from Vithura and 65 km from the State Capital, the estate, situated in the foothills of the Agasthyarkoodam peak, wears a pall of gloom. The tea factory is functioning and the employees continue to work silently. The lack of proper care is reflected in the stunted growth of the tea plants and the reduced tea production. Although the tea estate has a hospital under it, there is no doctor nor are medicines for the employees and 2,000 persons dependent on them. There is only a compounder in the tea estate hospital. The workers alleged that the tea estate management does not render any financial assistance to take the sick to the hospitals and that they have to find their own way. The vehicles can proceed only to the estate factory and it is an arduous drive through the narrow winding road leading to the rows of quarters where the factory workers are housed. Many of the quarters on the way are dilapidated due to lack of proper maintenance and have been abandoned by the estate workers. The Tea Estate owned by Mahavir Plantations is headed by its chairman, Mr. Tarachand Bansalia, and has over 460 permanent labourers, 19 staff and other contract workers for the 2,500 acre estate. In addition to the tea estate, the company has also 110 acres of rubber and 84 acres of cardamom, pepper and coconut plantation. The house they stay in is in ruin and any point of time it could be collapsed thus they spend their night in the house with utmost fear. How would the workers renovate their house when they do not have money to feed their stomach at first? The heavy wind that blows in December and January really disturbs their sleep. The officials have conveniently closed their eyes to the plight of the plantation workers.

### **Policy Implications**

The present study supports the continuation of the PDS in the plantation areas. But certain modifications should be made effectively to perform this system to protect the

interest of the children of these poor areas. In some cases, there is paramount importance for distributing free ration in certain occasions especially in Bonakkadu.

Considering the present status of children in the tea plantation sector in Kerala, we would like to suggest some steps for its improvement. These are:

- 1) A fresh and a very detailed survey should be made to identify the number of children suffering from the issues mentioned in the study. It should be judicial and to be completed within a short period of time.
- 2) The Government of Kerala should make a legislation taking over the land of Mahavir plantation and distribute to the plantation workers and occupant of the layams.
- 3) Periodic medical camp should be conducted in all the layams and sufficient number of doctors and supporting staff may be appointed in the health centres. The role of NGOs, clubs, residence associations of the cities, professional organisations such as Kerala Medical Associations, Association of Medical and Surgical distributors etc should be asked to play a role in the health and educational empowerment of poor children of layams.
- 4) All the schools and anganwadies should have teachers and supporting staff from the same areas. The present system of teachers from distances places have many problems and erode the quality and teaching process.
- 5) Increase the quantity of grain allocated to the BPL sections of an average five-member family per month. If the economic situation of the people is found extreme poor, food grains should be given free of cost till they recover from the economic crisis.
- 6) The sale of other commodities at full market prices through PDS outlets should be permitted so as to ensure attraction and people get transaction completed.
- 7) More number of street lights, sufficient bus services.
- 8) Better counseling and proper career guidance for children.
- 9) Try to retain the children of plantation workers in Kerala than going to Tamil Nadu

- 10) Better hostel accommodation for both boys and girls in two or three centres of Kerala (Cities of Trivandrum, Ernakulum and Kannur/Kozhikodu) for pursuing higher education.
- 11) Required warm cloths should be given for children at free of cost in the plantation area.
- 12) The government may maintain/replace the age old drinking water pipe lines of Bonakkadu region.
- 13) Two pairs of uniforms should be given at free of cost to the children in the plantation areas.
- 14) Electricity connection should be given to the line houses in the Bonakkadu region.

This study has attempted to bring out the poor situations of the children in the plantation areas. Their problems are very complex and severe. We should take urgent steps to understand and solve these problems.