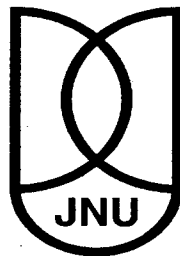


**HEALTH OF THE WORKERS IN PLANTATION ECONOMY:  
A STUDY OF CARDAMOM PLANTATIONS IN KERALA**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

**ANNS ISSAC**



**CENTRE OF SOCIAL MEDICINE AND COMMUNITY HEALTH**

**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY**

**NEW DELHI- 110067**

**2007**



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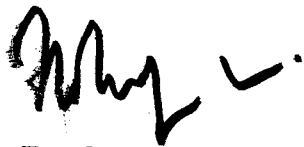
30<sup>th</sup> July, 2007

**Certificate**

I declare that the dissertation entitled **Health of the Workers in Plantation Economy: A Study of Cardamom Plantations in Kerala** submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any degree of this university or any other university.

  
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We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.



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30-07-2007

New Delhi

  
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## Abbreviations

AITUC	All India Trade Union Congress
BMS	Bharathiya Mazdur Sangh
CDS	Centre for Development Studies
CHR	Cardamom Hill Reserve
CITU	Centre of Indian Trade Union
CMC	Cardamom Marketing Corporation
CSI	Church of South India
CSMCH	Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health
ESI	Employees State Insurance
GoI	Government of India
GoK	Government of Kerala
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HYV	High Yielding Variety
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
ICRI	Indian Cardamom Research Institute
ICMR	Indian Council for Medical Research
IISR	Indian Institute of Spices Research
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
JRCS	Junior Red Cross Society
KIRTADS	Kerala Institute for Research, Training & Development Studies
KSSP	Kerala Shastra Sahithya Parishad
PDS	Public Distribution System
PF	Provident Fund
PHC	Primary Health Centre
PLA	Plantation Labour Act
UPASI	United Planters Association of South India
VVGNLI	V. V. Giri National Labour Institute

Chapter I

Introduction

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## **1.1 Introduction**

Health is a multifaceted complex phenomenon with socio-economic ramifications. The present study attempts to understand health of the workers from a public health perspective. The study reviews developments in the public health perspectives and proceeds to understand the health of the workers in the cardamom plantations in Idukki district of Kerala. It is quite significant to look into the issue, given the radical progressive nature of developmental policies and known trade union movement in the state of Kerala. The study stems from the assumption that liberalisation policies of 1990s affected detrimentally the plantations and the livelihood issues of workers in plantations. Though there are studies on public health and development, which brings out the prominence of socio-economic factors as determinants of health, there is hardly any study exploring the workers' right to livelihood as a health issue.

Although the role of socio-economic status, and working and living conditions of the people are recognized as factors influencing the health of the population; it was often argued that only economic growth can lead to social development including health indicators. It is the unique development experience of Kerala which questioned the established linkages between health and other economic indicators propagated by the mainstream developmentalists and various policy makers. The study, as suggested earlier, revisits and critically enquires into the health of workers in cardamom plantations, in the aura built by Kerala's development experience.

## **1.2 Review of literature**

Most of the public health scholars postulated the prominence of social and materialistic conditions as determinants of the health of the population. Snow's study on Cholera during the nineteenth century in Britain, for the first time recognised that living conditions and poor sanitary measures are linked to high mortality rates (Snow 1949). This was followed by many studies in the same line. To McKeon, health status of a population is linked with improvement in the



overall living conditions like adequate food, proper housing facilities, sanitation, and water supply and so on and so forth of the working population (McKeon 1976).

For instance, Rosen while attempting to define “health” argued that health is a product of poverty, by describing the materialistic conditions behind the public health movement in Great Britain and the United States during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He tried to look at how health and ill health are produced and how it differs among different social groups (Rosen 1958). In a recent study, the scholar explores the nexus between the anti-malarial campaigns that promoted the rise of Italian labour movement, the formation of socialist awareness among farm workers and the establishment of a collective consciousness among women in the history of modern Italy, vis-à-vis the social relations that existed between the farmers and the landlords which had contributed to the increase in malaria cases (Snowden 2003).

Though there is a realisation among public health scholars that health is a product of social and economic conditions, most of the studies circulated the idea that health is an outcome of health service system; and improvement of health service system and programmes implemented in health sector, can bring positive changes in the health seeking behaviour of the people, thereby the health of the population. For instance, the concept of health culture, implicitly assumes that health service system plays an important role in improving the health of the population by changing the health seeking behavior (Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1976, Banerji 1982).

Djurfeldt and Lindberg discuss that health problems are not mere technical problems rather are political and economic in nature. They analysed the process of the introduction of western medicine in a village in Tamil Nadu and argue that disease burden cannot be reduced only with health service development. Along with health service system, the existing socio-political characteristics of the village also influence the health behaviour of the people (Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1976). According to Banerji, the health care programmes/institutions serving the

people in a particular community too influence their health seeking behaviour. The study hypothesises that the perceptions of the health problems and the various institutions that are constituted to deal with these problems form the 'health culture' of a community. The study implies that health services system play a significant role in improving the health of the population (Banerji 1982).

It is argued that the process of planning, organising and operating the medical and health programs, demand that persons entrusted with such tasks should have thorough understanding of various social institutions of the community in which the program is to be carried out in order to make modification in human behaviour (Hassan 1967).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, upon a case study of Hoima, rural district in Uganda, the scholar argued that it is the lower use of rural maternity services, due to unwillingness of women to use modern medical system that led to high maternal mortality rate. He further opines that, they believe in traditional birth practices, and pregnancy is perceived as a natural process for their unwillingness to accept any other methods (Grace 2003). The above mentioned studies provide either biological or cultural reasons for the lower health indicators, while following the same logic of attributing health as a self responsibility.

Black Report points towards the differences in health status across social classes and tries to analyse those factors which might have contributed to this differences in Britain provides a major shift in the public health understanding. The study discusses that income, employment, environmental conditions, housing, transportation, health services etc., contributes to the health of the population and all these factors favours the better off (Black Report 1992).

There are studies which recognise the limitations of health service system as a determining factor of health of the population. For instance, Lesley Doyal explores the relationship between capitalism and medical practices in the case of

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<sup>1</sup> Through a case study of Chaniura village in rural Uttar Pradesh, Hassan identifies the poor water supply and sanitation, poor quality housing, insecurity, age old habits, ways of bathing (without using soap) and so on as cause of poor health. See Hassan, Khwaja Arif (1967), *The Cultural Frontier of Health in Village in India, A Case study of a North Indian village, Manakdas, Bombay.*

national health services in Britain. It is argued that industrialisation under capitalism has increased life expectancy and improved the quality of life for certain social groups. But this has however been carried out at the expense of populations in other parts of the world, whose health has suffered as a result of colonialism and loss of their own resources (Doyal 1979).

It is also argued that the interventions made by the state in the field of health needs to be questioned. Renaud problematises state interventions, while discussing about the structural constraints that are deeply rooted. He criticises modern medical system for its responsiveness to the new diseases of civilisation that created more and more costly technology and facilities; in the absence of convincing evidence of benefit when there were sufficient evidence to indicate that changes in the larger environment played the critical role, as prime determining factor for the improvement of health (Renaud 1975). On the query as to why the state supports medicine so heavily, when such medicine produces its own disease burden that outweighs its potential benefits; the author argues that state in capitalist society has two contradictory functions viz., to sustain capital accumulation and to legitimise the social consequences of these accumulations. This is reflected in public policies as well.

Scholars like Ivan Illich argue that medical establishments have become a major threat to health. He argues that western medical system has turned health care into a sick making enterprise. On the other hand for him health of the population depends on the way in which political actions condition the milieu and create those circumstances that favour self reliance, autonomy and dignity for all, particularly the weaker (Illich 1976).

The present research is situated in the larger discourse on public health with specific reference to scholarly writings on health conditions of Kerala. A brief review of literature on health studies in Kerala suggest that better indicators of health in Kerala is an outcome of various socio-economic reforms rather than increase in GDP or any other economic indicators. One of the pioneering studies in this area proposes that most of the conventional correlations do not work in

the case of Kerala. The study conducted by Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, started with the presumption that high level of nutrition leads to high level of health status of the population. High status of health of population is manifested through high life expectancy and low mortality rate. The nutrition levels of Kerala show that it has high mortality rates and shorter life expectancy depending on the nutritional norms whereas Kerala has the lowest mortality rates and higher life expectancy rates. From this, it is obvious that better level of health require something more than the nutritional norms set up by the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR). The other possible explanation offered by the study is the expansion of modern health care facilities with less discrimination to poor income groups. The study concludes that bed-population ratio and hospital population ratio can be other indicators which could better explain these trends in mortality rates (CDS 1975).

While making a historical analysis of the development in Kerala's health status, to assess the contribution of the health and non-health sectors in the health improvement, it is argued that the health status is shaped by a variety of factors such as the level of income and standards of living, housing, sanitation, water supply, education, health consciousness, personal hygiene and by the coverage and accessibility of medical facilities (Panikkar and Soman 1984).<sup>2</sup>

KSSP<sup>3</sup> studies tried to link socio-economic status and health status of the people. They found an inverse relationship between the rate of mortality and socio-economic status. Further, since poverty induced diseases dominated the pattern of illness, a government intermediary both in the health as well as the non-health sector is recommended. The study shows that the period from 1987-1997; saw a

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<sup>2</sup> Further it is stated that public policies of the government had an indirect impact on health status of the population though it was not undertaken with specific health objectives in their mind. For details refer Panikkar, P.G.K. and Soman, C.R. (1984), *Health Status of Kerala: the Paradox of Economic Backwardness and Health Development*, Center for Development Studies, Trivandrum.

<sup>3</sup> Kerala Shastra Shahitya Parishad is an NGO actively participated in the social and environmental issues at the grass-root level and later in the democratic decentralization process, and played a key role in the public health movements. Their major contribution to the sphere of public health is through carrying out two health surveys.

pronounced increase in the per-capita medical expenditure constituting mediflation; though there is a remarkable decline in morbidity.

Another study that traces the development of health care facilities, argues that the state has played an important role in the development of the health of the population through carrying out intersectoral reforms, such as spread of education, political awareness, development of road network and transportation and social movements<sup>4</sup>. It is argued that there is a reduction in the budget allocation of funds for public health since mid 1980s which in turn worsened health conditions. In short, it is observed that there is hardly any literature which looks beyond health as an outcome of health service system or intersectoral linkages. In spite of series of reporting on increase in prevalence and incidents of communicable diseases, reasons for which have to be located in the changing environmental and socio-economic spheres,<sup>5</sup> scholarly discussions on public health deals with performance of health service system. In this context, present researcher makes an attempt to look into the issues of workers, to understand how increasing trends in morbidity along with recent economic reforms have aggravated their vulnerability.

There are a few research works which throws light on the health and well-being of workers under different occupational categories in Kerala other than studies propagating the prominence of health service institutions and its accessibility and availability issues. A study conducted among coir workers in Alleppey

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<sup>4</sup> It is argued that the share of preventive and promotive services in the total expenditure reveals reverse trend, registering a steady decline, since the later half 1980s. The rate of expenditure on health care is falling steadily from late 1980s due to worsening of the fiscal crisis face by the state government. See, V. Ramankutty and P.G.K. Panikkar (1995), Impact of Fiscal Crisis on the Public Sector Health Care System in Kerala, a Research report, Achuta Menon Reseach Center for Health Science Studies, Trivandrum.

<sup>5</sup> Few studies show that various infectious diseases like dengue fever, diarrhea & leptospirosis have been increasing in Kerala during recent years and Kerala is facing a health crisis. See B, Ekbal (2007), "Kerala Health from Success to Crisis", in C.C Karta (ed) (2007), *Kerala: Fifty Years and Beyond*, Thiruvananthapuram:Gautha Books. Similarly mental illness and number of suicides increasing in Kerala - See Kerala Legialsative Assembly Query number \* 476, Xth KLA, 8<sup>th</sup> Seeeion. Recent reports on chicken guinea pose major threat to the failure of health service system in Kerala to tackle the issues. Army is called for help in Kerala due to increasing number of chikunguniya cases. See *Mathrubhumi*, June 11, 2007. About 3057 fever cases reported on June 5 on different hospitals in Pathanamthitta, and 130 are suspected to have chikunguniya. See *The Hindu*, June 6, 2007.

district, found that in terms of gender and caste, workers form a homogenous group. They are all facing indebtedness even to have mere subsistence level of living. Moreover, nature of work and conditions of work place, make them all the more vulnerable. It further argues that continued migration from agricultural sector, due to insecurities in the field as part of capitalisation of agriculture, adds to disguised unemployment in the field of coir industry as this is the only option available in the area.<sup>6</sup>

Another study pointed out that introduction of new innovations in farm technology coupled with demographic pressure deteriorates the condition of agricultural workers in Kuttanadu region of Kerala state<sup>7</sup>. Another case study of fisher men community argued that health and well-being of fishermen is inextricably linked to the social and cultural matrix which in turn is the product and outcome of the prevalent modes of production in fish economy. An important finding of this study is that the decline in fish production and the introductions of net spinning machine has displaced the women labour force from fish production in large quantum's. This adds to existing vulnerable conditions of fisher folks in the context of absence of alternative occupational avenues<sup>8</sup>. It is quite interesting to note that, though all these studies throw light on health related issues among particular communities, there is clearly a conceptual distinction between health and well being. This is of course a reductionistic way of looking at health from a public health perspective and suggests to us different perspectives of public health itself.

Since 2000, there have been series of reports and studies on agrarian crisis, especially in the case of plantation sector. The crisis in the agricultural sector in

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<sup>6</sup>This study was an attempt to understand the implications of health and well being of coir workers due to socioeconomic status, working conditions like nature and type of work, facilities in the work place, and perceptions of health problems. For further details, see Bindu B Nair (1993).

<sup>7</sup> The study observes that conditions of capitalist agriculture reduced the number of working days of agricultural workers and left them in the misery of unemployment and poverty. Apart from the water related diseases, malnourished poor class of Kuttanadu is subjected to different health hazards resulting from pesticide and fertilizers poisoning. See, Sindu Divakar (1994).

<sup>8</sup>The study further points out that TB, diarrhea are disease frequently affected by the fishing community in this area which are poverty related. Diarrhea was the major cause of death among the community. For more details refer, Peppin, S (1993).

Kerala is widespread and can be read from the increasing rates of farmers' suicides from many parts of the country. The growing incidents of farmer's suicide are the one of the physical evidences of the agrarian distress in contemporary India (Patnaik 2003, Ghosh 2005, Sainath 2004). Many scholars have discussed the agrarian crisis and farmers' distress in Kerala, in relation to the neo-liberal policy regime implemented since the last decade and argued that it is hard in the regions of the state which heavily depend on export oriented crops (Kumar & Sharma 2006). The responses of different agencies to the farmers' suicides show the general apathy towards the crisis in the agrarian sector. The causes of suicides are attributed to alcoholism, mental depression and sometimes crop failure (George and Krishnaprasad 2006). The issues of indebtedness and price crash of the crop are rarely mentioned by government in their response to this crisis. Much of the discussions are focussed on the impact on farmers of cash crops, but the issue as to how this crisis has affected the labourers is to be looked into. The plantation industry is highly labour intensive and does not have a scope for technical innovation beyond a point in the production process. In the context of the agrarian crisis, this study attempts to look into the structure of cardamom economy in Kerala and to find out the inter linkage between this crisis and its impact on the health of the workers.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Last few decades show a shift in the large scale plantation to small grower plantations and increased employment of temporary and seasonal labour. Given the heterogeneity of crops and changing structure of plantations, it is hypothesized that it accentuates the vulnerability of workers in plantations. In spite of the significant contribution to the economy in terms of foreign exchange and a considerable number of people who are dependent on the cardamom industry, it has never been part of any large scale discussion in the plantation sector, in the back drop of globalization.

There is limited mentioning of workers in cardamom plantations in the academic writings, policy discussions as well as in the demands raised by trade union

representatives elsewhere. While discussing about plantation workers in general, the 'right to livelihood' issues of workers in cardamom plantations is often ignored and sidelined. The present researcher feels the need to address the issues of workers in the cardamom plantations, given the peculiar nature of the cardamom industry, nature of work performed in the plantations along with the socio-economic conditions of the labourers in the backdrop of the changing market relations in the post-liberalisation era. The implications for such a change for the health of the worker form the nucleus of the present study.

## **1.4 Objectives**

- To understand the workers well-being in relation to changes in cardamom industry.
- To understand as to how workers negotiate their basic rights to health by looking into their material conditions.
- To understand the dynamics of representation of plantation workers issues by various stakeholders.

## **1.5 Methodology**

### **1.5.1 Area of the Study**

The study is focused on Udumbanchola Panchayat of Idukki district of Kerala. The Idukki district is best known as the 'Plantation District' of Kerala, with a prominent share on the production of all the four plantation crops like tea, cardamom, coffee and rubber. Idukki is the major cardamom grower with about 79% of the total area under cardamom in the state and contributes to about 92% of the total production of cardamom (GoI 2006). Idukki is one of the least developed areas in the state and has the third lowest position in Human Development Index. Udumbanchola panchayat is one of the major cardamom cultivating regions in the district. About 70% of the population in Udumbanchola Panchayat consist of labourers in the cardamom plantations (GoK 2005).



### **1.5.2 Sample Selection of the Study**

The selection of the plantations is carried out after a preliminary visit to the various plantations in the Udumbanchola Taluk. It is based on the accessibility of the researcher since most of the plantations visited are not in favour for conducting the study. A total of seven plantations are selected from the Udumbanchola panchayat for the present study. These seven plantations are categorised into three groups according to the size of the holdings for a comparative understanding of nature of cardamom industry in the area. According to this, there are three small scale plantations ranging between five to ten hectares, three medium scale plantations ranging between ten to twenty hectares, and one large scale plantation of above fifty hectares. All the available workers in the plantations during the period of study are taken as sample population. The sample population consists of a total 95 workers.

In order to get a better understanding of the complexities of the cardamom industry and issues of small growers<sup>9</sup>, four holdings below five hectares are also included in the interview, taking into consideration the fact that majority of the holdings in this crop are below five hectares i.e., not coming under the definition of plantation provided in the Plantation Labour Act (1951)<sup>10</sup>.

### **1.5.3 Methods of Data Collection**

The study relies on primary and secondary data. Primary data is collected through informal discussions and in-depth interviews with workers and other informants; and along with this, observations are carried out simultaneously both at the working and living sites to get a closer understanding of the real life situation in the area. Secondary data is collected from both published and

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<sup>9</sup> The holdings under 5 ha constitute about 45% of the total area cultivated under cardamom in the state and about 47% in the country. GoI (2005), Spices Statistics, Spices Board, Cochin.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Plantation Labour Act (1951), plantation is any land used or intended to be used for growing tea, coffee, rubber (cinchona or cardamom) which measures 5 hectares or more and in which 15 or more persons are employed or were employed on any day of the preceding 12 months.

unpublished documents. This include Census reports, journals and newspapers, books and theses, Plantation Enquiry Committee Reports and records from panchayath office, health centre and Spices Board are used.

A pilot study was undertaken to familiarise with the research problem and to identify the area and sample population for a detailed study. Informal interviews with various people related to the plantation industry helped in identifying the main issues in the plantation sector. This also helped in building a rapport with the people and enabled the selection of key informants. The researcher had visited many cardamom plantations in Idukki and discussions were conducted with different sets of people. Discussions were conducted with workers and planters, trade union leaders, social activists, reporters of regional newspapers, forest department staff and non-governmental organisations working among the people in Idukki. The researcher stayed with a marginal farmer household in the area for some period during the study and conducted semi-participant observation. A checklist was prepared after the preliminary visit.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the workers and owners were collected through a survey after identifying the sample population. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders with the help of the checklist. The responses of the owners and trade unions towards the problem of workers were collected. In-depth discussions were conducted with the workers regarding their perceptions about the present crisis in the industry and in what way that has affected and continue to affect their lives.

To understand the various dimensions of the problem, discussions were conducted with trade union leaders, Grama Panchayat President and other members, Block Panchayat Personnel, *Kudumbasree*<sup>11</sup> in charge, Spices Board officials, Plantation Inspector, Labour Welfare Officer, managers of banks in the area and a few local activists who are concerned about the environmental degradation in Idukki. Interviews were conducted with the personnel in primary health centre and taluk hospital to obtain information on the general health status

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<sup>11</sup>*Kudumbashree* is a programme implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission by organising the women below the poverty line by creating community based structures.

of the people, reported cases of mortality and morbidity in the area, accessibility and availability of the health care services, utilisation of services by the workers apart from the over all perception of health care service personnel towards the issues of plantation workers.

## **1.6 Chapterisation**

Apart from this introductory chapter, second chapter discusses various phases of development of cardamom industry in Kerala. An attempt is made to link the well-being of the workers with different factors which affects industry like price fluctuations, technological changes and so on.

Third chapter looks into the working and living conditions of the workers in the study area. It focuses on how the socio-economic characteristics affect their negotiation to attain their basic right to health. The chapter also discusses health care services and reported health issues of workers in the region.

Chapter four discusses composition of workforce in the cardamom industry and discusses about the vulnerability of the workers. It makes an effort to examine how the issues of workers are represented by various stakeholders like government, trade union activists, planters, and small growers. Concluding chapter presents the major arguments and findings of the study.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

Constraints of time were the major factor that limited a deeper enquiry in the present study. Due to strong objection of the producers, field work was not carried out in certain plantations, and the plantations taken in the study were comparatively better off in terms of welfare measures undertaken. However, our concern of looking into the issues of workers from a public health perspective is accomplished. The study did not deal deep into the theoretical debates on agrarian distress in the developmental context of Kerala. A deeper discussion on these themes may have enriched the study.

## Chapter II

# Growth Profile of Cardamom Industry in Kerala and its Impact on Workers

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## **2.1 Introduction**

Plantation agriculture is generally considered as one of the chief means by which various underdeveloped countries have been brought to the 'tributaries' of the modern world economy (Beckford 1972). The plantation sector was the major employers of the labour force from the beginning of the 20th century itself in India and Kerala. Though other sectors developed gradually, plantation industry still retains to be a large employer and continues to play a major role in the economic development of the country. The general features of plantation agriculture are huge capital investment, export oriented production, dominance of corporate ownership and management, peculiar production and organisation structure and enormous labour force (Rege 1946, Beckford 1972, Raman 1986, Sajhau 1987, Baak 1997) The plantation industry spread over hilly regions of the country and lagged basic infrastructure and other welfare services. In India, the plantations are concentrated at Assam, West Bengal, Sikkim, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu (GoI 2006). Within the larger context of plantation industry, a specific case study is attempted here on the development of cardamom industry in Kerala in order to understand how its growth profile affect worker's health and well being.

## **2.2 Plantation Economy in Kerala**

Kerala plays a leading role in the cultivation and production of plantation crops in the country. The four plantation crops namely rubber, cardamom, coffee and tea, occupy about 30% of the total cultivated area in the state. It has been shown that in Kerala about 20% households directly depend on commercial crops (GoK 2006). The state accounts for 45% of the total area and 71% of the total production of plantation crops in the country. Kerala has near monopoly in the production of Rubber (92%) and Cardamom (72%) in the country. Its share in coffee is 23% and 8.1% in tea. The total area cultivated is 8.4% for tea, 24.4% in coffee, 84.6% in rubber and 57.2% for cardamom in comparison with the total

area all over India. Excluding the marginal farmers, the labour employed in the plantation sector comes to about four and a half lakhs (GoI 2001).

More than 80 per cent of the agricultural commodities produced in Kerala are dependent on domestic or international markets (Jeromi 2005). It is perceived that being the major cash crop producing state in the country, Kerala is perhaps most affected by the trade liberalisation policy of the government of India (GoK 2006). The import from other countries (for instances tea from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, cardamom from Guatemala), collapsing commodity prices, and stagnant consumer demand have cut deep into the profitability of the sector and forced many plantations to close down. The measures taken by the management to cope up with the financial problems include cutting of allowances, reduction in the wages, delayed bonus, stopping of incentive system and increase in the working hours and so on (*The Hindu* 2003).

India is the second largest producer of cardamom in the world and at the same time, the largest consumer too. In India cardamom cultivation is confined to the three major states Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Kerala accounts for 72% of production and 56% of the area under cardamom in India (GoI 2001). Cardamom cultivation in Kerala is concentrated in the high ranges, spread over in the districts of Idukki (about 79% of area), Wayanad (about 10%), Palakkad (about 7%) and in a lesser area in few other districts.

Small holdings are predominating in cardamom plantations. Unlike other plantation crops like tea, the majority of the holdings are below 5 hectares. The average size of the holdings of small cardamom in India is 2 hectares and 2.2 hectares in Kerala. About 45% of the area under cardamom in Kerala and 47% in India are cultivated by small holders below 5 hectares. Holdings in the range of 5 hectares to 20 hectares account for about 19 % of the area in Kerala and 23% in India. The holdings up to 100 hectares contribute to 12% in Kerala and 11% in India. The holdings of the size of 100 hectares and above constitute about 23% of total area cultivated under cardamom in Kerala and about 19% in India (GoI 2001).

It is estimated that besides the large number (about 20000) of small holders, about 17000 workers are also employed in cardamom cultivation (GoI 2001). No proper data regarding the number of workers in cardamom plantations are available since the available figures do not include the temporary and seasonal workers for whom no records exist.<sup>1</sup> Around 70% labourers are females and a very large number of migrant labours are involved in it. Employment of children for work is common, especially during harvesting season. However, the issues of workers and their different aspects of well being have been neglected in the development schemes of Government bodies and discussion on development in Kerala.

### 2.3 Growth of Cardamom Industry in Kerala

The beginning of cardamom cultivation in Kerala is traced from various writings on plantation industry and semi-official documents like Travancore State Manual and other writings. When international market was open for plantation crops like pepper and ginger in 16-18<sup>th</sup> century cardamom was only a forest product. Cardamom grew as a natural wild product in the ever green forests in the Western Ghats. It was considered as a minor forest produce till the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The system of cardamom collection from naturally growing plants continued till 1803 at least, but in the latter years the demand became too large, and large scale organized cultivation was started in India and Ceylon” (Ridley 1912). The increasing demand for exports leads to the starting of commercial cultivation of cardamom.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Discussions with trade union leaders in Udumbanchola and field observation in the plantations revealed that majority of the workers are temporary whom there is no record exist.

<sup>2</sup> Cardamom of commerce is the dried capsules of the plant *Zingiberaceae* that contain seeds possessing a pleasant characteristic aroma. Cardamom is used as a flavoring ingredient in various types of the food preparations, confectionary, beverages, liquor as well as in perfumery and pharmaceutical industries. In the Middle-East, cardamom is traditionally used in the making of ‘gahwa’, a beverage made out of cardamom and coffee. In India, it is used for culinary preparations and in Ayurvedic products.

Plantations were established for cardamom cultivation only in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that too as a secondary crop in coffee plantations.<sup>3</sup> The cultivators tried coffee and then moved in to cinchona for a short period when the coffee plantations faced a crisis. These crises lead to the introduction of large scale cultivation of tea plantations in the High Ranges, and subsequently to rubber plantations in the high and mid land regions in Kerala. The cultivation of cardamom spread rapidly in the hilly terrains of Western Ghats and the portion of the south of the Palghat gap came to be known as Cardamom Hills (Velu 1940, George and Tharakan 1985). It was an export oriented crop from the very beginning onwards with less domestic consumption.

After the first geographical survey conducted by Lieutenants Ward and Conner (1817-20), the state re-enforced initially by appointing a conservator of forests and then in 1823 by the creation of a special cardamom department (Sivanandan et al., 1985). The product gathered was transported to the port of Alleppey where it was sorted, graded and eventually auctioned. The complete monopoly of the state existed in the trading of cardamom till a very long period in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the early phase of procuring wild cardamom, government employed tribes for collection and curing.<sup>4</sup> In the time of peak harvest, the Nayat Brigade- the infantry of erstwhile princely state Travancore – is made use of. As the trade prospects was brightened in the course of time, the government began to increase its control by deploying a detachment of its infantry and posting large numbers of watchmen at various places in and around the cardamom growing region to watch the ‘thavalams’<sup>5</sup> to prevent smuggling of cardamom (Velu 1940).

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<sup>3</sup> In the native states of Travencore and Cochin, cardamom was a monopoly of the respective governments. The Raja of Travencore made it compulsory that all the produce shall be sold to his officials, who forwarded it to the main depot in Alleppey, then to the most important port of the state Travencore. At Alleppey cardamom was sold by auction, the main buyers were Muslim merchants and the best quality, known as Alleppey Green, was reserved for export. In the forest land owned by the British government cardamom was a miscellaneous produce, while in Coorg, forest lands were leased out to private individuals for cardamom cultivation.

<sup>4</sup> *Muduvan* tribes were employed to collect cardamom from the forests. See, Velu Pillai, T. K (1940), *The Travencore State Manual: Volume 1, The Government of Travencore, Trivandrum*

<sup>5</sup> Thavalam were places in the Cardamom Hills where the harvested cardamom was brought for drying and transportation.



Cardamom plantations, in the strict sense of the term, probably date from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Mysore and Travencore. The area under cardamom plantation was estimated in 1940 by the United Planters Association of South India (UPASI) as 81,720 acres (Rege 1946). Rapid expansion of area under cardamom was the result of deliberate policy formulation of the state followed during the early decades of the 20th century. This was due to the fact that land revenue and the tax on agricultural produces constituted in those days the most important government policy which had greatly emphasized the need for encouraging commercial cultivation of the most remunerative crops, which included cardamom. The various land revenue and allotment rules framed during the period between 1860 and 1925 were essentially meant to attract more people into the process of expansion of commercial agriculture.

Tea, coffee and cardamom plantations grew up in the Western Ghat region with land available at very liberal terms. In order to sustain the production of cardamom for the state's trade monopoly in the earlier phase, the government also offered special grants of land for settlement purpose and financial help to cardamom growers. The forests were protected by regulations for the grazing of cattle- the areas such as plantations less than 15 years old and natural forests under 20 years old were prohibited for grazing in order to protect the young cardamom plants (Sivanandan et al., 1985).

The system of cultivation in this region on a plantation basis was initiated by persons from outside Kerala, either the British or cultivators from the Madurai District of the Madras Presidency (mostly from Goodallur, Cumbum, Thevaram). The Tamil growers recruited plantation workers from all over the Madurai District to perform annual agricultural operations in the cardamom estates. The Europeans, on the other hand, kept gangs of coolies permanently in their estates to carry out various agricultural operations on a regular basis. Among the growers, the European planters and *Chettis'* from Tamil Nadu owned most of the area under the crop (Sivanandan et al., 1985).

The terms offered by the state for the procurement of cardamom were, not favourable to the growers during the period of the monopoly trade under the British. Between 1823 and 1841, the ryots were given a 'kudivilay' (production price) at the rate of 8 rupees 6 annas and 9 paise per *thulams* of 20 English pounds of dry cardamom (Aiya 1989). Between 1841 and 1869, this rate was further reduced by 11 annas per *thulam*. In the year 1870, a change was made in the system of payment: the ryot's claim was calculated as a share of the average rate of auction price at Alleppey. Under the system, the ryots received a loan or advance from the superintendent of cardamom hills at the commencement of each season for weeding and harvesting operations; after the sale of their produce, they were entitled a share (at the rate of one-third between 1870 and 1887, two by fifth between 1887 and 1896 of the average price of each variety) of the market value of their produce less than the amount and supervision charges and a further deduction of 10% of the total amount in lieu of ground rent (Viswanathan 1978).

The crop being very sensitive to weather conditions and its price very sensitive to export demand, wide fluctuations in the total output of the cardamom and its unit price were very common. Under such conditions of uncertainty, the government found it un-profitable to continue the system of monopoly procurement and trade in cardamom. As the unit price of the produce began to move on a course of steady decline, and a buyer's market developed, the fixed share of the two by fifth of the value accruing to the growers ceased to give them any incentive for increasing production. Moreover, the government found it impossible to ensure a satisfactory system of procurement, a situation which further accentuated the feeling of uncertainty among the growers as well as the Government (Sivanandan et al., 1985).

This uncertainty of the cardamom therefore eventually led to significant shift in the state policy, namely abolition of state monopoly of trade in cardamom in 1896 (in the *Kanni Elam* tract, the monopoly was lifted only in 1907) and to the beginning of an era of active governmental encouragement and support to private enterprise in cultivation of cardamom for increasing production. With the abolition of state monopoly, trading in cardamom had passed initially to the

control of a group of traders called 'Nattukootta Chettis'. They purchased all the *Makaraelam* cardmom from the ryots. In the cardamom hills, the number of traders increased from 183 in 1891 to 277 after a decade. As in the case of growers, these traders also came from the nearby Tamil region. They controlled large estates in the high ranges and handled out most of the cardamom produced in the Palani Hills of the Madras Presidency and in the Travencore region. With preponderance of the Tamil traders, the marketing center shifted from Alleppey to Bodinaikanur in the Madras Presidency (Sivanandan et al., 1985).

The Cardamom Hill is declared as a reserve forest by an order of Travencore Raja in 1897. It was in 1935 the Travancore government had framed special rules for leasing out the hill for cardamom cultivation. Land ceiling measures for cardamom cultivation was introduced in 1940s. The "Grow More Food Campaign" in the 1950s accelerated the migration to the high land region, and this coincided with the expansion of cardamom cultivation. During this period various programmes were in existence, such as the High Range Reclamation Scheme for providing waste lands for cultivation and there were rules for the allotment of land in various high land villages under the 'Kuthakappattam' lease rules (Aiya 1989). Along with the non-cultivators, there are a number of small holders who came in search for cultivable land. Many people who came to work in the developmental projects (hydro electric projects) also acquired small pieces of land. The land is leased out for cardamom cultivation for a particular period of time. In 1961, by another amendment, the government increased the lease period from 7 years to 20 years.

## **2.4 The Various Phases of Cardamom Industry and the workers**

On an analysis of secondary data and discussions with various stakeholders, it is reported that the crisis prevailing in the plantation industry in general is the main reason reported for lack of attention to the issues of workers. The possible reasons for this crisis in the industry, as reported by various stakeholders include lowering of domestic price due to imports and smuggling of cardamom from Guatemala at lower price started coming to Indian market after liberalisation, the manipulation

of price by big auctioneers, reduced exports of Indian cardamom, high cost of production, crop loss due to climatic changes and prevailing rules in the cardamom cultivating area. So in this background, this section seeks to analyse how the various phases of development of cardamom industry affected the workers' lives.

#### **2.4.1 Trends in Area, Production and Productivity**

This section analyse area, production and productivity of cardamom with a view to get some broad indications of the possible changes that have been taking place in the cardamom economy during the last three decades. There is difference on official estimates of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Commerce of Government of India on the statistics of area and production of cardamom industry. Trade estimates of production by the Indian Spice Trade Association, Kochi gives another statistics which also differ from other statistics. The official estimates of production have always been considerably lower than the trade statistics. The difference in the official estimates arises mainly out of inadequate sampling and estimation which do not take into account the perennial nature of the crop and exclusion of encroached forest land and unregistered small holdings from the purview of estimation.

In 1970-71, the total area under cardamom cultivation is enumerated as 55190 hectare in Kerala. There was no change in the area till 1983-84. There was an increase in the area from 61000 hectare to 64000 hectare in 1988-99. The Spices Board conducted a survey for assessment of area under cardamom. Accordingly the actual enumerated area of 44008 hectares replaced hitherto reported area of 64000 ha which was based on the area registered by the state governments. After that the area remained more or les same till 1995-96, but showing a decreasing trend from 44248 ha in 1995-96 to 41332 in 2002-03 (Spice Board 2005). The recent trends in the area of cardamom in Kerala from 1988-89 are given in table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Area, Production and Productivity of Cardamom in Kerala**

Year	Area (Ha)	Production (MT)	Productivity *(Kg/Ha)
1988-89	64000	2820	---
1989-90	44008	1900	80
1990-91	44008	3450	70
1991-92	43670	3450	81
1992-93	43388	2570	136
1993-94	43459	4430	145
1994-95	44237	4720	165
1995-96	44248	5380	149
1996-97	41268	4550	172
1997-98	40867	5290	162
1998-99	41499	4990	214
1999-00	41491	6585	247
2000-01	41288	7580	272
2001-02	41336	8380	281
2002-03	41412	8680	
2003-04	41332	8875	

Sources: Spices Statistics 2004 and \* *Spices India*, Various Issues

The data shows there is a fluctuation of production of cardamom industry in India over the period. Introduction of irrigation during summer has stabilized the yield to some extent in certain areas. There is an increasing trend in production after 1998-99. This may be due to improvement in productivity, using improved varieties and better production technology. The figure of productivity is important as it has direct bearing on the cost efficiency and profitability of cardamom cultivation. The yield level was around 34.65 kg/ha during 1970-71 has not shown much improvement till the end of 1980, except for occasional fluctuations. The productivity was improved from 1990 onwards and reached 162 kg/ha during 1997. The average annual productivity of cardamom in Kerala ranges from 200 kg to 250 kg per hectare depending on receipt of seasonal and timely rain (Spices Board 2005).



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The increased price of the crop resulted in intensifying the cultivation and it is reported that many small growers initiated to the cultivation of cardamom. This resulted in the employment of more workers as well. Correspondingly, there is increase in the production and productivity of the crop. The increase in productivity is explained through the changes in cultivation practices from traditional varieties of plants to high yielding varieties. As in the changes in production, the market price has also highly influence producers and workers in cardamom industry.

#### **2.4.2 Trends in price**

Most of the workers attached to industry are employed in temporary status and it is reported that their wage and welfare measures are directly linked to the price of the output.<sup>6</sup> The analysis of price fluctuations is important to understand how it affects producers and workers in the industry. In cardamom, marketing is mainly carried out through auctions.<sup>7</sup>

The sale of cardamom was dominated by the Auction sale. For instance, the Auction sale was up to 80 % till late 90s. The data of sale practice over the period shows that the sale through the auction is decreasing and producers prefer private sale (Spices Board 2005). It is noted that when the price in private sale is low producers prefer the Auction as they get relatively better price in the Auction. In 2003-04 sale through the Auction was only 48 % (Spices Board 2005). However, small and marginal producers have no major role in price mechanism and sale practice. In the Auction the minimum lot size and grading system and other trading conditions discourage participation of small and marginal producers. In

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<sup>6</sup> Many producers reported that their main source of income comes from cardamom cultivation and since labour charges constitute the major share of production cost they are unable to provide their wages and other welfare measures if price declines.

<sup>7</sup> There are 17 firms currently conducting auctions in Kerala, Tamilnadu, Karnataka and Mumbai. The licensed auctioneers conduct weekly auctions during the harvesting seasons in the production tracts or assembly centers on particular days as approved by the Spices Board as per the conditions issued from time to time. Due to continuous harvesting of small cardamom in different production centers in the recent years, auction is being conducted through out the year as desired by the grower. Vandanmedu in Idukki district was the largest and one of the oldest auction centres of South India.

private sale mediators and agents dominates the trading practice where these producers have no role in decision making. Though there are rules and regulations of the Spices Board to ensure fair practice in the auctioning the big auctioneers play a major role to undermine the rules.<sup>8</sup>

The market politics played by the big traders with in the country and the price variations of the product in the open market in different places in the country are least looked into. Various planters associations and a number of cooperative societies like Cardamom Processing and Marketing Corporation (CPMC), Cardamom Marketing Corporation (CMC), Cardamom Plantation Association (CPA) and Indian Cardamom Marketing Corporation (ICMC) are active in the trading practice. CMC in Vandanmedu were considered a leading Auction house in the country and now it is closed down because of the mismanagement and corruption of the managing partners.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of product forces the producers to sell it promptly after the harvest. For instance, the market value of cardamom is affected, if the colour of pod is changed from its particular green, which often happens if not stored properly. This may happen even in short term. In short period, the moisture content will either loss or it absorbs moisture from the air or it loose quality of product. Further, the pods are susceptible to the attack by insects. It affects highly to small and marginal farmers because they hardly own any adequate storage facilities. The large holders have better storage facilities and to certain extend, they can keep the product till the time of better price. They can manipulate the market prices by creating shortage and sell their product in the off-season when there is high demand. There is no mechanism to cope with the risks of price movements in the market. The 'online trading' is announced for cardamom, but small traders are protesting for its

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<sup>8</sup> It is reported by planters and Spices Board officials that in Bodinaikkannur, the major auction centre now in South India, it is always the same four big buyers who are controlling the whole auction since many years. They have an adjustment among them of maximum auction prices.

<sup>9</sup> The auction centre was started in order to get the planter a good value for his crop and to avoid the difficulty to go to Bodinaykannur in Tamilnadu for marketing. But now, it is again shifted to Bodinaykannur where the large scale auctions are carried out. About 300 of the planters from Kerala and Tamilnadu deposited about Rs 50 crores in CMC on a promise of 18% interest. But the partners of CMC are denying that they did not accept any deposit from anyone. Cardamom Planters in Kerala, TN chase lost deposit", *Economic Times*, January 5, 2006

revoke. This will only help the big players to make profit and manipulate the prices, which will worsen the situation of small scale cultivators.<sup>10</sup> All these factors are determinant in price fixation mechanism in the market. It has been observed that price of the cardamom is highly fluctuated over the period. The recent trends in the prices of cardamom from 1991-92 are given in table 2.2.

**Table 2.2 Auction Price and production of Cardamom in India**

Year	Auction Prices (Rs/kg)	Production (MT)
1991-92	267.92	5000
1992-93	465.37	4250
1993-94	340.06	6600
1994-95	255.38	7000
1995-96	201.58	7900
1996-97	365.82	6625
1997-98	276.44	7900
1998-99	567.52	7170
1999-00	487.42	9330
2000-01	569.75	10480
2001-02	622.87	11365
2002-03	561.26	11920
2003-04	361.03	11580
2004-05	301.27	11415
2005-06	308.69	12540
2006-07	275.41	---

Sources: GoI, Spices Board (2004), *Spices Statistics*  
*The Spices India*, various issues

The price declines from 2003-04 compared to earlier prices. For instance the price was Rs.561.26 in 2002-03 and it has sharply declined to Rs. 361.03 in 2003-04. The fluctuations in the price of cardamom have a significant bearing on the

<sup>10</sup> This is revealed in discussions with planters, small growers etc.



conditions of supply side. It is noted that the high price have positive impact on production and productivity of cardamom (Madan 2004).

The upswings and downswings in the prices of the product is not a recent phenomenon as is revealed by analyzing the price of the product over years. The formation of the prices is depending up on a variety of factors. The well experienced traders can predict the crop prospects for the forthcoming season based on the length of the summer, occurrence and severity of draught, pre-monsoon showers and the quantum of rainfall during the June-July period. Many of the dealers and exporters are also plantation owners. When the expected production is much lower than the normal production, a significantly higher price than the previous year is set at the beginning of the season. If on the other hand, the expected production is much higher than the normal production, a much lower price is set.

Changes in international market conditions, impact of unexpected climate change on production, artificial scarcity/demand creation by big players and so on determine price in the market (Nair et al., 1989). Initial price of the season may have many impacts on producers as they consider it for their production and maintenance practice for the year. The producers are justifying the low wages and inadequate welfare measures for the workers in the backdrop of price crash of the crop. But it is found that during the time of higher price for the crop also, the wages and other services provided for the workers are not different.<sup>11</sup> When there was high price for the crop, the producers intensified the cultivation which provided employment through out the years.

Demand from domestic and international market influences market price of the product as well. Industrial consumption by pharmaceutical/Ayurveda and bakery is the highest and accounts for over 45% of the total consumption. There are clear regional differences in the consumption of cardamom. Retail market size in South India is estimated at around 30% for small cardamom. The share is the highest in the West (45%) followed by North (35%) and lowest in the East (20%). The demand for cardamom in rural areas has also increasing though its consumption

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<sup>11</sup> Details of welfare measures of workers are discussing in chapter 3.

was predominant in urban areas. The use of cardamom in households is very limited. The demand for cardamom has increased due to its consumption for *garam masala*, sweets, *pan* products and so on in recent period (Spices Board 2005). The domestic demand was estimated to be around 82.4% of the total production in 1988-89. The current domestic demand for cardamom has been estimated at 11000 metric tones for 2004-05 which was around 94% of the total production.

Major overseas markets for Indian cardamom are Saudi Arabia, UAE, Japan, Europe and USA. During the 1980s, the share of export of Indian cardamom was 53% of India's production but it has drastically reduced 5% in 2002-03. Quality of the product, competition in the international market and recent trade policies are the major determinant factor to India's cardamom exports. Export value of cardamom has a strong bearing on the colour of the pod. A particular green colour, known as 'Alleppey green' is considered as the highest quality among the Indian cardamom. It is also widely acknowledged that Indian products are high quality in international market (Spices Board 2005). Guatemala is the major competitor in international market due to its low priced products.

After the second world war cardamom production in Guatemala expanded considerably mainly because of the shortage for cardamom and the high price prevailing at that time, and soon became the largest producer in the world. There is no domestic market for cardamom and so almost the entire produce is exported. The oil boom and the related economic upswing in west Asia and Europe during the mid and late 1970s resulted in increased demand for cardamom in the Middle East, who is the main consumers, at high price levels. This added to the growth of cardamom in Guatemala as an export oriented crop. The average price of Guatemalan cardamom in international market in 2002-2003 was 6.5 to 8 US dollars per kilo gram against 10.5 to 14 US dollars for Indian cardamom. The domestic consumption there is only 2 to 7 percent of the total production and the entire produce is meant for export (Spices Board 2005).

Indian cardamom loses its superiority in the world trade due to a number of interrelated factors including comparatively higher unit price, detection of

pesticide residues in the product, changes in the economy of importing countries and so on. The low productivity and high cost of production vis-à-vis stiff competition in the international market rendered Indian cardamom less competitive and subsequently non-remunerative for the planters (Thomas et al., 1990). A rise in the export price is not always paralleled by a corresponding increase in the domestic price, whereas a fall in the export price is transferred entirely to the domestic price (Nair et al., 1989). There is an attempt to revive the industry by increasing productivity and reducing the cost of cultivation.<sup>12</sup>

The entire discussion on the cost of production is attributed to the labour charge. However, studies show that expenditure on pesticides and fertilizers are also significant (Usha 2003, JRCS 2006). The Spices Board has calculated the labour component in the production cost accounts up to 60% during the establishment stage and more than 40% thereafter in the total cost of cardamom cultivation in India (Spices Board 2005).

### **2.4.3 Changes in the Cultivation Practices**

The changes in cultivation practice of cardamom have influenced workers in various phases. A very high yielding variety (HYV) of cardamom, '*Njallani*' is developed by a cultivator and it became the major cultivating variety in High Ranges by 1995. The productivity of this new variety is far higher than the earlier varieties like *Mysore* and *Vazhukka*. *Njallani* cardamom is said to give more than 500 kilograms per hectare while the other varieties give a maximum of 200-250 kilograms. Today, more than 80% of the cardamom cultivated belongs to *Njallani* variety. The introduction of HYV plants also induces various impacts nature of cultivation, harvesting and work of the labourers in industry. For instance, harvesting time for cardamom is increased from August to February or March whereas it was only up to few months in earlier.

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<sup>12</sup> The various reports brought out by planters, Spices Board officials, traders etc blame the high cost of production for the present non-remunerative status of the industry. Further details; see Ravindran and Rajiv (2002), Constraint Analysis in Cardamom Cultivation, in: Ravindran, P.N and Madhusoodhanan, K.J (eds) Cardamom, Taylor and Francis, London.

In the initial phase of the cultivation, there was no need for additional fertilisers, as forest land was naturally fertile. And the wild varieties of cardamom plants cultivated earlier were resistant to pests. The attempts to increase the productivity of cardamom is associated with introduction of HYV and increased use of pesticides and fertilizers in Kerala. The HVY introduced were not resistant to pests and it needed intensive pesticide application. It was around the end of 1970s, organic chlorine pesticides were started being used in the large cardamom plantations in Idukki. It spread to the smaller holdings and by mid 1990s, a number of synthetic pesticides were applied in the plantations. The productivity increased due to using HYV and improvement of irrigation facilities, and the harvesting period is extended considerably for the crop.

In addition, HYV have reduced capacity to resist the attack from pests. When the traditional varieties have 28% chances of pest attack, for *Njallani*, it is 80% (as told by farmers and spices board experts). So even the class one pesticides, which are highly poisonous and recommended by Spice board to use a maximum of 6 to 7 times per year, is applied every month in the plantations. The total consumption of pesticides in Kerala was as high as 2220 tons (1999-2000). Per hectare usage of pesticides in Kerala is higher in areas like Idukki. Reports reveal that in cardamom plantations, more than 50% of the cost for cultivation is for purchasing fertilisers and pesticides (Usha 2003).

“Pests developed resistance and so each month different pesticides are used by the cultivators. In most of the holdings, two or three pesticides are mixed together for spraying. Many scientists have pointed out that the mixing of different pesticides may change the entire property of the pesticide, leading to unpredictable hazards. Majority of the cultivators and workers are not aware of the quantity of the pesticides to be applied and the hazardous impact of these pesticides in human beings and environment”. A big share of the income from cardamom is spending on pesticides and fertilisers. In Idukki district, more than 50 pesticide agencies and more than 500 retail shops are functioning.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Discussion with Mr. Raison Joseph, Secretary of JRCS, Idukki. JRC conducted a study about the pesticide use in Kanchiyar Panchayat in Idukki.

Pesticides banned in Kerala and in many developed countries are easily available in Idukki. These include ethiphone, emisan, endosulphan, carbo furidan, chloro faris etc. Endo sulphan is marketed under different names like pyarisulphan, encephan etc. Endosulphan is banned in Kerala after the incidence of increased occurrence of genetic abnormalities and other disabilities in people working and living nearby cashewnut plantations in Kasargod (Jayadevan et al., 2005). There are a number of pesticide agencies in Tamil Nadu border and from there, and different kinds of pesticides are reaching Idukki. Majority of the large scale cultivators are from Tamilnadu. Due to increased competition, a number of agents of different pesticide companies are ready for taking order and delivering the pesticide at the plantation.

There is no figures regarding the extend of use of pesticides in Idukki. A study conducted by Junior Red Cross Society (JRCS) in Vandanmedu *panchayat* shows that about 112 kilograms of Phorate, a class one pesticide, is used per hectare in cardamom plantations. They calculated that in a year more than five lakh kilograms of this particular pesticide is used in this *panchayat* where 4500 ha area is under cardamom. The increased use of fertilisers and pesticides in the high Range area has caused wide impacts on local ecological balance, biodiversity, livelihood of the workers and health of people in the locality. The intensive cultivation with the use of chemical fertilisers reduced the fertility of the soil, drying up stream and shortage of ground water. The properties of the soil altered and water holding capacity of the soil came down (JRCS 2006).

As quoted from respondents from plantations, 'the splendid bio-diversity in the high range region has disappeared now. The wind in the cardamom cultivating area has no more bearing the scent of spices, but is carrying the smell of highly poisonous pesticides. No more earth worms in the soil, no more bees to pollinate cardamom and the rich biodiversity has reduced. Growers have to add trichoderma (a fungus to control root rot) to the soil as nothing is left in the soil. The climate has changed considerably over the years.<sup>14</sup> However response towards these

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<sup>14</sup> The District, which used to receive an average rainfall of 6,050 mm per annum in 1950, got only 5,500 mm in 1970, which further dropped to 4,500 mm in 1990 and 3,500 mm in 2000. The minimum temperature in Munnar was minus 3 degrees centigrade in 1950s and early 60s, which

impacts on local ecological balance and livelihood of the workers is very limited by the stakeholders.

Though the introduction of HYV varieties and use of pesticides employed more workers and induced productivity they hardly addressed the issues of impact of pesticides on workers. Many child labours employed only for spraying pesticides.<sup>15</sup> Local news papers reported that children from the age group 10 and above are employed widely in the plantations for pesticide spraying. When the adult labourers rejected to do this work, child labourers from Tamilnadu are deployed for this work through contractors.

## **2.5 Predominance of Small Growers**

There is no precise definition of the term small grower and is usually defined in terms of the average land holding size in the region understudy. In the present study, the term small grower used to denote cultivators of less than 5 hectares of land and whose main source of income is cardamom cultivation and they rely mostly on family labour. The small growers are occupying an important place in cardamom economy as more than 45% of the holdings are under this category (Spices Board, 2001). Small growers are to be considered separately from the plantation owners since they have unique problems. Unlike larger planters, they have limited resources that restrain their ability to cope with shocks and cannot negotiate with the trends in the new global economy. But they are at a relatively privileged position than labourers as they possess some land and labour force that gave them some power over decision making. They are at the bottom level in cardamom economy as high scale of production, distribution and marketing of plantation crops always favoured the big holders.

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has gone up in recent times. The average maximum temperature used to be 18 degrees during the day, but this has now increased to 26 degrees. See M, Murugan, N, Mini Raj and Carmel Rani Joseph (200), Changes in Climatic Elements and their Impact on Production of Cardamom in the Cardamom Hills of Kerala, Journal of Spices and Aromatic Crops, Vo.9, No. 2 .pp.157-160.

<sup>15</sup> Details of child labour and impact of pesticides use are discusses in following chapters

The production and organization structure of small holders are different from plantation model. They are at the same time both worker and owner. Apart from family labour, small growers employ workers in peak seasons. They also work in neighbouring plantations. Some of them cultivate other crops as well though their main source of income comes from cardamom. It is reported that they used to cultivate multi crops earlier. However, low profit and crops failure forced them to rely on cardamom. Many of them had tried vanilla cultivation sponsored by the government a few years back, but diseases and price crash now entirely wiped out vanilla from the area. Apart from cardamom, the remuneration for coffee, pepper and coconut are also not very attractive that forced the farmer to a complete trap. It has been observed that some of them could manage livestock and which supplement their income. Impact of crisis in the plantation sector attributed to the price crash is severe to small growers who do not have any alternative source of income. Liberalization increased input costs, resulted in market fluctuations and increased competition; small growers are not able to withstand this and majority of them have been trapped in misery (Ravindran and Rajiv 2002).

Planters' associations have started co-operatives to sell fertilizers, pesticides, machinery etc. These small growers sell their product to the local trader who again sells it to the town dealer from whom it goes to the auction centres in different places. In this chain, the small growers are the ones who are exploited maximum. The price they are getting is much lower than the market price, but the growers are not much dissatisfied since these local traders come to their houses to collect the product and so they do not have to go to town with the product. It is regulated by domestic and external policy regimes as well as structural and institutional factors in the region. In developing countries, there is a huge difference between the price at the border or at the national and international market, and the price that the small grower gets. The structure of the market is such that ultimately the traders are benefited from the increasing prices. Since the demand is small, there is no bigger market system to provide inputs or buy products in the village area. They have to either go to the town or rely on agents of different fertilizer and pesticide firms who come to the farms (Spices Board 2005).

Prices of inputs are also increasing and small growers, who do not have any savings, face difficulty in coping with it. They depend on bigger planters or their co-operatives in the area for curing purpose. For this, they have to pay six to eight rupees per kilogram of cardamom. Lack of storage facility forced them to sell the product at the price available at the time. They are not able to afford the new technologies that other planters are using. Many of the small growers do not possess any tenancy certificate as leasing out is stopped since a long time. So getting credit from registered banks is practically impossible as no land ownership can be given as security. Most often, small growers has to rely on private financiers who offer money without much security deposit, but the interest rates are high. Changes in the climate affect the crop severely and there are no mechanisms to cope with it. Recurring drought and lowering of water tables demanded proper irrigation facilities. Insurance is needed against crop failure and price volatility. Crop insurance is introduced for some crops but the effectiveness of this is under question. Government is giving subsidies to help small growers, but how much it is beneficial to them is a real question.

Many of these households started constructing houses and bought amenities, taking loans from banks and private financiers, thinking that on the next harvest they can repay the debt. The price crash has spoiled their plans and they are in a debt trap. But the irony is that they can not abandon the crop as any delay in the caring affects the harvest and life of the crop since cardamom is highly sensitive to climatic variations and pests. They continue the inputs to the field on the hope that the price will increase some day. The increase in the prices of fertilizers and pesticides adds to their burden. Apart from this, the pests developed resistance to many pesticides and so they have to apply different pesticides, more than the intervals and doses prescribed by the spices board. Most of the small growers reduced the intensity of cultivation practices in their field which in turn reduced the employment opportunity for workers.



## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to trace the various phases in growth and development of cardamom industry in Kerala, in order to understand its impact on workers' lives. The increase in the price of the crop prompted the cultivators to increase production which leads to more or less regular employment opportunities for the workers. But the prosperity in the industry was not translated in to the worker's life, in fact, the methods adopted for increasing productivity by using pesticides and fertilisers created major health problems for the workers. Though the fluctuations in prices are not a new phenomenon in the history of cardamom trade, the trade liberalisation policies accelerated and widened the fluctuations in prices. We have looked in to the various reasons reported by different stakeholders for the crisis in the industry. The crisis had an impact on the over all industry, but it affected mostly the workers who are devoid of any supportive services to cope with the crisis. The state is withdrawing from its responsibility by cutting down the expenditure in public sector, the already under developed regions where the plantations are concentrated, is facing a serious threat. The government's entire interest is only in the commerce of the crop and the workers' issues are sidelined. In this background, this study explores the present working and living conditions of the plantation labourers in Udumbanchola panchayat of Idukki district in Kerala. The data collected during the field study are presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter III

# Working & Living Conditions of Plantation Labourers

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### **3.1 Introduction**

The present chapter intends to understand the socio-economic profile and material conditions of workers in cardamom industry. The livelihood issues of the workers often get sidelined, in comparison to the other aspects of agricultural sector. And this trend has intensified following the agrarian crisis experienced in the state especially in plantation sector (Sainath 2004, George and Krishnaprasad 2006). In this context the study, which inquires into the vulnerable position of workers engaged in plantations, becomes appropriate. The study presented here is based on field work done among the cardamom plantation workers in the Udumbanchola panchayat in Idukki district. A brief profile of the study area, indicating its backward position is provided in the first section. And then we proceed to examine socio economic background, working and material condition of the workers and narrate how they are subjected to various social and economic exploitations.

### **3.2 Profile of the Study Area**

Idukki district is located in the middle part of Kerala and spreads over 5105.22 Sq. kms. Idukki is a hilly region (located at an altitude of 300m above MSL) and with more than 50 percent of area under forest cover. For the purpose of revenue administration the district is divided into four *taluks* (Devikulam, Peermedu, Udumbanchola and Thodupuzha) and into eight blocks for the purpose of developmental activities (Arudai, Devikulam, Elamdesom, Idukki, Kattappana, Adimali, Nedumkandom and Thodupuzha) (GoK 2005b). The area, which presently falls under Idukki, was primarily a tribal inhabited area in the pre-colonial times. The migration to this region started at the end of 19th century when Tamilians came as plantation workers for the European planters in Peermade, Udumbanchola and Devikulam taluks.

The district accounts for 13% of the geographical area of the State of Kerala, while the population of the district is only 3.7% of the state. The population of the district is estimated to be 11.29 lakhs (Census, 2001) and density of population is 252 per sq. km which is the lowest in the state. The Scheduled Castes (SC) and

Scheduled Tribes (ST) account for around 18.63% of the total population in the district. According to the latest figure the estimated Tamil population in the district is more than two lakhs, who are primarily employed in tea and cardamom plantations spread over Peermade, Udumbanchola and Devikulam taluks. Literacy rate is 88%. The human development indicators of the district are much lower than state average. For instance the district has a sex ratio of 993, which is lowest in the state. The district is less equipped with proper infrastructure including transport and communication, electricity, medical and educational facilities compared to other districts of Kerala (GoK 2005a). The district gets poor supply of electricity, despite the fact that 66% of the entire production of electricity in the state is produced in 8 electricity projects located in the district.

The economy of Idukki is predominantly agricultural and the sector contributes more than 50% of the revenue earnings of the district. Cardamom, tea, tapioca, rice, pepper, rubber, coconut, sugarcane, coffee, arecanut, ginger, lemon grass and vegetables forms the important agricultural products. Except large plantations of tea and cardamom seen in high lands, majority of the holdings falls under small and marginal category (GoK 2005a).

Our study area, Udumbanchola belongs to Nedumkandam block *panchayat*, located 65 km away from the district head quarters at Painavu. It's bound in the north by Santhanpara, south by Nedumkandam, east by Tamilnadu and west by Konnathady and Senapathy *panchayats*. Udumbanchola records the least density of population (196 per sq.km) in Nedumkandam. It was after the construction of Kumali-Munnar state highway which links the area with other major parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, people increasingly started inhabiting in Udumbanchola. The literacy rate and the sex ratio of the *panchayat* is 77% and 950, respectively much lower than the district figures. Around 17% of the total population belongs to SC and ST. and there are three SC and seven ST colonies in Udumbanchola (GoK 2005b).

Cardamom is the main cultivation in Udumbanchola, which provides employment to almost 70% of the population in Udumbanchola *panchayat*. Other crops cultivated in the region include paddy, tapioca, vegetables, ginger, pepper, coffee,

coconut, arecanut, and plantain. However, their market accessibility is very limited and very often they rely on established markets in Rajakkadu and Ernakulam which is around 60-70 kilometer faraway from their panchayat (GoK 2005b).

Electricity has not reached many households, especially that of tribal and migrant labourers. Water scarcity is a major problem faced by the people. Toilet facilities are also poor and due to high water scarcity, even the people who have toilet facilities are forced to go to open fields. Health care facilities in the panchayat include one Primary Health Centre (PHC), four sub centres and two private allopathic dispensaries. There are eighteen Integrated Child Development Scheme units and 12 Public Distribution shops functioning, in the panchayat (GoK 2005b). There is four lower primary, two upper primary, one high school and a higher secondary in the panchayat but all schools run by private managements. With majority of the population being Tamilians there is no Tamil medium schools in the panchayat. The transportation system and telecommunication facilities are not developed. Because of the poor development the region is considered as a Special Grade Panchayat.

### **3.3 Organisation and Nature of Work in Cardamom Plantations**

This section explains the production system and maintenance process of the cardamom plantations and how workers are related to it. Majority of cardamom plantations belongs to the category of small and medium scale holdings and so the distinct hierarchy of workers, supervisors and management is generally exists only in large scale holdings. Majority of large scale cardamom plantations are owned by individuals either who do not belong to the district or from Tamil Nadu and hence seldom stays in the plantation. A manager is appointed to take care of operations in the plantations who mostly will be owner's relative or someone from owner's native place. In addition there will be field supervisors, who are generally experienced worker and/or sharing good liaison with management. There are also labour contractors, to supply labourers to the estate and they will be either present employees or those gave up employment in plantations. In the small and medium

scale holdings, there may or may not be supervisors apart from the owner, depending on the occupation of the owner and season.

As noted, cardamom plantation is a labour intensive industry and workers are mainly employed for manual works. The harvesting process starts in August and extends to February-March covering 5 to 6 rounds of harvesting. Harvesting include plucking of matured pods from each semi-erect panicle at the plant base with hand. But through out the year, there is work in the plantations as cardamom is highly sensitive to pests and climate. Work in the plantation includes (a) maintenance of cardamom plants including hand weeding, forking the plant base and mulching operations, re-planting, shade regulation, irrigating the plants and application of fertilizers and pesticides, (b) hand plucking of matured pods during harvesting and (c) drying of cardamom pods. Identification of matured pods is through experience and on an average; a labourer plucks 14-18Kg of green pods per day.

Operations like Shade regulation, weeding, trashing etc are to be carried out two-three times a year. Cardamom needs to be processed before it sells in the market and conventionally fire driers are used for drying in most of the plantations. The drying chamber is a big room with provisions for regulating heat through pipes connected at the sides of the room. Generally, it takes 3 days and in between, the cardamom pods have to be checked and stirred. Female workers were allotted to work in traditional drying chambers but men workers replaced them when drying process use in electrical drying machine. Coffee is planted as an intercrop in most of the plantations in Idukki, especially on the two sides of the walking tracks in the plantations. Though it is not giving much income, pruning of branches and harvesting and drying the seeds are common activities apart from cardamom harvesting.

### **3.4 Socio-Economic Profile of the Plantation Labourers**

The study covers three small and medium plantations each and one large plantation of cardamom in the Udumbanchola panchayat. A survey was conducted with workers and various stakeholders to understand the development profile of

workers, various factors involved it and different perspectives and responses. In-depth discussions were conducted with 95 workers (who belong to 74 households), owners of surveyed plantations, and supervisor of large scale holding<sup>1</sup>, trade union leaders, elected members in the local *panchayat*, members of *Kudumbasree*, environmental activists, bank managers, officials from the Spices Board, and media persons in the locality. Details regarding the size of sample holdings and the distribution of labourers of the survey are given below.

**Table 3.1 Distribution of Labourers according to the Size of Holdings**

Size of the holding (hectares)	Number of holdings	Number of labourers
5-10	3	12
11-20	3	29
Above 50	1	54

Source: Primary Survey

The sample population include 12 labourers from 3 small holding plantations, 29 from 3 medium scale holdings and 54 from one large scale holding. The sample population consists of a total of 95 labourers including 28 males and 67 females. There is a concentration of female labourers irrespective of the size of plantations. The age and sex-wise categorization of the labour force under study is given in the table below.

**Table 3.2 Age and Sex-wise Distribution of Sample Population**

Age group	Male	Female	Total Persons	Total Percentage
18-28	3	16	19	20
29-39	14	32	46	49
40-50	9	13	22	23
51-61	2	4	6	6
Above 61	--	2	2	2
Total	28	67	95	100

Source: Primary Survey

<sup>1</sup> The plantation owner, residing in Tamilnadu, was not available at the time of study in the locality.

It is evident from the table that majority of the labourers belong to 29-39 age group which consists of 49% of the total labourers in the plantations. 20% falls in to 18-28 age groups even though a few of them who reported their age as 18-19 seem to be less than that age. The 40-50 age groups include 23percent of the labourers while 6 percent are in 51-61 range. There are 2 female labourers who are above the age of 61.

In the younger age group, comparatively fewer males are coming for work in plantations than females. And especially all the labourers who reported their age below 24 are females. All the labourers in this category are migrant labourers. This may be due to the less attractive remuneration and non-sustainability of job in the plantations and availability of other works like construction work, shop assistant job etc. in the nearby towns and plains. Among the labourers interviewed, it is clearly brought out that system of employing whole family is prevalent in cardamom industry. It is noted by many studies that family labours are major work force in plantation sector (for instance, Bhowmic 1996, Sajhau 1987). In some case, whole family is employed in cardamom industry over the generation. Among the 95 labourers interviewed, they belong to 74 house holds. In the case of 15 labourers, both the husband and wife are employed in the same plantations. Six of the other labourers are children of some labourers in the same plantation. Distribution of labourers according to their marital status is given below.

**Table 3.3 Distribution of Sample Population according to Marital Status**

<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Unmarried	6	6
Married	87	92
Widow	2	2
Total	95	100

Source: Primary Survey

Of the total 95 laboureres, 6 are unmarried including one male and five female. All others are married and two are widows. Among the migrant laboureres, the



average age of marriage is 22-23 for females and 25-26 for males. The table 3.4 explains family size of the sample population.

**Table 3.4 Family Size of the Sample Population**

Family size	Number of Labourer households	Percentage
3	6	8
4	52	70
5	11	15
6	5	7
Total	74	100

Source: Primary Survey

The average size of the family is 4 among workers in the study region and it comes around 70 % of the total sample population. But families with 3 to 4 children are not rare. As shown in the table, around 7 percentage of the households having family size of 6. Some of them stay as joint family.

The details of religion wise distribution is given table 3.5. The religion wise distribution of sample population shows 67 Hindus, 26 Christians and 2 Muslims of total sample populations. Majority of the Christians and all Muslims are from neighboring districts of Kerala.

**Table 3.5 Religion-wise Distribution of Sample Population**

Religion	Number of Workers	Percentage
Hindu	67	71
Christian	26	27
Muslim	2	2
Total	95	100

Source: Primary Survey

Among the Christians, 17 belong to CSI (Church of South India), 2 Latin Catholics and 7 Roman Catholics. Among the local labourers Ezhavas and CSI community dominates. These CSI community people are largely converted Christians from other backward communities. The caste-wise break up of study population is given in the table below.

**Table 3.6 Caste-wise Distribution of Sample Population**

Category	Number of workers	Percentage
Schedules Caste	32	34
Other backward Caste	55	58
Forward caste	8	8
Total	95	100

Source: Primary Survey

The majority of the workers in the study population are from Other Backward Castes (OBC) which includes *Ezhava, Thevar, Muslim, CSI* and *Latin Catholics*. The Schedules Caste (SC) population, consists of *Parayan, Chaklian, Pulayan* and *Pandi*, ranks second. Forward castes include Nair and Roman Catholics; constitute only 8% of the study population. For the migrant Tamil population, the festival of “Mari Amman”, a deity, is of foremost importance and they are allowed to go early from the job on that day.

An enquiry in to the educational status of workers revealed that about 89% has received formal education. However although not educated formally another 8% could read and write in Tamil, their mother tongue. 30% labourers have got schooling till Upper Primary level, while 46% labourers stopped their studies after Lower Primary level and 3% of the workers have passed 10<sup>th</sup> standard. The details of educational status are given in the table below.

**Table 3.7 Educational Status of Sample Population**

Level of Schooling	Number of Workers	Percentage
Illiterate	2	2
No formal Schooling, but able to read and write	8	8
Lower primary	44	46
Upper Primary	38	30
High School	3	3
Total	95	100

Source: Primary Survey

The labourers are very keen to educate their children as much as possible and most of the respondents' children are attending schools. Most of the Tamil households send their children to their relative's houses in their native place for schooling as there are no Tamil medium schools in the locality. However, there is one Tamil medium school in the nearby village, which is only up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard. Children have to travel to far away place from Udumbanchola to attend the only higher secondary school, located at Anakkara. Further the capacity of the school is inadequate to accommodate all the students. For higher education, they, have to depend on other districts, as Idukki has only two government colleges. Some private un-aided institutions and parallel colleges are working in Nedumkandam which serves very few students.

The Spices Board is giving educational scholarships to the children of labourers, but it can be availed only by the children of permanent plantation labourers. This prevent majority of children in availing those benefit. Some of the children are studying in higher secondary level, Industrial Training Institute (ITI), hotel management courses and so on while others dropout after failing 10<sup>th</sup> standard. It has been observed that children get opportunity to attend school irrespective of the gender. Discussion with the respondents also revealed that children of many labourers work in the cardamom plantations during the harvest time and vacations.

### **3.5 Employment Characteristics**

Working time in the plantations is 8 am to 5 pm usually and in the case of pesticide application or in the harvesting season, it may extend beyond these timings. They can take one hour lunch break. There is a clear division of labour and the wages given to female workers and male workers are not equal. The kind of work that female labourers has to do include weeding, trashing, plucking the pods, mulching, manuring, spraying pesticide etc and they get an average of Rs.90 per day. Tree felling for shade regulation, digging pits, irrigation, spraying pesticides, collecting and chipping of fire woods etc are the duty of men. They get Rs.100 per day. In the harvesting season, males also engage in plucking the pods.

The wage settlements are on a weekly basis. Permanent workers are entitled to maternity benefit, casual leave, Employees' State Insurance (ESI) and Provident Fund (PF) facilities, but in practice these benefits are not reaching to the workers. Two types of woollen sheets are to be provided by the plantation owners to the labourers in a year. One sheet is a thick and rough one, meant to be used in the field. The other one is comparatively better one for use inside the house. In the big plantations, permanent labourers are said to have getting two woollen sheets while it is not provided in the other plantations.

The distribution of labourers according to their status of work is given in the table 3.10. There are 72 temporary and 23 permanent labourers in the plantations under study.

**Table 3.8 Distribution of Labourers according to the Status of labour.**

Status of labour	Number of Labourers	Percent
Temporary	72	78
Permanent	23	24
Migrant	68	72
Non-Migrant	27	28

Source: Primary Survey

72% of the labour force consists of migrants from Tamilnadu. 43 among them are first generation migrants who came to the plantations in Idukki through some relatives and neighbours from their own villages in Tamilnadu. These relatives and friends came before them as labourers in the Cardamom Plantations and also worked as recruiters for the plantation owners. Children of many of the labourers followed their parent's path and 25 among the present labour force are second generation migrants. 28% are local labourers, mostly from other districts of Kerala neighbouring to Idukki like Pathanamthitta and Kottayam.

### **3.6 Material Conditions of Workers**

The Plantation Labour Act 1951 (PLA 1951) has laid down rules regarding housing, drinking water, sanitation, drainage and sewage arrangements. Of the 95

labourers interviewed, who belong to 74 households, only 31% families are living in the houses provided by the management in the plantation premises. They are permanent labourers. These houses are known as “Coolie Lines”. Coolie lines are rows of quarters constructed to provide shelter to the labourers and their families. Rest of the labourers is living in the rented houses (45%) and the remaining in own houses (24%). The table 3.8 explains basic facilities of workers.

**Table 3.9 Distribution of Labourer Households according to Residential Facilities**

<b>Facilities</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Total Number of houses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Roof	Tile	46	62
	Asbestos	26	35
	Concrete	2	3
Wall	brick + Sheet	2	3
	brick	72	97
Floor	Plastered with Cow dung	2	3
	Cement	72	97
Number of rooms including kitchen	No separate rooms	2	3
	2	9	12
	3	61	82
	4	2	3
Latrine	Pit latrine	2	3
	Septic tank	72	97
bathroom	Common bathroom	21	28
	Attached to the house	53	72
Drinking water source	Well	17	23
	Tap water	57	77

Source: Primary Survey

All the Coolie lines except 5 are with asbestoses sheet for the roof and concrete walls. The floors are also cemented. There are 2 rooms plus one kitchen in each line house. Toilets and bathrooms are common for each line and are not attached to the houses. Many of them reported that since the room size is very small they find it very difficult to for their children to study. It is also severe where there are many family members. But many houses have made their own bathrooms in the backyard, attached to the houses with sheets. Waste from the houses is dumped in

a pit dugged in the centre yard. Very little free space is available to each line and people have planted vegetables in the available space. The source of drinking water is tap water provided by the management for the Coolie lines. Labourers reported water scarcity. They said water comes in the morning for 2 hours and evening also for 2 hours. They store the water in plastic buckets and drums. All the lines are electrified and the electricity charge is to be paid by the labourer himself.

While 3 houses provided by the employer are with tile roofs, cemented floors and brick walls, the rooms are not separated. These houses are actually small sheds constructed for some other purposes and are later converted into labourer houses. In some cases the labourer has separated the rooms with sheets and plywood. They lack proper toilet and attached bathroom and they are forced to use the toilet-cum-bathroom much away from his house. The water source is the employer's well. Power supply is taken from the employer's house through an extension.

The condition of the rest of the two houses is very bad, with sheet roofs and sheet walls. The floor is polished of cow dung. Cooking, eating and sleeping are in the same room. Only the husband and wife are living here and they have sent their children to their ancestral home for study. They are using pit latrine in the plantation premises and for water, depend on the owner's well. The house is not electrified.

About 24% of the labourers are living in their own houses. Many of such houses are half way in construction. But all are tiled, with brick walls and cemented floor. Bathrooms and toilets are attached to the house. The land attached to the house is very small in most of the cases, but with the available land, they tried to manage a home garden. People who owned cattle and poultry are keeping them attached to the house in the *verandah*, constructed as an extension from the house using asbestos or plastic sheets. Cow dung is deposited not far away from the cattleshed. Water source is tap water for many but some of them use well water from the neighbour. Latrines are septic tank type and houses are with proper

drainage facilities. These houses are with a small drawing-cum-dining hall, 1 or 2 bed rooms and a kitchen, in general.

Rented houses are, in most of the cases, very congested and many of them are extensions from the already existing houses. They do not have proper drainage facilities, and little space for sleeping and cooking. Houses are very near to each other and quarrels are common for throwing waste from one's house to other's yard. But few of the rented houses are in good condition with few cents of land attached to it.

Labourers' recreation includes listening to radio and watching television when at home. Especially the younger generation goes to neighbour's houses to watch television and sometimes to the theatre in the town. No one is a member in any arts and sports club and they are not even informed about the existence of such organizations in their area. Distribution of labour households on the basis of household amenities is shown below.

**Table 3.10 Distribution of Household Amenities**

<b>Items</b>	<b>Number of Labour households</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Television	15	20
Tape recorder/Radio	38	51
Fan	17	23
Iron box	9	12
VCD player	1	1
Bicycle	14	19
None of the above	19	26

Source: Primary Survey

20% of the households have television and 51% have radio sets with tape recorder in their home and one house has VCD while 18.92% have bicycles. 26% of the households do not possess any of the above.

For cooking purpose, mostly firewood is used which they collect from surrounding areas of the plantations. Kerosene is also used for cooking along with

firewood. Rice is the common staple food and they are non-vegetarians. They have reported that they use fish and egg according to the financial situation and sometimes buy meat which is costly. Milk is used in tea widely and they take tea regularly. Male members along with children eat before women. Left over rice cooked in the previous day, if any is used as breakfast before going for work. But the younger generation prefer maida and food stuffs made of atta which are a luxury to many households. Laboureres reported that the quality of the rice supplied through PDS is not good and hence for cooking purpose, most of the laboureres have to buy rice from the open market. Those who have cattle or poultry use these ration rice as cattle feed or poultry feed. Very few people said that they don't have any problem with the quality of the rice supplied in the PDS shop.

While asked about their neighbourhood relations a few of them reported that they are not in good terms with their neighbours. The reasons that the majority reported are that their neighbours throw waste in to their area; they gossip about them, they are of bad character or shout at them after having liquor etc. Use of intoxicants like toddy, beedi, pan, ganja etc is frequent among the labourers and illegal preparation of arrack is common in the area. There is ganja cultivation in the nearby hills and hence it is available easily. Many of the jobless people in the area are turning to arrack making as it is profitable.

### **3.7 Sources of Income**

The main source of income for majority of the households is the wage obtained from the plantations. For 69 % of the households under study, plantation labour is the only source of income. In 12% of households, the spouses of plantation labourers are working as construction workers in Nedumkandam and Adimaly areas. 19% households are getting income from agricultural works other than in plantations. Additional sources of income for the labourers include earnings from animal husbandry, poultry, agriculture etc. Two of the sample households have cows while 12 of them have poultry. They sell milk and eggs after household use. A few of the people, especially children of labourers work as assistants in the textile shops and hotels/tea shops in the town. Income from agriculture means



earnings by selling produces from their cultivation. Table below shows details of possession of land of workers in the study area.

**Table 3.11 Possession of Land Holding of Sample Population**

<b>Size of land holding</b>	<b>Number of household</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1 acre	1	1
Above 10 cents	5	7
Less than 10 cents	18	24
No land	50	68
Total	74	100

Source: Primary Survey

32% households in the sample have got some land attached to their house, and 5 of them got land above 10 cents. One person has got 1 acre land of his own. In some rented houses also a few cents of land are attached to the house where the labourers are allowed to cultivate vegetables. All the labourers who are having their own land above 10 cents are cultivating cardamom along with some vegetables. The vegetables are mostly used for household consumption only. 68% of the labour households do not possess any land.

### **3.8 Savings and Indebtedness**

The sources of credit to the workers include employers and friends, relatives, shopkeepers and money lenders. The co-workers and relatives in the area are also financially weak like the labourer and hence they are able to make only short term financial adjustments for them. Getting credit from the registered banks are practically impossible in case of need, especially for the landless, migrant labourer who does not have anything to deposit as security. So their options of financial support are limited to employers and private money lenders. The purpose of taking credit varies from marriage, health problems, construction and maintenance of houses, buying household goods, children's education, to buying land and repaying debt.

Most of the labourers interviewed have taken money in credit either from the employer or private money lenders. The employer gives credit of small amounts

in unavoidable circumstances and deducts it from their wages later. There are plenty of private money lenders in high range area, most of them are from Theni in Tamilnadu and a few Malayalees from the plains.

**Table 3.12 Indebtedness of labourers**

<b>Amount</b>	<b>No. of people</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Less than 1,000	30	32
1,000-10,000	22	23
10,000 -20,000	9	9
Above 20,000	2	2
Reported no debt	20	21
No answer	12	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary Survey

All the labourers except 21% reported having taken money for different purposes. The amount varies from a few hundreds to more than 20,000 rupees. Interest rates vary from 125 to 150 per thousand rupees per month. i.e., if a labourer takes 1000 rupees as credit, he will get 850-875 rupees as his money, but he has to repay 1000 rupees provided he is paying with in the stipulated time. Every weekend, these money lenders used to come and collect the installment from the labourer since most of them are paid weekly. Suicide cases are reported among labourers and marginal farmers because of indebtedness and due to the threat of the private financier's. For repaying the debt, in many cases labourers have to sell their minimum assets like furnitures in the house.

Micro financing like "Kudumbasree" has started their operations in the area with the directions from the local government, with the objective of making the women independent. But it is not beneficial to the plantation labourers as they don't have time to spend on the Kudumbasree activities after their work in the plantations.

In spite of the financial crisis, some of the labourers try to save money. 12 of them, who are permanent, have deposited money in Life Insurance Corporation of India Scheme. This money is collected by the agents in regular intervals either from the plantation owners or from the labourers directly. 12 permanent labourers

in the large scale holding have PF deposits while rest of the labourers neither have taken any insurance scheme nor have any bank deposits.

### **3.9 Health Care Services and Reported Health Issues**

The small and medium scale cardamom plantation workers obtained no proper medical services as there is no legal compulsion for providing it to them. Manger from the big plantation reported that there will be a visit by a doctor once in three months. Apart from that, no medical services are provided to the labourers. So, workers have to rely on available health services in their locality.

As noted, the region is one of the backward districts in Kerala regarding the health services development. Posts of two doctors, 1 junior public health nurse and 1 lady health inspector are vacant in the PHC in Udumbanchola. The timings are not favourable for the workers to utilize the services. Apart from the routine vaccinations, no other activities are carried out in the PHC. There is no pharmacist in the PHC. The staff quarter is not in a condition to inhabit. The local people said that the PHC is not functioning regularly and most of the time staffs are absent. There is a demand from the people to improve the services. The Taluk Hospital is situated in Nedumkandam which is 16 km away from Udumbanchola panchayath.

The common diseases reported by the staff are diarrhea, fever, asthma, skin diseases, common cold, cough etc. In the year 2005-2006, there were 653 diarrhea cases, mostly among the Tamil labourer households, 2 Hepatitis-A cases including one death, 10 chickenpox cases, four malaria cases, one leprosy and five tuberculosis cases were reported in the PHC. Though they do not have any statistics of cancer cases and patients suffering from heart diseases the staff said both are increasing in the population. Many cases are not reported here as the migrant labourers go to Madurai for treatment. There are reports that cancer of uterus and oral cancer are increasing. In association with the panchayath, PHC had conducted awareness classes among the people to stop using pan products and on the safe handling of pesticides. There are four cases of delivery at home and all are among Tamil population. Three cases of still births were also reported last year among the labourers.

A number of private allopathic clinics and hospitals are there in the nearby town in Nedumkandam. The labourers whom I have interviewed mainly go to the private allopathic hospitals in Nedumkandam, as the timing is convenient for them and the services are far better than the government hospital. They added that even if they go to the government hospital, they have to buy medicines from outside. So they prefer to go to private hospitals even though the charges are high. There is no Government Ayurvedic dispensary or hospital in the area under study. Same is the case with Homeopathic treatment. For homeo, some private practitioners are there in the nearby town in Nedumkandam.

For mild fever or headache, people usually do not go to any health centre. They use home remedies for fever, back ache, common cold, small cuts and wounds etc. like drinking black coffee added with pepper, using any pain balm, oil massaging, and just washing and covering the wounds according to the bleeding severity etc. If the headache is severe, they take crocin or saridon by their own. And if this also doesn't work, only then they go to a physician. Females reported that they try some home remedies first then only go for doctor, while male workers said they prefer doctor first.

The workers reported symptoms like over sweating, dizziness, nausea, skin irritation, head ache, burning sensation in eyes, blurred vision, breathing difficulties, fatigue, loss of appetite etc while applying pesticides. But such cases do not generate wider discussion as the above symptoms persist only for a short time. So in most cases no medical help is sought. All the workers interviewed said that they have a vague idea regarding the hazards of the pesticides which they are handling, but most of them are not taking any precautionary measures such as using masks or gloves, or even do not wash their hands with soap after spraying. This is not due to the unwillingness of the workers but the non-availability of such protective devices and facilities. The workers reported that as the situation is not different in other plantations also, they even if they refuse, they do not have an option.

Asthma, cancer and infertility among the plantation workers are increasing as reported by activists. In Kanchiyar Panchayat, 300 cancer cases are identified in a survey conducted by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and JRCS. It is reported that the same company which produces pesticides, carried out their drug trial in the cancer patients in High Ranges through a prominent cancer research institute in the state capital. The particular drug cost one lakh twenty thousand rupees and which is give at free of cost to these patients.<sup>2</sup> The patients are forced to accept this 'treatment' because of their poor economic condition. Though it reported in local media it never captured public attention and any government bodies of Kerala.

The workers receive no guidelines or training in how to handle the pesticides. They do not have information about the quantity of the pesticide to be used per hectare and in different plantations; they follow differently according to the availability of the pesticide. They even mix different pesticides and sprays. The mixing of different pesticides alters its characteristics to unpredictable extend. The impact of the pesticides on humans depends up on the toxicity of the pesticide, the length of the exposure, and the health status of the individual. The long term effects of these pesticides are to be explored further.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter tried to situate the socio economic status and materialistic conditions of workers in the study area in order to understand how the issues of workers are unaddressed in the ongoing debates on development in Kerala. Plantations sector corner attention in development debates only when the industry is in crisis: high rate of hunger death, or prevalence of particular diseases in the plantation sector. The plantation region is continued to be highly under developed compared to other regions in the state. The workforce in the plantations is primarily composed of migrant labour, predominantly females and most of them are on temporary

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<sup>2</sup> Quoting the authorities in Idukki District Tuberculosis Centre and doctors in the hospitals in High Range, various local newspapers and activists including JRC Secretary, reported that asthma, tuberculosis and cancer cases are increasing in the plantation regions. For more details see *Deshabhimani*, 2004, July 5 and *Free Press*, 2005 March, *Madhyamam*, June 30 & July 1, 2004.

basis. Along with this, the lower socio-economic status adds to their vulnerability. The planters are not willing to provide the services entitled to the people working in their plantations. The over all cut in the social services as part of the stabilisation policies imply a greater burden on the daily living of the poor worker. How these issues are addressed by different stakeholders is a key concern for this study, which is discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter IV

# Prevalent Characteristics, Development of workers and Perspectives of Stakeholders

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## **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter addresses the issues of nature of labour in plantations in the study area and how it is significant to contribute to the health of the workers and their development. Very few scholars have pointed out the interrelatedness of working and living conditions on the health of the people. For instance, Qadeer and Roy pointed out the influence of the nature of the industrializing process, social stratification, welfare services, legal processes and trade union movements on the health of the population (Qadeer and Roy 1989). Chapter explores different perspectives of various stakeholders to understand how and why the well being of the workers are unaddressed over the period. As we have discussed the workforce in the plantations is primarily composed of migrant labour and predominantly females and child labour employed on temporary basis. Here we make an attempt how this structure of labour force increases the vulnerability of the workers in the industry.

## **4.2 Pre-eminence of Migrant Labours**

Employment of migrant labour is a common feature of the plantation economy in India (Bhowmic 1981, Sajhau and Muralt 1987, Xaxa 1997). In the study area, it is reported that, labourers were brought from Tamilnadu and mainland of Kerala to cope with the high demand for labour force. As noted, the majority of the plantation workers in Idukki are migrants from Tamilnadu. They include labourers both who are brought in to the plantations through 'Kankanis'<sup>1</sup> and also their children who are born and brought up in plantation premises who followed their parent's work. Some of the early migrants were worked as agricultural labourers in their native place. A discussion on the reasons for migration varies from poverty and unemployment in the native place to landlessness. One labourer reported that he came to Idukki hearing that lots of land is available for cheaper rates. He sold all his property in Theni in Thamilmnadu and came to Idukki to buy land. But the person, who has taken the money from him, cheated him by giving him some land that was already sold to some other person which later turned him to a plantation labourer.

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<sup>1</sup> Kankanis are overseers or foremen who work as recruiters of labourers for the plantations.



For majority of the labourers whom I met in the plantations, they started their work as plantation labourers and are still continuing. In the case of a few female migrant labourers, they started working in the plantations when they were brought to Idukki after marriage. It is clear from the field that, local labours constitute only 28% of the total workers. The employers prefer migrant labourers as they can make to work for low wages.

The migrant workers are unable to avail any social security schemes because of the law of interstate migrants<sup>2</sup> are failed to implement. The migration and its history shows that these migrants have also lost their hereditary property from their native place and many of them reported that they even do not have any lineage to their own village and relatives. Though some of them could occupy marginal land nearby area majority of them are landless and hardly own any property here as well. It is reported from one of the respondents that though they have bought land here it was done under fake registration with the local elites. Earlier they assured the land but they had to leave the land later because of they have realised that they were cheated.<sup>3</sup> These situations added their low bargaining power though they share major workforce in the plantation sector.

Various studies have shown that migrants are disadvantaged relative to the native population regarding employment, education and health. Scholars pointed out that migrant worker predominate in the lower income labour market with higher risks of exposure to unsafe working conditions (Allotey 2003). The vulnerability which is primarily premised on the *alien status* of the migrant gets complicated by the combination of factors at the area of destination. Limited choice and reduced

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<sup>2</sup> Inter State Migrant Workmen Act 1979 regulate employment of inter-state migrant workmen and ensures the provision of welfare measures to the migrant workers in equal terms with local labours. It is applicable to every establishment in which 5 or more interstate migrant workmen are employed/ who were employed on any day of the preceding 12 months.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion with a labourer revealed that he came to Idukki hearing that lots of land is available for cheaper rates. He sold all his property in Theni in Tamilnadu and came to Idukki to buy land. But the person, who has taken the money from him, cheated him by giving him some land that was already sold to some other person which later turned him to a plantation labourer.

capacity to negotiate results in increased discrimination in life chances (Chatterjee 2006).

### 4.3 Temporary Labours

In recent years it is noted that there is a trend to use temporary workers in plantation sector and there is no transform this temporary nature to permanent workers. In small and medium plantations under the study, permanent workers are only six. In sample survey, about 76 % of the workers are temporary and permanent workers are only 24%. Most of them have been working over ten years in the cardamom plantations.

**Table 4.1 Years of Work as a Plantation Labourer**

Years of work	Number of workers by origin	
	Migrant Labour	Local Labour
Less than 10	19	--
10-20	30	16
20-30	11	11
Above 30	8	--
Total	68	27

Source: Primary Survey

Since most of the schemes and law including Plantation Labour Act (1951) are aimed to permanent workers, producers are not liable for any welfare measures and other facilities to these temporary workers. Apart from this, there is fragmentation of land holding in to smaller ones in order to escape from the gamut of PLA. According to the PLA 1951, there should be minimum two females and one male worker permanently per hectare. However, none of the producers in the study plantations follow this minimum requirement for workers. As noted in the table 4.1, there is no intake of new local labour now a day. Their attempt is to replace the permanent workers with available migrant workers as temporary. Infact, they will also appoint more workers in peak season as seasonal workers by providing only daily wages. Since the area is well known for the supply of seasonal migrant workers and their contractors, it is hardly matter to producers to find workers in peak season.

As noted, it is reported that in peak season contractors supply migrant labourers as seasonal workers to the plantations. Mostly, some of the current labourers and age old people, those who are unable to offer his labour, works as contractors in these plantations sector. Workers those who work in seasonal workers also work other plantation in off days. Contractors arrange these shifting work and they take major share from his/her wage. This contracting system for workers is common among migrant workers from Tamil Nadu and child labours.

#### **4.4 Predominance of Female Labours**

Plantation sector is characterised by the existence of sexual division of labour from the very beginning itself (Sajhau 1987, Breman 1989). This division is rooted in the positioning of women in the society which is based on the prevailing attitudes about their capabilities and roles that are supposed to perform (Gothoskar 1997). It has been observed that the existence of sexual division of labour is favoured by the producers since female workers are to be paid less than male workers. The producers give preference for females because, as explained by one of the owners, 'they are regular, sincere, hard working, obedient and less unionized'.<sup>4</sup> However, producers claim that females are allotted only light works in the industry, like plucking and weeding where as male workers are allotted 'heavy jobs' such as chopping wood and shade regulation and so on. Women workers have to do continuous 'back bending' jobs while plucking the pods from the panicles of plants. Health related problems of the workers, especially the problem of back-ache in female workers, attributed to the nature of the work they are performing in the plantation. There is no toilet facility in the plantations except in the labour lines. This is creates more problem for women workers as they have to go in the open field.

Though the Equal Remuneration Act (1976) ensures the provision of equal wage for equal work, none of the plantations found in survey follow it. The wage varies from Rs. 80-90 for women and Rs.100-115 for men from different localities of

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<sup>4</sup> These details were collected by the researcher during the discussions with planters in the field.

cardamom plantations in Idukki. Females are forced to do hazardous jobs like spraying of pesticides which majority of the male labourers are reluctant to do. In all the reported cases of pesticide poisoning, the victims are either child labourers or women. The Maternity Benefit Act 1961 was enacted to provide maternity benefits for the female workers in various sectors but it failed to implement properly in cardamom industry. In cardamom plantations, where the majority of the female workers are temporary, at present none of them could avail it. In plantation, even the permanent female workers could avail benefit only in a mutilated form in spite of legal provisions.<sup>5</sup> None of the segments provide any child care facilities such as crèche for kids. They are forced to work under pressure as they keep their infants with neighbours or relatives at home.

It is necessary to relate the problems of women workers within the wider context of gender inequality and resultant discriminatory treatment prevailing in the society. Many studies have already explored how female workers are object of exploitation in both at the work place and at home (Duvvury, 1989). In most cases the responsibility at the domestic front is not shared by the male members in the family. Very few women reported that males are also assisting to certain extent in household chores. Women do not have much role in household decision making also. Though the women are earning, they do not have the freedom to spend their earnings as they wish. The decisions regarding allocation of the family resources under different heads are commonly taken by the male member, and the woman is expected to simply accept such a decision. In addition, many of them reported that they were also victimized to domestic violence as well. So the employment instead of make them independent, making them vulnerable and helpless both at home and at work. When men and women perform the same type of work they are getting unequal wages. At the work site also the supervisors and owners are always men and they dominate in field. Female workers are not able to come out

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<sup>5</sup> It is reported from tea plantations in Idukki that when the planters came to know that the worker is pregnant, they refused to give them the prescribed minimum period of work of 80n days which is the criteria for getting leave with wages before and after delivery. This rule was modified in 1989 in order to include maximum workers, earlier it was 160 days. Meenakshi Thamban, M L A, Call for attention, Kerala Legislative assembly, July 30, 1991.

to fight for their rights. The reasons for this include lack of family support and fear of loss of job.

It is reported in the local print media that there is maltreatment for female workers in the cardamom plantations. The study enquired about the sexual harassment faced by the female labourers in plantations. It has been observed from the informal discussions with female workers that many of them were often subjected to severe verbal abuse and harassment from their male supervisors at work place.<sup>6</sup> It may be said that different forms of sexual harassment may possibly be present in the plantation sector, but female workers are hesitant to express their sufferings due to social interdictions. It has been also observed that there is no platform for female workers to address their issues with other stakeholders and government bodies. The unions are only concentrated in big plantations and only few female workers are members in the union.

#### **4.5 Existence of Child Labour**

Many of the studies have pointed out the existence of child and adolescent labour in different plantations (Rege 1946, Sajhau 1987, Raman 1986, Bhowmic 1992 and Xaxa 1997). For instance, Rege committee reported that in child labour constitute to about 10% of total work force in tea plantations in South India (Rege 1946). Another study conducted among the child labourers in the unorganized sector of brick making in suburban Calcutta points out that there is complete violation of labour laws on the issue of wages, working hours, different benefits like bonus, holiday, medical facilities, and maternity leave and so on in this sector. It is argued that more than 78% of the children interviewed are compelled to work to save their families from indebtedness of their parents to the owners of kilns and the mediators called 'tekdal' in getting the job.<sup>7</sup> The recent government reports

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<sup>6</sup> Discussion with female workers in the plantations.

<sup>7</sup>This study analysed the factors which compel the children to join the workforce at a tender age and found out the condition under which they work affects their health and development negatively. For details refer, Ruma Ghosh (1999).

deny the existence of child labour in the plantations at present.<sup>8</sup> But the discussions with various stakeholders and the media reports point towards the existence of child labour in cardamom plantations in Kerala. As mentioned earlier, many of the labourers who reported their age as 18-19 seem to be much below that age. During the pilot study, the researcher came across with few child labours with whom the interaction is prevented by the labour contractor.

Children are employed in the cardamom plantations, especially during the harvesting seasons. They are paid only Rs.40-50 per day. They are mainly employed for spraying pesticides. Local news papers reported that children from the age group 10 and above are employed widely in the plantations for pesticide spraying. This needs immediate attention since the younger the individual, greater the impact of the pesticides. It is reported in the newspapers that one boy who was a daily wage labourer in a cardamom plantation is died and about 41 labourers, mostly women were hospitalised in Idukki due to phorate poisoning (*The Hindu* 2001). However, large number of such incidents goes undiagnosed and unreported. The enquiries with the trade union leaders and spices board officials showed that either they do not keep any record of pesticide poisoning or are purposefully not giving out the information, apart from the reported cases in the media.

It is reported by discussants that Tamil children are more among child labours. Local media reported there is high drop out students, especially males, from neighbouring schools during the cardamom harvesting season.<sup>9</sup> However, trade unions hardly make any attention to this 'child labour' and they always try to blame the parents of this drop-out students. The vulnerable situation of their family, lack of proper schooling facilities and other related factors also induce the child labour in the area. It also highlights the fact that legal measure alone can't eliminate the existence of child labour and it required further institutional reforms.

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<sup>8</sup> The Union Labour Ministry declares that there is no child labour in tea, coffee and rubber plantations in India. See Government of India (2006), Occupational Wage Survey 2006, Labour Bureau.

<sup>9</sup> A survey conducted in many schools in Idukki revealed that in many schools about 30-40 students are going for work in cardamom plantations by absenting from the school during seasons. For details see *Malayala Manorama*, May 31, 2006

## 4.6 Social Backwardness

As established by the empirical data, the study group is wholly constituted by the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. Many Scholars have pointed out that plantation economy developed on the exploitation of the weaker sections of the society (for instances, Xaxa 1997, Raman 1997, Baak 1997). Planters used coercive methods to avail cheap labour for work with the support of the state. The state provided the penal codes (the Workman's Breach of Contract Act (1859) in British India, The Criminal Tribes Act (1911) in Madras Presidency and The Coolie Ordinance (1880) in Dutch East Indies) which enabled plantations to track down, sentence and punish run away labourers. During the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the recruitment of indentured labour prevailed. Under this system, a labourer was bound by a penal contract to serve one particular employer for a specified period (Bhowmic 1996, Raman R 1997, Maya & Ramachandran 1997). Similarly abolishment of slavery in British India and native states like Travancore provided more workforces to the plantations. Baak argued that though legally liberated, often the relations between these ex-slaves and their ex-owners did not structurally alter (Baak 1999). Their lower social and educational status interfered with their capacity to negotiate their rights.

The discussion on the workforce in the cardamom industry on different issues including the denial of minimum wages, welfare measures, addressing health related issues point towards the powerlessness of the workforce. In the colonial period, the labour in plantation economy was built on the principles of exclusion, dependence and heightened vulnerability. The workers completely relied on their 'owners' for their basic rights and livelihood. As noted earlier, in this process of expansion of plantation indigenous forest dwelling people were evicted from their lands and many of them forced to become labourers in the plantations. It is observed that workforce in these plantations are those who are already denied any rights on land or driven out from their hearth and home. The bargaining power of the workers is very limited and major stakeholders in the sector hardly heed to labour issues. The workers are not represented in any decision making bodies and they do not have any role in decision making processes. The following session

discusses the perspectives and differences among the key stakeholders on issues in the industry.

## **4.7 Perspectives of Stakeholders' on Key Issues**

A large number of diverse stakeholders influence the cardamom plantation industry, ranging from workers to government bodies. It is very difficult to track the views of all the stakeholders in the present study and so an attempt has been made here to focus on the major stakeholders' views on the worker's issues in cardamom plantations. The major actors selected are workers, planters and small holders, trade unions, government bodies including Spices Board and Labour Welfare Department, political representatives and environmental activists.

### **4.7.1 Perspectives of Workers and Producers**

The wage obtained from their labour is not adequate to meet their basic requirements of the worker's family. There is no job security for migrant workers and they hardly find work in lean seasons. Increasing cost of living forces many workers to work on holidays in neighbouring plantations. Wage review committees are not considered the increase in the cost of essential commodities while fixing wage for the workers in the plantation. At present their wage rate is based on the amendments in the year of 2002. Workers are demanding hike in their wage to Rs. 135 from the present wage of Rs.92. In fact, the permanent worker's take home salary is very less after deduction the charges form LIC, PF and so on. Most of them complaint that major share of their wage goes to local money lenders as they have indebted to them for their basic expenses.

There is no surety of job on lean seasons. Increase in cost for food and other goods are forcing the labourers to work in holidays also when there is job without taking any rest. Any health problem creates a burden on the family not only because of the cost for direct treatment but also loss of wage for those days. Since the area is entirely cash crop producing area, the food items has to be come out from out side the area and the workers have to depend on the market. Most of the workers do not have land and so kitchen garden is also not possible. The major share of the income goes for food only. Migrant workers also reported that they



are not beneficiaries of any kind of credit facilities from local banks and they rely on local money lenders for money. The credit facilities are limited to plantation labourers and they fall victims to the private money lenders, locally they are known as 'blade mafia'. Due to these institutional structures and low wage they have no balance to sustain their livelihood.

In other hand, the producers justify themselves that the cutting down of the number of workers on the ground of price crash of the product in the market. The producers reported that even when cardamom prices are very low and they are running at a loss, they regularly pay to their workers. They have reported that they had provided possible facilities for workers which owners can afford. As members of organized sector labour force, the workers are entitled to enjoy these facilities and can not be considered as a favour from the plantation owner. It has been observed that workers could get not avail adequate facilities and other welfare measures even when price of the product was high in market. Hence, it the present position of producers may not justified because they claim they provide facilities according to their profits.

There are many other sources of income exist for planters in the medium and large holdings. Many of them are also running a business, holding other land and buildings in the mainland. The earnings from the plantation form only a part of their income. Producers have formed several associations and are pressurising the government to scrap the provisions for services and minimum wages to be given to the workers.<sup>10</sup> The media also project the problems of the producers due to the price crash while they are give very little attention to worker's issues.

#### **4.7.2 Responses of Government Bodies, Environmental Activists and Political Representatives**

Dominant political groups raised the issues of reduction in profits of producers in the plantation sector and their entire discussion focused on the welfare of producers. The inadequate material conditions, low wage and other issues hardly

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<sup>10</sup> The president of Association of Planters of Kerala demands for price related wage for workers. See, *Business Line*, September 27, 2004, Cochin Edition.

get attention even from the elected representatives and government bodies. Cardamom plantations do not get adequate attention by government programmes. There is no reliable data on the area and workers in this sector. The report on plantation industries, conducted by occupational wage survey 2006, does not include cardamom under plantation sector.

In the crisis period, the initiatives and attempts were also failed to address issues in the cardamom industry. However, few steps have been taken by the government to increase the productivity of the crop but there is even no attention paid to the workers attached to the industry. In the implementation of Plantation Labour Act and other related Acts to ensure the welfare of workers, government's roles limited to the appointment of labour welfare officers and plantation inspectors.

Chief plantation inspector's office and labour welfare offices for the concerned area are situated in within the plantation dominated area Vandanmedu but no attention made to the workers till today. There are labour inspectors whose offices are housed in taluk centres. These labour inspectors are supposed to visit the plantations regularly but it never happened. Even when they pay a visit to the plantations, they do not interact with the labour as such, but visit the offices and verify records and do such routine jobs. As it often happens many of these officials have good rapport with plantation owners and they ignore the interests of plantation workers.<sup>11</sup>

Another important concern raised by them is the ongoing debates over the issue of encroachment and eviction in Cardamom Hill Reserve (CHR). The CHR is under the dual control of state revenue and forest departments. There is a fight between the revenue and forest departments regarding as to how many acres of land in the Cardamom Hill has been declared as reserve forest and about the boundaries of reserve forest area. The environmental activists in the state are advocating for the inclusion of CHR under bio-reserve and there by abandon all cultivation. The organizing secretary of Kerala State Swadeshi Science Movement reports- "the increase in population was mainly due to large-scale migration precipitated by the land-grabbing economy. Those who had encroached, deforested and occupied the

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<sup>11</sup> Discussions with plantation labourers in Udumbanchola Panchayat.

forest land were given title deeds and no government has shown the political will to evict these encroachers” (*Business Line* 2002).

Land grabbing by ‘the rich, the powerful and the influential’ is continuing unabated in the Cardamom Hill Reserves (C.H.R) of Idukki district in Kerala, according to the report of the Central Empowered Committee (C.E.C) of the Supreme Court (The Hindu 2005). The report added that there is information that large-scale encroachment of revenue/forest land and issue of forged title deeds are going on in Idukki district with the support of the bureaucrats and political establishments.

The revenue department claims that the CHR has never been a reserve forest but revenue land. The regional farmers’ parties objecting the eviction of encroachment in the area do so by saying that these are not forest lands, but revenue lands. The leader of one of the regional parties, the Kerala Congress (M), who has a strong hold on the plantation area argues- “Any attempt to declare the cardamom hill reserve as forest would render at least four lakh people of Udumbanchola taluk, in Idukki District, homeless. Before and after independence, successive state governments abetted migration to the hill reserve for promoting cardamom cultivation. No government can ignore the farmers now” (*Tehelka* 2007). While arguing about the risk of termination of lease rights of the cultivators, none of the discussants show any concern about how it will affect the poor workers. Infact this uncertainty of the cultivators makes them reluctant to make any attempt for implementing long term development activities in turn resulted in decreased labour absorption.

The following table presents the summary of responses of various stakeholders to the issues raised in the study.

**Table 4.2 Perspectives of Key Stakeholders**

	<b>wage</b>	<b>Bargaining power</b>	<b>PLA implementation</b>	<b>Adequate material conditions</b>	<b>Health &amp; occupational hazards</b>
<b>Workers</b>	Not availing minimum wage	No associations for temporary workers and no bargaining power for minimum rights	No implementation of PLA. Since most of them are temporary and small producers are availing from PLA	Not availing any basic facilities including water, sanitation and shelter	Many diseases are prevalent due to the nature of occupation and lack of basic facilities.
<b>Trade unions</b>	Providing minimum wage	Predominantly temporary workers and high share of female workers. No serious issues are dominant compared to other plantation industries.	PLA is not important for temporary workers because of ongoing crisis in cardamom industry	Minimum working conditions relied on production structure and profit of the producers.	Many occupational hazards are avoidable if workers are more conscious. Pesticides usages are inevitable to increase high productivity in HYV plants.
<b>Small growers</b>	Providing adequate wage	Small growers are not having any membership in trade union or associations. Failed to provide platform for association/union for workers in small/marginal holders	Not applicable for PLA. Not affordable to provide welfare measures other than regular wage.	High production cost prevents them to provide other basic necessities in gardens.	Pesticides use is inevitable. Because to increase high productivity. No measures to prevent impact of pesticide use.
<b>Owners</b>	Wage should be based on price fluctuations of the commodity	Plantation owners are actively associated with their own associations and other social networks.	Implementing PLA in their own plantations	Though they provide basic rights they cant transform this into their basic business case	Labourers are not ready to take precautions.
<b>Government bodies</b>	Providing adequate wage	Though unions and association are active but no measures and initiative to address workers issues	No direct role in implementing PLA though they are concerned bodies to implement PLA	There is no adequate basic facility but their intervention is very limited.	Very few cases are reported.
<b>Environmentalists/ social activists</b>	Wage is inadequate compared with the occupational hazards related to their work	No active participation of union to address works issues, specially occupational hazards, minimum material conditions for works	No PLA it affects their basic rights to avail sustainable livelihood.	No facilities	Pesticide use is increasing and cancer and other diseases are prevalent.
<b>Elected representatives</b>	Demanding more on reducing input costs for producers rather than workers	Major focus is on producer's interests.	Violation of rules are there, but justifying it in comparison to tea plantations	The intervention points are very limited to provide basic facilities in small and marginal plantations.	Cases are reported by the media.

Source: Primary Survey

As depicted in table 4.2, perspectives of key stakeholders are very often in conflicts on development and basic rights of workers. Among stakeholders, trade union holds major role in upholding the sustainable development of workers in any sector. As noted, studies also pointed out trade unions constitute major role in plantation sector in the crisis period as well (Usha 2004 and Behal 1985).

### **4.7.3 Trade Union as a key stakeholder in the Plantation industry**

The trade union movement came in the plantation industry in Kerala in 1940s (Nair 2006). During that period, British capital was dominating plantation sector. The colonial state employed several coercive measures to retain the labour needed for plantation work. The state's machineries are in favour of the planters. The trade unions started in tea plantations and leaders were from the neighbouring districts of Kottayam and Alappuzha. Management and police tried to suppress trade union activities with cruel attacks on leaders and workers. But the entry of trade unions to cardamom industry took more time and there is little documentation on it. Only at the end of 1960s trade union movement entered in to cardamom sector.

After independence, there is not much change in the role of the state in the sense that the beneficiaries remain as such. Labour welfare is highly neglected. Trade union movements compelled the government to form an enquiry commission in 1948. The PLA came into existence as per the recommendations of the commission. As mentioned earlier even the provisions of these acts have lots of loop holes that helped the planters to escape from providing such measures to the labourers. The less unionised sections of workers in different plantations can not even protest against this atrocity. It is clear from the field work data that the extent of union participation among the labourers is very less. The reasons reported are that the trade unions were not at all representing the workers interests.

There are four unions working among the Cardamom Plantation labourers in the study area viz., CITU (Centre of Indian Trade Union), INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress), AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress) and BMS (Bharathiya Mazdur Sangh). Among them, CITU has the maximum number of

labourers and INTUC comes the second, AITUC the third and BMS has very few members. The membership is limited to permanent labourers in the registered plantations. Among the seven land holdings under the study, these trade unions are having members only in the larger plantation as in the table 4.5.

**Table 4.3 Distribution of Workers in Trade Unions**

<b>Trade Union Membership</b>	<b>Number of Workers</b>	<b>Percent of workers</b>
CITU	10	67
INTUC	4	26
AITUC	1	7
BMS	Nil	Nil
Total	15	100

Source: Primary Survey

There are 18 permanent labourers in the above studied larger plantation and among them 15 have taken membership in different trade unions. Many workers are even reluctant to reveal that they are trade union members. The migrant labourers are largely excluded from unionization since most of them are temporary workers.

Discussions with the trade union leaders in the area revealed that female participation is very low and never goes beyond taking the membership or to a maximum of participating in the strikes, if any. In none of the trade unions, female members are in the leadership or in any of the important positions. One of the reasons as to why women are preferred by many managements is that they are not union oriented and hence less troublesome. Women as a group seem to have shown less inclination for union participation or towards unionization. The reasons given by the women are: that participation cuts into the time spent on domestic work, inconvenient meeting timings etc. Though 70% of the study population are females, the female participation in the trade union is only 9% of the sample population. Even if they participate, it is restricted to mere membership and/ or attending some protest marches, if any. They reported that union participation did not bring any visible changes in their life. Women's non-

participation in trade union activities is also closely related to their under representation in the political institution.

Apart from the lack of political consciousness, another important factor hindering the unionization of workers is cultural heterogeneity. In the study area, the population is divided into migrant Tamil labourers and native Malayali labourers. This may be attributed to the less organised and less established nature of cardamom industry as compared to tea. Apart from a few big plantations, all other holdings in cardamom are small and marginal and scattered in a sparsely populated area. Unlike tea, where more foreign capital is invested, it is less in cardamom. The difference in the operations is also another factor. The socio-cultural differences of the migrant plantation labourers in Idukki is another factor attributed to the less attention to this matter by the other trade unions and political parties in the main land. Though they all are victims to more or less same kind of exploitation by the owners and the apathy of the state, these factors prevented them from forming a strong union.

Dominant political groups raised the issues of reduction in profits of producers in the plantation sector and focused on the welfare of owners and made least attention to the workers in the sector. Plantation owners have formed strong associations which could influence the government and they got the support of various political parties, irrespective of the political ideology. The measures taken to reduce the costs include cutting down of benefits to labourers and number of labourers. It slowly leads to the use of more temporary and seasonal labour than permanent labour. So the owners can escape from the provisions of labour legislations. They are demanding for wage freeze and asking the government to bear a part of the social cost. Even for the permanent labourers the situation is not much safe. The houses they lived and the land they worked for generations belong to the plantation management. They have earned practically nothing and nowhere to go. The trade unions are not able to highlight these issues and bargain for better conditions for the workers. There is a labour court in the district head quarters to which the workers can carry their grievances, but none among the respondents had approached the labour court till date with any complaint. For that matter even the

level of legal awareness among workers is very low. Given the fact that court procedures involve enormous delays and expenses, none of them take the bold step of approaching the court. So in such a situation, there is a strong need for trade unions to keep the rights of the workers.

The activities of trade unions in cardamom plantations are very limited. One can see a maximum of three or four protest marches, conducted jointly with all trade unions in tea, coffee and rubber plantations, against cutting down of dearness allowances of workers etc. Issues of pesticide deaths, child labour, unequal wage system for male and female labourers, ensuring minimum wages, sanitation and medical facilities etc were never been raised by the trade unions. The intervention of trade union in cardamom sector could not bring any radical change regarding these aspects. Temporary and seasonal labourers are not at all represented in the trade unions who are the majority in cardamom plantations. The union leaders have built a nexus with the plantation owners.<sup>12</sup> Trade union leaders reported that the workers in the cardamom industry are getting fair wages and benefits in spite of the crisis in the plantation sector and hence no need of any other initiatives. The management always try to resist the trade union movement and it has succeeded to a certain extend. The trade union leaders are themselves owners of many hectares of plantations, and therefore whose interest is they going to serve is an obvious question before the labourers. Unhealthy competition among trade unions, low degree of democracy, lack of their commitment to address issues of workers irrespective of the labour status, low participation and marginalisation of female workers are the major challenges of the trade unions in the cardamom industry in Kerala.

During the interviews with different cross sections of people including owners, spices board officials, trade union leaders, people's representatives, labour welfare officers and chief plantation inspector; they are always making a comparison with the situation in tea plantations in the district, many of which are facing severe

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<sup>12</sup> The trade union scene has changed with the total inability of the labour leadership to respond to the situation with vision. Though no one speaks out, it has become an accepted reality that some of the trade union leaders at the abandoned tea plantations have changed their role. For further details, refer to *The Hindu*, January 24, 2005.



crisis. They are repeatedly saying that the working and living conditions of labourers in cardamom plantation are much better than those of tea plantations. But this does not lead us to a conclusion that cardamom plantation labourers have access to opportunities for and benefits of development. They are trying to justify the existing lack/denial of facilities to workers in the cardamom plantations on the backdrop of price crash of the crop. They all are aware about the fact that most of the plantations are not providing the adequate housing and other facilities, but they are trying to close their eyes to it.

#### **4.8 Conclusion**

The forces operating in the production process like nature of employer-employee relationship, the type of industry i.e., small, medium or large in respect to capital investment, the demand for the product and the type of market along with the bargaining power of the people attached to the industry, all have an influence on the welfare of the workers. The contemporary debates on agrarian distress hardly address distress and vulnerability of workers. The nature of workforce in the plantation sector is very significant and this can be one of the chief reasons why these issues are unaddressed in the debates for over a quite long period. It is found that the discourse of public health is more centered on attempts to reduce of disease, questions over increase in public expenditure on particular disease or supply of medicine rather than apprising and addressing the basic right of workers to a dignified existence or conceiving development as freedom. With the changes taking place in the nature of labour force, along with the reduced capacity for negotiation offer formidable challenges to reigning development paradigm specifically in public health discourse.

Chapter V

Conclusions

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Relocating the concerns of 'health' from the dominant bio-medical perspective, the present study tried to understand the health of the population as the sum total of people's negotiations for their right to livelihood. The present study situates its argument on the development discourse on Kerala. The developmental experience of the state, on achieving high quality of life without much economic development is projected as a 'model of development' in the world itself. Kerala stands highest in the social development indicators compared to all other states in India which is comparable to that of the developed countries. However, the recent evidence shows that there were a number of problems relating to people's health that remained neglected or unaddressed by the state.

In this context a specific case study of workers in cardamom plantations in Idukki district of Kerala is undertaken in order to understand the various dimensions of 'health' of the population. Plantation industry is significant in Kerala in terms of both the number of people dependent on it for livelihood and in terms of its contribution to GDP. The liberalization policies resultant in opening up of market had affected the plantation industry severely. The government attention and much of the scholarly discussions focussed primarily on the impact of this crisis on farmers and planters, leaving aside the issues of workers.

The study was mainly based on empirical data collected through interviews and in-depth discussions with workers, producers and other major stakeholders. The secondary literature is used to substantiate the primary data and to make a coherent argument. The study tried to demonstrate the link between the general socio-economic contexts of the workers interacting with the particular work environment in the plantations in order to understand its implications on health.

The study clearly shows that an overwhelming majority of workers in the cardamom plantation have not benefited by the provisions of various legislations including the PLA 1951. The key points that emerge here are the problems with the definition of 'plantation' and on the terms for providing services without considering the specific nature of the cardamom industry. The majority of the cardamom plantations are small and medium holdings and therefore they find reason for not providing the welfare measures to the workers. Apart from this, the

obligation under the PLA is circumvented by the fragmentation of bigger holdings. The majority of the workers in cardamom plantations who are divided in the small holdings are deprived of the benefits of the PLA because the Act fails to address the peculiarities of the cardamom industry. In such cases the workers have to depend on the services available in the locality. While in the case of Idukki, which is one among the least developed districts in Kerala, the plantations workers are dispossessed of the basic amenities due to the insufficient infrastructural development.

The various phases of development of the cardamom industry revealed that workers are subjected to exploitation for the profit of the producers. When the prices were remunerative, producers intensified cropping using new technologies and the government encouraged it through various schemes. One can argue that this increased the employment opportunities of the workers by providing regular employment. On the other hand, considering the long term impact of these new production technologies like use of pesticides, it can be seen that the producers exploit the poor workers for their benefit. The impact of technological change on the environment is coming into discussion these days, supported by different environmental movements in the area. But in those discussions also, workers issues have got least attention. How these technological changes had affected the workers is an unexplored area.

The composition of the work force revealed that the workers are at a disadvantage at various levels. Most of them are migrants with the majority being female and temporary workers. Child labour is prevalent among the plantation workers. Workers are mostly drawn from socially disadvantaged groups. They are forced to work for low wages in unhealthy work conditions. They are unable to negotiate with the stakeholders for their basic rights.

Most of the labourers in the plantations are now temporary labourers, even though majority of them had worked for more than ten years in the plantations. The existing policies address the needs of only the permanent labours in plantations, thus dividing the weaker sections and excluding the poorest of the poor and most marginalised of the workforce from welfare services. The temporary workers are

not counted in any statistics. For majority of the labourers, their wage as workers in the cardamom plantation is the only source of income. They have become occupationally immobile due to their lower educational attainment and non-availability of alternate sources of employment which leads to a total dependence on their employers. Along with inadequate wages and inconsistencies in employment opportunities, the high incidence of indebtedness and exploitation by private moneylenders heightens their vulnerability.

It is also seen that the governmental response to the problems of plantation workers has been rather weak. The interest of the government is solely on the commerce of the crop and it is favoured towards the planters. The Government's entire activities are focused towards increasing the production and productivity of the crop. In that process, the workers interests are left unheeded. The planters and their representatives felt that a lot has been done for the plantation workers in terms of welfare measures. But the study shows that except for some basic provisions not much is being done for the workers. They are stressing on the price fall of the crop and increase in input cost for the production. But the discussions with workers and a review of the literature shows that even at the times of high productivity and high market price, nothing is done for the welfare of the labours. The failure of implementation of labour welfare measures coincided with the less unionization of the workers in the industry. The divisive politics played by the different trade unions failed to represent the labours' interests. In fact, trade unions are not at all representing temporary labours who are the majority in cardamom plantations.

The study concluded that even though the position of Kerala state was always glorified with its achievements in education, health, existence of strong trade unions etc., the situation of the backward groups like plantation labours are not only low but also far behind when compared to the other segments of the state. This study emphasizes that the formulation of health policies and medical services on the concept of health as 'absence of disease', is no more able to deal with the real problem in the state.

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## Appendix

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**Map Showing Udumbanchola Panchayat, Idukki District, State of Kerala**

