Strategic Human Resource Management in the Tea Industry of the Dooars Region: Challenges, Practices, and Future Directions

Ranjit Saibya
Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Mathabhanga College, West Bengal, India
Email: ranjit.saibya@gmail.com

Abstract

West Bengal is the second-largest tea-producing state after Assam, where about 450 tea gardens are there. The Dooars tea belt of West Bengal, comprising 154 estates and contributing over 200 million kilograms of tea annually, remains a paradox of economic significance and chronic labour distress. Despite its pivotal role in India's tea production, the region grapples with persistently low wages (₹176–₹232/day), substandard living conditions, and systemic non-compliance with statutory welfare provisions under the Plantation Labour Act. This study critically examines the prevailing Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices within these estates, highlighting acute deficiencies in labour welfare mechanisms, skill development initiatives, and industrial relations frameworks. Empirical evidence reveals alarming gaps: formal training programs are present in only 5–50% of estates, absenteeism among male workers exceeds 50% in certain areas, and essential amenities like sanitary latrines and safe drinking water remain accessible to less than one-third of the workforce. However, pilot interventions through NGO partnerships have demonstrated scalable potential in enhancing worker livelihoods and organisational stability. Against this backdrop, the paper proposes a comprehensive SHRM roadmap encompassing three strategic pillars: (i) professionalising HR infrastructure through certified personnel and technology-enabled statutory compliance; (ii) implementing worker-centric initiatives addressing grievance redressal, gender equity, and social welfare; and (iii) fostering strategic partnerships to integrate ethical supply chains and reposition Dooars tea within premium markets. The study positions SHRM not merely as a functional necessity but as a transformative strategy integral to aligning workforce well-being with sustainable business practices and regional socio-economic development.

Keywords: Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), Dooars Tea Industry, Labour Welfare, Industrial Relations, Plantation Labour Act, Workforce Productivity, Livelihood, ESG Comp.

1. Introduction

The tea industry has been a cornerstone of India's agrarian economy for over a century, not merely as an export commodity but as a lifeline for millions of workers across plantation regions. The Dooars region of West Bengal, with its 154 tea estates contributing approximately 25% of India's total tea output, stands as a critical node in this supply chain. Despite its economic prominence, the Dooars tea belt has remained ensnared in chronic labour challenges marked by low wages, inadequate welfare provisions, and fragile industrial relations. These structural inadequacies have perpetuated a cycle of low productivity, high absenteeism, and diminished worker morale, posing a severe threat to the long-term sustainability of the sector.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), which aligns human capital development with organizational goals, has emerged globally as a transformative approach to enhancing labour efficiency, fostering employee engagement, and driving sustainable competitiveness. However, in the context of the Dooars tea industry, SHRM practices remain rudimentary, often limited to transactional personnel management functions, with minimal strategic orientation. The persistent neglect of workforce-centric strategies has not only eroded industrial harmony but also undermined the sector's capacity to adapt to evolving market dynamics and ethical supply chain expectations.

Compounding these internal challenges are external pressures stemming from increasing global emphasis on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards, consumer demand for ethically produced commodities, and the urgent need for socio-economic upliftment of plantation communities. Pilot interventions by NGOs and social enterprises in the Dooars region have demonstrated that holistic human resource strategies—emphasizing skill development, welfare enhancement, and participatory governance—can significantly improve both worker livelihoods and organizational resilience.

This paper aims to critically examine the existing SHRM practices within the Dooars tea estates, identifying key challenges related to labour welfare, skill enhancement, and industrial relations. Further, it proposes a strategic roadmap for reform, positioning SHRM as a central pillar for aligning workforce well-being with operational sustainability and market competitiveness. By situating human resource management within a broader developmental and ethical framework, the study underscores the imperative for a paradigm shift from cost-centric HR practices to inclusive, strategic human capital development in one of India's most labour-intensive agricultural sectors.

2. Literature Review

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) represents an organizational approach where human resources are aligned with long-term business objectives to enhance both workforce performance and competitive advantage (Wright & McMahan, 2011).

Schuler & Jackson (2007) focus on their studies that, unlike traditional personnel management, SHRM focuses on proactive talent development, fostering employee engagement, and integrating HR practices with strategic business planning. In labour-intensive sectors like agriculture and plantations, SHRM has the potential to balance operational efficiency with workforce welfare (Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

In the study of Herath & Habaragoda (2018) and the study of Ochieng, Makau, & Wanyonyi (2015), it is observed that many plantation economies of Asia and Africa, exploitative labour conditions, wage stagnation, and fragile industrial relations, have been longstanding issues. Even though statutory labour protections exist, Herath and Habaragoda (2018) found that Sri Lankan tea estates routinely neglect the welfare of their workers, allowing systemic issues to persist. A similar scenario is evident in Kenya, where Ochieng et al. (2015) revealed significant disparities in wages, alongside ineffective grievance redressal systems and a lack of structured training for plantation workers.

In India, the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, provides a comprehensive framework for worker welfare, covering provisions such as housing, healthcare, education, provident fund, and bonus payments. However, several studies have documented the widespread non-compliance of these statutory obligations, especially in West Bengal’s Dooars region (Bhattacharya, 2015; Saha, 2019). Bhattacharya (2015) found that many estates either delay or deny benefits like provident fund contributions and medical facilities. Saha (2019) highlighted that wages in the Dooars tea estates (₹176–₹232/day) often fall below the rural employment guarantee rates under MGNREGA, creating an unsustainable livelihood scenario for workers.

Chakraborty (2017) emphasized the severe lack of essential amenities in Dooars tea estates, where access to clean drinking water and proper sanitation facilities remains highly inadequate. This persistent neglect of basic worker welfare infrastructure has significant implications for health, hygiene, and overall productivity within the plantation workforce.

Banerjee (2018) highlights those industrial relations in India’s tea plantations are often tense, marked by frequent disputes, strikes, and hostile interactions between management and workers. Such adversarial relations stem from unresolved labour grievances, wage conflicts, and a lack of effective communication channels between employers and the workforce. The lack of formal grievance redressal channels further exacerbates these tensions, as workers have limited avenues for addressing workplace issues.

Mathew and Thomas (2016), in their study of Kerala’s coffee plantations, showed that focused skill development programs, like multi-skilling sessions and leadership training, greatly improve employee productivity and minimize inefficiencies. In contrast, such proactive HR strategies are still missing in the Dooars tea estates, where conventional management approaches persist. Although women make up more than half of the workforce in tea plantations, they continue to face significant gender inequalities in terms of pay, access to welfare facilities, and opportunities for advancement within the industry, as highlighted by Basu (2019).

While there is an increasing volume of research on the social and economic issues affecting tea plantation workers, studies exploring strategic HRM perspectives in India’s plantation industry are notably lacking. Most scholarly works prioritize topics like welfare gaps, legal adherence, and labour rights, offering limited insights into HR strategies that connect employee well-being with business performance (Saha, 2019; Banerjee, 2018).

Furthermore, micro-level studies that capture estate-specific HR practices, managerial attitudes, and worker perspectives in the Dooars region are notably scarce. This gap underscores the need for empirical research that situates SHRM not merely as a functional HR process but as a transformative strategic pillar for enhancing workforce well-being, operational efficiency, and regional socio-economic development. India (Assam, Dooars-Terai) Studies highlight violations such as minimum wage shortfalls, inadequate housing and healthcare, and poor welfare implementation, even under statutory umbrella regimes like the Plantations Labour Act (PL Act, 1951)

Kerala's Munnar strike (2015), a landmark all-women-led protest forced wage revision for pluckers and raised visibility of gender-specific grievances (Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017). Sri Lanka (Kegalle District): HRM practices focusing on training, welfare, and career planning correlate positively with retention of factory officers (Abesiri & Jayasekara, 2018)

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to examine the dynamics of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices within the tea estates of the Dooars region. Specifically, the research intends to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the prevailing HRM practices in Dooars tea estates, with particular emphasis on workforce welfare, skill development initiatives, and the state of labour relations.
2. To identify key challenges hindering the effective implementation of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the tea plantations, focusing on issues such as wage disparities, inadequacies in worker welfare programs, and fragile industrial relations frameworks.
3. To analyze the discrepancies between statutory labour provisions and the actual HR practices observed at the estate level, especially in critical areas like housing, healthcare services, sanitation infrastructure, and social security benefits.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of existing HR interventions and their influence on workforce productivity, employee satisfaction, and overall operational efficiency within the tea sector.
5. To explore gender-specific HR challenges, including wage inequality, lack of adequate facilities for women workers, and their limited participation in leadership roles and decision-making processes.

6. To propose a Strategic HRM Framework that holistically integrates worker welfare, enhances operational resilience, and strengthens business competitiveness, while aligning with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles and ethical supply chain standards.

4. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The research is guided by the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) theoretical approach, which views human capital not merely as a cost factor but as a strategic asset that drives organizational success.

The proposed SHRM framework for the Dooars Tea Industry includes three interlinked pillars:

4.1. HR Infrastructure Strengthening:

- Deployment of professional HR personnel and Labour Welfare Officers.
- Digitization of payroll, statutory benefits, and grievance systems.
- Capacity-building for estate managers in SHRM best practices.

4.2. Worker-Centric Interventions:

- Structured skill development programs, including multi-skilling and leadership training.
- Establishment of transparent grievance redressal mechanisms.
- Policies ensuring gender equity in wages, sanitation, and welfare facilities.
- Health, education, and social security support systems for workers.

4.3. Strategic Partnerships & Ethical Branding:

- Collaboration with NGOs, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and ethical trade networks for livelihood diversification.
- Integration with ESG-compliant supply chains to promote fair labour practices.
- Rebranding Dooars tea as a socially responsible and premium product to attract global buyers and reinvest in human capital.

5. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study seeks to address the following key research questions to investigate the status and strategic direction of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in the tea estates of the Dooars region:

1. What are the existing HR practices in Dooars tea estates, and how effective are these practices in addressing workforce needs and enhancing operational efficiency?
2. What are the major challenges impeding the adoption of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) approaches within the Dooars tea plantations?
3. How can SHRM practices be effectively aligned with worker welfare initiatives and the long-term sustainability of tea businesses in the region?
4. What role can strategic partnerships (including government, NGOs, and buyer networks) play in enhancing the effectiveness of HRM practices in the Dooars tea sector?
5. How can SHRM frameworks be designed to address gender disparities and foster inclusive workforce development in Dooars tea plantations?

6. RESEARCH GAP

Existing studies on India's tea industry mainly focus on issues like low wages, welfare deficits, and labour rights violations. However, there is a noticeable lack of research on Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices in tea plantations, especially in the Dooars region. Most literature overlooks how structured HR strategies—such as professional HR systems, skill development, grievance redressal mechanisms, and gender-inclusive policies—can enhance both worker welfare and business performance.

Furthermore, research rarely explores how ESG compliance and ethical supply chain partnerships can support HR reforms. There is also a shortage of micro-level, estate-specific studies that reflect real ground-level HR practices and challenges in Dooars tea gardens.

This study aims to fill these gaps by developing a context-specific SHRM framework that integrates worker well-being, gender equity, and sustainable business strategies for the Dooars tea industry.

7. KEY HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES IN THE DOOAR'S TEA INDUSTRIES

The Dooars Tea Industry faces a complex array of HR challenges that obstruct the integration of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) practices. These challenges undermine efforts to align workforce welfare with organizational sustainability.

7.1 Labor-intensity and Exploding Wage Bills

Labour expenses constitute approximately 50–60% of the total operational costs in tea plantations, severely limiting the financial capacity of estates to allocate resources towards worker welfare, skill development, or technological up gradation (Bhowmik, 2019; Das, 2018). The situation is exacerbated by rising input costs (fertilizers, fuel, and logistics) and stagnant auction prices of tea**,** which compress profit margins and hinder the industry's ability to invest in strategic HR initiatives (Tea Board of India, 2018). This cost-intensive structure forces most estates to adopt a reactive, compliance-driven HR approach, undermining efforts towards long-term human capital development and business sustainability.

7.2 Occupational Hazards & Welfare Deficiencies

Tea plantation workers in the Dooars region face persistent occupational hazards, including pesticide exposure, musculoskeletal disorders from repetitive plucking motions, and inadequate sanitation facilities within estate premises (ILO, 2013; Bhowmik, 2015). Plantation hospitals are often ill-equipped, lacking essential medicines and trained medical personnel, while worker housing remains substandard, failing to meet the statutory norms outlined in the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951 (Chaudhuri, 2017; Das, 2019). These welfare deficits contribute to chronic health issues, absenteeism, and low morale among workers, posing significant barriers to strategic human resource development in the sector.

7.3 Seasonal Workforce & Poor Retention

The cyclical nature of tea production, especially during flush or peak harvest seasons, necessitates large-scale recruitment of temporary and casual labourers (Bhowmik, 2015; Basu, 2018). However, these seasonal workers often lack access to formal training, welfare benefits, and structured career development opportunities**,** resulting in dissatisfaction and frequent turnover. The absence of long-term employment security not only affects workforce stability but also impedes the implementation of strategic HRM practices aimed at skill enhancement and productivity improvement (ILO, 2013). The industry's reliance on a transient workforce further weakens labour commitment and organizational loyalty.

7.4 Gender Disparities & Limited Agency

Women constitute the majority of the plucking workforce in tea plantations, yet face gender-based wage disparities, limited access to supervisory roles, and under-representation in trade unions and decision-making bodies (Neetha, 2011; Bhowmik, 2015). Notable instances, such as the 2015 Munnar Strike in Kerala**,** highlighted women workers' collective action against wage inequality and exploitation, resulting in partial wage revisions but failing to achieve long-term structural reforms (Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017). Despite their pivotal economic role, women workers in the Dooars continue to struggle for formal leadership positions and gender-sensitive HR policies**,** making gender inclusion a critical gap in strategic human resource management frameworks.

7.5 Weak Social Dialogue & Union Representation

Despite the presence of unions like the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) and other regional bodies, tea plantations in the Dooars region continue to suffer from weak social dialogue mechanisms and ineffective union representation (Bhowmik, 2015; Roy, 2019). The inefficient implementation of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951, coupled with fragmented relationships among unions, management, and government authorities, has diluted the collective bargaining power of workers. Bureaucratic inertia and politicization of unions further marginalize worker voices, undermining efforts to establish participatory HRM practices aimed at improving labour relations and workplace governance (ILO, 2013).

7.6 Sustainability Pressures and Supply Chain Scrutiny

Global tea buyers and consumers are increasingly demanding transparency in environmental and social governance (ESG) practices**,** compelling tea estates to align with international standards such as the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP), Rainforest Alliance, and Fair trade certifications (ETP, 2016; Fair trade International, 2018). These certifications mandate compliance with labour welfare norms, environmental sustainability, and ethical sourcing practices. However, most tea estates in the Dooars struggle to integrate these requirements within their existing HR frameworks**,** owing to limited strategic HRM capacity and resource constraints (Baruah, 2017). Consequently, supply chain scrutiny is intensifying pressure on plantation management to adopt more sustainable and worker-centric HR policies.

8. HRM PRACTICES AND STRATEGIC RESPONSES

In response to persistent workforce challenges, global best practices in Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) illustrate how aligning HR policies with business strategy fosters workforce stability, productivity, and sustainability. For the Dooars Tea Industry, adopting such models can offer valuable pathways for future HRM transformations.

8.1 Sustainable HRM & Employee Happiness

Implementing cohesive Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) frameworks that emphasize worker well-being, accessible healthcare services, and empowerment—especially for women—has been shown to improve employee engagement, reduce turnover, and enhance overall organizational performance (Guest, 2017; Neetha, 2011). Global studies indicate that prioritizing employee happiness through welfare-oriented HR strategies is not merely a social responsibility but a critical component of sustainable business success. For the Dooars Tea Industry, integrating worker-centric HRM practices is essential to address chronic issues of labour dissatisfaction and to foster a more committed and productive workforce (Baruah, 2017).

8.2 Training, Welfare, and Career Planning

Case studies from Sri Lanka's Kegalle district demonstrate that implementing structured training modules, welfare allowances, and clear career progression pathways can significantly reduce employee attrition (Abesiri & Jayasekara, 2018). For Dooars plantations, replicating such models could transform the traditionally casualized workforce into a strategically skilled asset.

8.3 Team-Based Work, Welfare Benefits, and Employee Involvement

Evidence from Kenyan tea factories indicates that fostering a team-based work culture, participatory decision-making and implementing welfare schemes significantly enhances productivity, even within resource-constrained plantation settings (Ochieng, Makau, & Wanyonyi, 2015). Such participatory HR practices, if adopted in the Dooars tea estates, could strengthen social dialogue, enhance workforce commitment, and improve labour-management relations.

8.4 Holistic Community-Based HR: The Sri Lankan Model

The Hayleys Plantations model in Sri Lanka offers an exemplary approach by integrating education, healthcare, housing, and women empowerment initiatives across both employees and surrounding communities. This alignment of CSR with strategic HRM has resulted in global HR recognition (Hayleys, 2017). For Dooars, such community-centric strategies can enhance socio-economic resilience and brand value.

8.5 Certification-Driven HR Reforms

Adherence to certifications such as Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) and Fairtrade mandates compliance with standards on wages, health and safety, worker voice, and freedom of association. Training programs supported by ETP enable estates to upgrade labour practices and prepare for sustainability audits (ETP, 2018). For the Dooars region, aligning HR strategies with certification requirements is crucial for maintaining market access and supply chain competitiveness.

9. STRATEGIC GAP ANALYSIS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The transition towards Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the Dooars Tea Industry requires addressing critical gaps that hinder the alignment of workforce management with long-term business sustainability. By leveraging innovative HR strategies, technology integration, and inclusive policies, tea estates can overcome legacy challenges and pave the way for a future-ready, resilient workforce. The following strategic gap analysis outlines key challenge areas and actionable pathways for the Dooars region:

Challenge Area	Emerging Strategic Opportunities for Dooars Tea Industry
Labour Cost–Productivity Linkage	Implement workforce planning systems, time-motion studies, and productivity-linked incentives to optimize seasonal labour deployment, minimize absenteeism, and control wage expenditures—critical for labour-intensive Dooars plantations (Bhowmik, 2015; Das, 2018; ILO, 2013).
Gender Equity and Retention in a Female-Dominated Workforce	Introduce family-friendly HRM policies such as crèche facilities, menstrual leave, and structured career pathways to enhance retention of women workers, who form the majority of the plucking workforce in the Dooars (Neetha, 2011; Kamath & Ramanathan, 2017).
Health & Safety Compliance	Strengthen Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) frameworks through proactive health risk monitoring, pesticide safety protocols, and sprayer training programs, in line with Plantation Labour Act (PLA) compliance and global labour standards (ILO, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2017).
Social Dialogue and Worker Representation	Expand worker-community forums and grievance redressal mechanisms to complement union-led negotiations, fostering participatory governance and improving labour-management relations in Dooars estates (Bhowmik, 2015; ACMS Reports, 2018).
Certification Alignment and Continuous HRM Improvement	Embed HR performance indicators (KPIs) into ESG reporting**,** using platforms like Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) and Fairtrade as vehicles for ongoing HR policy improvements and global supply chain compliance (ETP, 2016; Fairtrade International, 2018).

Challenge Area	Emerging Strategic Opportunities for Dooars Tea Industry
Digital Transformation of HR Processes	Introduce mobile-based HR platforms for digital onboarding, skill training, attendance management, and telemedicine to modernize workforce administration in remote Dooars tea plantations (Baruah, 2017; ILO, 2013).
Climate Resilience Workforce Planning	Train workforce and estate managers in climate-resilient tea bush management, pest and disease forecasting, and align HR strategies with estate-level sustainability and environmental risk mitigation plans (Tea Board of India, 2018; Baruah, 2017).

This strategic roadmap highlights the necessity for Dooars tea estates to move beyond compliance-driven HR practices towards a holistic, strategic HRM approach that not only enhances worker well-being but also strengthens the industry's long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

9. DISCUSSION

This study highlights that implementing Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in the Dooars Tea Industry requires context-specific frameworks rather than direct adoption of corporate HR models. The unique structural characteristics of tea plantations—such as self-contained worker communities, seasonal labour cycles, and estate-managed welfare systems—necessitate HR strategies that are embedded within plantation operations. Global best practices demonstrate that interventions like structured training programs, accessible health services, team-based work cultures, and gender-inclusive policies significantly enhance workforce engagement and productivity. For the Dooars, scaling these interventions through digital HR platforms, certification-driven accountability (ETP, Fair trade), and SHRM designs centered on female workforce empowerment is essential. Investments in worker well-being, health, and skill development are not merely ethical obligations but strategic imperatives that directly impact labour productivity, retention rates, and cost efficiency (cost per kg of leaf plucked). Furthermore, certification mandates and buyer-driven sustainability standards can act as catalysts for HR reforms, particularly in overcoming challenges posed by narrow profit margins, traditional management mindsets, and weak governance mechanisms prevalent in the Dooars sector.

In essence, the future of SHRM in the Dooars Tea Industry lies in integrating worker-centric welfare strategies with business sustainability goals, fostering a human capital-driven model of competitive advantage in the global tea supply chain.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The adoption of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) offers a transformative pathway for the Dooars Tea Industry**,** enabling the transition from a legacy workforce model to a resilient, skilled, and ethically governed labour force**.** By realigning HR practices with sustainability frameworks, digital innovations, and gender-inclusive policies**,** tea estates can effectively address rising labour costs, intensifying market competition, and stringent Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) expectations. Leveraging certification standards such as Ethical Tea Partnership and Fair trade can further institutionalize continuous HR improvements, ensuring compliance with global supply chain norms while enhancing workforce welfare. However, meaningful and sustainable change in the Dooars sector requires a strategic blend of business foresight and empathetic leadership**,** where the well-being, rights, and aspirations of tea workers—especially women—are positioned at the core of plantation management strategies**.**

In navigating the future, the Dooars Tea Industry must embrace SHRM not as an administrative function, but as a strategic enabler of productivity, social equity, and long-term competitiveness**.** Ensuring that the hands that pluck our daily cup of tea are empowered, valued, and safeguarded is not just a moral imperative but a critical business necessity for the industry's sustainable future.

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