

TEA GARDEN WOMEN, ISSUES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: A STUDY ON TEA GARDEN WOMEN OF SIVASAGAR DISTRICT, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT: The socio-economic status of women in India has been a matter of discussion since historic past. Women status has got traditional transformation with the passage of time. When women of India have been fighting since a long time to get some of their basic rights, unfortunately, women are being victimized simultaneously and deprived of getting equal status.

In the case of Assam, the present status of women is satisfactory in terms of those women who are blessed enough to avail each and every opportunity of the modern world and they belong to the middle class of upper middle class. On the other hand there are still a major portion of women who belong to the category called 'Below Poverty Line'. And these women are to be seen anywhere in the urban places as well as villages. It is very difficult to see the colour of grass distinctly from the sky. When one comes closer to the ground everything becomes clear and distinct.

In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the socio-economic status of tea garden women. The main objective of the study is to find out the socio-economic status of tea garden women and to suggest measures for improvement of the present socio-economic condition of the women of tea garden. Some selected indicators are applied here to analysis of women status in the study area.

Key Words: Tea garden Women, Socio-economic Status.

INTRODUCTION:

Stories from mythologies and history gave many instances that women in India have always respected. A woman is the first educator of a child. Mahatma Gandhi said that home is the first university and parents especially the mother is the first teacher. Women are part of our socio-economic system also. They uphold our rich cultural and traditional values as they have a strong bond with the society. The status of women indicates the level of civilization and progress of a society. It is also the index of standard of social organization.

In India large scale poverty, patriarchal religious practices and beliefs and gendered socialization process have facilitated much towards the condition of inequality and discrimination against women. Though the Indian constitution prohibited any kind of discrimination on ground of sex, no serious attempt has been made to promote gender justice. In this context in 1971, committee on the status of women in India was set up to review the status of women and its respect towards equality published in 1974, revealed that women of every category and social group face inequality in their respective position or status.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

The tea industry of Assam is well known internationally since long back. From the time of steady growth of the tea industry began from 1870, the plantation faced labour shortage. It needs both men and women. But Assamese men were not ready to allow women to work under the British Planters. So supply of labour became the crucial factor. To solve this problem the Planters began to require workers from Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, and other parts of India also. They have now well settled in Assam and the new generation that grew up in Assam has become well integrated with the Assamese culture (Kar, 2001).

Now the tea industry constitutes the largest single employer in the organized industrial sector in Assam employing around 6.5 lakhs workers daily where women workers constitute more than 50% of the total work force. Women labourers have been working with man in the tea industry from its inception. These women labourers are working under certain limitation and hardship. Both at home as well as in the field, they have to face discrimination in various spheres.

So far no systematic study on the economic and social role of this group of women has been taken up. The existing knowledge is not sufficient to have a comprehensive idea of the socio-economic status of the tea garden women. Present study proposes to investigate in-depth and detail about the life and status of tea garden women.

OBJECTIVES:

The main objectives of the present study are –

- 1) To study the present working condition of tea garden women labour in the Sivasagar district, Assam and
- 2) To study the socio economic status of tea garden women labour.

DATA BASE AND MATHODOLOGY:

The proposed study is based on the information collected from the primary and secondary sources. Primary data are collected from tea garden women labourers through field survey with the help of questioners. Secondary information is collected from various published and unpublished documents and reports of government and semi government agencies as well as bulletin and journals.

For the proposed work sample tea gardens are selected by adopting stratified random sample method. The work is done in to two stages. In the first stage sample tea gardens are selected and in the second stage sample respondents are selected from these sample tea gardens. Accordingly 200 respondents are taken from the five sampled tea gardens.

Table - 1

SI No	Name of gardens	No of respondents
01	Maduri Tea Estate	36
02	Jaya Tea Estate	52
03	Makypur tea Estate	39
04	Hatipoti Tea Estate	37
05	Hanuman Tea Estate	36
	Total	200

STUDY AREA:

In Assam Tea Gardens are concentrated in upper Assam's districts viz. Sivasagar, Jorhat, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Golaghat. Nearly 95% tea gardens are confined to these districts. So, Sivasagar district is selected for the study. The study area Sivasagar district is extending from 94.8 and 95.4 East longitudes to 26.7 and 27.2 North latitudes. It covers an area of about 2668.00 sq. kms.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:

Women labour in tea plantation:

The tea plantation provides largest avenue for employment of women labourers. The report of the study on socio-economic condition of women workers in plantation (1980) mentioned that there is no other important industry employing women in thus a high proportion of women. The study of economic and social status of women workers in India (1953) stated that plantation offered the largest employment of women. One important reasons of employing women as labour in these sector only a special kind of agricultural work which is familiar to women.

NATURE OF WORKS:

The table shows the nature of works of the respondents women labour in five selected gardens.

Table - 2:

Distribution of women labour engaged in various occupations in Selected gardens:

Tea estates	Nature of duties		
	Plucking	Factory	Total

Maduri T.E.	31(86.11%)	05(13.89%)	36(100%)
Joya T.E.	49(94.23%)	03(5.77%)	52(100%)
Makepore T.E.	35(89.74%)	04(10.26%)	39(100%)
Hatipoti T.E.	34(91.89%)	03(8.11%)	37(100%)
Honuman T.E.	34(94.44%)	02(5.56%)	36(100%)
Total	183(91.5%)	17(8.5%)	200(100%)

Source: Field Survey

The table shows that 91.51% respondent woman was engaged in the factory in the selected tea gardens. It was observed that usually the labour women who cannot be employed in heavy work of plucking due to some reasons were engaged in various operations such as sieving of tea in the factory. However the women were also engaged in other agricultural operations such as pruning, weeding, manuring etc. in the off plucking seasons. It is observed that the women had to work throughout the year except in the holidays. Work in the plantation begins generally at 7 A.M. There is however, no hard and fast rule regarding the commencement of the work and they are free to report any time they like but the only requirement is to finish their allotted task. They therefore go out to work early.

AVERAGE DAILY WAGE OF WOMEN LABOUR:

Before independence wages of plantation workers were very low. It was the usual policy to fix the rate of wage of labourers by the management. After independence in 1948 a committee comprising management, workers and government were formed to fix the wage. But difference of wage between men and women labour continued. In 1976 'The Equal Remuneration Act' was enacted. The main aim of this act was to implement the principle of "equal pay for equal work for both men and women", which was rectified by India in ILO Convention no. 100. Though the act was enforced in the plantations yet it could not be implemented in the true spirit as the planters. The study reveals that the wage rates of woman labour are less than those of men. Women labour get daily wages less than those of males. In all the tea gardens of the sample most of women labourers were engaged in plucking, during peak seasons i.e. from April to December. It was observed that their earnings during this period were higher than those of the main labourers.

Apart from their regular daily wages the labourers in tea plantation also receive yearly bonus. The bonus system in plantation in N.E. India first introduced in 1953 – 54 and was fixed on an ad-hoc basis, ranged from 65.00 to Rs. 130.00. From 1959 the paying system of bonus was directly linked to profit of the tea estates. Bonus is usually paid in cash during September and October or just before the Durga puja festival.

HEALTH OF WORKERS:

Health is a pre-requisite for human development and is essentially concerned with the well being of common man. Health is a function, not only of medical care, but also of the overall integrated development of society- cultural, economic, educational, social and political. Good health and good society go together. This is possible only when supportive services such as nutrition and improvements in the environments and in education reach a higher level.

The Survey of G. K. Medhi and others concludes that high magnitude of under nutrition and infectious diseases exist among tea garden population. The Report shows that Nutrition problems like underweight among children (59.9%), adult (69.8%), and micronutrient deficiency disorder like anaemia (72%) were widespread. Common infection diseases among them include worm infestation (65.4%), respiratory problems (6.7%) diarrhea (&%), skin infections, filariasis(0.6%) and pulmonary tuberculosis(11.7%). Thus study has shown acute problem of health of the tea garden labourers.

The present study shows that Nutritional anemia is a major problem for women in plantation. This is particularly serious in view of the fact that woman labour in plantation has heavy workload and anemia has profound effect on psychological and physical health. The diet is generally deficient in calcium, Vitamin A and Vitamin C. Maternal mortality was reported to be high among the plantation labourers. The chief causes of it were found to be unhygienic and primitive practices for parturition. From the inception of pregnancy to its termination, women consume no specific nutritias diet. Some pregnant women reduce their food intake. The consumption of iron, calcium and vitamins during pregnancy is poor. The habit of taking alcohol during pregnancy has been found to be usual among labour women and almost all of them are observed to continue their regular their regular activities including hard labour during advance pregnancy. A large proportion of deliveries are conducted at home attendant by elderly ladies of the household. No specific precautions are observed at the time of conducting deliveries, which resulted in an increased susceptibility to various infections. The tea plantation laboureres have a very poor food habits. Because of

the busy work scheduled they rarely take a proper breakfast or mid-day meal. Rice, Dal and little bit of vegetables are the main food items used for their breakfast, mid-day meal and for dinner. There is no diversification of food items and fruits, milk products, eggs etc. are rare. Many of the women workers don't have a mid-day meal at all. The high infant mortality, low birth weight and overall nutritional status of children in tea plantation are closely linked with mother's nutritional status. In tea plantations as child bearing began at an early age it affects the health and nutrition status of mothers and babies.

The plantation labours suffered by different type of diseases. Among them some are endemic (regularly found diseases) having their root in the prevailing physio-climatic environment, some are epidemics, contiguous and may have a seasonal nature.

Education:

In the early phase of the development of tea gardens there was no any provision for education within the tea garden of Assam. The planters were not interested to promote education in tea garden labour. Only a few enthusiastic and liberal managers tried to establish few primary schools in their gardens. The Tea Board of India now provides financial assistance to the children of tea plantation workers up to the highest level to meet partly or in full the non-recurring expenditure incurred by a student going for higher education. This provision of Tea Board certainly has positive impact on the children of tea garden workers. Thus generally speaking the educational facilities provided for the plantation children are far below the actual needs, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and cannot be compared with other plantation facilities. The reason for wide spread of illiteracy in tea gardens are due to the ignorance of their parents who fail to understand the need of education and as a result prefer their children to work in the garden and to help them to solve the financial problems of their families.

Recreation:

It is observed that there is no facility of recreation for women labour in all the tea gardens surveyed. Although Plantation Labour Act, 1951 has made statutory obligation for the employers to provide recreational facilities to the labourers yet the position was not much satisfactory in the gardens under study. Cinema is only the source of enjoyment for which the tea labourers are crazy. The youth respondent women of the sample were found to be familiar with the names and particulars of some popular Hindi film actors and actresses. Harlalka reports that "plantation labourers are very fond of Hindi film songs and the radios in the recreation centre are mostly utilized to listen such songs." Generally women labourers took little interest in games and past times. They generally enjoyed mobile Cinema shows in their own gardens and nearby garden s occasionally. Folk Dance (Jhumur) is an important source of recreation for them. Folk songs and dances and socio- religious festivals are important source of recreation for women labour. Religious festivals like Durgapuja, Kalipuja, Holi were observed with quity and marry making.

Canteen:

The canteen facility is a common amenity available in most of the industrial establishment for their employees. It is observed that most of the canteens are located near the factory and garden office and supply light refreshment and drinks at a subsidized price. As the plantation most of the workers are engaged in the field, so it is not very convenient for field workers to make use of this facility.

Leave:

In regard to leaves of the worker, there is no discrimination between the male and female labourers of the plantation. As far as leave is concerned, the plantation labour Act, 1951, has prescribed three different types of leave to the laborers such as annual leave, sick leave and maternity leave. According to the Act, annual leave with wages shall be allowed at the rate of one day for every 20 days work to each adult worker. Under Assam Rules, sick leave is to be granted with full salary. However, sick leave is to be granted only after the production of medical certificate from authorized medical officer. Harlalka(1975), observed that in Assam 97% estates granted sick leave which is the highest among all the tea producing centers of India. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, provides for payment of maternity benefit top women workers at the rate of average daily wage for the actual period of absence before and after confinement. The maximum period of leave entitled twelve weeks before and six weeks after confinement including the day of delivery. A woman who has worked at least minimum of 160 days in 12 months immediately proceeding to the date of expected delivery becomes eligible to avail maternity leave. This act also provides for two breaks each of

15 minutes duration, for working mothers in addition to regular rest interval for feeding the baby until the 15 months.

All the five gardens under the study provide prescribed maternity benefits to the women. However, it was observed that in all the sample gardens the pregnant woman workers availed maternity leave only a few days before the expected date of delivery. It may be due to the fact that these women considered that the leave is more useful after the birth of the baby. Although women workers avail maternity leaves only few days before delivery. Yet all the gardens under study paid due maternity allowances for 12 weeks plus food concessions. In case of miscarriage, payment equivalent to maternity benefit for six weeks is payable. In the case of illness arising out of pregnancy, delivery, premature birth or miscarriage, additional leave up to one month with wages at maternity benefit rate is also admissible. All the respondent women availed in the maternity leave and it was reported that they had not faced any difficulty in availing it. Besides all these leaves, sometimes labourers go on 'khet leave' to do cultivation on their own land.

Social Status of Tea Garden Women Labour:

Status is defined as a relative position of individuals in a social system. Each individual while maintaining a distinct status within a society has to perform a verity of roles.

The outlook of the tea plantation labour communities towards women can be judged from the prevalent level of literacy. The level of literacy in general was very low but it almost became non-existent in the case of women. The females in the tea plantation labour society enjoy considerable freedoms. They not only have the freedom to go to the work in the garden but also to go to the fortnightly tea gardens markets and did the marketing for the households. In the family, these were usually no restriction imposed by the father in laws. They also visit the fair and festivals. The unmarried girls enjoy freedom to mix with boys of their own societies during fair and festivals. Divorce in the tea garden labor society was comparatively easier than other societies and the divorced females could remarry if they desire. As far as the expectation of new born baby is concerns biasness towards baby is considerably less, perhaps as because both male and female work equally. Even in marriage both sides the girls as well as the boys spent nearly the same amount. The girl was not only an economic liability but also an asset.

Status of Tea Garden Women Labour in the family:

Women in plantation families are considered as natural home makers and care givers. Women were seen as primarily reproducers of life and thought to define themselves in relation to men. For example in the coolies line in the tea plantations women had to become one male worker's wife and do the house work for him, bear children. Ideologies embedded within the larger structures of the society impacts the workers and the work places. The lack of education amongst the women and the girl children was also a part of the keeping women in subordinate's positions. As plantation labour communities follow patriarchal system and so the senior male member of the family is considered to be the head of the family. However, as both male and female members work and earned for the family, both play an important role in deciding on important issues of the family. Many cases it is observed that the females' members are more responsible than male in running the families as male mostly spend their earning on drinking.

House hold duties:

The duties and responsibilities of the tea garden women would indicate their role in the household. The particulars of respondent women regarding their performance of household chores is reflected in the table 4:10

In majority cases these respondent women had to perform all household works such as cooking, cleaning house, utensils and clothes and marketing and shopping besides their regular duties in the garden. The extent of help extended to the respondent women by their households, grown up children and relatives etc. presented in the table 4:0.

Particulars of respondent women regarding their performance of house hold duties.

Name of the garden	Number of women						
	Who has to do			Who is helped by			
	Cooking	Cleaning house etc	Marketing & shopping	Husband	Grownup children	Relatives	Servant
Maduri T.E.	33 91.67%	34 94.44%	32 88.89%	06 30.05%	14 48.63%	04 6.45%	-

Joya T.E.	51 98.07%	51 98.07%	46 88.46%	08 4.5%	15 42.05%	06 15.02%	-
Makepore T.E.	36 92.31%	37 94.87%	27 69.23%	06 2.6%	15 4.79%	05 11.61%	-
Hatipoti T.E.	34 91.89%	35 94.59%	35 94.59%	06 1.9%	-	05 4.9%	-
Hanuman T.E.	32 88.89%	34 94.44%	30 83.33%	-	-	-	-
Total	186 93.00%	191 95.5%	170 85.00%	26 (11.16%)	44 (18.88%)	20 (8.58%)	-

Source: Field Survey

The table shows that only 11.16% husbands, 18.88% grown up children and 8.58% relatives of respondent women helped them in carrying out various household duties. There was no any household of the sample that the respondent women were helped by servant in household works. For the dual role in the work front as well as in the domestic sphere, the women labourers were over burdened. The dual responsibility appears to have been the main cause of great mental and physical strain of the labour women particularly the married women with their small children. As both man and women work equally in the garden, the women naturally expect some sympatric help from their husbands in their day to day house hold works. It was observed that the women were over burdened with works and practically they had no leisure till they go to bed: but they rarely expressed their dissatisfaction. In the sample tea gardens, the women are generally given due privileges in the matter of decision making. The present study shows that, opinion of the woman was taken in to consideration in important functions, such as family worships, marriage etc. In some aspects, the labour women of the tea gardens enjoy some privileges. They are allowed to participate in all social, cultural and religious festivals without any complaint from the male members.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

- i. The enactment of Plantation Labour Act (1951) was a remarkable achievement in the labour legislation. Apart from providing various facilities to the workers it also made provisions for giving them protection from all types of economic exploitations. It was found that the implementation of PLA in Assam is not up to the ark and has helped marginally to improve the quality of life in the plantation. It was found that most of the amenities are provided in the tea plantation to fulfil the legal requirement and there is lack of true dedication and complement for improving the quality of life of workers. Certain important amenities like postal services and Banks are completely absent in the plantation areas.
- ii. It is observed that socio-economic problems of plantation labourers are closely associated with their law education attainment. The rate of literacy in general among the tea garden labour community and more particularly among the women is very low. Enrolment and attendance of school going children are very poor. Most of the parents preferred to engage their grownup children of school going age in looking after the babies when the parents are away from home for works in the garden.
- iii. The women labourers in general are engaged as plucker. In this particular job, women are more swift and efficient than male labourers. They preferred to be engaged in plucking in which they could earn some extra money during the peak plucking season. In lean seasons they are engaged in other agricultural activities such as pruning, weeding, manuring etc. Otherwise they worked as daily wage labour in various constructions of road, building, bridge etc. in the nearby areas of the tea gardens under the contractors. But most of them remained unemployed throughout the year. It is observed that the respondent women played the vital role in family budgeting.
- iv. The saving habit of the labour women is very poor. On the other hand, some families had to borrow money from money-lenders at very high rate of interest which toll heavily on their economic conditions. In case marriages opinion of girls is sought.
- v. It is found even after the enactment of the equal Remuneration Act, 1976 wages of women are found to be less than male labourer by about 10 to 18 per day in the tea garden of Assam. This is the

- case of clear discrimination against labour women. However, the earning of women who are usually employed in plucking on piece rate basis was higher during plucking seasons.
- vi. The working hours for the women labour is fixed at eight hours per day. They are entitled to various leaves such as annual leave, sick leave and maternity in availing of maternity leave. Medical facilities in the tea gardens under various managements taken for study were not adequate to cater the need of the labour force. Labour women in general are not prompt in consulting a doctor when they suffer from sort of illness.
 - vii. Recreation facilities for labour women in the tea gardens in the sample are extremely limited. There is no socio-cultural organization of the women. Female labourers always look forward to the occasional cinema shows. Some religious ceremonies are the important festive occasions for the men and women when they get opportunity for merry-making, dancing and singing.
 - viii. Though most of the sample women labourers were reported to be members of the trade union, but most of them were only passive members and did not play any active role in trade union activities. The women in general remain busy with their activities and they cannot think of their better future in life. Their mental makeup is observed to be such that they are born to be tea garden labourers and their future generations would have no other alternatives but to work as tea garden labourers.

Suggestions:

On the basis of the findings of the present study, certain suggestions are made for the socio-economic uplift of the tea garden labour women.

- i. It is noticed that there is an urgent need for improving of the working conditions and to provide better amenities to the tea garden labour community. Better working condition and availability of more welfare amenities are necessary to ameliorate the hard working life of the tea garden labourers in general and raise the status of the labourer women in particular. Certain long term measures are also necessary to alleviate their problems in view of growing unemployment in the tea gardens.
- ii. The wage disparity between man and women labourers should be eliminated as per provision of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 as the women labourer are equally efficient. Suitable roles should be framed to provide means of transport for women labourers if the distance of working sites exceeds two kilometers. This will save time and energy for efficient performance of works. Construction of some sheds in plantation area is also necessary which would help the labourers in taking shelter from heavy rains and storms during the working hours.
- iii. In case of health sector it is necessary to provide at least one lady doctor to render necessary medical services to the women labourers in each garden. The women labourers should be encouraged to form sort of social organization like *Mahila Samities*. These will give chances to the labour women to get together and exchange their views and opinions. It is felt that the tea garden labourers need guidance and encouragement on building up the habit of savings as well as family budgeting and rationales family expenditure.
- iv. It is observed that the political parties and their unions usually neglect to communicate with women. The women may be encouraged to form a politically organized section in the trade unions.
- v. It is found that all the socio-economic problems of plantations labourers are closely associated with their low educational attainment. The orientation towards money and materials achievement created by the industrial environment is also responsible to a great extent for their social degradation.

Conclusion:

This report is the result of intensive field study on the socio-economic status confronting the tea plantation women labour of Assam. This group of labourers of Assam being the victim of poverty, ignorance literacy has become part and parcel of Assam. And the socio-economic problems of these workers continued to be deplorable. The fruit of the participatory democracy is still beyond their reach.

Tea plantation has brought the state of Assam in to the lime light of national and international area. There is enormous information available concerning the scientific and technical aspect of the industry, but unfortunately there is no systematic and reliable data base for studying socio-economic aspects of the plantation labourers. Tea plantation labourers are being subjected to a long process of socio-political deprivation and discrimination in the state. Their presence has a significant impact on the socioeconomic life in the state. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the government evolves suitable policy to improve the quality of life of tea plantation women labour.

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