

Status of the Tea Garden Women Workers of Assam: An Analysis

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Abstract

Assam is the largest producer of tea in India. Assam tea is significant to the state both economically and culturally. The tea industry of the state has been playing a crucial role in the Indian economy. It is a labour intensified industry and highly dependent on a large workforce. The women in the tea gardens make the largest workforce in the tea industry. Plucking of tea leaves, which is considered as a unskilled work is the main task of tea garden women. All tea garden women carry a busy day to day work along with their domestic activities, so they do not get any time for leisure or relaxation. They are playing a significant role in tea production, but unfortunately they are not getting due recognition even today and instead they are facing various social, economic, political, educational and health related problems. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine and analyse the socio-economic, political, educational and health status of tea garden women workers.

Keywords: Tea garden, women worker, social status, economic condition, empowerment, education, health status, exploitation, improvement

Introduction

The tea community forms the backbone of the tea industry. They are the people brought nearly about 180 years ago by Britishers from different parts of the country to work as labourers in the tea gardens. According to different scholars the first group of tea labourers were recruited by the East India Company in 1841, to work in the tea plantation of Assam. They are considered mostly of tribal and other backward Hindu Caste groups from regions of Chotanagpur. Since then, their population has increased the number fold. They have become a part and parcel of Assam. They account for around twenty percent of the total population of the state. Presently there are more than 1000 small and large tea gardens in Assam spread over all the districts of Assam. The tea tribe community is hence spreading throughout the tea gardens in all districts and mostly in upper Assam areas. The tea industry is a labour intensified industry. Tea plantations do not need many skilled workers as the main work of the tea plantations is plucking of tea leaves. Women workers account for more than fifty percent of the total workforce of the tea plantation industry in Assam. They have been employed in the tea industries of Assam almost from the inception. Besides plucking of tea leaves they are also employed in some other important tasks such as pruning, manuring, weeding, planting etc. Their role in the state's economy is very crucial. Despite their indispensable role in the tea production, their status in private as well as working fields is very poor. They work under certain limitations and hardships. They are still lagging behind in various aspects of their life like social, political, economic, education, health and so on. They are deprived of various rights. The majority of women workers are illiterate so they are not aware of the minimum standard of living. In the

social aspect, they have been suffering from prejudice, superstitious beliefs, alcoholism etc. They are exploited in many ways by the employers as well as their men folk. They are fighting against illiteracy and poverty but they are becoming economically poor, socially and politically backward and neglected.

Objectives:

To study the socio-economic and political status of the tea garden women workers.

To identify and examine the educational status and health conditions of the women workers.

To suggest some measures to improve their status in these different aspects of their life.

Methodology:

The proposed study is based on the information collected from the primary and secondary resources. Primary data have been collected mostly by personal and direct contact methods from selected people. The secondary sources include different journal articles, newspapers, magazines etc.

Social Status:

Tea tribe women are considered inferior by their man folk, and they have also internalised this. The male partners consider them as their personal property. Again since the women workers belonged to the lowest status in the social hierarchy in the tea plantation, they are subjected to abuse and ill treatment at the hands of the managers. Sometimes they are also subjected to sexual harassment by the tea planters but they rarely complain of such incidences. Researchers have found that most of the tea planters maintain 'harem' or 'chokri khana' in their Bungalows, where a bunch of attractive young women are kept. Such kinds of practices are regular assault borne by the women workers. In their society, many prejudices and superstitions still operated among the tea garden labour community and women are the worst sufferers of these kinds of social evils. Witch hunting is very common among them and many women are killed for this even till date. Almost all the members of the tea community including women are very much addicted to the consumption of drinking alcohol. Excessive drinking is the chief cause of all family and social problems among them. Their male partners spend a major portion of their salary in buying alcohol. If the wife shows any objection, then she is beaten up badly. They feel a sense of inferiority in every aspect of their social life. The early marriage system is prevalent among the tea tribe communities. A girl usually marries between the ages of thirteen to sixteen. This tradition of tea community affects women education along with many health issues. Girl trafficking is common in the tea gardens of Assam. The female workers of the tea gardens mostly remain busy with their work in the tea garden. From early morning till night they have to do hard work both in households and in the garden. They don't have time for relaxation or enjoyment and don't get time to take care of themselves. Plucking is quite monotonous work and can be very risky particularly during the hot and wet summer months.

Though they have adjusted themselves to the hard working pattern of the industry but even today they have not received due recognition to their significant role. They are assigned to the lowest status in society at large. They are living in very miserable condition despite contributing equally to that of their male partners.

Economic Status:

The economic status of the tea garden women workers is very low. They get a very small amount of money after working very hard in the industries. They spend their earnings in meeting the needs of their

family life. In some of the gardens there is a wage difference between male and female workers. But though an earning member, they do not get freedom to spend their hard earned money. In many families the husbands spend their entire incomes in buying alcohol and so they are unable to contribute to the family expenses. In such families, the women or wives manage the financial needs.

Due to illiteracy, ignorance and unplanned expenditure, the tea labourers have no knowledge about the proper saving process and its importance. They hardly save their money for the education and future of their children. At a very small age, the girls have to carry the burden of household chores and of their siblings as their parents go to work. Poverty is the main cause of this. No opportunity is provided for their overall development. To meet the demand of labour in the garden or for earning a little to contribute to the family income, they usually drop out from schools. However it is worth mentioning that in recent times the formation of Self Help Groups has become very popular in many tea garden areas.

Educational Status:

The educational condition of tea tribe women is not satisfactory at all. Not only of the women but among the entire tea labour community, the educational condition is very poor. They are deprived of basic educational facilities. Women and girls are the worst sufferers in this field. Along with the prevalent social evils of their community and many other factors are responsible for their poor educational condition. Due to their ignorance and poverty they themselves do not show much interest in education. Again because of the poor financial condition of the family, the parents find it difficult to pay fees for school going children. Also parents attitude towards girls education is unfavourable. From an early age girls are engaged in different household activities. They are employed in money earning jobs in the tea gardens. As both the parents work, so in the absence of their mothers, the girls have to look after almost all the responsibilities of family life including taking care of younger siblings. Hence they have no time for study and for that matter attending schools. As a result they perform poorly in examinations and most girls leave study without completion. So the drop out rate is high among them. Even if some of them wish for education, their home and social environment is not good for education. Higher education is not possible for most of them. Due to poverty, parents are interested in engaging their girls in money earning jobs. Another important factor of unwillingness among girl students to go to school is because of lack of adequate facilities and poor infrastructure of educational institutions, they do not get motivated. The practice of alcoholism in many ways place an obstacle and has an adverse effect on female education. Due to the tradition of early marriage among the tea tribe community, girls are deprived of taking education. Besides all these government's apathy towards quality education among them is another aspect of their poor status in the field of education.

Political Status:

Political awareness of the Tea Garden women workers is very low. A huge percentage of them are illiterate and hence politically not conscious. The few political activities that women are engaged with are also influenced by the male members of the family. Besides most of the women workers are busy and working very hard to maintain their families and so they have less awareness about their rights and privileges. They do not show much interest in participating in political activities. However in recent times, women are increasingly participating in the elections as voters. But they are not independent voters. They are not very enthusiastic to join in public meetings or campaigning for any public meetings and demonstrations. In societies, patriarchy still dominates the women's decision making aspect. Even the elected female

candidates among them are just like puppets at the hands of their male guardians. They are unaware about their political rights.

Health Status:

The health status of tea garden women workers can be analysed in relation to nutritional deficiency diseases, infectious diseases, and other physical and psychological health problems. Smoking, consumption of alcohol, poor quality of life, poor housing, unhygienic practices etc make them more vulnerable to various diseases. Malnutrition is common among the tea tribe women of Assam. Because of the busy work schedule they rarely take a proper breakfast or mid day meal. Rice, dal, and a little bit of vegetables are the main food items for them. A study by UNICEF and the Assam Medical Cooperation found that, of the fourteen meals in a week, only two are nutritional in a tea tribe family. Women and children from tea tribe families suffer from malnutrition from an early age. Most of the tea garden women workers are unaware of their menstrual hygiene related practices and their adverse health impacts on them. Only a few use sanitary napkins. The unhygienic and unsanitary practices lead to a lot of infections. There is a higher maternal mortality rate among the female tea garden workers. Anaemia is a major health issue among them. Tea tribe women usually drink alcohol and high salt induced tea which serves as an energy drink to combat dehydration and extreme fatigue in summers. The consumption of tobacco based substances and betel nuts is common among tea tribe women and because of this tobacco related cancer is high amongst them. Moreover due to the unavailability of any nearby hospitals and healthcare facilities, the women face deadly difficulties during delivery. A large proportion of deliveries are conducted at home by elderly ladies of the households. Inhalation of smoke during domestic cooking largely contributes to developing diseases like tuberculosis. Another very serious health concern is related to hiding pregnancies . It's very common among them as they fear losing their jobs. They do heavy work through eight months of their pregnancy with poor nutrition. However the Assam government and a few NGOs are trying to promote good health practices among the tea tribe women with some success. But a lot more needs to be done.

Suggestions:

Women education among tea garden workers should be given importance at all levels. Along with the management of tea industries and trade unions, the government, Civil society, NGOs etc should organize literary campaigns among them to improve and encourage them about education.

As women workers are less conscious about their health, nutrition, diseases , the government agencies should take initiatives to make them conscious and aware as well as provide better healthcare facilities.

There is the presence of many social evils like superstitious beliefs, early marriage, alcoholism, witch hunting etc, where the women are the worst sufferers. To eliminate these kinds of social evils, proper education should be given to them.

In most of the cases, women workers get low wages as compared to their male counterparts . To eliminate this kind of wage disparity provisions of the Remuneration Acts of government should be strictly followed. They should be given guidance and encouragement to build up the habit of savings as well as family expenditure.

The women may be encouraged to form politically organized sections. They should be given education about their rights and have their voice in public spheres.

Conclusion:

The tea plantation of Assam mainly depends upon the women labourers, who have to perform dual roles; as homemakers as well as a dairy wage earner. They work almost for eight hours in the gardens. But the status of tea garden women workers in most aspects of their life is fairly bad. They still are dealing with social evils like illiteracy, teen marriage, domestic violence, high maternal mortality, improper health facilities, poor housing conditions, limited access to money earning opportunities, alcoholism, political negligence and a lot more. These challenges stand as obstacles to their all round development. These obstacles are very serious; and for the upliftment of her own personality and their family it is certainly essential to remove them permanently .

In spite of various problems, the tea garden women workers have been playing a significant role and contributing to the state's economy. So it is the duty of the government, civil society, NGOs and government agencies to make them literate, culturally enriched, economically stable and politically empowered. For that certain long term measures will be required to address their problems.

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