

THE STATUS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN THE TEA GARDENS OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

In the overall economic activities of India, women workers constitute about one-fifth of the total work force, out of which only six per cent are employed in the organized sector. Rest of the women workers are engaged in unorganized sector. In spite of the mandatory legislative protective provisions, the extent of their exploitation exists not only in unorganized sectors but in the organized sectors also. There are still cases where women workers are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-à-vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services, etc. Several factors are responsible for their plight like indifferent attitude of the employers towards women workers, their weak bargaining power and in many cases the women workers themselves being unaware about their rights. This is worst felt in case of female tea garden workers. Although the Government is seized of the situation, yet it continues to remain a problem area due to non-availability of reliable statistical data and other information pertaining to working, living and socio-economic conditions of women workers. This paper attempts to highlight the status of women empowerment in the tea gardens of Assam and to find out remedies for their problems.

Keywords: awareness, empowerment, right, status.

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Introduction

It would be no exaggeration to say that after independence the real green revolution in India has taken place in tea. India is one of the largest producer, consumer as well as exporter of tea in the world. It has its specific importance in India where unemployment is one of the serious economic problems. Being the second largest employment provider almost 12, 58, 800 families are directly employed in Indian tea industry and almost same numbers of people are worked as casual workers. Another 10 million people are indirectly employed by tea industry.

A larger portion of the workers in tea plantation sector is women. The reason is that these plantations are historically linked with colonialism. The plantations are located in remote areas and were sparsely populated during the colonial period. As a result, families were employed rather than individuals, thus absorbing women in the labour force. The workers are mostly landless and they do not possess any skills other than plucking tealeaf.

Women workers have all along been an integral part of the labour force engaged in the Plantation Industry in India. Owing to the very fact that soft hands and nimble fingers are suited especially for tea leave plucking, they dominate the employment scene in tea plantations. However, the wages of workers in the plantation sector continue to remain low. The ineffective implementation of the statutory provisions has impeded the progress in the direction of alleviating the plight of women workers in this industry. Paucity of reliable data and other information have been the major drawbacks.

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine the status of women empowerment in selected tea gardens of Assam in terms of various indicators such as economic participation, political participation, access to education etc.
2. To identify the hidden constraints on women empowerment in tea gardens of Assam (in spite of the fact that many programs are launched and policy initiatives are undertaken by the Government) and
3. Suggest measures to bridge the gap between men and women in tea industry.

Research methodology

This work is primarily an empirical enquiry of the problems related to women empowerment in tea industry. A variety of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection is employed. Study combines both desk and field research. Secondary data have been collected from books, published literature of the plantation companies, associations, journals, reports published by different organizations (public and private) and websites. Primary data is collected from 300 female workers of six big tea gardens in Jorhat district, selecting randomly. Semi structured questionnaires are tool for data collection. The simple techniques of percentage (%) analysis and mean analysis ($\bar{x} = \sum x/n$) have been used for comparative assessment. While studying the status of women empowerment in tea industry, emphasis was given on understanding the process of implementation rather than quantifying the participants.

Plantation workers

It is estimated that more than 50 per cent of the tea garden workers are women. The majority of workers working on the plantations in the northeast are third or fourth generation migrants that were brought by the British from the central part of India, and the majority of them are either lower caste or tribal peoples belonging to the lowest social strata. Workers have always lived inside the plantations and housing has been used as an effective means of enslavement of generations of workers by the plantation owners. The industry has continued to maintain a feudal/semi-feudal structure in its pre-marketing production phase so as to maximize its profits.

The social status of the workers has ensured that their plight has been continuously ignored for generations. These workers have very low literacy rates and non-availability of any other livelihood in the region ensures that the children of the plantation workers are left with no other option than to work on the plantations under abysmal conditions. There is no escape from the vicious circle of the highest level of exploitation. The plantation workers do not enjoy the basic amenities like safe drinking water, adequate educational facility, healthcare facility etc.

The tea plantation workers in India are covered by the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951, which regulates the working and living conditions of these workers. As well as prescribing standards for housing, healthcare and education, the PLA regulates working conditions including

maximum working hours, overtime payments, child labour, paid leave, and sickness and maternity benefits. However, it seems that even though the Act has been there for more than 50 years, the majority of workers are deprived of the basic minimal necessities in their lives. Their wages have not seen any real increase for so many years.

Ironically, the tea industry is considered one of the most organized industries in India, with the first union being recognized by the industry as early as 1948. There are more than 50 recognized unions in West Bengal alone. However, the industry associations have been denying the benefits that workers should receive under the Plantation Labour Act. Most of the workers have been classified as unskilled workers and are paid daily wages and the majority does not receive any wages for Sunday.

Table 1: Social welfare measures provided by the sample gardens

Social Welfare measures	Available in gardens (Percentage)
Pucca House	70 %
Running water facilities	12 %
Tube well & ponds facilities	89 %
Hospitals	100 %
Well equipped Hospitals with regular doctors, medicines	69 %
Educational facilities	100 %
Subsidized foods	100 %
Playgrounds	89 %
Temples, church	100 %
Accidental benefit	100 %
Employment in Compensation ground	89 %

Source: Field Survey

Table 2: Standard of living of the workers

Indicators that represent standard of living	Responses
Pucca House	Yes, 60 % of the workers has
Water facilities	Yes, But filtration is not adequately done
Electricity	Yes, more than 86 % has
Music system	Yes, 90 % has
Television	Yes, all the respondents have
Health status of the labourers	69 % are suffering from more than one diseases
Nutritious food	Can not effort by the labourers
Educational status	More than 80 % are illiterate
Mobile	Yes, each family has at least one
Awareness about hygienic living condition	Not aware
Eagerness for higher education	Only 1.1 % has
Importance of News Paper, News Channels in T.V.	NO
Awareness about savings facilities, banks, post offices etc.	Negligible, Only 3 % have savings account in banks
Consumption of Alcohol	Yes, more than 87 % of both male & female workers

Source: Field Survey

Houses are provided to the permanent staffs and labours in majority of the gardens. Tube well and ponds are the source of water supply, Other than ponds and wells, few gardens provide safe drinking water through pipelines. Majority of the gardens have medical facilities inside their gardens. However they are unable to handle any serious patient due to lack of instruments and surgery facilities. Child education has been taken up by the garden authority by setting up L.P. Schools in the garden, of which 28 per cent are Government aided schools. Some of the gardens also provide some other facilities like playground, auditorium, temples, Children Park etc. for their workers.

The female workers

The removal of tea leaves without ruining the quality is a delicate matter and has been carried out by women. Women move between rows of tea bushes picking leaves in both hands, tossing them into large baskets on their backs. This first flush involves removing the downy terminal bud on the stem and the first two leaves below it. This is also referred to as 'fine plucking'. It has always been said that women are the best at this type of work due to their smaller hands and fine dexterous skills. Tea Pickers who are capable of picking quantities of the finest leaves are considered as an asset to the company and would therefore receive better wages than those with lesser skills or those in training. Unskilled pickers may have an adverse effect on the quality of the tea as well as on the yield harvested.

Three million women are pickers worldwide. Women who are a major workforce in the industry continue to face increased discrimination. The women have been often denied the maternity and related benefits they should have under the Plantation Act. For a long time their wages were much lower than the workers of other sectors. More than half a century after the country's independence, health and educational opportunities for tea garden labours are among the most basic and other forms of social support either absent or inadequate. In most tea estates, according to health officials, there exist serious issues about the state of women's health. Many of them suffer from a range of diseases like anemia, allergy, gastro intestinal disorders, and under-nourishment continues to be a norm.

Early marriage is widely prevalent in most of the tea estates, young women find themselves in an unenviable position. The fact that multiple child birth is a common feature to tea tribe women only adds to their difficulties. The absence of proper healthcare in most tea gardens is a hurdle that is yet to be surmounted. Although some tea majors have established well equipped hospitals, there are hundreds of tea estates without necessary health support in the form of infrastructure and doctors. For the women of such estates, there is little recourse to healthcare as they cannot afford private medical intervention, which may be available outside the estates.

Table 3: Number of Children of the Women Workers belongs to Age Group 15-45

Number of Children	Percentage
1	1 %
2	2 %
3	6 %
4	10 %
5 or more	80 %

Source: Field Survey

The National Rural Health Mission has forged ties with some tea estates to augment the available healthcare facilities. However, the net has not spread to cover many tea estates where healthcare support is nil, a fact that even NRHM personnel acknowledge.

Those well acquainted with the situation say that lack of awareness among the women created by scarce educational opportunities is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. Surprisingly, even after intervention from the Sarva Siksha Abhijan Mission, the girl child in tea estates still gets a raw deal. Right from the time she steps into the school, the girl child also has to take part in running the household with little time to enjoy childhood. Later, as the family grows, and with her mother at work she would take care of younger siblings, and thus find no time for studies.

Table 4: Education Level of the Women Workers

Education Level	Participation (in percentage)
HSLC or more	3 %
Class V to X	10 %
Class I to IV	23 %
Illiterate	64 %

Source: Field Survey

When we examine the factors like household decision-making, control over resources, freedom of movement, workforce participation rate, women's experience of violence, attitude towards unequal gender role etc., we find some interesting result. Only 4 % of the women participate in all the household decision making process.

While analyzing the linkage between women empowerment and human development we find that female literacy rate is positively related with human development. This is because in Assam, especially in tea gardens, women are engaged in wage employment basis and their economic conditions are not good.

Findings of the Study:

1. Majority of the workers are unskilled.
2. More than 64 per cent women workers are illiterate.
3. The average earning of labours is Rs 75 to Rs 100 per day.
4. Around 80 per cent of the gardens provide maternity benefits to the women workers.
5. Only 30 per cent gardens have appointed welfare officer to look after the social securities provided to the workers.
6. Only 18 per cent women workers are aware about available welfare schemes for labours.
7. Women are in a disadvantageous position both in absolute sense and relative to men in the area of access to education, employment and exposure to media.
8. Most of the women do not have final say about the use of their own earnings.
9. Most of the women do not have household decision-making power, particularly in large household purchases.
10. Most of the women do not have freedom of movement.
11. Traditional gender norms particularly those concerning wife beating are still prevailing among the tea garden labours.
12. Only 4 per cent female labours are exposed to physical as well as sexual violence.

Suggestions for improvement:

The present study throws light on the status of women empowerment in the tea industry. It is found that in spite of number of efforts on the part of Govt. female tea garden workers are

disempowered, both absolutely and relative to men. The major implications of the study are as follows:

1. The first and foremost attempt should be expansion of education among the women workers of tea gardens, which is lagging behind.
2. Measures must be taken to prevent availability of alcoholic beverages in and around garden area.
3. To become empowered urge should come from one's heart. Women workers must realize the implications of their subordinate status and should long for emancipation. Their labour union must guide them in this direction.
4. Enlightened women should organize awareness camps in the gardens to make their sisters aware about themselves.
5. Students, particularly girl students have a great role to play. They can make these illiterate women workers of tea gardens aware of their labour rights.
6. Special value based education should be introduced for the women workers so that violence and injustice against women can be reduced.
7. Media should highlight the on going injustice and exploitation of female workers in the tea gardens.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that tea workers, particularly women workers in India are facing one of the worst form of exploitation in the modern times, especially in Industry which is milking billions of dollars in profits. It is also evident from the financial reports of the Tea brands like Tata tea that are published online. In 2008 Tata Tea paid its top manager Percy T. Siganporia earns a yearly salary that includes benefits and bonus in the tune of US\$ two to six million which is easily 1,000 times more than the daily meager earnings of the tea workers. Government and Tea Board must take strong initiative to overcome these problems of the workers. Majority of the Indian tea producers are not getting fair price in the market for their tea and this passes to the workers as wage cuts. The underdeveloped conditions of the workers adversely affect the industry, as without a strong and skilled labour force one can not imagine a productive tea industry. Hence, labour welfare with appropriate social security measures is urgent need for the long term sustainability of the industry.

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