

Tea Tribes are lagging behind in the Process of Urbanization:

A Study on Selected Tea Gardens of Jorhat District, Assam

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Abstract: Tea is a popular beverage around the world. People consume tea irrespective of ages or classes. Tea industry is the crucial part of Indian economy and among the tea producing states of India, Assam is well known internationally since long back. It is a labour intensive industry and highly dependent on a large workforce. It is the only sector where majority of the workers are female.

About two million labourers are dependent on Assam's Tea industry and almost all of whom are the descendents of those who were brought to Assam as slaves by East India Company mostly from Jharkhand and Orissa. The descendents of those slaves are now called tea tribes. The sacrifice, toil and hard work of these labourers gave shape to the tea industry of Assam. However, the story behind the tea cultivation, plucking and processing of tea leaves in the plantations is one of exploitation and untold hardships for the tea labourers. These labourers are still living with the basic facilities provided by the Tea Planters or Companies. Poor standard of living and lack of education, health facilities etc. are main problems of tea labourers. This paper will highlight how tea tribes or tea labourers are far away from the fruits of urbanization and living their lives in vulnerable conditions. Here attempt is made to measure urbanization among labourers based on their standard of living. Though urbanization has a vast dimension, the study attempts to limit it within health status, education, family planning, women empowerment etc.

The study uses both primary and secondary data. Primary data are collected from the field with the help of questionnaire. Books, journals and websites are source of secondary data. The study has focused on the life of tea garden workers. Their standard of living is traced with some selected parameters. Observing field data and secondary data the study reveals that tea garden workers are still in very deprive condition. They are far away from the urbanized society and living an isolated life.

Key words: *Urbanization, employment, empowerment, Social Securities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian tea industry is continuing a long journey since 18th century. Since the first commercial consignment, (1839) tea continues to be the most popular drink in India. 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. Therefore, tea industry plays a prominent role in Indian economy.

TABLE 1: INDIAN TEA INDUSTRY: AN OVERVIEW

Year	Production (million kg)	Export (million kg)	Import (million kg)	Consumption (million kg)	Auction price (Rs)
2005	945	199	11.34	757	68
2006	982	218	17.41	771	61
2007	986	179	15.99	786	67
2008	980	203	20.28	802	87
2009	979	197	22.03	819	105
2010	966	193	25.84	837	103

Source: Tea statistics, Tea Board of India, 2010.

Tea plantations are located in remote areas and were sparsely populated during the colonial period when these are initiated. As a result, families were employed rather than individuals. The tea workers are mostly landless and they do not possess any skills other than plucking tealeaf. Women workers are the 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. One cannot imagine the survival of Indian tea industry without this labour force. However, the ineffective implementation of the statutory provisions has impeded the progress in the direction of alleviating the plight of tea garden workers in this industry. Paucity of reliable data and other information have been the major drawbacks.

A. The Objectives of the Present Study are:

1. To observe the impact of urbanization felt by the tea labourers and
2. Suggest measures to uplift the status of tea labourers in present economy.

B. Research Methodology

This work is primarily an empirical enquiry of the impact of urbanization 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 are collected from 1500 permanent workers selecting randomly from six big tea gardens of Jorhat district of Assam. The age group of this selected workers lies between 18 years to 50 years. Semi structured questionnaires are tool for data collection. The simple techniques of percentage (%) analysis, mean analysis ($\bar{x} = \sum x/n$) and (χ^2) Chi square have been used for comparative assessment. Emphasis was given on understanding the process of implementation rather than quantifying the participants.

II PLANTATION WORKERS

There is no agreement on the number of workers employed in the tea industry and different sources give different figures, roughly between 1 to 1.5 million employed directly and another 10 million that are employed indirectly. It is estimated that more than 50 per cent of the 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 the plantation owners have used housing as an effective means of enslavement. The wages they receive are among the lowest in the world, about Rs75- 90 a day, this in spite of the fact that the industry is global in nature and has quite capital-intensive operations.

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 also do not enjoy even basic amenities like safe drinking water, and often workers suffer from diarrhea, cholera and other waterborne diseases. Malaria and tuberculosis are also rampant. The infant mortality rate is much higher than the national average. It is estimated that only one percent of the workers is active after attaining the age of 60.

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. Women who are a major workforce in

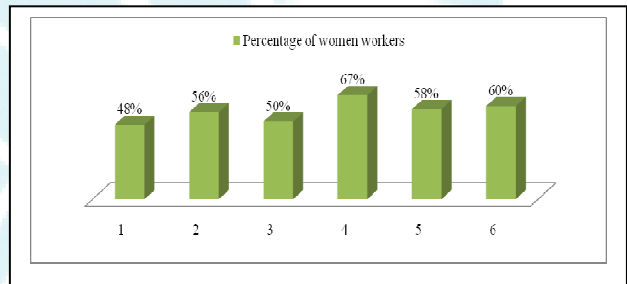
the industry continue to face increased discrimination. Plucking the leaves from the plants is a very hard and tiring job. The women have been often denied the maternity and related benefits they should have under the Plantation Act.

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.

A. The Women Workers

Picking or plucking is the most crucial operation in obtaining the finest quality of tealeaf. The removal of tealeaves without ruining the quality is a delicate matter and has been carried out by women. It has always been said that women are the best at this type of work due to their smaller hands and fine dexterous skills. Hence, demand for women in tea plantation is always higher.

Fig1: Percentage of Women Workers in Selected Gardens in 2010



Source: Field Survey

Three million women are serving as tea plucker worldwide. However, they provide the cheapest labour for the most important role in the tea industry. 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 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 still widely prevalent in tea estates. Multiple childbirth, which 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.

TABLE 2: MARITAL STATUS OF THE WOMEN WORKERS

Marital Status	Percentage
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Married	64 %
Widow	5 %
Separated	3 %
Unmarried	28 %

Source: Field Survey

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF CHILDREN OF THE MARRIED WOMEN WORKERS (age 15 to 55)

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

Source: Field Survey

The tea garden workers are not aware about family planning measures and they do not feel its necessities. The National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) 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 workers 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: EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF THE WORKERS

Education Level	Participation of Female (in percentage)	Participation of Male (in percentage)
HSLC or more	3 %	15 %
Class V to X	10 %	25 %
Class I to IV	23 %	20 %
Illiterate	64 %	40 %

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 11 per cent of 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.

TABLE 5: STANDARD OF LIVING OF THE WORKERS

Indicators that represent standard of living	Responses
Pucca House	60 % of the workers have
Water facilities	Available, No proper filtration

	is done
Electricity	More than 86 % families have
Music system	90 % families have
Television	All the respondents have
Health facilities	Available, but not adequate
Nutritious food	Can not effort by the labourers
Education facilities	Only L.P. School is available
Mobile	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

III FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

1. Majority of the workers are unskilled.
2. More than 64 per cent women workers and 40 % male workers are illiterate.
3. The average earning of labours is Rs 84 per day.
4. The daily needs of tea garden people are very limited.
5. About 64 per cent of the women workers are married.
6. 80 per cent of the married women workers have more than 5 children.
7. Workers are not aware about Family Planning Measures.
8. Around 80 per cent of the gardens provide maternity benefits to the women workers, but it is not adequate.
9. Only 30 per cent gardens have appointed welfare officer to look after the social securities provided to the workers.
10. Only 18 per cent workers are aware about available welfare schemes for labours.
11. 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.
12. Most of the women do not have final say about the use of their own earnings.
13. Most of the women do not have household decision-making power, particularly in large household purchases.
14. Most of the women do not have freedom of movement.
15. Traditional gender norms particularly those concerning wife beating are still prevailing among the tea garden labours.
16. Only 4 per cent female labours are exposed to physical as well as sexual violence.
17. While considering educational facilities, only one L.P. school is available. And workers do not feel the need of higher education.
18. Workers are not aware about hygienic living conditions and notorious foods.

19. Most of them (around 69 %) spend more than 50 percent of their income on drinking and gambling.
20. Tea garden workers are not aware about day-to-day happenings of outside world. They are far away from the Globalization, liberalization, privatization, present economic condition, political ups and down, new inventions, market price etc.

IV SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The present study throws light on the standard of living of the tea garden workers and impact of urbanization upon them. It is found that in spite of number of efforts on the part of Govt. tea garden workers are disempowered. Though they are unavoidable part of the industry, their development is lagging behind. They are far away from the fruits of urbanization. The major implications of the study are as follows:

1. The first and foremost attempt should be expansion of education among the tea garden workers, which is at very poor standard. Government should take special care for the development of education among tea garden labourers. Open education system will improve their standard of living.
2. Measures must be taken to prevent availability of alcoholic beverages and gambling in and around garden area. Garden authority should implement strong rules and regulation in this regards.
3. Development of women will accelerate the development of the entire tribe. Hence, women empowerment is urgent need for tea garden workers. 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. The Non Government Organizations (NGO), working for women should focus more on the women workers of tea gardens.
4. Enlightened women of the area (in and around the estate) should organize awareness camps in the gardens to make their sisters aware about themselves.
5. Special value based education should be introduced for the workers so that they can come out to the global field.
6. Media should highlight the on going injustice and exploitation of tea workers so that various organizations can take initiative to provide better education and job opportunities for the children of tea tribe.
7. Government and Tea Board must take proper steps for the all-round development of the tea tribe. Only then, they will give better return to the industry.
8. Labour Welfare department should regularly investigate the status of Social Security Measures available in the tea gardens.

V 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. 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. Today we are living in an urbanized town. However, the tea garden workers do not know what is urbanization. Hence, we must help them to see the world with a new look moving out of the primitive tea garden life. This will increase their skill and productivity and ultimately the entire industry will develop.

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