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Living and Working Conditions of Women Tea Garden Workers in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Tea estate workers hold a significant position in Assam, India. This study examines the socio-economic aspects of living and working conditions of workers, in the tea gardens of Sivasagar district, Assam. 50 women who work in tea plantations formed the sample. Findings revealed that the more than half of the women workers generate a monthly income of Rs. 5001 to Rs.7000 and due to low income, workers find difficulty to cover their daily expenditure. It was also found that the women workers at the tea plantations have poor working conditions such as forced labour, continuous work-load without rest and health issues.

Keywords: Living Condition; Tea; Plantation Workers; Work Ability; Working Condition; Assam

INTRODUCTION

Tea plantations are predominantly located in North-Eastern and Southern States of India. The working class in the tea gardens of Assam, a North-Eastern state is the most exploited class in the organized sector of economy. The tea business saw a period of consistent expansion starting in 1870, during which time plantations encountered a shortage of workforce. Currently, the tea industry in Assam serves as the primary employer within the organized industrial sector, employing around 6,50,000 individuals on a daily basis. Notably, women workers account for over 50% of the total workforce in this sector. Since the inception of the tea industry, women have been employed alongside men as labourers (Baishya, 2016, Borgohain, 2020). Plantation work can lead to multiple exposures for workers due to the seasonal nature of the work, the variety of tasks, the type of working postures, and the length of

the tasks. These exposures can include exposure to poisoning, infections, parasite diseases, allergies, toxicity, bites, infections, and other health issues (Rehena, 2018). In addition to their poor socioeconomic standing, the populations of tea gardens are defenseless against many diseases because of illiteracy, overcrowding, and unsanitary living circumstances. (Saikia et al, 2013). Women workers in tea gardens face significant challenges like discrimination in both domestic and professional spheres. Since the 19th century, issues such as low pay, inadequate housing, and a lack of social safety-nets persist in tea gardens. There is a glaring absence of a maternity benefit programme due to which women often work strenuously during pregnancy and the postpartum period without necessary support. The existing body of knowledge falls short in providing a thorough understanding of the socio-economic standing of women in tea gardens in Assam, highlighting the urgent need

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for targeted research and advocacy. The present study proposes to investigate in-depth about the living and working conditions of women tea plantation workers with the following objectives.

- To access the socio demographic profile of the women tea garden workers
- To examine the living condition of the respondents
- To observe the working condition of the respondents
- To analyze their work ability and working experience

METHODOLOGY

Locale of the study: The study was conducted in *Suntak* tea plantation in the Upper Assam region of Sivasagar district during July 2022. Upper Assam, chosen using a random sample technique, has a higher concentration of tea gardens compared to other Assam regions. The study offers a comprehensive analysis of socio-economic characteristics, living and working conditions, and wages of respondents, employing both descriptive and analytical elements.

Sample Size: Total numbers of tea plantation workers in *Suntak* tea estate is 123 casual women workers; out of which, 50 respondents were selected at random.

Data collection: Face to face communication, interview schedules, group discussions, and observations. This approach ensures a well-rounded understanding of the challenges and realities faced by women workers in the specified tea plantation setting.

Data Analysis: Frequency, percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation and one way ANOVA.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Socio- Demographic Profile of the Women Tea Plantation Workers

In examining the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, the findings of the study reveal that majority of the respondents (32%) included in this study were of 20 to 25 years. Notably, studies by Sarma (2017) align with this finding, emphasizing the prevalence of young women, particularly in the age group of 15-25 years, engaged in tea plantation work and it was also found that majority (76%) of respondents were found to be married. The women in tribal areas generally get married at young age, and have to face both marital pressure as well as work pressure at such a young age.

A majority of the respondents (84%) belonged to nuclear families, emphasizing the potential influence of family environments on individual values and behaviors. Majority of respondents (64%) attained the primary level education. Most of the respondents (58%) had a monthly income ranging from Rs.5001 to Rs.7000. This income level is deemed insufficient by the respondents to cover their daily expenditure, leading to a financial instability. These findings align with Sharma (2022), This underscores the economic challenges faced by this demographic group, emphasizing the need for interventions to improve their financial well-being.

Living Conditions of the Women Tea Plantation Workers

The analysis focused on the living conditions of the respondents, examining factors such as the nature and kind of housing, accessibility to facilities, availability of assets, monthly expenditures, and patterns of savings and are presented in Table 1.

Table-1: Living Conditions of Women Tea Plantation Workers*

Variables	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Nature of house		
<i>Pucca</i>	9	18
<i>Kacha</i>	23	46
Semi <i>pucca</i>	18	36
Type of house		
Line house	39	78
Separate house	11	22
Accessibility of facilities		
Education facilities*		
Primary school	50	100
Middle school	44	88
High school	30	60
Toilet facilities		
Available	36	72
Not available	14	28
If, available then type of toilet		
Low-cost latrine	43	86
Pit latrine	-	-
Sanitary latrine	7	14
Water facility*		
Water Taps	50	100
Hand Pumps/ Tube Well	35	70
Wells	16	36
Rain water	21	42
Others (river- water, pond water)	11	22
Electricity facilities		
Available	32	64
Not available	18	36
Access to health care		
PHC (Primary health center)	45	90

Variables	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Garden hospital	50	100
Availability of Doctors	19	38
Availability of Nurses	32	64
Free-of-cost medicine	12	24
Ambulance	34	68
Labor room/Delivery room	-	-
Availability of Health workers	50	100
Possession of assets		
Gas connection	28	56
Television	41	82
Mobile phone	21	42
Two-wheeler	42	84
Computer	3	6
Music system	24	48
Others	50	100
Monthly expenditure		
Below Rs 3000	4	8
Rs 3001-6000	39	78
Above Rs 6001	7	14
Major expenditure on*		
Food	46	92
Clothes	37	74
Education of children	20	40
Medical treatment	41	82
Transportation	31	62
Is the Monthly salary sufficient to meet the monthly expenses of family?		
Sufficient	11	22
Not sufficient	39	78
Saving Pattern		
Saving	19	38
Not saving	31	62

*Multiple responses

From the table, we can see that housing conditions of the participants varied. The survey revealed that 46% of the respondents possess rudimentary housing structures. According to a study conducted by Kabir (2007), it was found that tea plantation workers and their offsprings have the right to inherit their residential property upon their demise. Similarly, both studies found that majority of the respondents had *kacha* houses. Those were constructed with mud walls and have roofs made of straw. Majority of the respondents (74%) had access to separate toilet facilities. However, the prevalence of single toilets without water facilities underscores the urgent

need for improved sanitation infrastructure in these areas.

The findings underscore the importance of targeted interventions to improve living conditions, ensuring a more equitable and dignified life for this community.

Association between Monthly Income and Expenditure

The association between the monthly income and expenditure of the respondents was assessed and presented in Table 2. The test of the mean differences in the expenditure of different income groups, one way ANOVA was applied.

Table 2: Association between Monthly Income and Expenditure (N=50)

Variable		MEAN	SD	SE	F - VALUE	P - VALUE
Expenditure	Below Rs 3000	2.00	.00	.00	3.628	.034*
	Rs 3001-6000	2.50	.56	.29		
	Above Rs 6001	2.30	.48	.08		

*Significant at 5% level

The estimated 'F' was 3.628 and the corresponding 'P' value was 0.034. As the 'P' value was less than 0.05, it shows that expenditure has varied or different significantly across various income groups. The findings indicates the presence of a significant association between income levels and spending patterns, affirming the notion that as incomes fluctuate, so do expenditures, reflecting the dynamic nature of financial behaviors among the surveyed respondents.

Working Conditions of Women Tea Plantation Workers

The working conditions of women tea plantation workers were assessed and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Working Conditions of Women Tea Plantation Workers

Variables	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Nature of work		
Plucking	20	40
Tipping	19	38
Weeding	11	22
Minimum wages per day (In rupees)		
Below 200	-	-
201-300	50	100

Variables	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Above 301	-	-
Ways of calculation of wages		
Days	50	100
Working days in a week		
6 days	50	100
Working hours in a day		
7-8 hours	50	100
Working experience		
Less than 5years	4	8
Between 5&10years	11	22
Between 10&15years	25	50
Above 15years	10	20
Task completion Target		
Up-to 40kg	9	18
41-45 kg	11	22
46-50 kg	18	36
51-55 kg	8	16
More than 55 kg	4	8

Results show that a majority of the participants were engaged in tea leaf plucking. The findings also indicate that the minimum wage per day was between 201 & 300 rupees by all the respondents.

The findings also suggest that their living conditions are characterized by low or inadequate standards. 100% of the respondents had reported working six days a week on the tea plantations.

Typically, tea plantation workers engage in an eight-hour work schedule on a weekly basis. The designated working hours consist a duration of eight hours every day, commencing at 8 am. The tea plantation workers usually work for a fixed duration of 8 hours per day, adhering strictly to this timeframe without exceeding or falling short in the field.

The findings also says that a majority (36%) of respondents are made to work overtime to attain targets. An average person can pluck upto 35 kg but if they are forced to work overtime it may result in several health issues like, back pain, loss of weight etc.

Work Ability among Women Tea Plantation Workers

The capacity of the workers to perform their jobs at Tea Plantation was evaluated based on one of three grades.

Table 4: Working Ability among Women Tea Plantation Workers (N=50)

Variables	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
Poor	1	2.0
Moderate	41	82.0
Good	8	16.0

When the respondents' work abilities were evaluated, it was discovered that a majority of them had moderate ability (82%). Therefore, all of the women workers are involved in tea-related work, although their ability is moderate. The workers are actively involved in the execution of laborious tasks, resulting in a proportional rise in their proficiency as they accumulate more experience in the same occupation. The workers were involved in plantation work from a young age, allowing them to develop natural abilities in this area.

Association between Work Ability and Working Experience

An attempt was made to investigate the association between a person's level of job ability and the length of professional experience they have. The discussion of the results can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: Association between Work Ability and their Working Experience

Variable		MEAN	SD	SE	F - VALUE	P - VALUE
Experience	Less than 5 years	1.92	1.01	.21	7.562	.000**
	5 – 10 years	2.85	1.07	.30		
	10 – 15 years	2.50	.55	.22		
	More than 15 years	2.14	1.35	.21		

****Significant at 1% level**

The table illustrates the outcomes of a One-Way ANOVA analysis conducted to examine the relationship between job capacity and work experience. The obtained F-value of 7.562 and the corresponding P-value of .000 indicate a significant association between work ability and work experience. It was observed that individuals with limited working experience had favorable work ability. The observed trend aligns with prior research by Anbazhagan et al. (2016), strengthening the evidence for a connection between job experience and work ability. This emphasizes the importance of considering an individual's professional tenure in understanding and predicting their work ability, contributing valuable insights for effective work management.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion is drawn from the findings of an extensive field investigation into the living conditions, working conditions, and socioeconomic status of women workers in Assam's tea plantations. The working conditions of workers at the tea plantations are substandard, and unfavorable. It was also found that the women workers have poor working conditions such as forced labours to achieve targets, continuously work without rest and carry heavy loads of tea basket which causes

several health issues. A majority had financial issues and had to face social and economic disparities. A majority of the participants engage in tea leaf plucking and a significant proportion of workers possess moderate work ability. Hence, it is the responsibility of the Government, policy makers and the tea board authority to improve the working conditions of women workers in tea gardens through appropriate measures.

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