

# Hindrances for the Development of Tea Garden Workers in Assam: A Socio-Historical Perspective

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## Abstract:

The production of tea is an integral part of the economy of Assam. After its discovery in 1823 by the Bruce brothers in the Singpho hills and eventual commercialization from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the industry was cherished by the capital investment of the European planters and supported by the workers who were mainly imported from outside the state. Over the years, the tireless efforts of the tea workers have made it possible to make tea an important source of income for the state. Despite their crucial role, the life of the tea garden labourers remain challenging and sorrowful. Upto now, they face certain issues and challenges in areas like wage distribution, healthcare etc. thus severely limiting the human resource development among the tea garden workers. These issues need to be addressed for the upliftment of this community.

**Keywords:** tea, worker, wage, challenges, health, women.

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## I. Introduction :

There are over a million tea garden workers nationwide, with more than two-thirds of them employed in the tea gardens of Assam. Approximately 17% of Assam's workforce is in the tea industry, supporting about 20% of the state's total population. To cite history, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the British identified Assam as a prime region for cultivating tea and sought to boost their income by establishing tea plantations. To clear extensive forested areas and create these gardens, laborers were recruited from various regions across India. Local workers were unsuitable due to high wage demands, potential dangers from aboriginal tribes, and reluctance to work as wage labourers. Planters sought a cheap, obedient workforce and found a solution by importing labourers from famine-stricken areas of Eastern and Southern India, essentially initiating a slave trade. Over several phases spanning from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, workers were brought to Assam's tea estates, primarily from the tribal regions of central-eastern India, under the system of indentured labor. In a period of more than 150 years they now identify themselves as the broader term "The Tea Garden Labour Community".

Despite their part in making Assam a top player in tea business in the whole world, the situation of these workers are not without hindrances. According to Cambridge Dictionary, Hindrance means something that makes it more difficult for someone to do something or for something to develop. The tea garden community has historically been facing a number of hindrances. The major ones among those hindrances are the matter of discussion in this paper.

## Objectives of the Study :

1. To study the challenges or hindrances for the development of tea garden community of Assam in general with the help of socio-historical perspective.
2. To analyze the condition of tea garden workers of Assam in the light of the issues discussed here.

## II. Methodology:

A number of secondary sources have been used to gain a better understanding of the subject. Besides, field observation was done to acquire information.

## III. Results:

The tea garden workers of Assam are striving to get a better life. The scenario is more or less same in every tea garden of Assam. The hindrances which are identified as factors for the disadvancement of the tea garden workers have been discussed in this paper.

Among all these, the lack of proper healthcare facilities is the most discussed one. This issue needs to be traced from the colonial period. In the colonial era we have seen the rudimentary efforts of the British

administration towards the healthcare facilities of the labourers. According to Dr. Bipul Das, they were interested only in the healthy labourers and the sick and unhealthy labourers were left in the spot without any provision for food and medical facilities. Again, A comprehensive study conducted by the Regional Medical Research Center (ICMR) in the Northeast region of Assam has identified significant health challenges among tea garden workers. Findings indicate a high prevalence of malnutrition among children (59.9%), underweight adults (69.8%), and widespread micronutrient deficiencies such as anemia (72%). These health issues are predominantly linked to inadequate household and personal hygiene practices, compounded by a lack of education and awareness. Additionally, there are serious concerns regarding the insufficient and substandard medical care provided to pesticide sprayers, exposing them to significant health risks. Furthermore, the labor-intensive demands placed on women during pregnancy pose substantial risks to maternal and fetal health. The labourers suffer from tuberculosis, hypertension, lack of proper treatment etc. It is being observed that the laborers do not show any interest to go to hospital for treatment. They either lack knowledge or are unaware of proper personal hygiene and sanitation practices. According to the Registrar General of India's 'Special Bulletin on Maternal Mortality' for the period 2018 to 2020 released last year, Assam recorded 195 deaths per lakh live births, though it was an improvement from the previous figure of 215 in the period 2016 to 2018. Thus the never-ending list of vulnerable health situation in the tea producing estates of Assam going on.

Again, while plantations ostensibly offer equal opportunities to both sexes, female workers are often treated as inferior to their male counterparts. After work hours, while men relax and socialize, women are left to manage household tasks alone and may face abuse from dominating male members. Despite various legislative measures like the Plantation Labour Act 1951, the Minimal Wage Act 1948, the Assam Tea Plantation Employment Welfare Fund Act 1959, and the Maternity Benefit Act 1961, the ground reality remains largely unchanged. Tea garden management tends to prefer women workers as they typically accept lower wages and are perceived as more docile and submissive. Consequently, women often face physical or sexual assault in the workplace, compounding their challenges. Historically, British planters, and now current management, have exploited the illiteracy, ignorance, and socio-economic backwardness of these women. Living in isolation, physically and mentally underdeveloped, and socially disconnected, these women have a low level of political awareness. Coming from the most backward and economically weak sections of society, these women are highly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. They face domination and exploitation from men both at home and in the workplace. While the forms and extent of exploitation have evolved over time, it persists to this day. Women tea garden workers face significant challenges due to their lack of education and awareness. The neglect of female education among plantation workers contributes to high illiteracy rates among women in the gardens. Basumatari & Goyari's 2013 study found that female dropout rates exceed those of males. Many women workers missed out on formal education due to childhood responsibilities such as cooking, fetching water, collecting firewood, and childcare. There's a prevailing belief among workers that for girls, learning household skills is more important than formal education. The hierarchical relationship between planters/managers and workers is evident in the accounts of some interviewed workers. A retired woman who had worked at Ghogra tea estate in Sonitpur district expressed disapproval of workers disrespecting managers. She recalled a time when workers were more patient and tolerant, even accepting managers addressing them by their blouse colours without taking offence.

During our research, it has come to notice that besides the above mentioned major issues a number of relatively minor issues also have negative impact on the lives of the tea garden workers of Assam. We have tried our best to provide a glimpse of these issues.

1. **Living Conditions:** Workers often live in substandard housing provided by the tea estates. These accommodations lack basic amenities like clean water, sanitation facilities, and adequate ventilation, contributing to poor health outcomes.
2. **Wages and Labour Rights:** Despite being integral to the tea industry, many workers are paid minimal wages that often do not meet living wage standards. Issues related to delayed payments, non-payment of bonuses, and lack of formal contracts are common.
3. **Education:** Educational opportunities for children of tea garden workers are limited. Schools within tea estates are often underfunded and lack resources, leading to low enrollment rates and high dropout rates among children.
4. **Working Conditions:** Tea plantation work involves strenuous labor under harsh weather conditions, including exposure to pesticides and other chemicals. Occupational safety measures are often inadequate, leading to frequent accidents and health hazards.
5. **Debt and Dependency:** Many workers and their families are trapped in a cycle of debt owed to estate owners or local moneylenders, perpetuating their dependency on the tea estates for basic needs.
6. **Social Issues:** Alcoholism and substance abuse are prevalent due to the stressful living and working conditions. These issues further exacerbate social problems within tea garden communities.

7. **Land Rights:** Many tea garden workers are descendants of tribal communities who were historically displaced and often lack secure land rights or access to alternative livelihood options.

8. **Unionization and Representation:** While there are efforts by trade unions to advocate for workers' rights, there are often challenges in organizing due to intimidation tactics by estate owners and the remote locations of tea estates.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Till now, a brief discussion has been presented reflecting the hindrances or challenges of tea garden workers. Similarly arises the need to understand the trends of protest by tea labourers to raise their voice against oppression and the initiatives adopted by the Govt. to address their issues. The roots of the protest of this community can be traced back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This community has been raising its voice and demonstrating against the injustice done to them through a series of protests. Organizations like The Assam Tea Tribes Student's Union, Assam Tea Mazdoor Sangh are the guiding forces for greater upliftment of this community. In the year 2024 itself, places like Dibrugarh, Duliajan etc have witnessed massive protests by the tea garden labourers condemning the measures of Govt. for sale of tea estates, lack of healthcare facilities, insufficient rations etc.

The various agencies of the government are working for the development of the tea community. Tea Plantations Provident Fund Scheme ON 12th SEPTEMBER 1955 This scheme ensures that tea garden workers have access to provident fund benefits, providing them with financial security for their future. The Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund and Pension Fund Scheme is currently providing services to 8,16,948 (as on 31-03-2011) members (approx.). All the employees of a plantation or a tea factory receiving monthly salary upto Rs. 6500/- p.m. and daily wages worker are eligible from the very 1st day of their works to become member of the scheme and entitle to P.F. benefit, (as per amendment vide office order dated 12-10-2009). The employees contributes @ 12% of their wages including dearness allowances, value of food concessions and amount received for plucking tea leaves. The members Provident Fund deposits are credited with interest at the rate declared by the Board every year.

Again, the scheme "Wage Compensation Scheme for Pregnant Women of Tea Garden Areas of Assam" has been inaugurated on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2018, the scheme has been taken up under the State Health Budget. The objective of the scheme is to provide better health and nutrition to the Pregnant Women of the Tea Garden Areas. Under the scheme a cash benefit of Rupees 15,000 is provided to each pregnant woman of tea garden areas in four instalments so that she can better look after herself and her unborn baby without compromising the livelihood of her family. All pregnant women residing in Tea garden areas are eligible for the scheme. The pregnant women may be Temporary worker, permanent worker or non-worker – all are eligible. However, two child norms of Government of Assam will be applicable. That means, the scheme is applicable up to two children only and the pregnant women should not be below 18 years of age.

Besides the above two schemes, a number of other schemes have been initiated by the government with a view to uplift the status of the tea garden workers. However, the implementation of these schemes is dependent on factors like effective bureaucracy, proper awareness, absence of middlemen etc. Lastly, cooperation from all sides such as the organizations of the tea community, NGOs, the concerned departments of the government is necessary to reach the goal of eradicating hindrances for the development of the tea garden workers.

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