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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# STRUGGLES OF WOMEN BEHIND “A CUP OF TEA”: A STUDY ON THE TEA TRIBE WOMEN OF ASSAM

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### ABSTRACT

Assam is known for its tea and tea industries. Women workers are an asset and backbone of the tea industry, from planting to plucking women are 150% more efficient than the males (Koshy and Tiwari et al, 2011) and despite their contributions women workers in the production of tea have always been relegated to the bottom strata and considered the most abundant and cheapest labour force rather than as a source of specialized labour. Women Workers still earn low wages other unorganized sectors; suffer from low levels of health care and personal well-being. Less importance and recognition is given to the women's of tea tribe community in spite of their immense contribution towards the tea production. The objective of the study is to understand the struggles of tea community women and their contribution behind “a cup of tea”.

### INTRODUCTION

Most of the person's starts there morning with a cup of tea. Basically tea is the most popular drink in the planet after the consumption of water. But less amount of people know about the hard work behind that production of tea. From plantation to plucking it's needs tremendous hard work and effort. According to the 2011 census report, the total population of Assam is 3,11,69,272 of which 1,59,54,927 are male and 1,52,14,345 are females (Directors of Economics and statistics, Government of Assam). Tea is one of the major contributors in the economic development of the states; it contributes 17% of the income of the state. Assam produces 51 % of tea produced in India and about 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the tea produced in the world. (The Govt. of Assam, official website). The working class of in the tea gardens perhaps the most exploited class in the organised sector of economy. The origin of tea is in China, but the tea industry of Assam is more than 180 years old by now. The modern term 'Tea' has been derived from the early Chinese dialect word, such as Tchai, Cha, Thea and Tay, used to describe the both beverage and the leaf. The tea gardens of Assam have usually been presented as an icon of Assam with the ubiquitous photographs of tea plucking women. In the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tea industry entered India with the Britishers, which was indeed a remarkable era in respect of establishment of industries and factories of India (Choudhury et al, 2010).

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**History of tea and Assam:** Tea was discovered in China sometime in 2737 BC. China continues to the most significant producer and followed by India. Scottish adventure Robert Bruce went on an expedition into Assam, in 1823. While in Assam, Bruce met up with an Assamese nobleman Maniram Dewan. After death of Robert Bruce, in 1836, Charles Bruce, Robert's brother on his initiative set up a tract of land in Sadiya, Assam as a nursery and planted it with indigenous tea seed plants. In 1839, the Assam Tea Company was the first company established to grow and make tea. Now, Assam is the world's single largest tea growing region, collectively produces over 700 million kg of tea per year.

**Tea garden laborers in Assam:** To expand their colonial power through tea gardens in Assam, Britishers had begun to accelerate their laborers from the outside of Assam like the states like Uttarpradesh, odisha and West Bengal to meet the demand for labour. The labourers had to live in very unhygienic environment, they paid little and fed too less and the magnitude of human exploitation was beyond imagination. But in course of time these people from different parts of India forgot their roots and through a process of influence with the Assamese a new unique culture evolved and in time span they became an integral part of greater Assamese Community. Women are the integral part of our society; they are often neglected by our society, considering them as marginalised populace. A clear picture of change in status of women at ancient, medieval and modern period has been recorded. Women's status is dependent on their rights and privileges and their role in society.

The status of women is related to the level of education, economic development, socio cultural development, belief system, socio political awareness etc. In country like India woman are considered as goddess lakshmi, worship as Maa Durga and Kali. But in the same society women also faced domestic violence, forced labour, sexual and mental harassment etc. Constitution of India endows various constitutional safeguards and rights for the protection of women but still the status of women in our Indian society is pathetic. The tea tribes are one of the socio economically backward sections of greater Assamese society. The women of tea tribe community of Assam are also victims of various challenges in their day to day life. So this paper mainly focuses on the challenges of female tea garden workers in the production of Tea.

#### The main objective of the present Study:

- To study about the contribution of Female tea garden workers in the production of tea.
- To Study about the Challenges of Female tea garden workers of Assam.

**Research Methods:** The present study has been conducted in the state of Assam including the districts like Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivsagar, Sonitpur etc. The research described has been carried out using an analysis of online secondary sources and secondary data through the newspaper clips, journals, periodic and internet sources have been implied. A qualitative enquiry also has been administered to understand the situation of the female tea garden workers in the study area therefore; precise numerical and statistical data were not included in the study. The study is a descriptive one. The sources of data collections are both primary and secondary. The sample size of the study is 25. Sample design is Simple random sampling from the tea gardens of Assam. Randomly identified the respondents, who have been engaged as tea garden workers and enquired according to the availability of their time and whoever interested in participation for the study. The universe of the study is Tea garden female workers. The researcher has used interview schedule and observation as a tool for the collection of data. Other than the primary data, the present study also used the secondary data. It was important to collect the information online and from the news publications during the lockdown.

**Life of a female tea garden worker:** As in many agricultural based industries, tea relies on female labourers. In most of the world, plantation labour is one of the lowest paid work, in which women are highly marginalized. The tea leaves are usually plucked by the female labourers and, this is because women's hands are perceived as being better suited to plucking the delicate tea leaves for processing and they have to labour very hard. By virtue of being female, they have to work hard both in garden and also at home. They wake up early and do all the household works and then have to reach the garden. Even after working so hard, they don't get adequate wages. They also don't get adequate amount of ration according to the government's schemes. The pressure on women workers in the tea industry continues throughout pregnancy and motherhood. While the primary job of women was plucking tea leaves, but they were also involved in manual jobs such as pruning the bushes during winter, sprinkling what they called "dry white powder" in the tea bushes. They too take the harvest to the factory for the weighting and soughing out the leaves

according to the quality or grade. Women were engaged in labour at all times and all days from Monday to Saturday (Personal survey, March 2019). Most of the tea garden workers began early in the morning at 4 am and ended around 10 pm. At work, they would get approx an hour for lunch break but which they sometimes skipped to meet daily plucking targets. Before independence wages of plantation workers were very low. After independence in 1948 a committee comprising of management, workers and government were formed to fix the wage. But difference between the wage of male and female labour continued. In 1976 'The Equal Remuneration Act' was enacted. The main aim of this act was to implement the principle of "equal pay for equal work for both man and woman". The women's work continued throughout the year and across seasons. Tea plucking did not stop even during monsoon and was especially difficult due to lack of shelter for lunch break and injuries caused at the time of plucking. Occupational hazards are common and there is dearth of safety and health protection amenities in general in tea industries, Women workers are involved in hard manual labor. Such work load takes its toll over their health and therefore most of them face health issues like backbone problem, weakness due to anemia, malnutrition and others. (Parvin et al, 2018). The women workers face great problems at workplace due to unavailability of separate washroom within the estate premises, there are no rest rooms, drinking water facilities in the tea gardens. The temporary women workers are the most exploited group. Temporary workers in the tea industries are not provided any facilities or even the basic medical facilities. In spite of the free government schemes for addressing the maternal mortality through basic health care system, they often do not reach to the female tea garden workers in the urgency of the primary health care. Even documentation says that very less woman received the complete maternity leave and pregnant women need to travel miles and miles to avail the government schemes. They even scared of institutional delivery because of the lack of transportation or ambulance and because the closest government hospitals are far away from the tea gardens. Even in the tea gardens the girls are married off as soon they hit puberty, which causes overburdened with housework, work in the fields, and early pregnancy. This type of extensive labor makes them more vulnerable to health issues. Being the female worker of tea tribe community she has to face various challenges at day to day basis, they are mentioned below:

*Alcoholism* is one of the major problems in the tea garden community. Women are the main bread earner of the family of a tea tribe community, but their husband used to drink local beer. Husbands also used to often beat their wives bitterly by losing their mental balance because of the excessive consumption of the liquor, for that the domestic violence cases are increasing in the tea tribe community. *Molestation and Rape* is another major challenge being faced by woman of tea tribe community of Assam. They often became the victims of sexual abuse and rape. Many cases are recorded for the workplace sexual harassment. In August 2019 a 21 year old girl was recovered by garden workers at Barbaruah tea estate in Dibrugarh ("Woman's body found in Barbaruah tea garden" .Telegraph India. 18 August 2019). Family members and local residents alleged that the girl was raped before she was murdered. The Assam Tea Tribes Students Association threatened to launch a mass agitation if the culprits are not arrested in 24 hours and said that the crimes against tea tribes have been rising.

This girl work as domestic help and in that they she went to her work from her residence. Then she was found among the tea bushes, with a noose around the neck. ("Woman's body found in Barbaruah tea garden". Telegraph India. 18 august 2019). *Women trafficking* is one of the major challenged being faced by the tea tribe community of Assam. The female workers are the victims of human peddlers. Due to poor economic condition and for the employment in various towns – cities, they usually falls prey to human peddlers. Mini is a 17-year-old girl from Kokrajhar District. On July 31, 2020, Mini's fate took an unprecedented turn. She was sold. A man named Jibon Ali sold her to Helahi Sheikh of West Siliguri. She had fallen into the well-planned trap by the trafficker who seduced her to his false love, hiding his religious identity. The perpetrator tried to bring this brave little girl into prostitution. Unable to find their missing daughter, her parent filed a case in the Serfanguri Police Station and with the help of a local activist from Siliguri, finally, Mini was found in Khalpara Red Light area. (COVID-19 has exposed Northeast India to an unwanted vulnerability of increasing human trafficking, 2020)

### Conclusion

Plucking, planting and pruning are mainly considered to be female jobs. Total fifty percent of the workforce of a tea garden is dependent on the female workers but still women have been exploited by the management since history and still continue to exist. Around 80% to 90% of the woman workforce is engaged exclusively in the plucking of tea owing to their nimble figures and greater dexterity that covers 60 % to 70 % of the work. According to Koshy and Tiwari(2011), women are 150% more efficient than the males at plucking. The main reason behind the high employment of women is that work in the tea plantations is to a large extent gender specific (Mukherjee 2007).The quality of tea depends upon the care and attention paid whilst plucking, fine plucking is two leaves and a bud. Despite of forming the half of the labour force, women are socially and economically backward. Education and skills are very important for the empowerment of women. Poor educational achievements, lack of training and low level exposure to the external world limits the ability of women workers to take up the leadership roles in the trade unions, access to well paid jobs and occupational mobility as there is no longer the source of alternative employment. The issue of women workers are hardly get represented in the meetings and the discussion of the trade unions. It is the time to create awareness about their rights through different government schemes and acts and should try to bring changes in the life of the female tea garden workers so that the whole tea community can grow towards sustainability. Because *behind each cup of tea there is an untold story of hard work.*

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