



Preparedness of Women Tea Garden Workers in Maintaining Livelihood: A Case of Study in Borholla Tea Estate of Jorhat District, Assam

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Abstract:

The tea industry in India occupies a very significant position in the world economic scenario. At present times, India stands as a formidable force in the global tea industry, ranking as the second largest tea producer worldwide. It is a product of colonialism in India. Its discovery in Assam in 1823 was followed by the expansion of the industry in different parts of the state. Its establishment as an organized industrial sector had resulted in the recruitment of huge number of labourers from the Eastern and Southern most parts of India. A significant portion of them were the women labourers. This paper deals with the tea garden women workers of Borholla Tea Estate of Jorhat district of Assam, India. Through this study attempt has been made to evaluate their preparedness in maintaining the livelihood amidst various hurdles. It is a real scenario that women workers of tea garden do not get actual evaluation in terms of financial and social aspects. They do hard work whole day long and they are deprived of minimum level of facilities. They live a miserable life in comparison with the other sectors. But the interesting fact is that they manage everything with their preparedness and try to maintain a better livelihood.

Key Words: *Tea Industry, Women Workers, Livelihood, Preparedness.*

1. Introduction:

Tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India. It occupies a pivotal position in the country's economy. At present times, India stands as a formidable force in the global tea industry, ranking as the second largest tea producer worldwide. The important aspect is that India is also among the world's top tea consuming countries, with eighty percent of the tea produced in the country are consumed by the domestic population. This industry has a history of long distant past since colonial period. Just like the position of India in world scenario, the position of Assam in domestic scenario is very vast from the point of view of production and quality of tea. It is the largest producer of tea in the country and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. Though the species grew widely in the hills and forests of Assam since time immemorial but the organized tea plantation in Assam is associated with the colonial period. The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can be traced back to 1837 A.D. as

the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. With this history of organized tea industry in Assam, the history of the tea community of Assam also develops. The tea industry requires huge manual labor force for the ground work. As there were shortage of labour during the initial stage so the planters had to hire huge numbers of people from different regions of colonial India. The people were imported from different places, e.g. the Mundan & Gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumij from Bengal & Bihar, Orangs from Bihar & Orissa, Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005).

The important thing regarding the tea industry is that the majority of the workforce constitute with women. Their principal duty is to pluck tea leaves. But, they are not given the proper importance by the management bodies. Employers prefer to engage women for plucking tea leaves since they do a better job and are paid less than the men. It is very real scenario that women workers of tea garden do not get actual evaluation in terms of financial and social aspects. They do hard work whole day long and they are deprived of minimum level of facilities and face low nutritional status etc. The tea garden workers specially the women workers live a very miserable life in comparison with the other sectors. The minimum wage levels are very low and not proportionate. As a result, it is highly insufficient to cover the basic needs. Though insufficient the women tea garden workers have to manage somehow. It is really the need of the hour to know about their preparedness in maintaining the livelihood with the minimum wages they are given by the tea garden management bodies.

2. Statement of the Problem:

The socio - economic conditions of tea garden workers is very miserable and pathetic because of the implications of tea garden management, especially for female workers, who are more vulnerable in terms of economic and social issues than males are. But, the women folk in the tea gardens try very hard to come up with the living conditions with preparedness. So, they need to be justified. In this study, I would like to explore the actual facts about the female workers of one of the largest tea gardens of Jorhat district of Assam, India. The facts are examined centering the different aspects in connection with their job environment and social status. So, the present study keeps an utmost attempt to reveal important clue about the preparedness of female tea garden workers in maintaining livelihood with special reference to the case of the study area.

3. The Area of the Study:

The area under study is Borholla Tea Estate located in Titabar Subdivision of Jorhat District, Assam. It is situated about twenty kilometers away from sub-district headquarter Titabar and about forty kilometers away from district headquarter Jorhat. It is under Borholla Gram Panchayat of Titabar Development Block. The nearest railway station is Titabar. According to the Census Report of 2011 Borholla Tea estate has a population of 3738 out of which male population is 1927 and female population is 1811. To know the exact data of present days we shall have to wait for the next census report. Literacy rate is 49.81% out of which 56.98% males and 42.19% females are literate. It shares the same latitude and longitude coordinates with Borholla town which is 26.45035°N and 94.13363°E.

4. The Objective of the Study:

The specific objectives of the present study are as following –

1. To study the survival strategies and preparedness adopted by the women tea garden workers for maintaining the livelihood in the study area.
2. To identify the socio-economic characteristics of women tea garden workers of the study area and how it is relevant to their adopted survival strategies for maintaining their livelihood.

5. Significance of the Study:

At present times, India stands as a formidable force in the global tea industry, ranking as the second largest tea producer worldwide. Just like the position of India in world scenario, the position of Assam in domestic scenario is very vast from the point of view of production and quality of tea. It is the largest producer of tea in the country and the tea produced in this region is the finest in the world. The female workers play a very significant role in this industry. But, they have to live a miserable life because of the negligence of the management authorities. They have to discharge their duties amidst lot of hurdles. They do not get full scope to avail all kinds of basic demands in full phase. Neither are they well known about their rights in family life and work places. They do not have any consciousness about the feelings of suppression and oppression. They just try to maintain their livelihood with the minimum facilities and wages provided to them by the authorities. It is true that they have to compromise in many ways in the course of their day to day life. Though they are the most significant agent in the field of tea industry, they do not get the proper importance. Therefore, it is very significant to extend our substantial knowledge about the nature and conditions regarding the job environment and social environment. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it attempts to understand the preparedness of the female tea garden workers in maintaining livelihood amidst lots of hurdles. Considering the vastness of the case the researchers takes the case of Borholla Tea Estate of Jorhat district which is a significant and old tea garden of Assam.

6. Methodology:

Methodology is a system of methods used in a particular area of study or activity. The reliability of a research depends on the proper methodology used in the study. It is very important for any research and has to be chosen carefully to fulfill the purpose of the study. Based on the objectives of present study and considering the associated limitations and other facilities, Borholla Tea Estate of Jorhat district located in Assam, India was selected as study areas of this research. Data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include information gathered from firsthand experience acquired through field verification and conversation with the key informants. Intensive observation was also made to acquire necessary information. Secondary data was obtained from various published and unpublished sources like relevant literature, news papers, journals, related websites, social media and others. The nature of the present study is explorative and the whole work has been done by descriptive as well as analytical methods.

7. Discussion on Findings:

To understand the survival strategies adopted by the women tea garden workers in the study area some aspects should be taken into account. In this regard we should focus on the some socio-economic conditions such as self control over their income, degrees of ownership on land and property and physical harassment. Actually control over their self income has been measured in this way that whether they can spend money by their own will or not. It has been found that major portion of them cannot spend money by their own interest and will; even sometimes they are compelled to give full amount of their income to their husbands. Otherwise, maximum of them are being beaten up and mentally harassed. Besides all these hurdles, they show immense preparedness in maintaining livelihood in a considerable extent. The women workers in the tea gardens are the most oppressed class and the women in the study area are also not different from it. They try to cope up with their situation with the limited resources they have. In this regard

we can quote the words put forward by Grown and Sebstad (1989). According to them "A livelihoods system refers to the mix of individual and household survival strategies, developed over a given period of time that seeks to mobilize available resources and opportunities. Resources can be physical assets such as property, human assets such as time and skills, social assets, and collective assets like common property (forests) or public sector entitlements. Opportunities include kin and friendship networks, institutional mechanisms, organizational and group membership, and partnership relations. The mix of livelihood strategies thus includes labour market involvement; savings, accumulation and investment; borrowing; innovation and adaptation of different technologies for production; social networking; changes in consumption patterns; and income, labour and asset pooling....". This definition is consistent with women's attempts to use and combine in different ways the resources at their disposal to achieve desired outcomes for themselves and their families. This may be something of an idealized perspective, in many cases; desired outcomes may simply not be achievable given current circumstances. This then necessitates considerable flexibility, both through modifying the objectives to be achieved and in searching for alternative means by which to attain them. The women of the study area have in general shown considerable resilience and tenacity in the face of both these demands and it is through these efforts that they have been able to cope under adverse economic conditions.

Just like the general condition of the other tea gardens of Assam, the women workers of the study area do not have control over their own income. What the limited wages they earn have to spend on items of daily consumption or other essential expenditure. When money is very short they even cut these essentials to a minimum. The idea of savings is far away from their mind. But, the present scenario is to some extent different. Because of the policies of state government in the name of self help groups, the women folk in the study area try to acquire some household essential items on the basis of loan and try to repay the loan in installments managing somehow from the limited income they receive from the authority. Though they are not very consciousness about financial management they try to manage their livelihood on the basis of some very common concepts of cutting expenses by skipping unwanted necessities and sometimes even skipping nutritional food items. They show their preparedness by taking less preferred cheap food and avoiding protein enriched costly food items in daily diet. They rarely consume fish, meat, egg etc as its market price is higher and beyond their affordability. They even try to help their male counterparts in cutting the expenses for gas cylinders by collecting firewood. It has been noticed that the women tea garden workers of the study area go for household works in the nearby areas for earning some additional income and by doing so they try to manage the day to day needs. It is worth mentioning that whatever the household situation the women tea garden workers bear considerable financial responsibilities with their preparedness. At present days because of the exposure to the outer world due to accessibility to mobile phones they are very much conscious about the education of their siblings. They try anyhow to send their children to the nearby schools. For that purpose also they have to bear financial burdens which are managed by them with preparedness. Women make choices about their children's education which will affect their chances of success in later life. Education involves considerable cost both through direct expenditure on school fees and uniforms, and through the income foregone by children being unavailable for income-generating work. Still they prefer to send their children for formal education. With the formal education parents also pass on skills to their offspring particularly tea gardening skills. Gender-roles are perpetuated, with fathers teaching their sons traditional 'male' skills and mothers passing 'female' skills to their daughters.

The women workers have little or no opportunity for any investment or savings. All available income is spent on items of daily consumption. Because of that they have to manage with little assets. Assets found in the common households are limited to basic furnishings and cooking utensils. House purchase or building a house is beyond their dreams. They have to live in the quarters provided by the management. For drinking water also they have to depend upon the government schemes or schemes installed by the tea garden authorities on shared basis. It has been noticed that health status of women in tea garden is not so satisfactory. Physically they are weak and suffering from malnutrition. The women try to

mitigate the very common diseases with their traditional knowledge that comes from generation to generation orally. Major portion of the women of this generation have two children spacing of two three years which indicates awareness about family planning. It is also an important survival strategy in comparison with the scenario of twenty thirty years ago. Marriage is a social custom. But early marriage or child marriage is not welcome in any society. Cases of early marriage are reported in the study area during the recent years. But, the women workers in this area show preparedness and they try to decrease the cases in consultation with the relevant authorities like anganwadi workers, nurses appointed in the estate run hospital, authorities of nearby schools and even with the civic bodies. It can be assumed that women tea garden workers of the study area play a very important role in decision making process of livelihood including financial decision, decision about children's education, social aspects and human relations. Though they are oppressed still they exhibit enough preparedness in the decision making process.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be opined that with the limitation of different aspects, the researcher try to focus on the preparedness of the tea garden women workers in maintaining livelihood in the study area. It is a fact that the social condition of the tea garden workers is very poor where mostly illiterate, ignorant and isolated from the mainstream of society. The women are more vulnerable. But, in due course of time the scenario is changing. The women folk show their preparedness in all aspects of life. The important aspect is the changing mentality towards the education of their children. Now - a - days they prefer to send their children to schools. For the purpose they even bear more burden than their male counterparts. It has been noticed that the change is not limited to this only. They adopt or try to adopt different kinds of survival strategies with lots of preparedness to uplift the living condition of their future generation and as a result the socio economic condition of the people of the study area is developing gradually. If the tea garden management authorities and other concerned authorities will put forward helping hand in this regard and constitute some sustainable strategies the socio economic condition of the women tea garden workers in particular and tea garden community as a whole will develop.

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