

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Everyday Life of the Tea Plantation Workers

The enchanting beauty of tea gardens give people of Assam a sense of pride without realizing the hidden side of consistent sacrifice and hard work of the tea plantation workers (Chhetri, 2005)

The daily life of the tea plantation workers were guarded and restricted by the tea garden clock. They wake up by the sound of the gong at 5 A.M and the gong of 6 o' clock to go to the garden for work. They work under the strict surveillance of supervisors or managers. The sound of the gong at 6 o' clock in the evening gives them a sense of bliss as they could get back home after full day hard work. In the middle of the work they get short break for lunch and tea. The tea workers work under chaotic schedule with minimum wage and long hours work (Behal, 2014).

The women working as a labourer have to carry a huge basket on their back and their wage depends on the weight of that basket. Further the wage system is also gendered. In the evening the workers are served salty tea to counteract dehydration. However this salty tea results into high blood pressure (Mukherjee, 2017). But in case of Chabua tea estate, there are no pay gaps on the basis of gender. This is opposing to what Mukherjee has said in her work, as there is no wage difference between men and women in Chabua tea estate.

According to International Labour Organization (ILO), activities concerned in the production of tea are heterogeneous and entails diverse sets of skills. Workers are divided according to activity into: i) field workers (pluckers and sprayers) ii) processing and packaging iii) security, maintenance and cleaning iv) drivers v)

technical assistance, certification and marketing; vi) administration and finance vii) management. Women are particularly prevalent in plucking and do most of the work involved in the field. Overall, field workers constitute 87 percent of the workforce plantations, followed by processing workers.²³

2.2 Women's Status in Tea Garden

The distinctive feature of Tea garden is that the half of the work force constitute of women and children. Women workers life comprises with hardship. Due to the work load and minimum wage they failed to afford nutritional food like meat, fruits, pulse, etc. Therefore, most of the women face challenges like food insecurity and undernourishment. Due to this women fail to go to work due to certain health issues and this result in dropping daily wage. Therefore, every fortnight women end up receiving fewer wages than men due to their increasing absence in workplace.

The women who pluck tea that we drink, they reside in pitiful conditions with low wages by the Tea estate in Assam. The investigation by British Charity Tradecraft Exchange found that the worker in the tea garden in Assam earns 137 rupees a day which is a smaller amount than the minimum wage of 250 rupees. Workers live in frail houses with leaky roofs. They have minimal access to sanitation facilities and most have to defecate in the bushes outside (Reuters, 2018).

There is contradictory view on Skilled and unskilled labour between management and pluckers. For management, the term skilled is quite masculine and so they do not consider women pluckers as skilled labour. Management is creating division of labour on the basis of skill. Plucking is a skill because it requires women's agile fingers and

²³ International Labour Organization(2018), *Improving Conditions in Tea Plantations in Assam*.

the process of plucking is not same for varieties of tea. The process of plucking CTC (Crush, Tear, Curl) is different from the process of plucking orthodox tea. Only experience workers know the difference. Whatever the workers earn is very less to compensate their hard work (Baruah, 2017). Therefore, the male workers search for high paid job outside the garden, so that they can have better living standards. Women generally work inside the garden, so that they could avail the welfare provisions provided by the company.

Sarkar and Bhowmik (1998) placed the reason behind the huge engagements of the women workers in Tea Garden as:

- a) The Plantation workers were brought to Assam by the Britishers and the entire family got engaged in the Tea garden.
- b) As the plantation work is gender specific, the women are mostly involved in plucking, Children and men engaged themselves into maintenance of the garden and factory work.

Varma (2005) argues that the plucking tea leaves are ‘typically feminine, requiring nimble fingers’. Therefore, women constitute half the workforce (Duarah & Mallick, 2012). In Bina Agarwal’s words “Gender divisions are contested and constructed within and outside the household. There is division between men and women not only in labour or resources, but also in ideas and representations. Men and women are regarded of different abilities, attributes, desires, personality traits, and behaviour patterns and so on.” As a result of these divisions at an ideological level, the expected behaviour for both the men and women are also different.

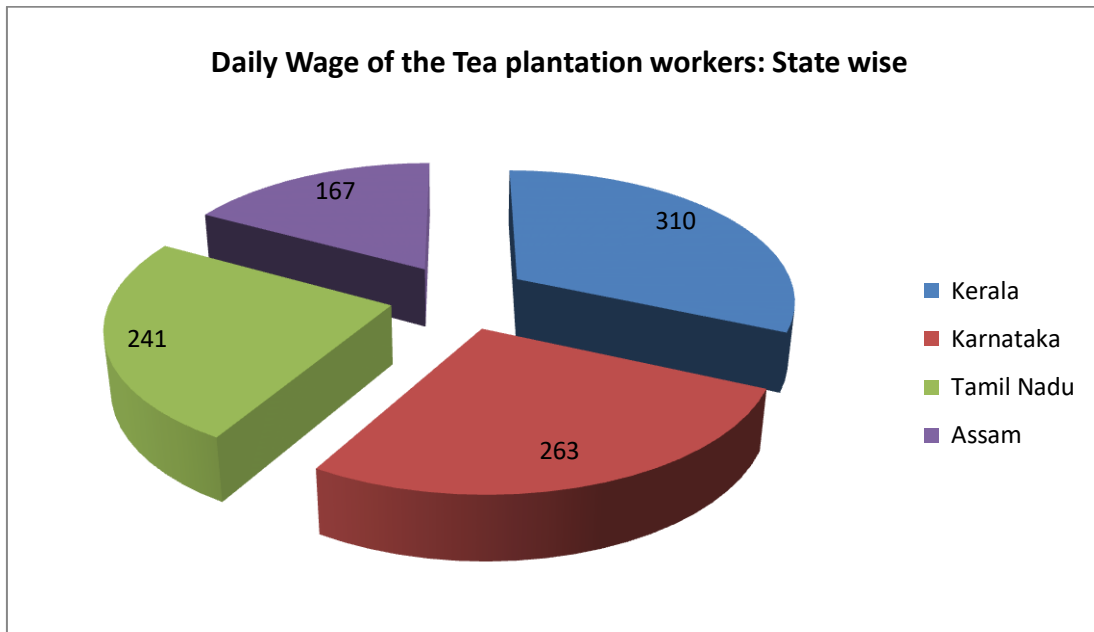
2.3 Wages in Assam Tea Industry

Arunabh Saikia (2017) argues that Assam Labour Welfare Department has institutionalised a board to decide the minimum wage of tea garden workers. The board has fixed the amount of Rs 259 per day for the workers. However the planters' association does not want government to intervene.

The Labour Welfare Department of Assam has most of tea garden workers and they had announced that from 1st March 2018 the daily wage of the tea garden workers will increase from Rs 137 to Rs 167(Sinha, 2018). However nothing is visible on the ground.

On 8th March 2018, The Telegraph has reported that the Advisory Board met to fix the daily wage at Rupees 351. Before this announcement the present daily wages was Rs 137. But the Tea garden workers of Assam are striving for Rs 351 a day which minimum wage advisory board had planned. Whereas, Tea workers in Kerala workers receives minimum daily wage of Rs 310, Karnataka Rs 263 and Tamil Nadu Rs 241. Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) leader said that the cost of housing, medical, electricity, drinking water, pension, gratuity and bonus should not be integrated as part of daily wages as it is in practice now(Dutta, 2018).

Chart No. 1: State Wise Daily Wage of the Tea Plantation Workers



Source: Rajib Dutta (2018), Tea Workers stage stir demanding wage hike.

The general secretary of ACMS said there is an urgent need to change the working time in tea industry of Assam. The colonial system has its relevance at this present era regarding working hours. The workers work for long hours and end up receiving low wage. They demanded working hours to be seven and half hours i.e. from 9 am to 4.30 pm, earlier the working hours was nine and half hours i.e. from 7 am to 4.30 pm(Dutta, 2018). The colonial idea of governance still dominates the popular narrative as far as working in tea industries is concerned. In case of Chabua tea estate working hours and conditions are miserable.

Bhowmik in his work, "Tea Plantation wage Agreement: Workers' interests sacrificed" argues that the production at current rate is not able to meet the increasing demand both in domestic as well as in foreign market. Though the increase in demand is healthy for our economy, it would hardly bring any positive change in the workers life and they still remain as the most poorly paid workers in the organised sector, the

total wage of the states of Assam and West Bengal is less than half the average wage of coal miners (Bhowmik, 1994) . As a result even after giving everything for the timely production of tea to meet all the demands, the workers are left to live a life full of hurdles and problems.

About 16 years ago in Sonitpur district (Upper Assam), a precarious incident took place the infuriated workers of the tea estate had burnt the estate's deputy manager and assistant manager alive. Due to ignoring attitude of the management towards the workers resulted to such tragic situations. The workers further said there was a reflection of colonial attitude among the management; they treated us like a dog. The management must be sensitive regarding the plights of the workers; some efforts are required to provide better quality of life to the workers (Misra, 2003). The workers in Chabua tea estate have similar opinion towards the management.

Biswas in his work, "Wage discrimination machinery of Tea Industry in India: A Case of West Bengal State" maintains that

In Assam and West Bengal, wage is determined through collective bargaining mechanism in a tripartite forum. Representatives of planters, representatives of workers' union and government representatives sit together through a series of negotiations to determine daily wage in an industry wise manner for a specified period. But it is pitiful that such labour market institution leads to abysmally low wages. In this context it becomes important to understand why wages and conditions of work are poor for the plantation workers in the Tea sector of West Bengal and Assam. But employers argue that plantation workers get many benefits apart from monetary wages as the planters are expected to adhere to the Plantation labour Act 1951. Moreover, even if one adds the monetary equivalent of such welfare benefits, wages paid to the workers are significantly below than the workers working in some other organised sectors (Biswas, 2016)

The wages the workers earn are not enough to lead a complete happy life. Therefore, some workers prefer working outside the garden on Sunday to earn their living.

Rana P. Behal in his pioneering work “One Hundred Years of Servitude” argues that

The feature of wage structure in Assam Valley tea plantations was found to be indenture system. Under this system, labour was bound to the gardens for a period of three to five years on the basis of fixed but differential payment rates of Rs 5 for men, Rs 4 for women and Rs 3 for children per month. This continued well after even the official termination of the indenture penal contract. Following the abolition of Act XIII of 1859 in 1926, the Indian Tea Association (ITA) enforced what came to be known as the ‘wage agreement’(an agreement between the employers themselves). Under this provisions of this ‘wage agreement’, every employer agreed not to pay labourers wages higher than that paid by his neighbours. At the same time, the planters’ ability to control the mobility of labour, both within and outside the gardens, prevented the formation of any labour organization till well into 1940s. Behal added that the variations in wages between men, women and children were totally arbitrary. Women and children were paid less than men, but the reasons for this were never given. The hours of work for women and children were the same as those for men. Women performed most types of work done by men, like hoeing, pruning, etc. In fact women performed work that was described as highly specialized, i.e. plucking, and proportionately their number was very significant in the labour force. In peak season, it was estimated that nearly 60% of labourers were women who engaged in plucking. Nor was there any reporting of women performing less or inferior work as compared to men. The productivity per unit of male and female labourers did not differ significantly. Therefore, it is clear that the conventional norms of sexual discrimination. Besides, the lower wages for women and children based on such

discrimination was certainly of significant magnitude, considering that their combined employment was equal to or higher than that of men. Women and children combined constituted more than 50% that of the total labour force employment in the Assam Valley tea plantations (Behal, 2014).

The working condition in Chabua Tea estate is similar to what Behal has argued in the above mentioned paragraph. But, some of his lines contradict to the present working conditions of Chabua tea estates as there is no child labour and no wage gap between two genders.

The Tea Garden workers were migrated to Assam by the British Planters about 150 years ago from various regions of India, viz. Bengal, Orissa, Tamil Nadu, etc. at the time of plantations. A distinctive feature of the tea industry is that half of the work force comprise of women (Baruah, 2008). The native populace did not find the terms of employment and wages on Plantations alluring enough. Therefore, the planters addressed them as “Lazy” and “Indolent” (Behal, 2014).

By the mid sixties the daily earning of the men was Rs 2.20, women Rs 2.06, adolescents Rs 1.90, Children Rs 2.06 in West Bengal. But, in Assam and Tripura the women earned more than the men. In West Bengal after 1966, the difference of wage among men and women continued and rose to 17 paisa difference. Since women were given less work than men. So, the tea garden managements discriminated workers on the basis of gender in states of west Bengal, Tripura and Assam Later, Equal Remuneration Act of 1975 was passed to eradicate wage difference among men and women in all industries. But, the employers refused to pay equal wage. In 1976, the Labour Ministry explained that the Equal Remuneration Act is functional to equal nature of work not to the quantity of work (Sarkar & Lama, 1986).

Baishya(2016) argues that In Tea Industry women workers are given “Chukri Hazira”(girl wages) which are less than men, maternity benefits are not provided to the women and they are forced to work during pregnancy and after delivering baby. Baishya added since there are no crèches, the women often come to work with their children, later they assist their mother in their work. But, the present situation of Chabua tea estate is contradictory to the Baishya’s some argument, as there is no provision of Chukri Hazira and maternity benefits are provided to the workers in Chabua Tea estate. Initially, in 1939 when tea industry was established in Assam, the planters recruited women and Children in huge numbers. But, at present there is no child recruiting provision in Chabua tea estate.

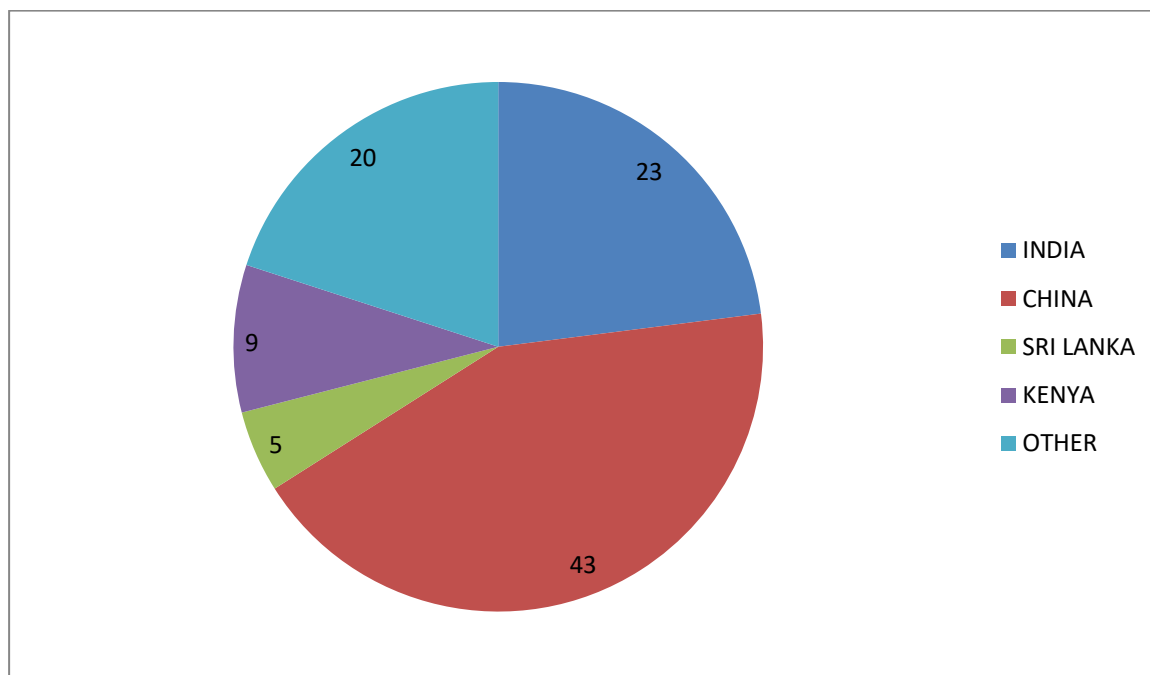
If we look at the wage system in different tea producing state we see that there is much gap between the wage in other states as compared to Assam. The daily wage of unskilled tea labour in Kerala is Rs. 254, in Tamil Nadu it is Rs. 209, in Karnataka Rs. 228, in neighbouring state of Sikkim its Rs 220(Nagbansi). While Assam tea plantation workers works for only Rs 167 as their daily wage. Therefore, Assam is a highest tea producing state in India, but workers are paid only 167 Rupees per day.

The workers in Tea garden could work for only 19-20 days a month. It is impossible for the workers to work for six days a week without getting injured and suffering from illness, due to heavy workload on the workers (Gothoskar, 2012). The tea garden workers are overlooked by the tea companies. The wage earned by the workers does not pay off their hard work. This results into degradation of their health and living standards.

2.4 Tea Production in India

The India Tea Board reported the production share of major tea producing countries in 2016: India produces 23%, China 43%, Kenya 9%, Sri Lanka 5% and others 20%.

Chart No.2: Production share of major Tea producing Countries in 2016²⁴



Source: 63rd Annual Report of Tea Board 2016-17.

The Tea board of India report depicts that after China, India is the highest producer of tea in the world and 80% of India's total production is for the domestic market.

Baruah (2008) mentions that in 2002, Assam produced 52.35 percent, West Bengal 22.98 percent, Tamil Nadu 15.61 percent and Kerala 7.22 percent of the total production of tea in India.

²⁴ Quantity in M kgs

Table No. 1: Production of Tea in India (1992-2004)²⁵

	1992	1993	1994	1999	2002	2003	2004 ²⁶
Total North India	570424	581534	567955	623259	631748	648277	662184
Total South India	161898	179292	184940	202676	206726	229852	230781
Total All India	732322	760826	752895	825935	838474	878129	892965

Source: Tea Board, Tea Digest

North Indian States: Assam, Mizoram, Tripura , West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar , Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland , Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Meghalaya and Uttaranchal. Assam is the lead producer of tea in India.

North Indian states do highest production of tea. Among the above mentioned tea producing state of North India, Assam is highest producer of tea.

South Indian States: Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka. The above mentioned table depicts that, Teas are produce in various part of India, but North Indian states tea production is very high compared to above mentioned South Indian States.

²⁵ Quantity in M Kgs

²⁶ 2004- Provisional

Table No. 2: Production of Tea in Assam (1992-2004)²⁷

District	1992	1993	1994	1999	2002	2003	2004 ²⁸
Dibrugarh	152383	149914	142409	158911	159006	175339	178352
Sibsagar	97320	97503	96869	115152	115243	100693	102192
Karbi Anlong	1577	1581	1413	1538	2186	2028	2012
North Cachar	5823	5413	5233	7448	4340	4438	4632
Darrang	82437	81724	81033	77216	75743	80291	80474
Goalpara	5920	6375	6319	6040	6031	6137	5665
Nowgong	12343	12642	12680	12380	11696	11587	10981

Source: Tea Board of India

The above mentioned table portrays that, in Assam, Dibrugarh district, followed by Sibsaagar district are the highest tea producing district in Assam

The tea plantation areas of Assam are divided into two parts:

- a) Assam Valley / Brahmaputra Valley consist of Dibrugarh, Sibsaagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Nogaon, Kamrup, Goalpara, Karbi Anglong and North Chachar hill districts.
- b) Cachar

Baruah (2008) in his work “The Tea Industry of Assam” maintains, “Amongst the tea growing districts in Assam, Dibrugarh is the largest one with 94,500 ha area under tea production of 154.55 m kg and yield of 1,635 kg/ha in 2002.”

²⁷ Quantity in M Kgs

²⁸ Provisional

Despite being the second largest tea producing region in the globe and highest tea producing region in India, Assam tea industry was dependent on Calcutta Tea Auction Market in the beginning. However later on 25th September, 1970 a largest tea auction centre in Guahati was established. The Guwahati auction centre is involved in the auction of approx 150 million Kg of tea which has an estimated cost of approx Rs. 550.00 crores annually (Baruah, 2017).

In 1911, in order to develop scientific methods for tea plantation, a research centre was established at Tocklai, Jorhat. The prime focus was on the use of fertilizers, soil testing, tea leaves processing and selecting sites for tea plantation. The research in Jorhat is the oldest and largest research centre in the world.

2.5 Workers on the Rolls in Tea Estates of India

Table No. 3: Permanent Workers

State	Male	Female	Total
North India	314233	336531	650764
South India	29488	45995	75483
All India	343721	382526	726247

Source: India Tea Board, 63rd Annual Report of 2016-2017.

The above mentioned table depicts that, Women workers contribution towards the tea production in India is comparatively high.

Table No. 4: Temporary Workers

State	Male	Female	Total
North India	146692	241244	387936
South India	7614	10145	17759
All India	154306	251389	405695

Source: India Tea Board, 63rd Annual Report of 2016-2017.

In case of temporary workers, women workers participation is much higher than their male counterpart in the tea industry of India.

Table No. 5: Total Permanent and Temporary Workers

State	Male	Female	Total
North India	460925	577775	1038700
South India	37102	56140	93242
All India	498027	633915	1131942

Source: India Tea Board, 63rd Annual Report of 2016-2017.

The India Tea Board, 63rd Annual Report of 2016-2017 clearly depicts the participation of women in Tea industry is significantly high²⁹. Women could be considered as the backbone of the tea industry, this clearly characterize “**Feminization of work**”.³⁰ Ghosh(2002) argued that the feminization of labour has both positive and negative effects. On the positive front it would ensure recognition to women and also increase their bargaining power within the households. On the negative front it would also increase burden of work. Hence feminization of work needs to be well

²⁹ Tea Board India, 63rd Annual Report 2016-17
Retrieved from <http://www.teaboard.gov.in/>

³⁰ Feminization of work means trends towards greater employment of women in a workplace.

supplemented by social policies and institutions which take care of the needs and works of women.

2.6 Statement of the Problem

It can be argued that there has been minimum effort to understand the socio-economic conditions of the women workers in the Chabua tea estates of Assam. This research would make some contribution to the further tea plantation women workers studies in Assam. The common problems in Tea estates in Assam which are worth mentioning are low wage, poor infrastructure, pitiable housing condition, poor sanitation and lack of approaches for social mobility. If we look through comparative lens we can clearly see that the tea garden workers are paid lowest wages in comparison to labourers in other sectors. They live in poor social and economic condition. Further they are also unaware of their rights and remains out of the sight of the policy makers. The poor working and living conditions results into various health issues.

The next chapter explains the research methodology undertaken for this research.