

## CHAPTER IV

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF THE WOMEN TEA WORKERS

The workers found to be underprivileged and unaware about the working rules and regulations. Some respondents were not even aware of their age. If they have school going children, they were not conscious about, which class their child is studying. The research place i.e. Chubwa Tea Estate consists of outsized workforce with mounting age diversity which has many benefits that are often unobserved. Age diversity in the workplace encourages a well-built spectrum of knowledge, values and preferences (Backes & Veen, 2013). The study found that there were class division among the workers. Those families which had more number of working members were at the privileged position.

Throughout the interview, it was found that diverse populace reside together in this tea-estate. They originally belong to different socio-cultural background. The chart mention below depicts the diversities of the tea-estate. Despite of being indifferent, the workers claim to be homogenous.

**Table No.: 6 Workers of different Tribes in Chabua Tea Estate**

Name of the Tribes	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Santhals	7	23.3	23.3	23.3
Munda	5	16.7	16.7	40.0
Kols	3	10.0	10.0	50.0
Others	15	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

There are also respondents from Tanti, Oran, Kurmi and Ghasi community. When asked about their native states, majority were from Orissa and also some of the respondents were not aware of their native states.

**Table No. 7: Native States of the Tea Garden Workers**

Native States	Numbers
Orissa	13
West Bengal	3
Bihar	2
No idea	12

**Source: Field work**

In common language the tea garden communities are known as “Adivasis” in Assam but they are not recognized officially as Schedule tribes in Assam. These Adivasis are demanding for the status of Scheduled Tribes for their community by virtue of which they would get the reservations which have been accorded to their forefathers in the States from where they were forcefully migrated by the British Planters (Zahan, 2016). The general view of the Government is that the Adivasis of Assam are not indigenous tribe. Therefore, majority were categorised into OBC. National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) states that there is not any single community which could be described as a “Tea Tribe” and is in the central list of OBCs for the state of Assam. However, there are 96 castes in the Central list of OBCs for the state of Assam, members of which is involved in tea sector and they fall under “Tea Garden Labourers, Tea Garden Tribes, and Ex- Tea Garden Labourers & Ex- Tea Garden Tribes”(Affairs, 2012)<sup>33</sup>. The findings of this research validate the above

<sup>33</sup> Press Information Bureau Government of India Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2012, August 31). Tea Tribe Community.

Retrieved from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=87106>

mentioned information given by NCBC. This research shows that all the 30 respondents belong to Other Backward Class only (OBC).

**Table No: 8. Caste Compositions of the Workers**

General	Other Backward Class (OBC)	Schedule Caste (SC)	Schedule Tribe (ST)
0	30	0	0

**Source: Field work**

One thing which was unexpected for me is that of all respondents, there was no representation of workers belonging to ST, SC and Others. The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha(ACMS) declared on January 2019 that they would observe 23<sup>rd</sup> January as ‘Betrayal Day’ for excluding 73 tribes from Schedule tribe status. The ACMS president Paban Singh Ghatowar stated that in Assam there are total 109 tea communities out of which only 36 were included in the ST (Schedule Tribe) list. He further added that the tea tribe people are lagging behind in every aspect, also they have been exploited since the British era and it is never ending process.

**Table No. 9: Marital Status of the Workers**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Married	24	80.0	80.0	80.0
Unmarried	3	10.0	10.0	90.0
Widow	3	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

**Source: Field work**

Married women bears more burden because they have three-fold responsibilities on their head. They have to take care of her In-laws, her husband and her children. However those who are married have minimum burden after returning from work. They provide helping hands to their mother in household work. Widow women have to face different type of hardships. They become heavily dependent on their children and lack a support system in the form of husband.

**Table No. 10: Number of Children**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	2	6.7	7.4	7.4
2	4	13.3	14.8	22.2
3	11	36.7	40.7	63.0
4	5	16.7	18.5	81.5
5	3	10.0	11.1	92.6
7	2	6.7	7.4	100.0
Total	27	90.0	100.0	
Not married	3	10.0		
Total	30	100.0		

**Source: Field work**

The study found that, Child marriage does not exist in the Chabua Tea estate. Minimum age of marriage were said to be 18 and some of the respondents were not aware of their age of marriage. In most of the cases it was found that the, majority of the respondents had their first child after one year of their marriage.

#### 4.1 Living Conditions of the Women Workers

As the field study for the research was carried inside the garden, therefore all the respondents were the residents of the garden quarters. Chabua tea estate has approx 1711 permanent employees and out of them the estate provides 1022 labour quarters as accommodation<sup>34</sup>. When asked about the types of house they resides: Out of 30 respondents 28 respondents resides in Kaccha-Pucca house and 2 respondents resides in tin roofed brick house. The respondents residing in the Tin roofed brick house have constructed their house spending their hard earned money.

What I found in my interaction with the women workers is that they do not question the existing realities even if they are detrimental in their overall development as an individual. They readily accept whatever their husband or other male members wants. They lack the power of decision making and are heavily dependent on the male members of the family. They rarely get a chance to have their say in the affairs of the family. They need to have critical approach towards their submissive nature.

**Table No: 11. Type of House**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Kaccha-pucca house	28	93.3	93.3	93.3
Tin roofed brick House	2	6.7	6.7	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

<sup>34</sup><https://amalgamatedplantations.co.in/tea-gardens/assam-estates/upper-assam/chubwa-tea-estate.html>

The Assam Plantation Labour Rules 1956 reported that, the employer shall maintain the houses provided for accommodation to workers and do necessary annual and such other repairs from time to time.<sup>35</sup>

But in reality the picture is very disheartening. The company provides housing facilities but the renovation is done by the workers themselves by spending their own penny. With the increase of the family size, the demand increases for the increasing size of the house. When the workers are found, constructing their house by themselves, the management sent them legal notice asking them, who gave them the authority to construct the house. Meena (name changed) said *now our children have grown up, they cannot share their rooms. Therefore, we extend our rooms in the house. When we complain about the same to the welfare department, they never come up with any solutions.* The welfare provisions provided by the Tea Company are not satisfactory. When it comes to drinking water the only source is tube well. The Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1951 says that “In every Plantation effective arrangements shall be made by the employer to provide and maintain at convenient places in the plantation a sufficient supply of wholesome drinking water for all workers”. The tube wells are provided by the company but two -four households have to share only one hand pump and hence the workers end up in setting up their own. As the average size of the family in tea garden is 5-8, so it becomes difficult for the workers to share considering the distance of the house as well.

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<sup>35</sup>The Assam Plantation Labour Rules 1956, Page no.808

**Table No. 12: Sanitation and Hygiene**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Single toilet per house with water	2	6.7	6.7	6.7
Single toilet per house without water	5	16.7	16.7	23.3
Common toilet with water	1	3.3	3.3	26.7
Open toilet	22	73.3	73.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

**Source: Field work**

But when it comes to the sanitation, most of the workers do not have access to the clean latrine. Further there are problems related to toilets as well, as it has to be constructed by the workers themselves. Those who fail to do so; they defecate outside under the open sky. The open drainage system of their latrines create detrimental environment. Majority of the respondents have toilets with broken door, open roof and use cloth or Tirpal (huge strong heavy Plastic cloth) to cover the toilet. As there is no provision of tap water, the workers carries water along with them to the latrines. It seems that, Chabua Tea Estate is not following Assam Plantations Labour Rules, 1956, which clearly states that, “Every latrine shall be under cover and so partitioned off as to secure privacy and shall have a proper door and fastenings”(P.790). The welfare department turn a blind eye to the problem. Majority of workers work for 6 days a week and on Sunday they get busy with their household shopping and other activities also they cannot afford the expenses of repairing from their little earned money. In the Tea garden (workers workplace) there is no washroom provided for the

workers. Therefore, they urinate and defecate in the bushes and inside the garden. Most of the women miss their work during their periods as there are no toilet facilities for the workers in the garden. This results into dropping their daily wage.

Regarding electricity every house hold has electricity connections. The electricity is provided by the company and the bills are deducted from the salary of the employees. Champa (name changed) said *we pay excess electricity bill. Every fortnight the company deduct approx 240-280 rupees for electricity bill. It is too high as we use only one/two bulb at a time even we do not have television at home.* Therefore, from their little earned wage, it becomes very difficult for the workers to bear the electricity bill charged by the company.

**Table No: 13. Type of Napkin used by the Women Workers during Menstruation**

	What workers use during menstruation		Total
	sanitary pads	Clothes	
Workers work during menstruation	3	27	30
Total	3	27	30

Source: Field work

Women workers could not afford sanitary napkins, therefore majority are found using cloths during menstruation. Dulumoni (name changed) said *Ma'am we cannot even afford our children education, how we could add extra expense on sanitary napkins from our wage.* In the Tea garden there is no washroom provided for the workers in their workplace. Therefore, it becomes very difficult to work during menstruation. All the 30 respondents work during menstruation.



**Table No: 14. Ration for the Workers**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Kilograms</b>	<b>Rupees</b>
Rice	3.5 kgs	Rs. 3
Wheat	3.5 kgs	Rs. 3

**Source: Field work**

The workers receives ration every fortnight. Only permanent workers are provided ration. The company also provide ration to the every dependent children. However the company does not provide ration to temporary workers. Even though the work done by temporary workers are same to that of permanent workers but they do not get equal facilities. This clearly shows discrimination on the part of company.

**Table No: 15. Ration for Children**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Kilograms</b>	<b>Rupees</b>
Rice	1.5 Kgs	Rs. 1
Wheat	1.5 kgs	Rs. 1

**Source: Field work**

The company provides fire woods for cooking once a year. The duration of the fire woods are maximum 3 months if used cautiously. Rest of the months the workers struggle to arrange fire woods or liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking. The workers are restricted to collect firewood from the tea garden premises.

**Table No: 16. Mode of Transportation**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Walking	22	73.3	73.3	73.3
Two Wheeler	7	23.3	23.3	96.7
Others	1	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Work

The workers with large family size with additional earning members could afford two and three wheelers as their mode of transportation. However, due to poor financial condition, rest of the workers could not afford any vehicles for their transportation

**Table No: 17. Use of Alcohol and its impact on the Family**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	17	56.7	56.7	56.7
No	13	43.3	43.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

Alcoholism is a common trend among the workers which leads them to heavy debt. They generally take Sulai or Hariya (traditional drink among the tea tribes). When asked, why do they take Sulai/Hariya, Binita(name changed) said *Dintu kam kri*

*vagori jao o Baideu*” English translation “ *We get exhausted working for a whole day long. Therefore, we go for it so that next day we can go for work with enthusiasm.*

Men are more addicted towards alcohol than women. Daily approximately 20-70 Rupees they utilise on purchasing their traditional alcohol (Sulai/Hariya).

#### **4.2. Literacy and Education**

In the words of Nelson Mandela, Education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to bring changes in the world. Majority of the respondents never went to school, they are illiterate. One, who went to school, later became dropout to give financial support to their family. As a result they are unaware of their own rights and privileges which lead to poor living standards.

**Table No: 18. Educational Qualification of the Workers**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Never Went to School	14	46.7	46.7	46.7
Primary	8	26.7	26.7	73.3
Middle School	5	16.7	16.7	90.0
High School	3	10.0	10.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

The poor educational status of the parents working in the garden also has a negative impact on the children. Proactive approaches by tea garden management and government are essential for practical and job oriented education (Nath & Nath, 2014). The estates have 3 lower primary schools. The tea estate also provides

vocational training like Beautician, Plumbing, Electronics, Tailoring, and Embroidery and so on.<sup>36</sup>

The company provide primary education. The workers had commonly, established high school name Chabua Shramik High School. Some respondents are so busy with their work that they are not aware of the regularity of their children to school. Education which is regarded as the trajectory of upward mobility in all sphere was absent among tea garden workers. Generally, their children end up being dropout as in the future they would engage themselves in Tea garden works. Because of their poor financial conditions they cannot afford higher education. Chanda (name changed) said *I cannot bear the expenses for my child education; therefore he gave up his studies to support his family financially*. Further they also find it irrelevant and of no use as they know that to work in the Tea garden higher education is not required. The absence of Upper Primary Schools and High Schools in the Tea Estate is also the prime reason they think so.(Deka, 2017).

#### **4.3.Women, Work and Employment in Tea Plantation**

When the respondents were asked about the activities they perform. One of my respondents said *apart from Driving and heavy technical assistance, we do all the other activities*. Women dominated every sphere of the commercial and domestic culture related to the tea gardens, be it tasks like plucking, cleaning, manuring, planting, or running errands and doing chores for their personal households.

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<sup>36</sup><https://amalgamatedplantations.co.in/tea-gardens/assam-estates/upper-assam/chubwa-tea-estate.html>

Ball maintains that engaging women workers in non-traditional jobs in male dominated disciplines would be a thrust to break the conservative beliefs that keeps women out of non-traditional jobs (Ball, 2008)

**Table No: 19. Type of Workers in the Tea Estate**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Permanent	21	70.0	70.0	70.0
Temporary	9	30.0	30.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

The permanent Tea garden workers works for 12 months. The situation for temporary workers is not good. They face huge financial crisis as they get to work for only 6 months a year. The permanent and temporary workers are paid the same amount of wage. The welfare provision enjoyed by the permanent workers includes housing, subsidized ration and tea, Medical benefits, bonus, firewood, blankets, umbrella following the Plantation Labours Act, 1951. However, the temporary workers did not enjoy all the welfare provisions. Anu (name changed) said *I had joined as temporary worker in 1977 and became permanent from 2005*. Generally, it takes time to become permanent worker in Tea Industry.

Tea Garden has such norm where the child gets the job of the retired father or Mother working in the Tea garden which is said as *Badli* (replacement system on the family basis). This gives financial security to the family, so that the family would not face financial crisis even after the retirement. It can be said that the tea garden workers

spend their entire life working in the Tea garden. The children give up their studies as their parents could not afford their higher educations. Therefore, they too enrol themselves to work in order to give financial support to the family.

In case of permanent workers, if they are absent for 4 days at a stretch, a legal notice is sent to them and if they do not come up with any valid reason for their absence, they would be dismissed from their job. If they want sick leave for their illness, they need to report the garden hospital thrice a day, to receive half of their day's wage. Morning they have to report on or before 6 A.M, they cannot get late for a second otherwise, they would be marked as absent. Later, they have to mark themselves as present at 9A.M at the hospital. Lastly, at 3 P.M they have to report at the hospital. One of my respondent said *if we could report hospital thrice a day, we could also go for work. She added that the management considers us as fraud; they think we are giving excuses for not going to work.* Jimi (name changed) said *Once we report at the hospital with a decent appearance, the hospital authority generally provoke us saying that we look fine, we are well dressed, we do not seem to be sick. She further added that we feel awkward to carry untidy appearance to the hospital as there are elite doctors at the hospital.* Therefore, most of the workers prefer going for work than reporting hospital, despite of facing such stringent formalities. Also, they have to feed their family from their daily earned money. The permanent workers are given paid leave for maximum 14 days at one go in a year. Paid leaves are specified on the basis of regularity in their works. Generally, in the end of January month the workers are given paid leaves as there is minimum work load in the garden.

#### 4.4. Marx's idea of Surplus Value

We can understand the status of Tea garden workers through Marxian lens. Marx's theory of Surplus Value clearly fits here. Marx, influenced by Ricardo (an English Classical economist), and with the help of his friend Engels, introduced the Theory of Surplus Value to explain the reason behind the class struggles. To him, the capitalist not only attain the private ownership of means of production, they also try to procure profit from the manufactured products<sup>37</sup>. Karl Marx strictly stood against the capitalist class who creates division in the society in the form of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Surplus value gives abundance of profit to the 'Owner' of the Tea Estate; nonetheless it gives dwindling return to the tea garden workers. This Surplus value gives birth to alienation, as the Tea Estate owners are more concerned about the production regardless the skills of the labourers. So, the labourers work under stringent wage system to earn their livelihood, this result into the alienation from their work, family, society and themselves.

The women have to pluck minimum 24 kilograms of leaves to earn their daily wage. They are paid extra if they pluck more than 24 Kilograms. They earn additional 0.27 paisa per kilogram, during the peak season (March to October). The manner in which Tea garden workers are paid validates the theory of Surplus value. This clearly shows that the huge profit which is the result of the hard work of the labourers goes into the pockets of Company of the Tea Estates. Bonita (name changed) said *there is corruption in the incentives that are paid to workers if plucked above 24 kilograms leaves. The higher authority never pays us the additional incentives, by recording absentee workers as present and they seize our money.* The incentives that are paid are also not manifested in the worker's pay slip.

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<sup>37</sup> Dutta, A.(2011). *Political Theory: Issues, Concepts and Debates*. Guwahati, Assam: Arun Prakashan

Earlier there was a task assigned to a woman worker to take care of the babies whose mothers are in work, now due to absence of such workers the mother use to wrap her baby at her back with cloth and continue working. Now-a-days, there are no khosora kam( light works) assigned to the weak and pregnant women workers. Therefore, they are bound to carry out heavy works all day long. The women workers have to walk about 2 km to their workplace, if they are assigned work at the distant garden.

#### **4.5.Foucault's Panopticism approach**

Michel Foucault idea to "Panopticon" on systematic disciplining and controlling of the population through hidden forces could be addressed here to understand the tea garden workers. The daily life of the tea garden workers are guarded and restricted by the garden clock. They wake up by the sound of the gong at 5 A.M and the gong of 7 A.M is to report for work. They work under the strict surveillance of supervisors or managers. The sound of the gong at 4.30 P.M 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.<sup>38</sup> When understood in comparative perspective the wage which these plantation workers get are very less. The minimum wage for the unskilled agricultural workers in the state of Assam is Rs. 240 per day; whereas the national minimum wage is Rs. 300 per day. Contrary to this the tea plantation workers gets only Rs.167 a day. In addition to this they get some 'In-Kind' benefits, but those are for just the namesake (Traidcraft Exchange Report, 2018).

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<sup>38</sup>Michel Foucault in his work "Discipline and Punish" refers to "Panopticon" as icon of surveillance and disciplinary society. Firstly, we need to understand Bentham who designed hypothetical prison to understand Panopticon. He explains panopticon as circular building with tower from where the prisoners would be constantly under surveillance. Foucault realized that the panopticon is more than a building.



The Tea Garden workers get Rs.167 as their daily wage after working 8 hours a day. If somehow fails to work for 8 hours they might not get their whole wage. If they miss their work for certain reason like health issue, family issue, etc they would miss their per day wage. It becomes very challenging for the women workers to work for 8 hours every day under the sun with only half an hour break. They are not aware under what basis they receive wage and bonus. They are not even aware of deductions made in their wage.

**Table No: 20. Average Monthly Income**

2000-3000	-
3000-4000	11
4000-5000	19
More than 5000	-

**Source: fieldwork**

It has been observed that the wages of the workers earn are minimal and cannot aid family basic needs. It was said that the daily wage would increase to Rs.351 but they still receive Rs 167. Therefore, Joint Action Committee for Tea Workers' Wages (JACTWW) in Assam maintains that the government failed to keep their promise of increasing the workers daily wage to 351.33 Rupees. Here, we can understand the plights of the workers and their sustenance with the minimal wage. The rules are so stringent that if they miss their work even for some day their electricity connections would be disconnected.

**Table No: 21. Workers Voter Card**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
YES	23	76.7	76.7	76.7
NO	7	23.3	23.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

Majority of the respondents having voter card, signifies good electoral roll among the tea garden workers. But, the workers are not much aware of their Rights.

#### **4.6. Welfare Provision**

The tea estate has labour welfare department. If they have any issues regarding their welfare provisions they need to first report to the welfare department. Chumki (name changed) said, *Welfare department is discriminating in nature; they pay more attention to the workers who comes from well off family. They ignore helpless workers like us.* Jeena (name changed) said *they never responds to our problems, instead they provoke us saying that they are not here to only sort out our problems, they have many more pending workers to do. They always come with new excuses for not doing our works.*

Tea Company bears the responsibility of the treatment and medicine of Tea garden workers. The Chabua Tea Estate assures a better medical facility to their workers. One thing which is very heartening is that there are provisions for maternity leave with full payment. Company bears the responsibility during pregnancy. The work essentials that are provided are Umbrella, Slippers, tiral and blankets are of destitute condition. The provisions provided by the company are not adequate and satisfactory.

**Table No: 22: Workers work during Menstruation and Pregnancy**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	30	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field work

When workers were asked, do they work during Menstruation? Rupali (name changed) answered *Yes, because we have no other alternatives, to earn our living, we hardly miss our work.* She further added *sometimes we became very uncomfortable in front of the Sardars (Male supervisors) to inform about our sudden menstruation and seek leave. Generally, we denote menstruation as Ladies problem.* Therefore, the management are recruiting new ladies Sardars (Supervisors) to understand the workers problems in a better way during Pregnancy and Menstruation. According to the respondents the company provides proper Medical assistance to the pregnant workers with minimum three months maternity leave.

**Table No: 23: Washrooms in Workplace**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
YES	3	10.0	10.0	10.0
NO	27	90.0	90.0	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field work

The workers defecate or urinate inside the garden during their working hours, as there are no washrooms provisions provided by the management in the garden workplace. During menstruation, it becomes very difficult for the workers.

#### 4.7.Labour Welfare

The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha(ACMS) is very active in solving disputes in the garden through meetings. They also have **Gaon Hurokhya Bahini** to solve various cases in the garden, if the case is extreme than the workers seeks police help. The Labour Welfare Centre sluggishly performs their works.

When asked about workers conflict with the management, Hunmai( retired worker) said *About 30 years ago there was a conflict with the manager to increase the workers bonus as they received only 8 percent bonus. Due to vigorous conflict the garden endured 13 days of work pause. The workers were warned by the management that if they initiate conflict further, the garden would be closed forever. Thus, now workers negotiate with the management duly. Presently, the workers receives 20 percent bonus.* Even though, the workers are not satisfied with the welfare provisions provided by the management, they peacefully negotiate with the management as it would become difficult for their survival if the garden get closed.

**Table No: 24: Do you have idea about Plantation Labour Act 1951?**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
YES	2	6.7	6.7	6.7
NO	28	93.3	93.3	100.0
Total	30	100.0	100.0	

**Source: Field work**

The above table shows the awareness of the workers towards their rights. Due to lack of awareness among the workers about their rights, the management takes advantage of it. Worker needs to be enlightened on Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and Assam Plantations Labour Rules, 1956. Workers should be acquainted with their basic rights.

The next chapter explains division of labour and suppression of women.