

A Study About Socio-Demographic and Socio-Economic Conditions of the Tea Workers of Assam: A Case Study of Darrang and Sonitpur Districts of Assam

Dr. Namita Sarma

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, West Guwahati Commerce College, Maligaon, Guwahati, Assam-781012, India.

Abstract

Tea is a popular and heavily demanded beverage in India. It originated in China and was later introduced to India by the British. Tea cultivation began in Assam in the early 19th century. Assam tea is famous for its bold, malty flavour and antioxidant properties. Tea garden labourers perform a very crucial role in our society. So it is pertinent to look into the socio-economic condition of this section of our society. This is a study about the socio-demographic and socio-economic status of the engaged workers of two main tea garden concentrated districts of Assam. A primary survey is conducted in Darrang and Sonitpur districts by selecting randomly nine tea gardens. Various information regarding age, sex, educational status, religion, marital status, household status, employment status, monthly income status, etc, has been collected using a standardised questionnaire. Also, some relevant data have been collected for the study, such as food habits, health status, etc. Study reveals some issues of the workers like low wages, poor sanitation, limited access to health care, and education, although they avail themselves of the facilities through the management provided by governmental and private agencies. Data analysis of the study draws attention to the fact that women are the backbone of the workforce in the plantation estates. Traditionally, women have been employed in plucking because they are seen as having greater dexterity for handling the leaves.

Keywords: Tea Cultivation, Socio-Economic Conditions, Socio-Demographic Conditions, Tea Garden Labourers, Monthly Income Status.

Introduction

India stood as the second-largest producer of tea plantations in the world. As of the latest official work, Assam is the home of over 850 registered tea gardens, making it the largest tea-producing State in India. In addition to these estates, there are thousands of Small tea growers who contribute a huge portion of Assam's tea output. They produce together more than 50% of India's total tea. The Tea sector in India is one of the largest private sector employers, where 3.5 million people are directly and indirectly involved through related businesses. A remarkable significance is that women are a significant part of the workforce, constituting over 50% of the labour force of the industry. The tea gardens in Assam are mainly located in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Sonitpur districts of Assam.

Some of the most renowned estates are Halmari and Monabarie (Asia's largest tea estate) covering over 1,158 hectares of land. The tea industry of Assam has been continuously growing in demand, backed by heavy global demand, and has surged and eventually eclipsed China as the leading tea producer in the world. Today Assam's tea estates collectively yield approximately 649.84 million kg of tea per annum during 2024.

Generally, tea garden workers are migrant people. In Assam, they are known as "Tea Tribe," which consists of two words. The term tea tribe is a specific group of indigenous people who cultivate tea leaves and who are devoted to their lives in the field of tea plantation. During the British regime, some people were migrated from different places of India to engage in work for tea cultivation. They are known as tea workers and have a multi-cultural culture. The tea garden workers in Assam are recognised as Adivasi, the primeval or ancient dweller (Sayar Singh Chopra, 2016). The official identity of the tea tribe community falls under the category of Other Backward Class and Most Other Backward Classes.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the income and employment status of the selected workers in the year 2024.
2. To make an overall study about the living conditions of the employees during the study year.

Research Methodology

The study is based on primary data carried out in the selected Tea gardens of Darrang and Sonitpur Districts of Assam. Relevant data was collected for the studied population through the sampling method. Out of total employees, 160 workers were selected for the study. Through the multistage stratified random sampling, the population was categorised at the age group of the subjects between 18 and 60 years. There are 32 tea gardens in Darrang district, which are registered with the Tea Board of India, and in Sonitpur district, there are 59 tea gardens available now. Out of the total 9 tea gardens were randomly selected from both districts, which is almost 10% of the total. Then 160 workers have been selected from 4 gardens of Darrang and 5 gardens from Sonitpur district. Based on legal documents (voter ID card / birth certificate), necessary verification has been done, including name, age, gender, etc., of the participants. Thorough discussions were made with the workers about the aim, objectives, process, and other works related to the research study.

Outcome

After making proper investigation of the workers' socio-economic conditions, the study reveals some problems like the children of the gardens have to face some serious and critical situations such as a lack of sufficient numbers of educational institutions nearby their areas, inadequate transportation, family and financial problems, etc. Results have been diagrammatically illustrated.

Figure 1: Age Group of the Workers

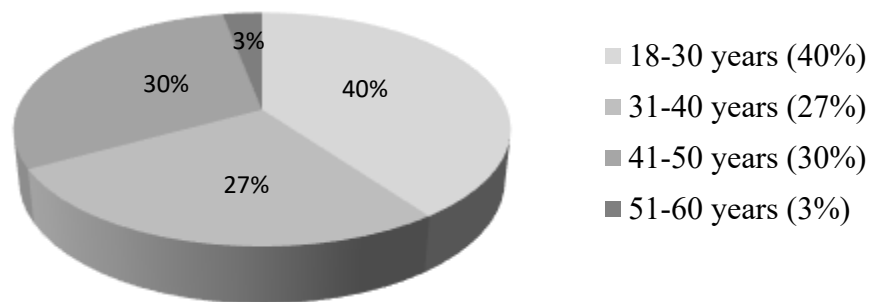


Figure 1 shows that the majority of the tea workers belong to the age group between 18 and 30 years old, with 40% of the total workers. On the other hand, the next largest groups are between the age groups of 31 and 40 years and 41 to 50 years, with 27% and 30%. In the age group of 51 and 60, only 3% workforce belongs.

Figure 2: Sex Ratio of the Workers

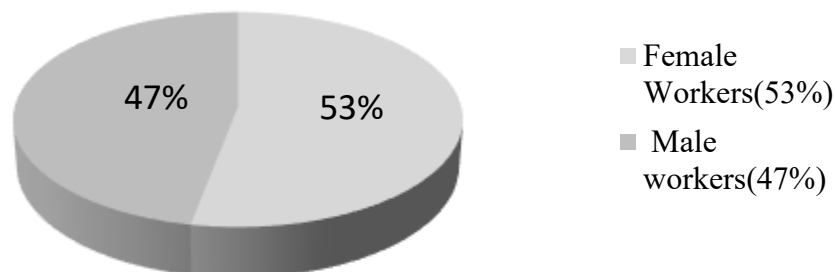
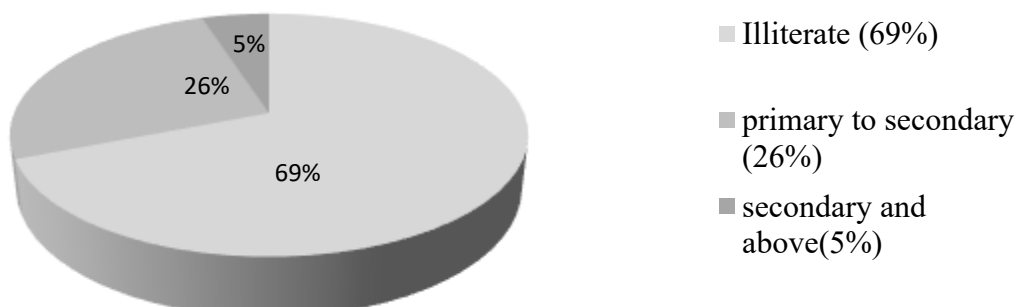


Figure 2 reveals that 53% of the workers are female and 47% are male. It creates a picture that women workers have occupied a significant role in the tea garden, reflecting a picture of women's empowerment by improving their economic status.

Figure 3: Educational Qualification of the Workers



As per the result of the survey, it has been found that yet 69% of the workers are ignorant about reading and writing, meaning they are illiterate, 26 % have learning in school from primary to high school level, and only 5% are on the path to higher education after clearing the 10th board examination. The majority of respondents discontinued their education due to financial constraints, and it is a fact that generally, girls' children have dropped out of their education.

Figure 4: Marital Status of the Workers

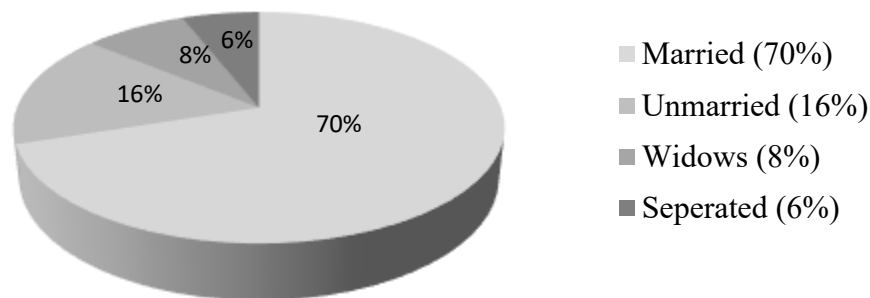


Figure 4 depicts clearly that 70% of the workers were married, 16% were unmarried, 8% were widows because of death of their husband due to various reasons such as high fever, liver disease, smoking habits, mal –nutrition, smoking etc. and 6% were separated due to unable to carry the family maintenance.

Figure 5: Marital Age of the Male Workers

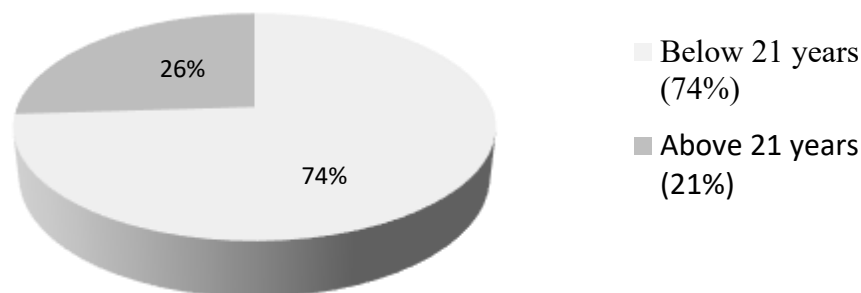
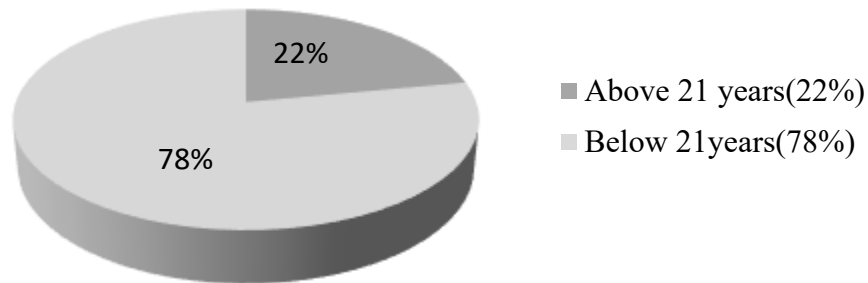


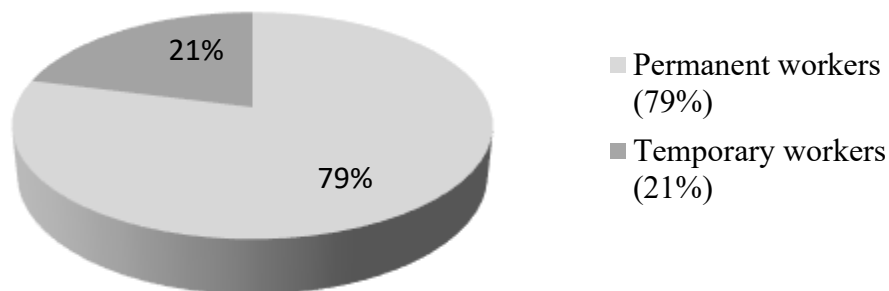
Figure 5 says that there is a tendency towards early marriage among the tea workers, which leads the tea community to a backward situation. Because of a lack of sufficient education, they are not eligible to understand the various developmental schemes provided by the state and central government at different time periods. 74% of male workers marry before 21 years, and only 26% do so after 21.

Figure 6: Marital Age of the Female Workers



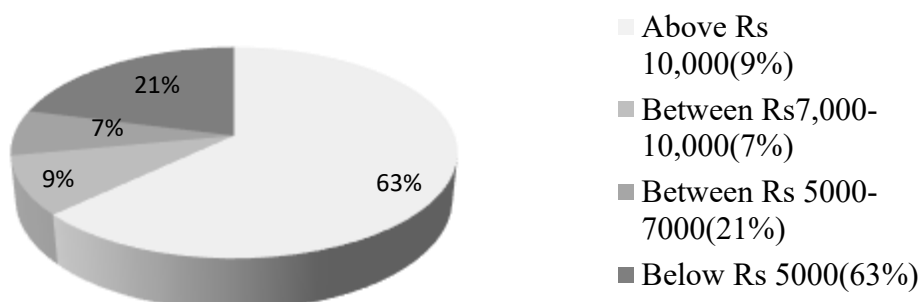
According to Figure 6, 22% of the female workers have married when they reached 18 years of age. On the other hand, 78% of women have married as before they reached 18 years. The consequences of early marriages have become a global concern for the young women workers of tea garden.

Figure 7: Employment Status of the Workers



As per Figure 7, 79% of the tea workers are permanently engaged in the selected workplace and 21% are temporary or contractual workers. All the facilities provided by the government are availed by the permanent workers, but the temporary workers are deprived of the same.

Figure 8: Monthly Family Income of the Workers



With the help of the questionnaire, the participants were interviewed to respond about their monthly earnings. From the data collection final result has come out that 63% earned below rupees five thousand per month, 21% earned between rupees five to seven thousand per month, 7% earned between rupees seven to ten thousand and only 9% workers earned above rupees ten thousand per month. Thus, Figure 8 depicts the clarity about the earning pattern of the workers of the gardens.

Figure 9: Public Distribution System

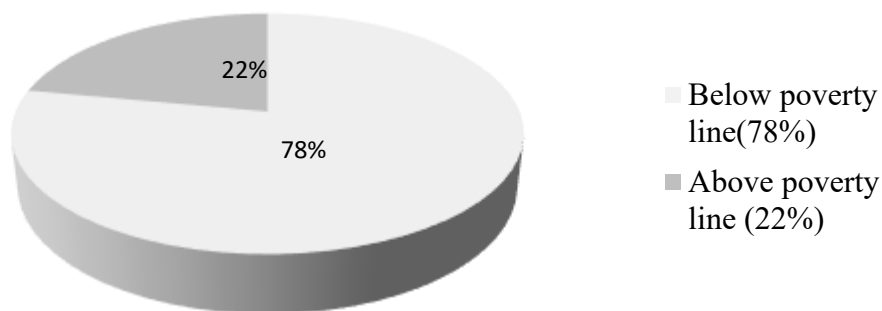


Figure 9 says that 78% of the total respondents belong to the poverty line and only 22% belong above the poverty line. This result highlights the fact that the economic condition of the workers is yet a matter of concern, due to which poverty is a burning problem among them.

Figure 10: Status of Drinking Water

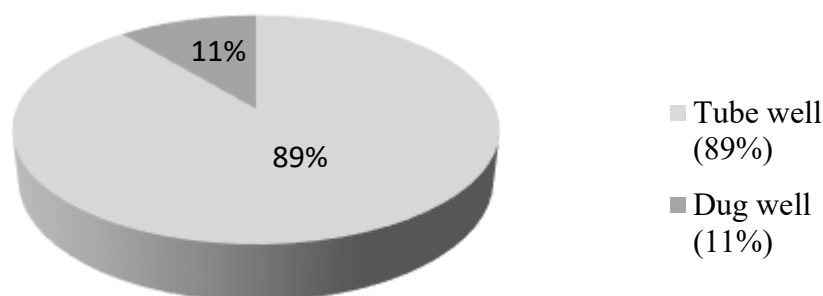
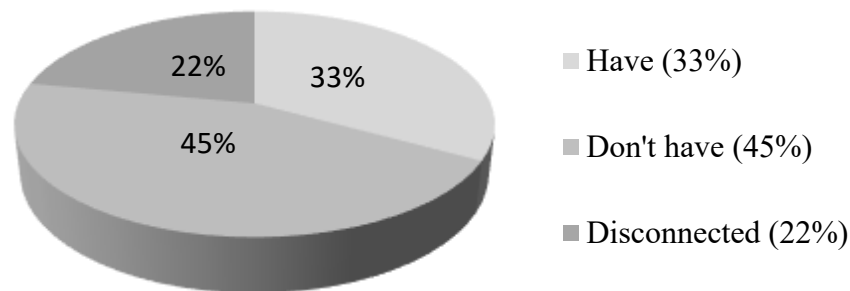


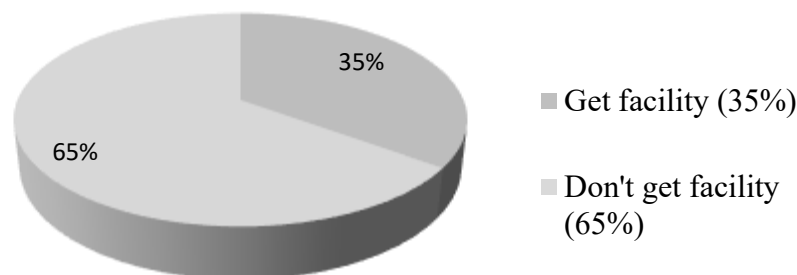
Figure number 10 indicates that the majority of workers 89% collect their drinking water from tube wells (hand pumps); only 11% of respondents use dug wells, ponds, and even nearby streams. A significant issue is that due to consumption of groundwater without testing, serious health issues have been raised. It is clear from the report that in spite of having so many schemes for the development of the living standard of that community, they are still thirsty for pure and sufficient drinking water.

Figure 11: Status of Electricity Connection



According to Figure 11, only 33 % of the respondents have their own. Again, it is also clear from the study that 45 % have not connected ever, and the remaining 22% of the workers have disconnected with the electricity supply due to non-payment of dues.

Figure 12: Status of Health Facilities



According to Figure 12, it is clear that 65% of the respondents are not provided sufficient health-supporting facilities, although having a public-private partnership model to improve health care services through the National Health Mission of the Government. Again, it is only 35% of the total that are getting the desired level of health-supporting services from Government.

Discussion

The condition of the tea workers of India highlights the picture of their poor socio-economic condition, such as low standard of living, illiteracy, unhygienic environment of their society, and poor health conditions in the residential colonies. Reports of various studies about the inhabitants of tea gardens in Assam also illustrate the same sketch. The literacy rate in Assam's tea garden areas is significantly lower than the state's overall literacy rate. While Assam's overall literacy rate is around 73%, the literacy rate in tea garden communities is only about 46%. This disparity highlights a clear picture that this is a critical and challenging situation. There are various crucial reasons for which the inhabitants of tea gardens are facing such types of hurdles. In the health sector, they are facing a serious situation due to a lack of sufficient hospitals in nearby areas, stock, and supply of medicine. Although the Indian government has taken initiatives for the supply of pure drinking water through the scheme Jal Jeevan Mission, these programs haven't always reached the tea communities, focusing on a persistent water crisis.

In the present study, the socio-economic condition of two gardens has been studied and found that most of them are illiterate, yet after having undergone different acts like “Act of Education in 1952,” “Plantation Labour Act,” “Assam Plantation Labour Rules,” “Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund,” which collectively addresses the educational needs of tea garden workers’ children. Due to financial constraints, some of them discontinued education. As a result, they can’t follow the new policy, programmes for their development initiated by the Government.

Study also reveals that workers are involved in early marriage instead of doing education, which creates a negative impact upon their physical and mental health by welcoming a basket of problems in future life. After completion of the study, it has become clear that the workers are still deprived of supportive health facilities because the majority of them had to go far away to get even minimum treatment from the government hospital. So malnutrition and communicable disease occur among the workers. They are unable to access today’s digital era’s advantage because they are unable to carry the cost of the same. Various steps have been taken from various angles to improve the quality of life of the people of the tea communities at different times. There is a partnership between the ABITA (Assam Branch of The Indian Tea Association) to uplift the socio-economic status of the marginalised children and women living in 128 tea gardens of Assam and to raise awareness about the survival, being, and development with government resources. The Right to Free & Compulsory Education Act, The Multi–Sectoral Development Programme (MSDP) is a remarkable initiative as a result of the recommendation of Sachar Committee to improve the socio-economic condition of the backward and minority children as well as the provision of scholarship for the talented children of the backward community (N.K. Das, 2016). Assam government provides social security like provident fund, gratuity, and maternity benefit. Facilities provided by the private agencies are housing, medical facilities, education, water supply, sanitation canteens, crèches, etc., but due to the timely submission of documents, some percentage of workers are unable to avail themselves of the facilities provided by the bodies.

Conclusion: The Socio-economic condition of tea garden workers of Assam is not sound. Addressing this issue requires a multi-faceted approach that includes creating awareness, providing education and economic opportunities, and implementing policies which will protect their rights and improve their working conditions. Therefore, there is a need for an integrated approach of all the private and Governmental support, including Management, Labour Union of Tea workers, for proper implementation of all-round development of the tea workers in Assam.

Reference

1. P. Baruah, “The Tea Industry of Assam, Origin and Developments” EBH publisher, Guwahati, 2008.
2. G .Sharma, “A Historical Tea Background of Assam”, An Online Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 2013, 1(4).
3. Government of Assam, “Economic Survey of Assam”, 2013-2014, and “Statistical Handbook of Assam”, 2014.
4. Tea Board India, North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd., “Tea Statistics 2013–2014”, Tea Board Kolkata and NEDFi Databank, 2014.
5. S. Debnath and P. Debnath., “Socio-Economic Condition of Tea Garden Workers of West Tripura District with Special Reference to Meghlipara Tea Estate”, International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies, 4(1), 248-261.

6. T. Panwar, “Living Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers”, International Journal of Advance Research and Development, 2017, 2(8), 4-8
7. S. S. Chopra, “Tribal Identity Concerns in Literature: A critical Studies of Gopinath Mohanty’s The Ancestor”, International Journal of Research, 2016, 3(5).
8. N. K. Das, “Tea Plantation Workers of Assam and the Indian National Movement”, Primus Book, 2016.
9. Sentinel Assam, “Indian and Assam Tea Production Fall in 2024: Tea Board of India”.
<https://www.sentinelassam.com/topheadlines/indian-and-assam-tea-production-fall-in-2024-tea-board-of-india>