

Socio-Economic and Political condition of the female tea garden worker of South Assam and Reflection in Literature and Culture

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In the first quarter of the 19th century, tea industry entered India holding the hands of the British, which is indeed a remarkable era in respect of establishment of industries and factories in India. It needs mention here that more than a million labourers are directly and two million labourers indirectly associated with tea industry in various ways, out of which 50% are female. There are 6, 19,743 (as in 2006) labourers engaged in the tea industry in Assam. The tea industries are usually located in the interior places of Assam. The families of the labourers including women are engaged in the tea industry. This research work is an attempt to bring to the surface the lives of the female tea labourers of Assam and present a comprehensive picture of their social, economic and cultural aspects. The main motive behind this work is to internalize the power of women, the daughters of India, the working women by a thorough study of the lives of female tea labourers.

Tea is one such industry out of the few where women labourers are given priority. Women labourers get priority because owing to their nimble fingers, they are experts in plucking the tea leaves. It requires a lot of expertise to pluck only two leaves and a bud and that too without causing damage to the trees. During the colonial rule, the lives of the female tea labourers were not at all smooth. They were tortured, humiliated at the hands of the lewd Sahibs; led a miserable existence being engulfed in poverty; homeless and alone with no relatives to provide a healing touch to their woes. This state of their existence is very well reflected in this song:

কোন দেশে গৌ বাবা বিয়া দিলি মোৰে

গাছে ওড়ে পাতা নাহি পড়ে

আমপাতা নড়ে চড়ে

মাতা পিতা গৌ মনে পড়ে

(In which country you have married me

Not a single leaf falls from the tree

The leaves of mango tree moves

The memory of my parents flashes before my eyes)

The tea labourers were allured by the agents to come to Assam. They were told that in this part of the country, money falls just like the leaves from the trees. In this song, the female labourer brings out this pathos wherein she has been deceived to leave her home and hearth, near and dear one's to an alien land where she was greeted by abject poverty and torture. This and many other such folk songs represent the painful life of the female tea labourers of Assam during the British regime. The female tea labourers of Assam toil hard to strengthen the economy of the garden owners and the state. But in return they get torture, low wages, unhealthy rooms to dwell, unclean drinking water and various other deprivations. As a result not only they suffer but even the entire family of the labourers are receded deep down the socio-economic ladder.

The family life of the tea labourers comprises of multiple problems ranging from unchanged work culture, lack of awareness and education, involvement in petty unsocial activities and drinking to economic hardships. As a result, the female members of the family have to take in the reigns in their hands. In such attempt, they often have to take private loans and repay them amidst great hardships. This pain of the female is reflected in one such song:

পাহি পাহি পাতা তরি

টোকারি ভরাই

হায়রে হায়রে হায়রে হায়

এ সখি কিয়ৈ কি উপায়

একটি কলি দুটি পাত

তহিতো পেটের ভাত

দোটাংকার বাজার করি বাকি আনি লাউপানি

হারাদিন পাতা তরে, হাপুেহি তোপাই

বাবুদের ছেনা পিনা ইস্কুলে পরে যায়রে

(We pluck the tea leaves and fill the baskets

Oh my friend, what shall I do?

Two leaves and a bud

That is our bread and butter

I do marketing for two rupees and purchase drinks with the rest

The whole day I pluck leaves

The children of the garden officers studies in school

But our children go astray.)

The song speaks about the misery and mental agony of female labourers and the social and cultural life of their children. The female labourers does hard labour from dawn till dusk in return of low wages from the owners and no wages for household works. Before starting work at 8 AM, they complete cooking and other household activities. From 8 in the morning, they engage themselves in plucking leaves both in sun and shower under strict supervision. They suffer from various ailments as a result of standing for such long hours for a considerable number of years. The Plantation Act of 1959 specifies rest rooms for female tea labourers, system of sanitation canteen. The Ministry of Labour & Employment in its Report of 2008-09 mentioned that there exists 6.8% rest rooms, 0.6% washing facilities, 7.6% separate toilets and 15.7% canteen facilities. The condition of female tea labourers in Assam is almost same as it was during the colonial regime. The tea leaves are usually plucked by the female labourers and so female aborigines are brought from various parts for this purpose. They have to labour very hard. By virtue of being female, they have to work hard both in the garden and also at home. They wake up early and do all household chores and then has to reach the garden at the stroke of the bell. They have to pluck the leaves both in sun and shower under strict supervision. Plucking the leaves requires skill. After that they have to deposit the leaves in the store house of the garden. Even after working so hard, they do not get adequate wages. They also do not get the specified amount of ration due to them as per government rules. The hard labour performed throughout the day earns only 89 rupees per day for the female labourers, which is very less at this moment. Reflecting upon the health condition of the female tea labourers of Barak Valley, Dr. Sushanta Talukdar writes:

“Tea garden managers are always under pressure to produce fine tea and cut production costs and when it comes gets the axe first”.

Plucking of leaves in a proper manner is a very important task in the tea manufacturing industry because even if one of the leaves is damaged than tea could be manufactured. The female labourers are engaged in the plucking of leaves and cleaning them subsequently before the tea is manufactured in the factory. This is a fact that women are skilled and expert in this trade. The following is the statistics of the female tea labourers in the various tea gardens of Barak valley:

Karimganj: 18%

Rosekandi: 15%

Lakhipur: 60%

Hailakandi: 58%

Around 3 crores of female labourers work in different tea gardens of the world. Though they are probably the cheapest labour force available in the world, yet they are indispensable for the functioning of the tea industry. These female tea labourers get married at a very early age and subsequently also become mothers at a considerable low age. It has been observed in a study that among tea garden community:

Married: 64%

Widow: 05%

Divorce: 03%

Unmarried: 24%

The data regarding the number of children of the female labourers is stated below:

No. of Children Percentage

01	1%
02	2%
03	6%
04	10%
More than 05	40%

The tea garden labourers are not at all conscious about health and family planning and so they are gradually sinking in the darkness of oblivion. In matters of education, the condition of the female is worst. They are not in a position to reap the fruits of the various facilities made available by the government. At the age when they are supposed to get enrolled for primary education, they get engaged in looking after their younger brothers and sisters because their parents have to work in the tea gardens from dawn till dusk. From the tender age they take on the reigns of the family and so could never get the light of education. This tendency can well be reflected by the following statistics:

Level of Education	Female	Male
HSLC	3%	15%
Class VI to X	10%	25%
Class I to IV	23%	20%
Illiterate	64%	40%

It is for this reason that the female tea labourer's remains enveloped in superstitions and are also outside the ambit of health services. That is why they become prone to various diseases at a very young age and die a premature death. However, the fact remains that their contribution to the tea industry cannot be denied. Law specifies that there should be crèche in every tea garden but the reality is quite opposite. Majority of the tea gardens do not have crèche facilities and as such, the mothers become bound to tie their children on their back when they go for plucking the leaves. The State government has formulated various schemes for general health facilities and maternal welfare of the tea labourers, but the garden owners exhibit an indifferent attitude to all these schemes. Female health depends upon their socio-economic condition, work place facilities and lifestyle. Due to low wages they are unable to have a healthy diet which directly affects their health and also that of their children. The female tea labourers also play a crucial role in the socio-cultural arena. They actively participate in various folk rituals and religious festivals.

However, it seems that with the passage of time, life also undergoes myriad changes. That is probably why many female of the tea garden community can now be seen to contest and win Gaon Panchayat election and many others could be found to be involved in Female Labourers Welfare Association also. Bharti Koda and Behala Majhi of Tejpur, Sharmila Karmakar of Tinsukia have shown a new path of survival by establishing small tea producing group (Self-Help Group). This is indeed a revolutionary move in ushering a transformation in the social life of Assam. The traces of colonial hangover still seem to be there in their lives even in this age of globalisation. The female tea labourers have contributed a lot in the improvement of the socio-economic status of Assam, India and the entire world. The need of the hour is to improve the condition of the female tea labourers. In order to enable the tea community to become a part of the mainstream of life, a proper roadmap is required by means of constructive thought process.