



Socio-economic realities and livelihood vulnerabilities of tea garden communities in the Dergaon sub-division, Assam

Bedasri Das

Independent Researcher, Dergaon, Golaghat, Assam

*Corresponding author E-mail address: bedasridas23@gmail.com

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Abstract

The tea garden communities of Assam, historically identified as the *Adivasi* or tea-tribe diaspora, constitute a distinct socio-cultural and economic stratum within the region's landscape. Uprooted from their ancestral homelands in Central and Eastern India by British colonial authorities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these communities have historically formed the backbone of the region's plantation economy. However, despite over a century and a half of continuous labor contribution, these populations remain among the most economically marginalized and socially vulnerable groups in contemporary Assam. This paper examines the complex socio-economic realities and structural livelihood vulnerabilities of tea garden communities within the Dergaon sub-division of Golaghat district, Assam. Utilizing a multidisciplinary framework combining historical political economy, labor sociology and rural development studies, this paper analyzes dimensions of wage precariousness, substandard living conditions, inadequate health infrastructure, educational deprivation and gendered labor exploitation. Furthermore, the study evaluates the efficacy of state welfare interventions and structural adjustments required to integrate these marginalized populations into mainstream sustainable development frameworks.

Keywords: Assam Tea Tribes, Dergaon Sub-Division, Livelihood Vulnerability, Plantation Economy, Socio-Economic Marginalization, Labor Exploitation

1. Introduction

Assam occupies a prominent position in the global agro-industrial landscape, producing a substantial share of India's total tea output. This flourishing commodity chain is inextricably linked to the labor of the state's tea garden communities. Comprising roughly one-sixth of Assam's total population, the "tea tribes"—officially categorized under various nomenclatures such as Other Backward Classes (OBC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), or Tea Garden Laborers depending on political and administrative contexts—trace their origins to Chotanagpur, Santhal Pargana and the Central Provinces. Recruited under coercive indentured labor systems during the colonial era to clear dense forests and cultivate the *Camellia sinensis* plant, these communities were systematically

isolated from the indigenous Assamese society, creating an insular, plantation-bound socio-spatial enclave (Bhowmik, 1981; Guha, 2006).

While the formal end of the indenture system brought legal freedom, the structural legacy of plantation capitalism persists. The Dergaon sub-division in Golaghat district exemplifies this historical trajectory. Dotted with numerous large-scale tea estates and smallholder tea gardens, Dergaon is a microcosm of Assam's wider plantation economy. Despite the economic vitality generated by tea production, the laborers who sustain this industry grapple with persistent socio-economic deprivation, low generational mobility, systemic health deficits and escalating livelihood vulnerabilities driven by climate variability and shifting market dynamics.

This paper investigates the multi-dimensional vulnerabilities defining the lives of tea garden workers in the Dergaon sub-division, questioning how colonial structural legacies intersect with modern economic policies to perpetuate persistent poverty.

2. Historical Context and Theoretical Framework

To understand the contemporary vulnerabilities of the Dergaon tea communities, one must examine the political economy of plantation capitalism. Theorists such as Beck (1992) and Sen (1981) provide valuable lenses for analyzing how vulnerability is socially constructed rather than merely a product of natural hazards. In the context of Assam, the plantation economy operated as a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961), wherein the estate management controlled virtually every aspect of the worker's life—housing, healthcare, rations, leisure and social mobility.

During the colonial period, the *Plantation Labour Act* (PLA) of 1951 ostensibly replaced colonial coercion with statutory welfare obligations, requiring garden managements to provide housing, medical care, drinking water and educational facilities. However, implementation has historically been weak and erratic. In Dergaon, as across Assam, the shift toward neoliberal economic restructuring, contract farming and the rise of small-scale tea cultivation (STG) in recent decades has altered traditional labor relations, often externalizing labor costs and increasing precarity (Barbora, 2008).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining secondary literature review, archival historical analysis and qualitative insights derived from field observations across selected tea estates and adjacent ex-garden settlements in the Dergaon sub-division of Golaghat district. Quantitative indicators were sourced from government statistical compendiums, district census reports and labor welfare directorate publications. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with tea plantation workers, union representatives, civil society actors and local healthcare providers in Dergaon, focusing on wage structures, living conditions, educational attainment and healthcare access.

4. Socio-Economic Realities in Dergaon Sub-Division

4.1 Wage Structures and Economic Precarity

The primary determinant of socio-economic vulnerability among Dergaon's tea garden workers is the wage structure. Historically, plantation wages have remained significantly lower than the minimum wages prescribed for comparable unorganized or agricultural sectors in India. Although periodic tripartite negotiations between state authorities, tea associations (such as the Consultative Committee of Plantation Associations - CCPA) and labor unions result in incremental wage revisions, the daily wage remains inadequate to meet the rising costs of living.

In the Dergaon sub-division, cash wages are frequently supplemented by in-kind benefits, including subsidized rations (rice and wheat), free or low-cost housing, firewood and medical allowances. However, the quality and regularity of these in-kind distributions have deteriorated over time. Consequently, households face severe cash liquidity constraints.

[Low Cash Wages] ---> [Inadequate Savings] ---> [Dependence on Informal Credit (Mahajans)] ---> [Intergenerational Debt Bondage]

This cycle forces workers to rely on informal credit networks, particularly local moneylenders (*mahajans*), locking families into deep debt traps.

4.2 Housing, Sanitation and Infrastructure

The spatial geography of tea gardens in Dergaon is characterized by segregated worker settlements known as *line quarters* or *coolie lines*. Originally constructed during the colonial era, many of these barracks-style dwellings remain dilapidated, damp and structurally unsafe. Overcrowding is endemic, with extended families often sharing single-room or two-room mud-and-thatch or corrugated-iron structures.

Sanitation infrastructure within the labor lines is critically deficient. Piped drinking water is absent in many interior gardens; workers frequently rely on ring wells, shallow tube wells, or untreated surface water sources, increasing vulnerability to waterborne diseases such as gastroenteritis, cholera and typhoid. Furthermore, the absence of proper sewage systems and latrines leads to widespread open defecation, compounding public health challenges during the monsoon season.

4.3 Health, Nutrition and Morbidity Profiles

Healthcare delivery in the Dergaon tea estates relies primarily on the estate-managed hospital system mandated by the Plantation Labour Act. However, field observations indicate that a significant proportion of garden hospitals suffer from chronic underfunding, a lack of qualified medical personnel, shortages of essential medicines and poor diagnostic infrastructure. Serious medical emergencies require referrals to district hospitals in Golaghat or Jorhat, imposing prohibitive out-of-pocket transportation and treatment costs on impoverished workers.

Nutritional deficiency remains a pervasive crisis. Anaemia among women of reproductive age and chronic malnutrition (*stunting* and *wasting*) among children under five are disproportionately high in tea garden areas compared to non-tea rural regions of Assam (National Family Health Survey - NFHS data). This is linked to low dietary diversity, heavy maternal workloads and the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

Furthermore, alcoholism—frequently fueled by illicitly brewed liquor (*sulai*)—remains a major socio-economic and public health concern, eroding household disposable incomes and triggering domestic violence.

4.4 Educational Deprivation and Generational Stagnation

Education serves as the primary engine for social mobility, yet educational attainment among tea garden communities in Dergaon remains dismally low. While primary schools are often located within or near tea estates, their quality is frequently compromised by high teacher-student ratios, multi-grade teaching, inadequate infrastructure and high rates of absenteeism.

Language barriers further exacerbate educational exclusion. Instruction in state-run or vernacular schools is predominantly in Assamese, whereas the linguistic identity of many tea garden residents is marked by regional variations of *Sadri*, *Kurukh*, *Mundari*, or other Central Indian dialects, alongside local non-standard Assamese. Drop-out rates escalate sharply at the middle and secondary school levels. Economic pressures force adolescents to drop out and enter the labor force as temporary or casual leaf-pluckers, reinforcing generational cycles of low-skill, low-wage employment.

4.5 Gender Dynamics and Female Labor Exploitation

The plantation economy is structurally dependent on female labor. In Dergaon's tea estates, women comprise the vast majority of the leaf-picking workforce. Plantation managements historically favored female labor based on the gendered assumption that women possess "nimble fingers" and can be subjected to lower wage scales and disciplinary control (Endle, 1911; Sharma, 2011).

Female tea laborers face a triple burden:

1. **Strenuous Plantation Labor:** Long hours under harsh weather conditions carrying heavy bamboo baskets (*sali*) filled with green leaves.
2. **Domestic and Care Responsibilities:** Unpaid household chores, cooking, firewood collection and child-rearing.
3. **Institutional Vulnerability:** Limited representation in labor union leadership and vulnerability to workplace harassment or exploitation by lower-level management staff (*sardars* and tea-house managers).

5. Emerging Livelihood Vulnerabilities in the Contemporary Era

5.1 Agrarian Distress and Climate Variability

In recent years, the ecological stability of Dergaon's tea plantations has been challenged by climate change. Erratic monsoon patterns, prolonged dry spells, rising ambient temperatures and unseasonal rainfall have adversely affected crop yields and the phenology of the tea plant. Pests and diseases have multiplied, increasing operational costs for garden managements, which are frequently passed down to workers through intensified output quotas or wage freezes.

5.2 The Rise of Small-Scale Tea Growers (STGs) and Informalization

A structural transformation in Assam's tea sector is the proliferation of Small-Scale Tea Gardens (STGs). Many local landowners and marginal farmers in and around Dergaon have shifted from traditional paddy cultivation to smallholder tea production. While STGs have generated alternative rural employment, they operate largely outside the purview of the *Plantation Labour Act*.

[Traditional Estate Model (Regulated, In-kind benefits)]

vs.

[Small-Scale Tea Grower Model (Informal, Daily-wage, No statutory benefits)]

Workers on smallholder plantations are typically engaged as casual daily wagers without job security, provident fund contributions, medical leave, or housing entitlements. This casualization of labor has deepened systemic vulnerability.

5.3 Migration and Human Trafficking Vulnerabilities

Due to extreme economic distress, limited local employment options and landlessness among ex-garden populations in Dergaon, youth migration has increased. While some migrate to urban centers within Assam (such as Guwahati or Dibrugarh) or other Indian states for construction, domestic and hospitality work, this mobility exposes them to severe exploitation. Unscrupulous labor agents (*dalals*) frequently target vulnerable tea-tribe youth, leading to cases of bonded labor, human trafficking and unsafe working conditions in distant metropolitan destinations.

6. Policy Interventions and Structural Gaps

Recognizing the historical marginalization of Assam's tea communities, both central and state governments have introduced various welfare schemes. Initiatives such as the *Assam Chai Sanjeevani Scheme*, educational scholarships, housing assistance through rural development programs (e.g., PMAY) and targeted financial inclusion campaigns have yielded incremental benefits. Furthermore, periodic proposals for granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to the tea-tribe communities remain a contentious and central political demand, viewed by community leaders as a necessary step for political empowerment and enhanced reservation benefits.

However, significant implementation bottlenecks persist:

- **Bureaucratic Apathy:** Delays in the disbursement of welfare funds and bureaucratic red tape hinder grassroots impact.
- **Top-Down Design:** Schemes are frequently formulated without adequate consultation with community stakeholders, resulting in a mismatch between actual needs and administered benefits.
- **Lack of Land Tenure:** A fundamental vulnerability is the lack of formal land ownership rights. Most tea garden workers reside on company-owned land; upon retirement or retrenchment, they face eviction threats, exacerbating homelessness and landlessness.

7. Conclusion

The socio-economic realities of tea garden communities in the Dergaon sub-division reflect a paradox: while these populations generate immense wealth and foreign exchange through their relentless labor, they remain trapped within a framework of structural deprivation. The legacy of colonial plantation capitalism, compounded by modern economic informalization, climate volatility and inadequate welfare delivery, perpetuates multi-dimensional livelihood vulnerabilities.

Addressing these deep-seated challenges requires a paradigm shift in policy formulation. Merely viewing tea garden workers as passive beneficiaries of charity is insufficient. Sustainable upliftment demands structural reforms, including:

1. Enforcement of fair, living-wage standards that decouple survival from exploitative piece-rate systems;
2. Secure land tenure rights for permanent and retired workers;
3. Substantial infrastructural upgrades in health, sanitation and education within the labor lines;
4. Comprehensive legal protections for workers in the booming small-scale tea grower sector; and
5. Empowerment of women through equitable representation in governance and labor organizations.

Only through concerted, multi-sectoral interventions can the historical injustices inflicted upon Assam's tea diaspora be redressed, ensuring their integration into a framework of equitable and sustainable regional development.

Conflict of Interest: *The author declares no conflict of interest.*

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