



Health issues and insecurities: health hazards of employed tea tribe women in Assam

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Abstract

A very important factor concerning everyone is health, Health is considered as wealth. Basically, lower- and middle-income groups are often negligent to take care about their health and destined to earn for their livelihood as earning forms the sole objective in their lives. In case of lower income groups, the circumstances of earning are more challenging. They take risk in workplace working excess hours or work in hazardous conditions to support their family without considering the hazards of health or measuring any form of exploitation from their employers for the sake of economic security. It can also be narrated that there is the observation of gender disparity in the workplace basically in the lower income groups where women are found in certain cases to work for strenuous hours, which are directly linked with the ill health of such women. While discussing about the tea tribe women regarding their health most of them are the victims of anemia and iron deficiency, respiratory problems like TB, coughs, and skin infections. In another context tea tribe women were found to be suffering from diseases like hypertension, gastritis, due to many factors. Some of the factors include daily hardship, poor sanitation, lack of proper health care as well as lack of proper health facilities, irregular and low income etc

The paper highlights the health issues and insecurities faced by tea tribe women. The paper also emphasizes the various factors which highlights the causes of health hazards faced by the employed tea tribe women in the state of Assam. The various challenges in the workplace and in the domestic front including domestic violence are some major issues which concerns their health.

Keywords: Health, Tea Tribe, Women, Assam

1. Introduction

Poor health of the tea tribe women is mainly concerned with their poor economic status. Women who are employed under the tea industry are mostly underpaid and pushed to undergo excess work under low wages, with lack of proper housing, drinking facility and sanitation affecting their day to day health. It is accompanied by family stresses where an employed or un-employed woman work more hours at home which includes cleaning, cooking, bringing up children consuming a poor

nutritive diet with lack of vitamins, carbohydrates, proteins, healthy fats etc. Besides they lack resting hours which concerns a healthy body and mind. Most of these women are prone to intoxication along with their male counterparts with the consumption of local made alcohols prepared from inferior quality and also high uses of tobacco. Domestic violence, forcing the women to work even being unhealthy are common. Violent clashes among the spouses where a woman bears bodily harm such as injuries etc. in a family dispute are very common in most of these households. Spending women's income lavishly by the male, falling in indebtedness can have a negative impact on the women's health. As finally three main factors are observed faced by most of the tea tribe women. 1) Physical stresses. 2) Mental or psychological stresses. 3) Socio-economic stresses.

2. Objectives

- To study the factors, pertaining to health issues and insecurities in employed tea tribe women.
- To study the major health disorders that affects tea women workers.
- To study the implementation of government schemes protecting the health of employed tea tribe women.

3. Methodology

Basically, secondary data collection is conducted which includes the review of preliminary studies related to the topic, literature review of research papers, government reports, tea reports, census report, news articles, SRS bulletin and NFHS, Net information etc. The secondary data information depicts the factors which have caused employed tea tribe women prone towards various health issues leading to health hazards in the long run. So also, the types of illness which stands as obstacles in terms of income generation.

4. Factors pertaining to health issues of employed tea tribe women

When giving any importance to health of working women, women who faces psychological and physical stresses in the workplace as well as in home are prone to various health disorders. Employed tea tribe women in the tea estates faces several health problems which generally be categorized as physical, occupational, biological, chemical and mechanical hazards (Gogoi Shikamoni, et.al) The work profile of the pluckers of tea leaves in tea estate who are mostly women undergoes a very tough process starting from plucking to collection of leaves in the factories. The extreme heat and cold weather conditions where the tea women have to work for hours selecting the right choice of leaves otherwise the labour for such activity becomes futile. Further getting exposed to various chemicals used in the plantations, carrying the loads to the factories etc are extreme situations of health insecurities leading to health hazards in the long run. Working in strenuous situation the workplace safety is very important for health and quality of work of any employed. Preliminary study highlights how female labour in the tea industry is forced by management to produce excess value at the expense of their sanitation, health and hygiene (Saikia Vaishali, et.al). Women involved in tea work takes challenging task working long hours would require the basic amenities of workplace like safe drinking water, sanitation, crèche facilities etc. The necessities arise and if they avail the services provided by the employers which are unhygienic they are prone to various infections in their body.

It is to be remembered that health issues arise when there is negligence of the sufferer of any ailment and on the other hand failing to provide the requisite health care facilities by the employers like well-equipped

hospitals to the workers. Female tea workers who are vulnerable to various health disorders needs and requires medical attention at times. Although some major tea-estates have well equipped hospitals. There are hundreds of tea-estates without necessary health support in the form of infrastructure and doctors. (Hazarika Kakali). In fact, due to lack of health care facilities, women workers suffer more in these tea-estates as they cannot afford for health care in private hospitals.

The excessive domestic violence in some of the tea tribe households where women bears the violence from their husbands who return at night consuming alcohol and physically assaulting them. This is not enough women workers face abuses and harassment from their supervisors and managers in the workplace and it is natural that abusive language would be used to make the workers hard and for longer hours. (FPAR Findings)

Housing and Sanitation, safe drinking water and toilet facilities plays a vital role in the health of the workers. With an unhygienic environment with overcrowding houses, generally made of kaccha common toilets used by many, consuming unsafe water stands as a barrier for any worker for staying physically fit. Most of the households doesn't possess filters in their homes which is highly dangerous as they drink the contaminated water Women workers are vulnerable to a number of health disorders under such situation which requires immediate medical attention. The table below represent the housing type and sanitation of Tea Garden Workers (Case study of Karimganj District)

Table 1: Distribution of households across types of houses and sanitation

House type	Percentage of Households
Mud and sungrass	54.97%
Indira Awaas	5%
Bamboo and sungrass	15%
Tea garden given (old model pakka house)	3.35%
Pakka house	5%
Bamboo and tin	16.68%
Toilet Facility /types	Percentage of Households
Temporary	3.31%
Semi-sanitary	1.69%
Sanitary	5%
Nil	90%

(Source: Sinha Subhash, et.al, Socio - Economic Status Of Tea Garden Workers In Assam: A Case Study Of Karimganj District)

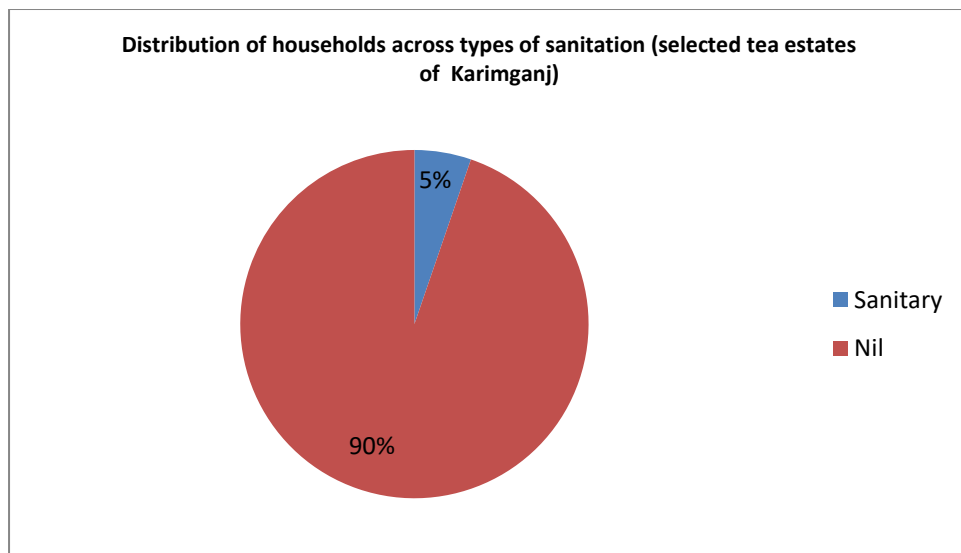
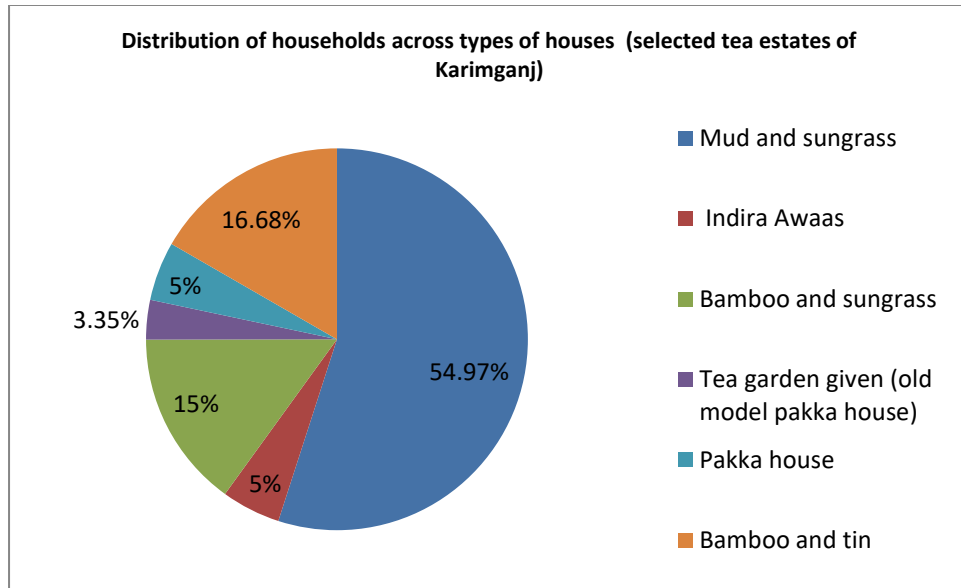
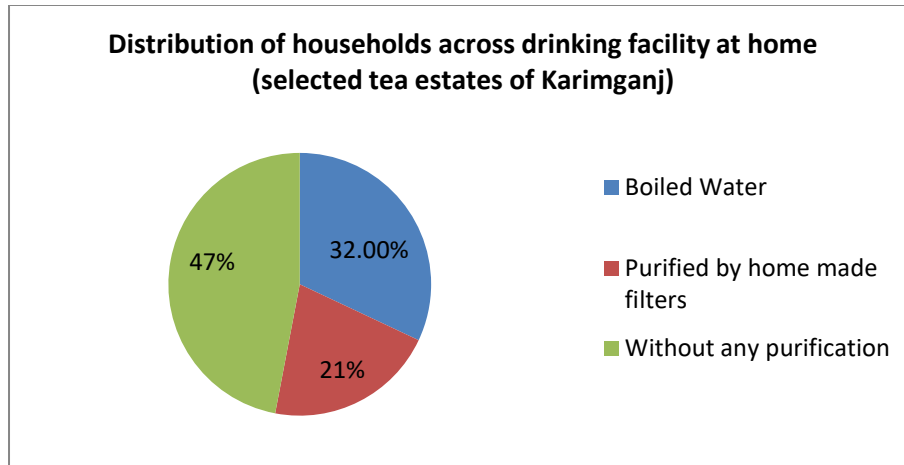


Table 2: Distribution of households across drinking facility at home (selected tea estates of Karimganj)

Drinking type	Percentage of Households
Boiled Water	32.00%
Purified by home made filters	21%
Without any purification	47%

(Source: Sinha Subhash, et.al, Socio - Economic Status Of Tea Garden Workers In Assam: A Case Study Of Karimganj District)



5. Major health disorders that affects tea women workers

It is true that when tea women workers face environmental stresses they are vulnerable to a number of health disorders which affects their day to day life and becomes fatal at times leading to death. Skin inflammation, blurred vision, respiratory and digestive disorders are common with women workers in tea estates who are involved in the tea leaves plucking as the uses of chemicals and pesticides in the plantation are concerned with such health issues. A study on the climate impact on the tea yield make women workers sick highlights women workers in Darjelling tea plantation who are struggling with an orderly arrangement of health issues caused by the exposure of toxic pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers being used to get rid of climate impacts on crop (Sah Purnima).

The female tea workers mostly suffer from anemia and iron deficiency, basically undernutrition, digestive problems which basically arises using unfiltered and contaminated water leading to gastro intestinal infections. Parasites and worms are the deadliest in many such cases.

Study highlights that workers suffers from three forms of anemia microcytic, normocytic and macrocytic. However, there was a significant rise in haemoglobin levels when the suffered individuals took iron with vitamin B12 and folic acid supplement for three continuous months supported by two doses of anthelminthic drug. Nutritional anameia is the major problem in female tea workers. (Das Bhaskar, et.al)

The ICMR study has identified high magnitude of under nutrition and infectious diseases among tea garden population of Assam. The findings highlight nutritional problems like underweight among children (59.9%), thinness among adults (69.8%) and micronutrient deficiency disorders like anaemia (72%) were widespread. Common infectious diseases were worm infestation (65.4%), respiratory problems (6.7%), diarrhoea (1.7%), skin infections, filariasis (0.6%) and pulmonary tuberculosis (11.7/1000)6. (with reference to Science Direct Mahanta Goswami Tulika, et.al)

Poor nutrition results with the decrease in the immunity level of the individuals which is vulnerable to a number of infectious diseases. Basically, the poor toilet conditions used by the households in tea estates are bound to transmit a number of communicable diseases. On the other hand, the high use of open fields toilets creates pollution and contamination in the surroundings out of the deflection done by the other members. This builds unhygienic and unsafe conditions for the households who are prone to various types of infectious diseases.

The findings of a study related to adolescent girls of tea tribe in Dibrugarh district, suggest health related complains basically highest in case of older adolescent girls. The higher rate of health complaints was found in older adolescent girls which include:

- 1) Symptoms of reproductive tract infection.
- 2) Poor menstrual hygiene.
- 3) Signs and symptoms of Vitamin A deficiency disorder.
- 4) Increase in atrophied tongue papillae.
- 5) Unhealthy teeth and gums.
- 6) Skin changes showing malnutrition (Mahanta Goswami Tulika, et. al)

Dibrugarh district has the highest number of Tea Gardens in Assam which is around 177 as on the year 2023 followed by other districts. (Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare, Assam website) The neonatal rate identified in these tea garden communities represents 46.5% per 1000 live births per year in the tea gardens of Dibrugarh. The deaths occurred either because of the health conditions of infants like Immaturity, fever/sepsis, breathing disorder, neonatal tetanus, neonatal diarrhea etc respectively. However, it is evident that mostly the infants born in the tea communities in these gardens showed lower birth weights (Phukan R.K, Mahanta).

Most of the mothers are provided less care during the stage of pregnancy. Several socio- economic factors held responsible in such situation which leads to poor health conditions like anemia, weight disorders, malnutrition etc. in the mothers where infant mortality rates are high (<https://europepmc.org/article/med/10218318>).

In another study on the education and health of tea tribe women in Assam with special reference to Tinsukia district, the analysis suggested the following health problems which affected the tea tribe women in the study area:

- 1) Cough
- 2) Skin Diseases
- 3) Anameia
- 4) Vitamin A deficiency.
- 5) Accidental injuries.
- 6) Learning disability
- 7) Blind
- 8) Deaf and dumb
- 9) Hypertension
- 10) Gastric problems (Handique Papori)

The various diseases affecting the tea tribe women cannot take a fixed shape or based on certain observations or environmental factors. In the recent times after the attack of pandemic the diseases are taking a different shape. In many cases the diseases remain undiagnosed affecting the general health of these people. The deadliest factor being low immune system in the human health which may arise due to various factors. The major being pollution in the environment, adulteration and hybridization in food, monotonous work , lack of rest and leisure, avoiding the indigenous knowledge which our ancestors

followed and so on. The society would face more such destructions affecting the health and other situations in the future where not only tea tribe women, all the rest living creatures, including nature would face the challenges of survival.

6. Implementation of government schemes protecting the health of employed tea tribe women

The various schemes implemented by the state government protecting the health of employed tea tribe women has numerous benefits for the tea tribe women if properly implemented in the state. Firstly, it must reach the majority tea tribe women residing in the tea estates of Assam. Cash disbursement delays, lack of estate awareness, failure of providing the assured benefits in the schemes are to be completely avoided.

The state government implements the schemes protecting the health of the tea tribe women in Assam”

The Government of Assam in collaboration with the National Health Mission, implements several targeted schemes protecting the health of employed tea tribe women. These measures constitute maternity safety, health screening and providing financial assistance to provide health protection in terms of critical illness. Some of the major schemes include:

- 1.) **Wage Compensation Scheme for Pregnant Women:** Provides Rs 15000/ in financial assistance to support maternal nutrition
- 2.) **Swasthaban Shramik Yojana:** It is a welfare scheme to provide door-door health care services and health check-ups for tea garden workers across the state.
- 3.) **PPP with Tea Garden Hospitals:** It is a scheme providing basic health care facilities to the marginalized tea communities in Assam. A joint initiative scheme under the umbrella scheme of National Health Mission, Assam and the tea garden hospitals.
- 4.) **Medical Grants for Major Diseases:** (Tea tribes)

The Government of Assam assists providing direct financial grants and wage compensation to employed tea tribe women suffering from major diseases. The administered agency being the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare. The grant amount is determined by the State Level Advisory Committee depending upon the status of the illness. It includes the following diseases and the amount of grant provided as assistance:

Diseases	Amount (Rs)
Tuberculosis (TB) & Eye Cataract:	10,000
Cancer, Kidney Dialysis, & Major Operations:	50,000
Heart Diseases & Strokes	75,000
Auto-Immune/Liver/Nerve Disorders	50,000
Accidents	15,000

(Source: Net information on health schemes sponsored by Government of Assam for employed tea tribe women)

7. Findings

The first part highlights the factors, pertaining to health issues and insecurities in employed tea tribe women in the tea-estates of Assam. Several factors affect the health of the tea tribe women working in the tea estates. Mental and physical stresses and socio-economic factors. The employed women have to face a

number of challenges in the workplace and in the domestic front Working for hours whether at home or in the workplace is common. On the other hand, facing violence are no less. These basic factors including the threats from chemical and pesticides with unsafe sanitation and drinking water, etc. cannot be ignored. All such situations affect the health of the employed tea tribe women.

In the second part it highlights the basic health disorders affecting employed tea tribe women which may vary from individual to individual depending upon the various environmental factors affecting the women ranging from minor illnesses to chronic ones. However, the major ones include, anemia and iron deficiency, respiratory diseases, gastro-intestinal disorders, infant mortality in married women also health disorders in case of employed adolescent tea tribe girls

The third part narrates the various assistance and the various sponsored schemes of the state government for combating the health disorders for the tea tribes in assam including the employed and the un-employed. However, the proper implementation of such schemes and its proper out-reach as well as awareness of such programmes are urgent.

8. Suggestion

Health of employed tea tribe women requires the strict monitoring of the NGOS, and agencies whether safety measures are employed in the workplace by the management in the tea estates, including the hygiene whether maintained in terms of drinking water, housing, sanitation etc. The hospital care services with adequate supply of medicines, equipment's, including facilities for treatment with availability of doctors and para-medical staff. All the suggestions include the proper implementation of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 which has provisions to safeguard the health and other important factors of the employed tea tribe women.

9. Conclusion

Different voluntary organizations including various SHG and NGOs working with women empowerment has much to do regarding the concern on the Health of the tea tribe women who often faces a number of challenges in the domestic front and the workplace. The need to sensitize such women regarding the vulnerabilities and insecurities regarding the health in their day to day lives. Camps organized to detect the health disorders they face and suggest the best ways to cure then providing knowledge about the various state sponsored schemes to combat the various health disorders they face.

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

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