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### **Educational Attainment of Women Tea Garden Workers: A Sociological Study in Six Tea Gardens of Upper Assam**

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#### **Abstract**

Women constitute almost 50 percent of the total workforce of tea industry in Assam (Duara & Mallick, 2019). Although many policies have been implemented to improve educational level of women but position of women tea garden workers in educational sector is very low. Thus, this paper tries to discuss the educational attainment of women tea garden workers in selected tea gardens and factors of lower educational attainment by using mixed-method approach. From the study it is found that most (55.83%) of the women tea garden workers only studied till primary level. The factors responsible for low education are early marriage, economic problems, and language barriers, non-availability of schools and lack of importance to female education.

**Keywords:** Education, Tea Garden, Women, Worker, Assam

#### **Introduction:**

In developing countries women suffer from patriarchy, gender inequality and oppression. In World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, 2024 India's rank is 129<sup>th</sup> out of 146 countries<sup>i</sup>. Distinct gender gap is noticed among men and women in terms of literacy rate in India. As per census report of 2011 literacy rate of women and man in India was 65.46 percent and 82.14 percent respectively. This census data shows the low educational attainment of Indian women. Assam is located in the North-East part of India. This diverse state is famous for 'tea'. Assam produced 53 percent of the total tea production of the country (Patgiri & Kazi, 2022). Women constitute almost 50 percent of the total workforce of tea industry (Duara & Mallick, 2019). Although in the tea industry, women workers play a crucial role, and they have been experiencing many problems both in the public as well as the private sphere. Despite many policies have been implemented to improve educational level of women but educational status of women tea garden workers is very low. Link between education and women empowerment is discussed by various scholars in their previous studies. Among them Bhatt (2015) mentioned that education is important for empowerment of women as it helps women to convert their life, tackle challenges, and to manage their traditional role (Bhat, 2015).

The India Government have been executing various schemes and policies for socioeconomic and educational enlistment of women workers, these includes 'Mahila Samakhy', 'Mid-Day Meal Scheme', 'Sarba Siksha Abhiyan', 'National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Levels'. Apart from this, in order to gain socioeconomic development of tea garden workers various welfare, measures are implementing by the Government of Assam through separate Directorate. Such as the 'Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare', and 'Assam Tea Employee Welfare Board' and 'Assam Branch Indian Tea Association'. Furthermore, the 'Tea Board of India', operating under the ministry of Commerce & Industry has, also started crucial schemes and welfare programs for the community (Patgiri&Kazi, 2022).

The 'Directorate of Tea Tribe and Adivasi Welfare', Assam has been executing different welfare measures for educational development of tea garden workers of Assam. Among these are Pre-Matric and Post -Matric Scholarship, Financial Assistance for Higher Studies, Simon Sing Horo Special Post Matric Scholarship, Financial Assistance for ANM/GNM and technical courses, Grants to women self -help group, etc<sup>ii</sup>. Despite those initiatives the educational attainment of women tea garden workers is very pathetic. Perumal (2022) found that female illiteracy is higher than male literacy among tea garden workers (Perumal, 2022). Toppo (1999) showed that because of poor quality of education children's drop out from school in tea gardens (Toppo, 1999). The educational attainment of women tea garden workers has been a long-standing issue with its root in various socio-cultural, political, and economic challenges. These challenges to educational attainment create both immediate and long-term implications for their social mobility, economic, political, and cultural empowerment and over-all wellbeing. With the above background this study tries to understand the educational attainment of women tea garden workers in sample tea gardens.

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To discuss the present scenario of educational attainment of women tea garden workers at sample tea gardens.
- ii. To highlight the reasons responsible for lower educational attainment among women tea garden workers.

### **Materials and Methods:**

While conducting this study both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used by the researcher. Interview and observation method of data collection have been used to collect data. The study was conducted in three districts of Upper Assam and from each district two tea gardens have been selected purposively. These are Dibrugarh, Sibsagar and Jorhat. From each tea garden 20 women tea garden workers, from which 10 permanent and 10 temporaries has been selected conveniently. Hence, from six tea gardens total 120 samples have been collected. After collection of data descriptive statistics have been used to analyse them.

### **Results:**

In social science research social background of the respondents play a significant role. As we know social background of people determines their status, perception, way of life, thinking process, and so on.

From the Table -1, it is seen that 39 (32.5%) belongs to 18-30 years of age. Majority of the respondents 40 (33.33%) belong to the age group of 30 to 40 years. 30 (25%) respondents come under 40 to 50 years. On the other hand, only 11 (9.16%) respondents belong to the 50-60 years of age. In terms of religion tea garden workers are heterogeneous society. The tea garden workers mostly follow Hinduism, while Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are also practiced by them. When they were brought to Assam, they carried their own religious belief. During colonial time some sections were converted to Christian religion by Missionaries. The Table-1 shows that most of the respondents, i.e. 116 (96.66%) follow Hinduism, whereas 3 (2.5%) respondents follow Christianity and only 1 (0.84%) respondent belong to another category. Tea garden workers prefer to marry within the tribe or caste. Out of 120 respondent's majority 99 numbers (82.5%) are married, 13 (10.84%) are unmarried and 8 numbers (6.6%) belongs to 'other' category. From the field study it is found that most of the family (67.5%) has more than or equal to four family members.

Table 1:  
Social background of the respondents

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	120	100
Age (Years)	18 to 30	39	32.5
	30-40	40	33.33
	40-50	30	25
	50-60	11	9.16
Religion	Hinduism	116	96.66
	Christian	3	2.5
	Other	1	0.84
Marital Status	Married	99	82.5
	Unmarried	13	10.84
	Others (Widowed and divorced)	8	6.66
Number of family members	Less- than 4 members	39	32.5
	More than or equal to 4 members	81	67.5

Source: Field study

Table 2:  
Educational Level of the Respondents

Education Level	Number of Respondents from Permanent worker		Number of Respondents from Temporary worker		Total	
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
Illiterate	25	41.67	24	40	49	40.84
Primary	32	53.33	35	58.33	67	55.83
Secondary	3	5	1	1.67	4	3.33
Total	60	100	60	100	120	100

Source: Field study

Above table-2, shows the educational level of the respondents. It is noticed that 49 (40.84%) respondents are illiterate, 67 (55.83%) respondents have completed primary education and only 4(3.33%) respondents completed secondary education.

The following table-3 shows the reasons of low literacy level among respondents. From the table it is seen that majority (43.33%) of the respondents could not completed their education because of economic problems. Apart from this non-availability of schools (7.5%), negligence of female education (9.17%), poor communication (28.33%), and early marriage (11.67%) are the reasons for low literacy level among the respondents.

Table 3: Reasons of low literacy level among respondents

Reasons of low literacy level	Permanent worker		Temporary worker		Total	
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
Economic Problems	25	41.67	27	45	52	43.33
Non-availability of Schools	5	8.33	4	6.67	9	7.5
Negligence of Female education	6	10	5	8.33	11	9.17
Language barrier	16	26.67	18	30	34	28.33
Early marriage	8	13.33	6	10	14	11.67
Total	60	100	60	100	120	100

Source: Field Study

### Discussion:

The study noted interesting idea on educational attainment of tea garden women workers. Majority (33.33%) of the workers comes under of 30-40 age groups. Hinduism (96.66%) is the mostly followed religion among the respondents. 82.5 percent respondents are married and most (67.5%) of the family has more than four family members.

### Present scenario of educational attainment of women tea garden workers:

Educational attainment means highest level of education a person has completed. Among the tea garden workers although literacy level has shown a gradual increase, the overall educational attainment, particularly among women, remains significantly low. In the sampled tea gardens only 3.33 percent respondents have completed secondary education. This indicates the persistent challenges in access to and completion of formal education beyond secondary level. This low rate of secondary education attainment among women tea garden workers emphasizes critical issues such as the lack of awareness, limited access to educational facilities, and lack of prioritization of education within the community.

In this context Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can be used to analyse the present scenario of educational attainment of women tea garden workers. Bourdieu conceptualize cultural capital as an individual's familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, particularly the capacity to understand and use 'educated' language (Sullivan, 2001). As member of the working class with a history of marginalization and systematic oppression, women tea garden workers face significant barriers in assimilating into dominant cultural framework of the Assamese society. Their structural poverty constrains their ability to navigate formal education, often resulting in high dropout rates. This structural disadvantage reinforces the cycle of poverty and perpetuates low level of educational attainment limiting their access to upward mobility and socio-cultural capital.

### Reasons for lower educational attainment among women tea garden workers:

The low educational attainment among women tea garden workers is shaped by multiple structural, socio-economic, and cultural factors. These are discussed below.

- a. **Economic Problem:** Economic hardship is a major factor contributing to the low educational attainment of women tea garden workers. The intersectionality of low wages, poverty and financial insecurity creates structural barriers. The daily wage of workers in Upper Assam is Rs. 250 for Private Limited Company Gardens and Rs. 205 for Public Sector Undertakings Garden. This meagre wage makes it difficult for the families to afford education related expenses such as pencil, pen, transportation etc. On the other hand, due to financial constraints, young girls are often expected to contribute to the household economy by assisting domestic chores, taking care of siblings and so on. Like other patriarchal society, tea garden workers often prioritized boys' education over girls. This leads to a gendered disparity in education.
- b. **Lack of adequate educational infrastructure:** As mentioned above table-3, 7.5% respondents said that they could not complete education because of non-availability of school. The lack of adequate educational infrastructure is a critical barrier to the educational attainment of women tea garden workers. The absence of school, particularly at secondary level, forces many young girls to discontinue their education. In all the surveyed gardens, except one Secondary and Higher Secondary schools are located far from the tea garden, making access difficult to girls, where social norms discourage women from travelling long distance alone. Respondents said, the distance between their house and school is very far, because of which they cannot afford to go to school. They expressed, we do not have bicycle or any transportation system, so we could not go to school.
- c. **Language barrier:** Language barrier is one of the reasons of drop out. In Assam Assamese is the major lingua franca, but tea garden workers mostly speak, understands and communicate in 'Sadri' a garden specific local dialect to communicate among fellow members, although Assamese is used intermittently. Because of this reason children face problems in learning. Hence, they score lower marks. Lower marks and communication problems leads do drop out of students. While doing field work it is noticed that in most cases, the older generations, specially retired workers, and women workers face problems while communicating in Assamese.
- d. **Early marriage:** Another reason of low educational attainment is early marriage. Though child marriage is banned by Assam Government, but during field study 11.67 percent respondents said they left school because of marriage. Similar situation is found in Bangladesh as explained by (Roy & Sattar, 2015).

### Remedial Measures:

From the observation in the field following measures can be taken to improve educational attainment of women tea garden workers;

- a. To establish secondary school inside garden in proper number. Government of Assam should take speedy step to initiate this process.

- b. To trained educated young minds from the tea gardens so that they can teach the elderly as well as the children.
- c. Non-governmental organizations should take steps to provide education. The NGO's which their service at interior tea gardens is already in operation can extent.
- d. Awareness campaign should be conducted by government and non-government agencies about the significance of education among children, adolescence and adults.

### Conclusion:

The educational attainment of women tea garden workers in Assam reflects a complex interplay of historical marginalization, socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and inadequate educational infrastructure. Although literacy rates have shown some gradual improvement but representation of women in secondary education remains low. Factors such as low wages, financial constraints, inadequate educational infrastructure, early marriage, gender norms continue to hinder the educational progress of women tea garden workers. However, certain initiatives have been undertaken to address these challenges. Field observations indicate that tea gardens such as Moran and Attabarie, in collaboration with Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP) have introduced joyful learning programs for children. Furthermore, the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) has been actively taking initiative to create awareness among workers about the importance of education and encourage school enrolment. Apart from this, the Assam government initiative, 'Gunotsav' have also contributed to improve the quality of education in schools situated in tea gardens.

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<sup>i</sup>[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2024.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup><https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/schemes/post-metric-scholarship-for-tea-and-tea-gardens-0>