

## Educational Status of Tea Plantation Women Workers in Assam: An Empirical Analysis

Dipali Bosumatari<sup>1</sup> and Phanindra Goyari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Scholar, School of Economics, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, School of Economics, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.

**Abstract:** A large proportion of tea plantation workers in India are still women, most of whom are illiterate or educationally backward. Since independence, the Government of India has been implementing various policies to accelerate the women's overall education, literacy rate as well as to reduce the school drop-out rates. Some of such educational policies include Mahila Samakhy, District Primary Education Programme, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Sarba Siksha Abhijan, National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level and various schemes under the Department of Women and Child Development. Despite the various educational policies, high percentage of illiteracy still exists among women labourers of tea gardens compared to other occupations. The present paper examines the educational status of women workers in tea garden areas in Assam based on sample survey data. The paper also has examined the factors responsible for low literacy rate and school drop-outs among girls in the tea garden areas.

**Keywords:** Education, Women Workers, Tea Garden, Illiteracy.

### I. Introduction

Tea industry in Assam is still a labour intensive industry which requires a large number of regular and casual labour forces. Due to this feature, tea industry provides employment to a large number of workforces in the state. The employment potential in tea industry is more than the employment potential of any other plantation sectors. The magnitude of employment generated by the tea industry in Assam can be understood by its direct employment of about 2 million persons spread over the state both in the field and

factory of which about 50 percent are woman workers and children (Tea Digest, 2005-06, Tea Board of India). In tea industry, women and children are generally considered the better pluckers and the most productive labour. It is sad that a large proportion of these women tea plantation workers are illiterate or educationally backward. Since independence, the Government of India has been implementing various policies for accelerating the women's overall education, literacy rate as well as to reduce the school drop-out rates. Some of such educational policies include Mahila

Samakhy (1989), District Primary Education Programme (1994), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (1995), Sarba Siksha Abhijan (2000), National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (2003-04) and various schemes under the Department of Women and Child Development. In addition to these policies, the Government of Assam through the Assam Tea Employees Welfare Board conducted various training programmes for the females at the Mezenga Female Labour Welfare Training centre situated at Mezenga in upper Assam (Kaniampady, 2003). The females are taught about the health, hygiene and first aid, family welfare, care for children including crèche attendance etc. and vocational training like cutting and tailoring, weaving, embroidery etc. Under another scheme, the Board also sponsored the willing female candidates from the tea community to undergo professional training in nursing courses at the Gauhati Medical College, Gauhati and Assam Medical College, Dibrugarh.

After independence, the Government of India through the 'Central Board for Workers Education' (CBWE) introduced educational programmes such as vocational training to increase the general awareness of the workers in the organised, unorganised and rural sectors at national, regional and unit levels. This central board also gave emphasis on the

adult education programme to educate those workers who could not attend or were compelled to leave schools early. The CBWE started functioning since 1958, which gets grants-in-aid from the Ministry of Labour and Employment to operate its activities. The Directorate of Welfare of Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, constituted by the Government of Assam in 1984 also introduced post-matric scholarship, grants for cultural activities including educational tour, grant to non-official organizations, grants for purchase of text books and uniform and grants for construction of hostel for boys/girls.

The Tea Garden Cell in Assam was established in line with Sarba Siksha Abhijan (SSA) and the officials of elementary education in 2003. Since the inception, the SSA Mission has been conducting many programmes such as enrolment drive programme, Meena Campaign, summer camp, etc. in tea gardens of Assam. Meena Campaign is a continuous effort to promote education among girl children in tea & ex-tea garden areas for creating awareness among girl children and make them active. In tea garden areas in Assam in collaboration with UNICEF, Meena Campaign is aimed to implement in 1055 tea gardens, 1336 ex-tea gardens and 2180 char area schools and education guarantee scheme centres by

engaging tea garden volunteers and mothers' group.

First, the SSA Mission in Assam identified some educationally backward areas covering all 825 registered tea gardens as the special focus group areas in 2004. In addition, to evaluate the available infrastructure facilities in the schools of tea gardens, the SSA officials conducted a survey on school infrastructure in July 2004. Though the SSA could not provide physical facilities to the tea garden schools, they have been engaging in many educational developmental activities in plantation areas. Every year during summer vacation, summer camps were organized in many schools in tea garden areas and tea garden volunteers were entrusted for organizing the camps. Orientation of children on scouts & guide, drills, reading ability development of children and enhancement of co-curricular skills of children were the main targets of the programme up to 2005-06. Further, the SSA mission also granted annual school infrastructure, maintenance & repairing and teachers' grants to the tea garden managed schools in 2008-09. This scheme includes granting financial assistance for construction and repairing school buildings, toilets, drinking water facilities and fencing/ boundary wall etc. Despite many efforts, improvement of their

educational level seems to be far below the expectation.

In spite of various educational policies since independence, high percentage of illiteracy still exists among the tea garden women labourers compared to other occupations. The study conducted by labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, New Delhi (1980) showed the pathetic condition of educational scenario in tea plantation areas even after the Plantations Labour Act (PLA) was introduced in 1951. There were only 66.1 percent tea gardens that provided educational facility to their workers in the country as a whole by the managements. Remaining 33.9 percent of tea gardens had no schools. The management provided only primary schools in all these tea gardens. Schools beyond primary level did not exist in these gardens. The study found that, no fee was charged in any of these schools. But the picture of supplying certain articles such as books, uniform, etc. to the school going children were in vague. Only about 27.3 percent of tea estates were supplying such articles to children in entire southern region of the country whereas about 15.1 percent were in West Bengal. Assam, where country's more than half percent of the tea is produced, has been receiving only 6.3 percent of such articles. Another study conducted by the Labour Bureau

(Chandigarh) in 2008-09 on Socio-economic conditions of women Workers in Plantation Industry found that about 40.4 percent tea gardens (19 units out of 47 tea plantation sample units in the country) were maintaining schools. The study also found that about 50 per cent of the units were providing education facilities in Assam and West Bengal. Toppo (1999) also showed the poor quality of education system in tea plantation areas which resulted in drop-out of children from schools. Similar studies by Fernandes et al. (2003) and Goswami (1990) also revealed that poor infrastructures as the main reasons behind the illiteracy among workers in the all tea growing districts of Assam.

With the above background, the present paper attempts to examine the present status of women education in the tea gardens in Assam. Specific objectives are: (i) to assess the present status of women education in the sample tea gardens, (ii) to examine the factors responsible for low literacy rate and school drop-outs among girls in the tea gardens and (iii) to suggest some remedial measures for improvement of women education in sample areas.

## **II. Data sources and methodology**

The analysis is based on field survey data collected from four tea gardens, viz.

Bhooteachang, Hattigor, Brotherhood and Jwnglari in Udalguri district of Assam. Data were collected from a total of 241 households from these gardens using the structured questionnaire schedules. Further, to analyse the factors responsible for low literacy rate and high drop-out in the sample gardens, total 120 female workers were selected for the interview. In order to examine the stated objectives, descriptive survey methods were used. The  $\chi^2$  (Chi square) tests were run in order to check statistical significance of women's literacy on their children's education.

## **III. Women education in sample tea gardens**

Bhooteachang and Hattigor tea estates are big tea gardens, where many garden workers stay inside the gardens. Bhooteachang and Hattigor tea estates were established in 1897 and 1893 respectively. Brotherhood and Jwnglari tea estates are comparatively small tea gardens and relatively new gardens, which were established respectively in 1993 and 1995. These big two sample estates are run by big companies, viz., McLeod Russel India Ltd. and Amalagated Plantation Pvt. Limited, respectively. Brotherhood and Jwnglari tea estates are run by small co-operatives on the partnership basis. Since they are new gardens, almost all workers

are casual and they stay outside the gardens.

According to the field survey information, primary schools were established before India got independence. But even after seven decades, situation has not improved much in tea gardens in terms of literacy. The field survey data have shown that about 60.2 percent of the total sample population are still illiterate, only 39.7 percent of the sample population being literate. The data on garden-wise distribution of literate population are given in Table 1.

The literacy rates varied across sample gardens. About 44 percent are literate in Bhooteachang and Hattigor tea gardens. Jwnglari tea garden, with only 30.7 percent, showed the lowest literacy rate among the four sample gardens followed by Brotherhood (39.5 percent) garden.

Looking across gender classifications, the study has observed that a large proportion of women workers in the sample gardens are illiterate (Table 2). Out of total literate population, women literates consist of only 33.4 percent in the total sample. Data showed that in all the sample gardens, female literacy was found to be less than that of male workers. This shows that women are lagging behind in education despite the fact that more

women are working in the tea garden activities.

Table 1: Educational Status of Sample Population

Name of the Garden	Total Sample	Literate		Illiterate	
		Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Bhooteachang T.E.	285	126	44.2	159	55.8
Hattigor T.E.	304	129	42.4	175	57.6
Brotherhood T.E.	258	102	39.5	156	60.5
Jwnglari T.E.	228	70	30.7	158	69.3
Total	1075	427	39.7	648	60.3

Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 2: Gender-wise Distribution of Literates in the Sample

Name of the Estate	No. of Literate Persons			Literacy rate		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Bhooteachang T.E.	76	50	126	51.0	36.8	44.2
Hattigor T.E.	79	50	129	48.5	35.5	42.4
Brotherhood T.E.	60	42	102	41.4	37.2	39.5
Jwnglari T.E.	48	22	70	37.8	21.8	30.7
Total	263	164	427	45.0	33.4	39.7

Source: Calculations from Field Survey Data, 2011

Female literacy rates varied across sample gardens also (see Table 2). It is observed that Jwnglary tea estate (with 21.8 percent) has the lowest female literacy rate among the sample gardens followed by Hattigor (35.5 percent) and Bhooteachang (36.8 percent). Brotherhood tea estate with 37.2 percent recorded the highest literacy rate among the sample tea gardens. This shows that female literacy is very lower compared to male literacy rate in both types (big and small) of sample gardens. Big tea gardens (like Hattigor compared to small gardens like Brotherhood) are also not doing so well in female literacy even though they have their own schools managed inside the garden.

The sex wise distribution of level of education among sample workers is given in Table 3. Except for primary level in Bhooteachang, number of literate

females is less than that of males in both big tea gardens in all stages of education. Further, it is clear that majority of the women workers have received education till primary level (till class IV) only. About 56 percent women workers had primary education where 13 percent women are high school literates (upto class X). Only 6 percent women workers received education beyond matriculation and above. The percentage of women literates declined as we moved from primary level to the higher level of education. This declining rate for women is faster than that of males. Thus, this trend shows that there has been a very high incidence of school drop-outs among female workers. Till primary level, many female workers register in schools but just after that level, many female persons drop-out of the schools.

Table 3: Gender-wise Distribution of Level of Education of Sample Population

Level of Education	Bhooteachang			Hattigor			Total	
	(No. of persons)			(No. of persons)			(Percentage)	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Class 1 to IV	22	23	45	37	33	70	38.1	56.0
Class V to VII	21	15	36	11	10	21	20.6	25.0
Class VIII to X	17	7	24	21	6	27	24.5	13.0
XI and above	16	5	21	10	1	11	16.8	6.0

Note: Data shown only for big tea gardens as small gardens do not manage their schools.  
Source: Field Survey, 2011

Table 4: Reasons Behind the Low Literacy among Female Population

Reasons	Bhooteachang		Hattigor		Total	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Economic backwardness	37	92.5	36	90.0	73	91.3
Negligence of female edu	22	55.0	31	77.5	53	66.3
Non-availability of schools	28	70.0	21	52.5	49	61.3
Early marriage	24	60.0	19	47.5	43	53.8

Note: Data shown only for big tea gardens as small gardens do not manage their schools.  
Source: Field Survey, 2011

#### **IV. Factors responsible for the low literacy among female workers**

There are several socio-economic factors which are directly and indirectly responsible for the high drop-outs and low literacy rate among female workers in sample areas. Some of these main factors observed from field surveys are listed in Table 4.

##### **(a)Economic backwardness**

According to the field survey data, economic condition of the family is one of the main reasons behind low literacy among the female workers in the sample. Generally economic condition plays an important role in obtaining education, i.e., families with higher income have more power of accessing education than poor families. About 91.3 percent sample female workers said that, the main reason for their illiteracy is poverty of their families. In those days, meagre income of their parents was not able to support family and hence expenditure of their education was out of question. Even at present generally workers in tea gardens earn very small amount. Regular workers are eligible to claim some concessions and perquisites such as concessional supply of food stuff, free housing, free medical attention including hospitalisation and maternity benefits, free primary education that are offered to the workers in addition to their cash wages. In addition to these

benefits, they further enjoy other benefits such as allowances of free tea of a small quantity, crèches, recreational facilities, etc. Owing to their poor economic condition, parents always considered their children as economic assets. Therefore, sending their children to school upsets the whole economic consideration of the family. Even today during the plucking season, the children (specially girls) are withdrawn from the schools and then either engaged as child labour in the gardens or in household works so as to enable more adult members to work in the garden. In this case, girls are more targeted ones than boys.

**(b) Negligence of girl's education**

About 66.3 percent of sample females said that negligence of female education among the plantation workers is another major factor for high illiteracy among female workers in the gardens. Responses reveal that illiterate women workers were not able to get proper education owing to their engagement of their childhood in cooking of food, fetching of water, collection of firewood, baby sitting etc. The general impression among the workers is that for a girl learning household works is more important than getting educated in institutions. From responses, it is found that the attitude of parents towards female education is very much negligible. Therefore, female children are very less

educated than boys and are not able to access to available educational facilities at par. Further, when all the elder members of the family go to workplaces, girl children looked into the household works and their young brothers and sisters. Moreover, employment of large number of women workers in the industry is also a responsible factor for the negligence of girl children's education among the tea labourers.

**(c) Non-availability of schools**

Distance of schools from the gardens is another reason for low literacy rate among the female workers in the sample gardens. According to our field surveys, about 61.3 percent of sample workers have replied that lack of availability of school beyond primary level creates problems in the entire educational process in the gardens areas. A few available schools in the gardens were limited only till the primary level. To pursue education beyond primary level, they have to go to nearby towns where higher level schools are located. Pursuing education beyond primary level became more difficult due to poor transport and communication system in the areas. There are no good roads which reached the nearby town easily. Added to this, majority of families are economically poor due to which they cannot afford to send children to high schools or colleges.

**(d)Early marriages**

Practice of early marriage also prevents girl children from obtaining higher education. Generally, workers arrange their girl children’s marriage at early ages. The first and foremost reason for arranging early marriage of their girl children is due to their unstable economic condition. As stated earlier, they are economically very poor. Many of them are not in a position to send their children to schools after primary levels. Therefore, they prefer marriage at early age especially for girl children. Owing to their illiteracy, poverty and a psychology of hard earned subsistence they cannot appreciate the value of female education. Therefore, the parents practically do not take any interest in the educational matters of their children (specially to girl children). As many as 53.8 percent of sample female workers said that, early marriage is another major problem for female education in the gardens. The labour families think that once their young girls are married, they find relief from some family problems. Therefore, many parents prefer marrying off their female children at young age instead of sending them to schools.

**V. Significance of women’s literacy on their children’s education**

In order to run  $\chi^2$  (chi square) test, 112 women workers (from each household) with various educational qualifications

were questioned to get information on education of their kids. Information of 280 kids is collected. The null hypothesis set is illiterate women workers do not send their kids to schools. The observed in data Table 5 have been transformed into the expected data in Table 6 in order to run the test.

Table 5: School Going Children according to Mother's Education (observed)

Qualifications	Children		Total
	In School	Out of School	
Class I-IV	17	1	18
Class V-VII	12	3	15
Class VIII-X	14	0	14
Class XI and above	10	0	10
Illiterate	174	49	223
Total	227	53	280

Source: Recorded data from respondents during field surveys.

The calculated  $\chi^2$  value obtained is 9.43 which less than the tabulated value (9.49 at 5% level with 4 degrees of freedom). This means that the null hypothesis set is accepted. Therefore, it can be inferred that although some educated women send their children to schools, on average, women workers do not want to send their kids to schools. This shows that how women’s education is given importance in the society in tea garden areas. In general, educated women as mothers have good understanding for the value of education of their kids that would help in building a good future life and good society.

Table 6: School Going Children according to Mother's Education (expected)

Qualifications	Children (%)		Total
	In School	Out of School	
Class I-IV	14.59	3.41	18
Class V-VII	12.16	2.84	15
Class VIII-X	11.35	2.65	14
Class XI and above	8.11	1.89	10
Illiterate	180.79	42.21	223
Total	227	53	280

Source: Calculations from field survey data.

## **VI. Policy measures**

The above analysis has shown the educational backwardness among the women workers of the sample tea gardens. Considering the factors responsible for educational backwardness, prompt measures for its improvement are considered highly necessary. Followings suggestions are put forward for implementation.

- (i) The existing barrier in education at tea gardens can be removed to a great extent by introducing more schools beyond primary level in the garden areas. This will help to improve education among garden workers qualitatively and quantitatively. It is good that the state government of Assam has already initiated to introduce schools through Assam Sarba Siksha Abhijan. However, the introduction of schools is limited to primary level only. Therefore, state government should initiate to establish school beyond primary level, college and some vocational technical centres.
- (ii) Maximum workers in sample gardens are illiterate and are not able to appreciate the value of girl's education. Therefore, constant campaign on female education through the government

agencies, NGOs and garden authorities to spread the awareness of female education among them is very important.

- (iii) To eradicate illiteracy, massive adult education programme should be introduced in the garden areas. For this purpose, night/evening schools may be established in the garden areas by the planters in co-operation with the concerned government departments and workers should be encouraged to attend to such schools.
- (iv) To encourage parents as well as children, special incentives should be introduced specially scholarship for girls in high/higher studies. It should be borne by garden authority or the state government.
- (v) Since most of the problems with obtaining higher education are related to economic backwardness of the garden workers, workers' economic conditions should be raised. This can be done, among many measures, by proper wage policies, promotion schemes, pay incentives for skilled workers, incentives to those who obtain higher education etc.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The present paper examined the educational status of women workers in tea garden areas in Assam based on sample data. The paper also examined the factors responsible for low literacy rate and school drop-outs among girls in the tea garden areas. The study found that a very low proportion (only 39.7 percent) of the sample population were literate. Again a large proportion of women workers in the sample gardens were illiterate, women literates consisting of only 33.4 percent. In all the sample gardens, female literacy was found to be less than that of male workers. Economic backwardness, negligence of girls' education, early marriages and unavailability of educational

infrastructures etc. were found to be important reasons for low literacy among women workers. The  $\chi^2$  test also supported the statement that illiterate women workers, on average, do not send their children to schools. This implies that women's education in particular should be improved in garden areas. In order to raise the overall literacy rate, the government and garden authorities should adopt some decisions and implement them properly. Some of these include establishment of colleges and schools above primary level, education awareness campaign, raising economic condition of workers through proper wage policies, promotions and pay incentives, adult and technical education etc.

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