

Education and Empowerment of Tea Tribe Women in Barsangan Tea Estate, Cachar District: An Analytical Study

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Abstract:

The tea garden community of Cachar District, Assam, refers to a multi-ethnic and multicultural population comprising tea estate workers and their families. Among this community, particularly among women, the literacy rate remains significantly low. Women's illiteracy within this group is a persistent and multifaceted issue that continues to hinder social progress, economic development, access to education, and personal empowerment. This study adopts a mixed-method approach to explore the root causes of female illiteracy in the tea garden community, focusing on cultural practices, economic inequality, gender-based discrimination, and limited access to educational facilities. The research was conducted in the Bajranpur Tea Estate, located in the Cachar District of Assam. Primary data were collected using focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, and direct observation. A total of 120 women, each representing a different household and aged between 20 to 45 years, were selected as participants. An interview schedule served as the main tool for data collection. Findings reveal alarmingly low literacy levels and a high dropout rate among women in this community. This lack of basic reading, writing, and numeracy skills significantly restricts their access to better employment opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures. The study highlights the urgent need for inclusive and community-based educational interventions to empower tea garden women and promote their socio-economic advancement.

Keywords: Economic inequality, Tea community, Women's illiteracy, Empowerment, Entrepreneurial potential.

1. Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a powerful agent of transformation, especially for marginalized and underprivileged communities. Its impact is particularly profound when it reaches historically disadvantaged groups such as the tea tribe women of India. As an old Chinese proverb states, "If you want to plan for a year, plant wheat; if you want to plan for ten years, plant a tree; and if you want to plan for a hundred years, educate women." This wisdom highlights the lasting impact of education, especially in empowering women to break cycles of poverty, discrimination, and marginalization. In contemporary times, the tea industry is known not just for being the producer of one of the most consumed beverages in the world, but also

as a site of social and economic hardship, especially for women workers. Tea is a widely consumed, affordable beverage that contains beneficial components such as caffeine, protein, and vitamins. It is known for relieving stress and promoting relaxation. The establishment of tea plantations in India is attributed to British colonial efforts, and the legacy of these plantations remains significant today (Goswami, 2005). In Assam's Barak Valley, the first tea gardens, including Barsangan and Ghungurpar near Silchar, were founded in 1856, as noted in the 1873 report by the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar (Chakraborty, 2014). This study focuses on the Barsangan Tea Estate, the first in the Barak Valley, and examines the educational status and empowerment of women from the tea tribes in this area. These women have historically borne the burden of economic hardship and social exclusion. However, education has begun to offer them a pathway toward freedom, equality, and self-determination. Empowerment, conceptually, refers to the process through which individuals gain control over the factors and decisions that shape their lives. Women's empowerment, in particular, involves equipping women with knowledge, resources, and opportunities that enable them to participate equally in society. It is about granting them the autonomy to make independent decisions and challenge systemic gender biases. Across the globe, numerous movements and international conferences have highlighted the need for women's empowerment as a central concern in modern development. In India, reformers and leaders have long emphasized the importance of uplifting women, and education continues to be the most effective tool in transforming their lives and securing a more equitable future.

2. Tea Tribe in Assam: Historical Background and Current Challenges

Over 150 years ago, during the colonial period, the foundation of Assam's tea industry led to the recruitment of a unique group now known as the Tea Tribe community. Initially, British contractors attempted to convince local Assamese communities that working in tea gardens would improve their livelihoods. However, it soon became evident that the local workforce was insufficient to meet the demands of the expanding tea industry. Consequently, the colonial authorities began importing laborers from eastern and central India, regions that today comprise states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. These migrant laborers were largely drawn from marginalized groups, including Adivasi communities, Dalits (formerly Scheduled Castes), and other socially disadvantaged classes, some of whom are currently classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Barua, 2008). Organizations like the Catholic Mission Cooperative Society played a pivotal role in recruiting these laborers, particularly from Adivasi communities in central India (Ekaa, 2003).

These workers were often forced into bonded contracts, subjected to exploitative conditions, and kept under the strict control of tea garden managers. Isolated from the outside world, their lives resembled those of indentured laborers (Das, 2016). Despite the difficult working and living conditions and limited access to transportation and communication, they adapted and carried on with their lives under surveillance and systemic neglect. This region has historically faced social and economic marginalization, with limited access to essential services such as education. Women, in particular, have been disproportionately affected, facing early marriage, poor access to schooling, and minimal economic opportunities.

In recent years, some progress has been made in improving educational access for women in the tea tribe

communities. However, major challenges remain. First, access to quality education is still inadequate. Many schools in tea garden areas lack basic infrastructure, trained teachers, and learning materials, severely affecting girls' educational outcomes. Secondly, socio-economic barriers, such as poverty and the associated costs of schooling—including uniforms, books, and transport—hinder continuous learning. Early marriage remains a persistent issue, disrupting girls' educational trajectories. Lastly, traditional gender norms and societal biases further limit girls' access to education and development. These deep-rooted cultural practices continue to discourage families from prioritizing education for their daughters, impeding their social and economic advancement.

3. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value as it aims to compare the economic and educational opportunities available to educated and uneducated women within the Tea Tribe community in the Barak Valley region of Assam. It highlights the broader socio-economic transformations occurring among individuals engaged in tea garden work, particularly focusing on how education influences the lives of women in this marginalized group. By examining both urban and rural contexts within the community, ranging from towns to the remote interior regions, this research provides a deeper understanding of the role education plays in shaping the quality of life. It serves as a vital indicator of the causes behind the increasing dropout rates among girls in the Tea Tribe community, shedding light on systemic challenges within the current education system. Moreover, the study reflects how access to schooling has impacted the social, cultural, and economic fabric of tea garden families. Through this analysis, the research contributes valuable insights into the empowerment of women and the long-term development of the Tea Tribe community in the Barak Valley.

4. Review of Literature

A thorough literature review allows a researcher to familiarize themselves with existing knowledge in their field of interest. It improves each stage of the research process, aiding in problem formulation, methodology, and data interpretation. Reviewing both current and historical publications offers a comprehensive perspective on the subject, blending ancient and modern ideas and potentially leading to new insights.

Ruma, D. N., & Dipak, N. (2014): The authors explore the educational vulnerabilities and risk factors faced by tea garden workers, focusing on Dewan Tea Garden in Cachar, Assam. Despite the availability of basic schooling facilities, illiteracy remains high, particularly among women workers. The study highlights how the lack of education contributes to broader social vulnerabilities and risks, including the poor socio-economic status of tea garden communities.

Kurmi, P. (2014): In this case study of Derby Tea Estate, Kurmi examines the educational challenges faced by children of tea garden laborers. The research points out the low educational status of children, largely due to the poor socio-economic conditions of their parents. Kurmi advocates for improved educational interventions and suggests several strategies to address the issue of low educational attainment in these areas.

S. Bandyopadhyay (2017): Bandyopadhyay's study examines the transformation of tribal identity in

India, focusing on the interplay between ecological and economic factors. Using the Bedia tribal community as a case study, the paper argues that tribal identity is dynamic, shaped by both traditional practices and external influences. The Bedia community, for example, has shifted from its traditional occupations of herbal medicine sales and bird-catching to new professions facilitated by education.

Sushant Kumar (2018): Kumar's book on tribal rights addresses the challenge of preserving tribal identity amidst economic development. He argues that economic progress alone is insufficient to protect the cultural and social identity of tribal communities. The book highlights the ongoing struggles faced by tribes in safeguarding their languages, customs, and beliefs from external pressures, particularly in the context of development policies post-independence.

Nabarun Purkayastha (2018): Purkayastha's study on the Oraon tribe in Barak Valley, Assam, investigates the socio-economic changes experienced by this tea garden community. Originally from Chotanagpur, the Oraons are predominantly employed in tea gardens. The study reveals that while the community retains its culture and language, there has been a noticeable shift towards a mixed cultural identity due to their interaction with the local population. Most Oraon women no longer wear traditional ornaments, signaling the impact of cultural assimilation in the region. Purkayastha employs descriptive research methods, using primary and secondary data gathered from various community members, including workers, retirees, and students.

G. Yoganandham (2023): Yoganandham's journal on tribal development in Tamil Nadu assesses the socio-economic conditions of tribes, particularly focusing on population, occupation, and the role of Panchayati Raj institutions. He discusses the challenges of tribal development, emphasizing that development cannot be viewed solely through the lens of economic growth but must incorporate cultural sensitivity and local context. The study also criticizes the lack of appropriate mechanisms to assess the unique needs of tribal populations.

Ramya S. (2018): In this journal, the author discusses the socio-economic and gender-related challenges faced by tribal women in India. Despite their substantial contributions to the household economy, tribal women face significant social marginalization, including gender-based violence and discrimination. The study highlights the need for empowerment programs to address these issues and improve their socio-economic standing.

Gopalakrishnan D., M. Indumathi, & C. Premlatha: This study examines the empowerment of women for rural development, noting that women's economic, social, and political empowerment is crucial for community development. The article stresses the importance of empowering women in rural areas, particularly in marginalized communities like tribal groups, as a means of fostering overall development.

Arup Majumder (2018): Majumder's study addresses the challenges in tribal education, particularly in Jharkhand, West Bengal. He highlights the low levels of literacy among the Bhumij tribal community and critiques the inadequacy of government initiatives in addressing the educational needs of tribal populations. The article calls for localized, context-specific educational interventions to improve access to quality education for tribal children.

Dr. Dildar Hussain (2020): Hussain's geographical study focuses on the socio-economic changes within the Santhal tribe of Jharkhand. Despite the implementation of various government policies, the Santhal community still faces poor educational and economic conditions. The study underscores the

necessity for more targeted efforts to improve literacy rates and socio-economic outcomes for tribal groups.

Dr. N.D. Gowda & Dr. Kariyanna K. (2021): This study explores the human rights violations experienced by tribal communities in India, particularly focusing on the exploitation and social exclusion faced by these groups. The authors emphasize the historical and ongoing discrimination experienced by tribal populations, which has led to the rise of tribal movements demanding social justice and the protection of their rights.

This literature review reveals the persistent challenges faced by tribal communities, particularly regarding education, socio-economic development, and gender equality. It also underscores the importance of localized and context-specific interventions in improving the conditions of these marginalized groups, with a particular focus on women and children. The studies emphasize the need for sustained efforts to address the unique challenges of tribal communities, including better access to education, socio-economic opportunities, and the preservation of cultural identities.

I. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the role of education in enhancing the social and economic empowerment of tea tribe women in Barsangan Tea Estate.
- To evaluate the educational attainment of women in the Barsangan Tea Estate and its impact on their participation in decision-making within family and community settings.
- To analyze the barriers faced by tea tribe women in accessing education and their strategies to overcome these challenges.

II. Research Questions

- How does education contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of tea tribe women in Barsangan Tea Estate?
- In what ways does educational status influence the decision-making power of tea tribe women at the household and community levels?
- What are the major challenges faced by tea tribe women in accessing education, and how do they address these challenges?

III. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources to explore the educational status and empowerment of tea tribe women in the Barsangan Tea Estate, Cachar District. Data were collected using systematic random sampling, with tribal communities from Bajrangpur and Haliya of Kathal Tea Estate selected for in-depth analysis.

A two-stage random sampling technique was employed: initially selecting tea gardens near urban areas of Barak Valley, followed by those located further from city centers, stratified by administrative divisions. A representative sample of 120 respondents from the Bajrangpur Tea Estate was interviewed. Data were collected from Bagan Panchayat members and tea garden workers to ensure diverse perspectives. While the study provides valuable insights, limitations include the small sample size, which

may affect the generalizability of findings, and language barriers, which may hinder accurate data collection. These constraints highlight the need for further, broader research in the field.

5. Discussion

This study was conducted to explore the educational status, gender disparity in literacy, and the impact of education on the lifestyle and empowerment of tea tribe women residing in the Barsangan Tea Estate of Cachar District, Assam. The analysis and discussion are based on both the research objectives and the primary data collected, particularly focusing on educational qualifications and marital status.

Educational Status of the Respondents

Table 1: Educational Status of the Respondents

Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	81	67.5
Elementary	32	26.6
High School	7	5.8
Graduation	0	0.0
Total	120	100.0

According to Table 1, the educational qualification data reveal that 67.5% of the respondents are illiterate, while 26.6% have attended only elementary school, and a minimal 5.8% reached high school. Significantly, none of the respondents had completed graduation. This glaring statistic confirms the first objective of the study, which is to analyze the literacy status of tea tribe women in Cachar. The data clearly shows a severe lack of educational attainment in this marginalized community, demonstrating the long-standing deprivation and educational backwardness among tea garden workers.

The high rate of illiteracy (67.5%) indicates that a majority of the respondents had no access to formal education. The primary reasons for this trend, as found in supplementary qualitative responses, include economic hardship, lack of educational infrastructure in remote tea gardens, early involvement in wage labor, and a cultural context where education is not prioritized, especially for women. This further addresses the second objective—to find gender differences in literacy—since in many tea tribes, boys are occasionally given access to schooling while girls are burdened with household chores or early marriage.

6. Marital Status and Its Influence

Table 2: Marital Status of the Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	52	43.3
Unmarried	50	41.6
Divorced	3	2.5
Widow	15	12.5
Total	120	100.0

Table 2 indicates that 43.3% of the respondents were married, 41.6% were unmarried, 0.025% were divorced, and 0.125% were widowed. When correlated with the educational data, it is observed that most illiterate women are either married or widowed, reflecting early marriage trends and the lack of educational continuity post-marriage. This finding supports the third objective: assessing how literacy influences the lifestyle and living conditions of tea tribe women. Illiterate married women were more likely to be involved in domestic or plantation labor, lacking exposure to alternative livelihoods or decision-making power in households.

Comparative Educational and Socioeconomic Analysis

As per the fourth objective, which compares the education level of women living near Silchar with those in remote areas, it was found from the extended field notes (not shown in table) that women living closer to urban areas had marginally better access to schooling and were more aware of the benefits of education. Those farther from Silchar, such as in Barsangan Tea Estate, were predominantly illiterate and unaware of government educational schemes.

Impact on Empowerment and Participation

The fifth and sixth objectives focus on academic success and its relationship with empowerment and participation in extra-curricular activities. The data confirms that the low education level severely hampers the empowerment of these women. There is limited participation in community development, self-help groups, or cultural programs. Women with elementary or high school education were more vocal, confident, and had aspirations for their children's education.

The discussion based on the above objectives and research questions highlights a disturbing trend of educational marginalization among tea tribe women in Cachar. Illiteracy, early marriage, and restricted access to resources continue to limit their empowerment and social mobility. There is a clear need for targeted educational interventions, government outreach, and gender-sensitive literacy programs to uplift the tea tribe community, especially its women. This study emphasizes the urgency of addressing these educational disparities to ensure long-term social development.

7. Findings of the Study

The study reveals several critical insights based on the stated objectives and field data collected from 120 respondents.

Literacy Status and Gender Gap: The overall literacy rate among the tea tribe women remains low. A significant gender gap persists, with fewer girls attending or completing school compared to boys. Early marriage plays a major role in this disparity. Many parents, influenced by socio-cultural beliefs, fear that higher education will reduce their daughters' marriage prospects. As a result, girls are often withdrawn from school before completing basic education.

Impact of Education on Lifestyle: Women who have attained some level of education show better awareness of hygiene, nutrition, and health practices. Educated women also exhibit increased participation in decision-making within their households and communities, indicating a positive impact of education on their empowerment and lifestyle.

Socioeconomic Differences Based on Location: Tea tribe women living near Silchar town have greater access to schools, tuition centers, and health facilities compared to those in remote areas. Urban proximity correlates with slightly higher literacy rates, school retention, and employment opportunities. In contrast, those living far from town face greater challenges such as lack of transportation, fewer educational institutions, and poor infrastructure.

Academic Barriers and Dropout Factors: Several critical factors contribute to the high dropout rates among girls:

- Absenteeism due to illness, domestic responsibilities, or lack of motivation.
- Poor academic performance discourages further schooling, especially if a student fails a class.
- Lack of instructional support, especially for slower learners, causes disengagement.
- Negative teacher attitudes and classroom neglect create a hostile environment for female students, pushing them to leave school early.

These findings indicate an urgent need for policy interventions focusing on educational access, teacher sensitivity training, parental awareness, and infrastructural development to enhance female literacy and empowerment among the tea tribes of Cachar.

8. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study titled "Education and Empowerment of Tea Tribe Women in Barsangan Tea Estate, Cachar District: An Analytical Study", several key recommendations are proposed to improve the educational status and empowerment of tea tribe women in the Cachar district.

Firstly, awareness campaigns must be initiated at the grassroots level to educate families about the importance of girls' education. These campaigns should challenge traditional beliefs that associate higher education with reduced marriage prospects and instead emphasize how education leads to economic independence, better health practices, and active community participation. Secondly, early marriage prevention strategies must be reinforced by implementing strict monitoring systems through

collaboration between schools, local authorities, and tea estate management to ensure girls remain in school until at least secondary level.

To address academic barriers, it is recommended that remedial teaching programs and counselling services be introduced in tea garden schools. These programs can support students who struggle academically or emotionally, reducing dropout rates caused by absenteeism and poor performance. Additionally, teacher training workshops should be conducted to sensitize educators toward gender equity and inclusive pedagogical practices. Teachers must be equipped to provide special care to academically weak students and foster a supportive classroom environment.

Given the geographic disparities, infrastructure development in remote tea estates must be prioritized. Building more schools within walking distance, ensuring safe transportation facilities, and improving classroom resources will help bridge the gap between urban and rural tea garden communities. Furthermore, scholarship schemes and financial aid programs targeted at tea tribe girls can significantly reduce economic constraints on education. Community-based study centers or evening schools may also be set up to assist working girls and those with domestic responsibilities.

So, the study reveals that educational attainment among tea tribe women in the Barsangan and surrounding tea estates of Cachar district remains low due to a complex combination of socio-economic, cultural, and systemic barriers. However, education plays a pivotal role in transforming the lives of these women—enhancing their confidence, participation in household decision-making, and economic independence. Therefore, a multi-pronged approach involving government agencies, NGOs, tea estate authorities, and community leaders is necessary to foster a supportive environment for girls' education. With sustained efforts and inclusive policies, it is possible to empower tea tribe women and enable them to contribute meaningfully to their families and society at large.

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