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Discovering Voices from the Margins: The Role of Media in Addressing the Issues of Social Protection among the Tea Garden Laborers of Assam

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Abstract

Tea is rooted in a very particular way in the lives and culture of various people in India. Tea plantation is still ongoing and shares a large part of Assam's economy. Planting is an intensive process of labor. Assam's tea plantations have a distinct type of labor participation and a specific social history. Colonial administration brought labors from outside the state. In Assam, the working condition of plantation labor has been wretched from the very beginning. Although a number of welfare programs and social protection schemes have been introduced by the government, it has not done much to help the tea garden workers. This study is a theoretical attempt using secondary data to analyse the impact of media in the implementation of social protection schemes. It employed techniques of both quantitative and qualitative research. This paper discusses the social development of the Assam's tea garden labor. It also examines various welfare schemes and analyzes the social conditions of tea garden labor. Health and education, among the many are considered as important social development indicators. This paper looks at their problems amidst various government-floated social welfare program and examines future

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implications with special reference to the tea garden laborers of Assam using secondary data sources from journals, research reports, news websites and so on. Finally, it poses some pertinent questions and gives valuable suggestions about how to tackle the problems of tea garden labour.

Keywords: *Development, Marginalization, Media, Plantation, Social Protection, Tea-Tribe.*

Introduction

The plantation industry in India, especially the tea industry is a product of colonization. Its discovery in 1823 in Assam was followed by an unprecedented expansion of the industry in various parts of the region. Tea plantation in Assam has a distinct form of involvement of labour and has a particular social history. Colonial administration brought in labourers from outside Assam especially the Chotanagpur plateau region including but not limited to states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Bengal. These indentured laborers were outsourced because the local people of Assam at the time were allegedly lazy who were either economically affluent possessing cultivable land or were status conscious of working as cheap laborers due to their illustrious past under the Ahom rule. (Das, 2013)

The living condition of the plantation labour since then, has generally been poor. Even though the government has introduced several welfare programmes and social protection schemes, it has not percolated down much to help the tea garden labourers. This research will be looking at the various aspects of the social protection schemes will also analyse the social conditions of tea garden labour. Health and education, among the many are considered as important social development indicators. This paper looks at their problems amidst various government-floated social welfare program and examines future implications with special reference to the tea garden labourers of Assam using secondary data sources from journals, research reports, news websites and so on.. Finally, it poses some pertinent questions and gives valuable suggestions about how to tackle the problems of tea garden labour.

Social formation of Tea Plantation labour in Colonial Assam

Tea plantation still continues and shares a major part of the economy in few Indian states. One of them is Assam. It is widely agreed that plantations of any kind including tea was an invention of colonial regime all over world. Similarly in colonial India, Indigo and tea plantations were promoted. British planters tried to engage the native tribal as well as non-tribal peasantry as labourers in the plantations, the repressive environment prevailing in the tea gardens failed to lure the natives (Sharma 2012). Britishers tried to bring in Chinese labourers to serve as plantation workers but they failed. Then they started looking for the alternatives as the local population, but they were perceived as lazy. Chatterjee and Das Gupta write 'the planters raised a hue and cry about local labour due to the alleged unwillingness of Assamese agricultural labourers to work in tea gardens'. Assamese were labeled as 'lazy lot' and indifferent to work by Britishers. But the actual reason for not coming to the plantation work in Assam was the high fertility of the soil. Sparse population and low rate of land revenue favoured the peasantry' (Chatterjee and Das Gupta 1981, 1861).

Large numbers of labourers came from the Chhotanagpur region. Over the period they settled into the local conditions. In tea garden of Assam they had their own social system. Bhowmik analyses plantation as a social system and explain its relationship with the state, influence of the working class organisation among the workers. He writes that the planters were able to maintain the plantation system due to four main factors: coercion, migrant labour, isolation and political support. He argues that 'the plantation system is not a static system. In order to understand the change in this system, it is necessary to analyse its relations of production and its linkage to the wider social system' (Bhowmik 1980, 1526).

It is interesting to note that though they are called as tea tribes, they are not listed in the scheduled tribe category. Time to time they demand for the ST status. But it creates more conflict with local tribal groups. It is difficult to understand that though workers in tea garden are known as Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, there are others who are recognized as Other Backward Classes

by the Government. These people not only constitute a sizable chunk of the population in the State but also play major role in tea production of the State (about 53% of the total tea production of the country) and this contributes to the economy of the State.

Tea Tribes Welfare Department was constituted in 2004 as Administrative Department vide Notification No. AR. 32/2004/34, dated 31-09-2004. A separate budget provision was made under Tea Tribes Welfare Department in the financial year 2005-2006. It has a mandate to accelerate the socio-economic development of the Tea Tribes of Assam. It also aims to enhance employability of the tea tribes, to enhance the education status, to coordinate with other development departments for providing basic amenities like health and hygiene, sanitation, safe drinking water, electricity etc. Sharma writes that 'despite their internal differences they are today referred to as a single community with the nomenclatures like 'Chah Janajati', 'Adivasi', 'Jharkhandi Adivasi'.

The socio economic condition of this community is most deplorable and has been a cause for their further exploitation (Sharma 2012, 292). There are different groups including tribal and non-tribal population in teagarden community. 'Though the mainstream Assamese society and the tea tribes have been enjoying a cordial relationship and the villages of ex-tea garden workers are mostly located near Assamese villages, of late there has been some tension in their relationship on the issue of granting Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to this community' (Sharma 2012, 294).

Concept of 'Marginalization'

In general the term marginalization describes the over actions or tendencies of human societies where people perceive to under reliable or without useful fiction are excluded, i.e. marginalized. The people who are marginalized are outside the existing system of protection and integration. This limits their opportunities and means for survival. The term defined marginalization can be in the following ways -

- 1) **Peter Leonard defines-** *"Marginality as being outside the mainstream of productive activity."*
- 2) **Latin observes-** *"Marginality is so thoroughly demeaning, for economic well-being , for human dignity as well as for physical*

security marginal peoples can always be identified by the members of dominant society and will face irrevocable discrimination."

- 3) **The encyclopedia of public health defines** - *"Marginalization as to be marginalized is to be placed in the margins as thus excluded from the privilege and power found at the center."*
- 4) Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines the term marginalization as *"To relegate to a un important or powerless position within a society or group"*.

Defining Social Protection Schemes

Social security and social protection, these two concepts are used interchangeably in most of the policy writings and academic writings. Social protection is very much in the discourse of policy programmes, *Governance and Social Protection Schemes* since last two decades.

UNICEF defines social protection as *"a set of public actions which address not only income poverty and economic shocks, but also social vulnerability, thus taking into account the inter-relationship between exclusion and poverty."*

Through income or in-kind support and programmes designed to increase access to services (such as health, education and nutrition), social protection helps realize the human rights of children and families. Social protection is concerned with preventing, managing, and overcoming situations that adversely affect people's well-being. Social protection schemes are 'social safety net' and 'protective security'. 'social security' or 'social protection' are not notional, but it is the income of an individual necessary for her/his survival (John and Mansingh 2013). Social protection deals with deprivation, risk and vulnerabilities sickness, old age, unemployment but to secure income food security, employment education social and economic security. There are various social protection schemes are initiated by the government of India such as MGNREGA, PDS, ICDS, NRHM, MDM, IAY and so on.

Governance and Social Protection Schemes

Governance is generally understood as government. But these two things are not the same. Government is a legal authority whereas governance is a process. Here both governmental and

non-governmental actors are involved. Here in this paper, the researcher prefers to use the word governance as various welfare schemes are related to people. So it is important to understand how they perceive various welfare schemes and act on it.

Thandika Mkandawire, Jimí Adésínà critiqued the ‘social protection paradigm’ as the ‘social’ side of neoliberalism – a narrow agenda dominated by conditional and unconditional cash transfers, that originated in safety net responses to structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s. Most social protection interventions target the poor or ‘ultra-poor’; their success is demonstrated through ‘randomised control trial’ impact evaluations and they are disconnected from broader social policy. In Africa, five sets of actors are driving the ‘social protection paradigm’: international financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank), bilateral donors, NGOs (often single-issue advocates), consultants, and lower-level government.

Sajjad Hassan talks about the range of interventions that the Indian government had earlier introduced or upgraded to claims-based legislated rights, notably the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS), the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Unfortunately, there is a disconnect between national-level rhetoric and ground-level realities – in practice, these social protection instruments continue to function as ‘quick fix’ handouts that fail to address the structural causes of poverty, such as inequality, social exclusion and ‘elite capture’ by local power structures. (Hassan, 2011)

Social Protection Schemes in Assam

Various social and economic variables like education, composition of family, availability of basic facilities such as water, sanitation, electricity, income, food habits, nutrition etc needs to taken into consideration for effective implementation of various social protection schemes.

“Fundamentally poverty is a denial of choice and opportunities a violation of human dignity” - U.N.

That is why each and every county of the world have been taking various initiatives and steps for eradication of poverty. Similarly

the Govt. of Assam has taken certain visions for eradication of poverty from the society through a policy document titled "Vision 2030". The poverty status of Assam as per estimation, was 34.4% during 2004 which is reduced to 27.34% in 2015. The reducing rate of poverty during the periods is 0.64%. The Govt. under Vision 2030 desires to reduce it to 0%. Accordingly a target of 1.82% is fixed to eradicate the poverty by 2030.

(Source: Eradication of poverty and Strategy and Action plan on Assam, SDG)

These targets are in conformity with the Goal No. 1.3 of the first SDG (No Poverty) which recommends to *"implement nationally appropriate social protection schemes and measures for all, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable"* (SDGs 2030)

The government of Assam has launched 18 new flagship schemes titled "Astadash Mukuta" in its budget 2020-21 , some of which are listed below –

HIGHLIGHTS OF BUDGET 2020-21

ASTADASH MUKUTAR UNNOYONEE MAALA (18 FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME)

1. Increasing stake of Assam Government in Numaligarh Refinery Ltd

- NRL's origins can be traced back to the historic Assam Accord
- Government of Assam to acquire additional shareholding in NRL to take its total stake to 26%
- Ensure NRL remains a Public Sector Undertaking in the long term
- Capacity to be expanded to 9 MMTPA from present 3 MMTPA capacity
- Rs.1500 Crore earmarked for this scheme



2. Anna Yojana

- Free rice for all beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act
- Total number of beneficiary families : 57 Lakhs
- Ensure nutritional guarantee for all

3. Jyotisman Asom

- Free electricity to all households with monthly consumptions less than 30 units
- Adequate to cover basic electricity needs of a family
- 14 Lakhs families to instantly benefit from scheme: many more to benefit by optimizing their consumption
- Additionally, Government to transfer a subsidy of Rs. 400 Crore to APDCL to insulate consumers from upward revision in tariff.





5. Chah Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela

- 7,21,485 Tea Garden workers from 752 gardens received a benefit of Rs. 5000 each during FY 18-19
- To receive another Rs. 3000 each in FY 20-21
- Will drive financial inclusion of Tea Garden workers and inculcate banking habits

6. Welfare Schemes for the Tea Tribes and Adivasi

i. Wage compensation for pregnant women

- Wage compensation expanded from existing 6 months to 9 months
- Compensation increased to Rs. 18,000 to be paid in 6 installments
- Will support pre-natal and post-natal health checkups and provide nutritional security

ii. Educational Benefits

- One-time support of Rs. 10,000 to Tea Tribes & Adivasi students who pass HSLC and HSC exams
- Students will continue to receive same benefit provided they are still pursuing their academic course

iii. Other Schemes

- 14,000 youths to get Rs. 25,000 each for starting entrepreneurial activities; additional 20,000 youths to get the same benefit in FY 20-21



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2020-21

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HIGHLIGHTS OF BUDGET 2020-21

- Smart phones for approx. 4000 Tea Garden Sardars
- Government to facilitate gratuity payment of approx. Rs. 50,000 to Tea Workers
- 300 km of roads in 300 tea garden divisions to be constructed
- 102 new high schools to ensure continuous education to children in tea gardens
- Renovation of 100 football grounds in tea garden areas
- Establishment of District & Block Programme Management Units for effective implementation of schemes



AMOUNT
₹ 150 Cr

7. Arundhati

- Rs. 40,000 in lieu of 1 tola gold to newly-wed brides with annual family income of less than Rs. 5 Lakh.
- Mandatory Registration of Marriage under the Special Marriage Act, 1954.

8. Comprehensive Social Security Schemes

- One time grant of Rs. 25,000 as family assistance to widows and 'Widow Pension' of Rs. 250 per month
- Swahid Kushal Konwar Sarbajanin Briddha Pension Asoni: Rs. 250 per month to citizens above 60 years of age, 13 Lakh senior citizens covered so far. Additional 10% to be covered in FY 20-21
- Deen Dayal Divyang Sahayiya Asoni: Rs. 1000 per month to Divyangs in Assam
- Aideu Handique Mahila Samman Asoni, new pension scheme for unmarried/divorced/separated/single women above the age of 40 years-Rs. 250 per month



AMOUNT
₹ 650 Cr

9. Vistarita Kanaklata Mahila Sabalikaran Asoni

- Revolving fund of Rs. 25000 and Rs. 10000 for female SHGs
- Rs. 50000 to each SHG availing / eligible to avail bank loans, benefiting 1.04 lakh SHGs
- Scooters for Jeevika Sakhis along with monthly allowance of Rs. 500

HIGHLIGHTS OF BUDGET 2020-21

10. Asom Mala

- Transformation of 57.617 Km of State highways and Major District and other Roads
- Rs. 250 Crore for upgradation of Industrial Roads in 7 districts
- 1000 timber bridges to be converted to RCC structures



AMOUNT
₹ 550 Cr

11. Pragyani Bharati

- Admission fee waiver, free textbooks and uniforms in Government Schools
- Rs. 1000 to 1 Lakh students for textbooks
- Textbook assistance of Rs. 1500 and Rs. 2000 for student at graduate and post graduate levels
- Rs. 1000 per month to all students towards their mess dues
- One time Education Loan Subsidy of Rs. 50000
- Scooters to 20000 top ranked female students in Class 12th

12. Assam Cancer Care Foundation

- 3 tier Cancer Care Grid
- State contributed Rs. 550 Crore and Rs. 250 Crore by Tata Trusts so far
- Construction in progress in 8 districts, Phase 1 within 2020-21
- Unified Technology Platform; 34,544 detections in 3 years



AMOUNT
₹ 148 Cr



AMOUNT
₹ 500 Cr

13. Bhraman Sarathi

- Free and dedicated bus services for women and senior citizens in Guwahati
- Pink buses in busiest routes will provide safe and comfortable rides
- Free ride in ASTC for youth appearing in examination / interviews

14. Asom Darshan

- Development of tourist spots and religious places of all faiths
- Rs. 10 Lakh transferred for infrastructure development to 915 religious institutions
- Rs. 2 Lakh Annuity Grant for each Devalaya in 2020-21
- Rs. 2.5 Lakh to 8000 Namghars for infrastructure
- Rs. 614 Crore for road connectivity improvement



HIGHLIGHTS OF
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HIGHLIGHTS OF BUDGET 2020-21

15. Yuva Arohan

- Development of entrepreneurial mindset in youth for a 'Resurgent Assam'
- Introduction of 'Entrepreneurship' as a curricular subject from Class XI onwards
- 'Nano-entrepreneurship Grant' as Seed Capital for real life projects



AMOUNT
₹ 315 Cr



AMOUNT
₹ 140 Cr

16. Sonali Shaishab Rupali Pathsala

- Infrastructure development grant to school management committee
- Upgradation to be completed by October, 2020
- School infrastructure upgradation at Rs.25 Lakh per School for 200 Elementary Schools on pilot basis

17. Teachers Provincialization Drive

- Provincialisation of services of all teachers within August 2020
- Provincialisation of 20,288 teachers under consideration



AMOUNT
₹ 2800 Cr



18. Orunodoi

- Tectonic shift in Governance delivery and poverty alleviation
- Minimum guarantee to the poorest for nutrition and health
- Annually Rs. 10000 to 27 lakh poor households through Direct Benefit Transfer
- Rs. 400 for medicines and Rs. 430 for pulses, sugar and fruits & vegetables
- Transfer of money directly to the primary care-takers of households i.e. women

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Given below are a few of the existing welfare and social protection schemes. These schemes directly or indirectly affect the tea garden community as a whole –

- ☐ PMAY
- ☐ MGNREGS
- ☐ Assam Chah Bagichar Dhan Puraskar Mela Scheme
- ☐ Assam Moitiri Scheme
- ☐ Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana
- ☐ Financial Assistance for Higher Studies
- ☐ Grants to Women SHGs
- ☐ Orunodoi
- ☐ Wage Compensation scheme for pregnant women of tea gardens
- ☐ Awareness Programme on Child/Human Trafficking, Family Planning, Legal Awareness, Health etc.

Objectives

1. To identify the socio-economic condition of tea-garden labourers relevant to the government welfare/development schemes.
2. To examine the extent of the implementation of the various government development/social protection schemes?
3. To find out the resilience of the tea garden labourers to various issues vis-à-vis education, health, occupational health hazards etc.
4. To find an efficient way to implement the various government welfare/social protection schemes.

Methodology

The paper employs theoretical discussion and interpretation of data qualitatively by looking at the problems of the tea garden labourers of Assam amidst various government-floated social welfare program and examines future implications with special reference to using secondary data sources from journals, research reports, news websites and so on.

Social Relevance:

This particular research article titled '*Voices from the Margins : The Role of Media in addressing the issues of Social Protection among the Tea Garden laborers of Assam*' aims to look at the various aspects of the social protection schemes floated by the government for the welfare of the tea garden labourers.

The tea tribe community has been one of the most marginalized group of people in this region and elsewhere in our country. Even though a lot of research work has been done with respect to various aspects of their lives, it leaves a lot to be desired for. Even though we can call plantation to be a somewhat organized sector in other countries, the same cannot be said about India. The guidelines and/or recommendations of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 are hardly being adhered to even after all these years. As a result this group of people has been vulnerable to socio-economic conditions. Decline in the tea industry since the 2000s and with the onset of the Corona Virus Pandemic the future looks grim for them unless the government steps in and tries to mitigate some of the issues. An in depth study to analyse the condition of this community needs to be done so as to effectively trigger policy changes in the immediate future.

Existing and proposed welfare policies :

Social protection needs to be more than a palliative agenda for alleviating poverty and vulnerability, believing instead that social protection should be fundamentally interested in realising economic and social rights for all. This alternative agenda is one grounded in social justice, and it opens space for understanding how issues of rights, governance, distribution and access are critical for breaking the production and reproduction of vulnerability over time. (Devereux, S. et al. ,2011)

However in reality social protection remains insufficiently focused on achieving social justice outcomes, in terms of both objectives and implementation. The primary goal of most social protection interventions is to protect minimum subsistence in low-income households

Social protection can do more than help poor and vulnerable people to manage risk in the short term; it can – and should – also

tackle the underlying causes of their vulnerability. Since many sources of risk and vulnerability are social and political, this makes it imperative to understand the sociopolitical context and to engage with the holders of power and the drivers of inequality, to achieve socially equitable outcomes.

Deepta Chopra in her article argued that the MGNREGS in India has limited potential to contribute to establishing social contracts, partly because of confusion about what it actually is – anti-poverty measure, job creation scheme, rural development programme, social protection intervention or flagship government programme? The ‘transformative’ feature of MGNREGS is not the employment it offers, but the empowerment that derives from the right to demand work. (Chopra, 2011).

Building on this, Nidhi Vij showed how the introduction of ‘social audits’ to MGNREGS has created a platform for participatory governance. Social audits give villagers a ‘voice’ to hold local administrations and programme implementers accountable for delivery, empowering poor people and potentially transforming community-level social relations and political structures. (Devereux, S. et al. ,2011).

Further Areas of Discussion

On September 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all. The 2030 Agenda is universal and applies to all countries of the world, seeking to bring about transformative change to achieve inclusive, people-centred sustainable development with no one left behind. It recognizes that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.

With the new 2030 Agenda reducing poverty has been transformed from a ‘worthy cause’ to a challenge in the public eye that is much more newsworthy for journalists and all media from the press to TV or radio, from social media to mobile phones and the use of ICT in general. This offers significant opportunities for the media to play a strategic role for eradicate poverty. It aims to ensure social protection for the poor and vulnerable, increase access to

basic services and support people harmed by climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.

The concept of “knowledge societies”, according to UNESCO is based on four key principles - freedom of expression, universal access to information and knowledge, respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, and quality education for all. This concept recognizes the crucial role of the media and information and communication technology in creating activities that will expand access to information, contribute to achieving the SDGs, and enable us to eventually bridge the ‘digital divide’, which is far more than a technological issue.

The time has come for all policy actors to recognize and support the vital contribution of the media to help identify innovative strategies to fight poverty particularly in developing countries. The media can play a major role in developing public understanding of economic, social, and environmental issues: The three pillars of sustainable development. It can provide significant opportunities for people who have experienced poverty to have a voice and share their views. These include: Informing a wide range of audiences on poverty reduction issues and providing an inclusive platform and an open forum to share the views and concerns of people living in vulnerable situations.

Conclusion

In today’s era of new technologies, the media, particularly the internet and social media platforms, offer more opportunities. The new media is increasing rapidly and its potential is constantly being developed and modernized. The media plays a central role in informing the public about global, national and local events and is a powerful medium for shaping opinion and policy.

Changes in national policies often come about after a sustained media campaign raising public awareness and causing national debates. High-quality public service and public service journalism in particular should be supported as public goods. Public interest journalism involves media content that provides citizens with access to information on key aspects of public life significantly affecting their well-being and involvement. Numerous examples exist to show how the media, including the widespread use of

new technologies, have contributed to reduce poverty by bringing basic services to people living in vulnerable situations including older persons, persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples.

The media are at the intersection of possible tools and innovations that can be used for a sustainable future. (Strategies for the eradication of poverty to achieve sustainable development for all, The United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD), 2017).

Poverty is under-reported in the media and, when it is reported, those facing poverty are often not given the space to explain what it really means. A few points needs to be pondered over.

- How people living in poverty situations can engage with the media to get seen and valued?
- How can the international community best harness the power of media, especially social media and ICTs to educate and transform?

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