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Education and Employment: Challenges of the Tea Tribe Community in Assam

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Abstract: The Tea Tribe community constitutes an important social and economic group in Assam and has a long historical association with the tea plantation economy. Despite their contribution to the state's tea industry, many members of the community continue to face challenges related to education, employment, occupational mobility and socio-economic development. Education is particularly important because it can provide opportunities for social mobility and enable younger generations to move beyond dependence on low-paid plantation employment. However, research has identified several barriers, including poverty, parental illiteracy, inadequate educational infrastructure, and geographical isolation of tea gardens, limited access to secondary and higher education, language-related difficulties, insufficient academic support and weak career guidance. Employment presents another major challenge. A significant section of the community remains dependent on plantation work, while opportunities for skill-based and non-tea employment remain comparatively limited. Recent research, however, indicates increasing occupational diversification and migration from tea gardens to alternative employment, with evidence that occupational mobility can improve socio-economic status. This paper examines the relationship between education and employment among the Tea Tribe community of Assam, discusses major challenges and evaluates possible strategies for educational advancement, skill development, occupational diversification and socio-economic mobility.

Keywords: Tea Tribe, Assam, education, employment, occupational mobility, tea garden workers, literacy, skill development, socio-economic development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tea Tribe community occupies an important position in the social and economic life of Assam. The community developed historically through the migration of labourers from different parts of India to work in Assam's expanding tea plantations during the colonial period. Over generations, these communities became closely associated with tea gardens and developed distinctive social and cultural identities within Assam. The tea industry continues to depend heavily on plantation labour, but the socio-economic conditions of tea garden communities remain a major concern. Education and employment are particularly important because they influence whether younger generations can achieve upward social mobility or remain dependent on traditional plantation occupations. Education can improve literacy, knowledge, skills, confidence and access to employment. However, merely establishing schools does not guarantee educational equality. Research in Assam has identified problems involving school accessibility, infrastructure, parental education, poverty, language, geographical isolation and continuation beyond primary education. Employment presents a related challenge. When educational attainment remains low, young people may have limited access to formal-sector employment, skilled occupations and higher-paying jobs. As a result, many continue to depend on plantation labour. Recent studies suggest, however, that occupational diversification is occurring. Research based on 927 households across five districts found evidence of movement from tea-garden employment towards alternative occupations and reported improved socio-economic status among those who had transitioned out of tea-garden labour.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the educational position of the Tea Tribe community.
- To identify the major barriers to educational attainment.
- To examine the relationship between education and employment.
- To examine the emerging trend of livelihood diversification.
- To suggest measures for improving education, employment and socio-economic mobility.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is based primarily on secondary research. It draws upon peer-reviewed journal articles, research studies, institutional publications and academic reports concerning the Tea Tribe and tea garden communities of Assam. Particular attention has been given to studies dealing with education, school participation, educational vulnerability, employment, occupational mobility and socio-economic conditions. The paper also uses recent research on occupational diversification to understand changes occurring within the traditional plantation-based employment structure. Because individual studies have been conducted in particular districts or selected tea gardens, their findings are not automatically treated as state-wide statistics. This distinction is important when presenting authentic academic research.

Historical Background of the Tea Tribe Community

The history of the Tea Tribe community in Assam is closely associated with the development of the tea plantation industry during the colonial period. When the British expanded commercial tea cultivation in Assam during the nineteenth century, there was a shortage of locally available plantation labour. Labourers were therefore recruited and brought from different regions of central, eastern and northern India. Over time, these workers settled permanently in and around the tea gardens. Their descendants gradually developed a distinct social identity and are today broadly referred to as the Tea Tribe or tea garden community of Assam. The plantation system shaped almost every aspect of their lives. Employment, housing, access to basic facilities and social relationships became closely connected with the tea garden. As generations continued to work in plantations, tea-garden employment often became an inherited occupation. This historical pattern has had important consequences for educational and occupational mobility. A family that has depended on plantation employment for generations may have fewer opportunities, resources and social networks outside the tea industry. The historical experience is therefore important for understanding present-day educational and employment challenges. The difficulties faced by the Tea Tribe community cannot be explained only by individual poverty or lack of educational interest. They are also connected with the historical structure of plantation society, unequal access to resources and the long-term dependence on a particular form of employment.

Importance of Education for the Tea Tribe Community

Education is one of the most important instruments for improving the socio-economic position of the Tea Tribe community. It can provide individuals with literacy, knowledge, professional skills, confidence and greater awareness of economic and social opportunities. For a community historically associated with plantation labour, education can create pathways towards occupations outside traditional tea-garden work. Education can particularly benefit the younger generation. A child who receives quality secondary and higher education may have opportunities to become a teacher, nurse, government employee, technician, entrepreneur, banking professional, administrator or other skilled worker. Such occupational diversification can reduce the family's dependence on plantation employment. Education also contributes to social empowerment. An educated individual is generally better positioned to understand government schemes, labour rights, employment regulations, financial institutions and healthcare services. Education can also strengthen participation in local institutions and decision-making. However, education can perform these functions only when it is accessible, affordable and of adequate quality. Simply enrolling children in school is not enough. Students need to remain in education, successfully complete different levels and acquire knowledge and skills that are useful in the labour market.

Educational Status of the Tea Tribe Community

The educational position of Tea Tribe communities has improved over time, but significant inequalities remain. The level of educational attainment differs considerably between tea gardens, districts, households and generations. Younger people generally have greater educational opportunities than earlier generations, but access to higher and professional education remains uneven. Studies conducted in tea garden areas of Assam have identified problems such as limited educational infrastructure, dropout, educational stagnation and restricted access to higher levels of schooling. Research in Udalguri, for example, examined the availability and accessibility of education among tea garden workers and identified significant educational challenges. The problem should therefore be understood at several levels. First, there is the question of literacy and basic schooling. Second, there is the problem of completing secondary education. Third, there is access to higher secondary, college and professional education. Finally, there is the question of whether education actually leads to meaningful employment. Consequently, educational development among the Tea Tribe community should not be measured only by school enrolment.

Poverty as a Barrier to Education

Poverty is one of the most important factors affecting educational opportunities among tea garden communities. Many households have limited incomes and must prioritise essential expenditure such as food, housing, healthcare and household necessities. Even when schooling is officially free, families may face indirect educational costs. These can include school uniforms, books, stationery, transportation, examination expenses, private tutoring and digital

devices. For a poor household, these costs can become significant. Children may also contribute to household activities. Older children, particularly adolescents, may be expected to assist parents with domestic responsibilities or income-generating activities. When a family faces financial difficulties, education may be considered less immediately important than earning an income. This creates a cycle of disadvantage. Low household income can reduce educational attainment, while low educational attainment can restrict employment opportunities and keep household income low. Breaking this cycle requires financial assistance, scholarships, and better employment opportunities for adults and strong support for children from economically vulnerable households.

Parental Education and Educational Attainment

The educational level of parents can strongly influence the educational development of children. Parents who have received education are generally more familiar with school systems, examinations, scholarships and higher-education opportunities. They may also be better able to help children with homework and encourage them to continue studying. In many Tea Tribe households, parents themselves may have had limited access to formal education. This can make it difficult for them to provide academic assistance to their children. It does not mean that parents do not value education; rather, they may lack the educational experience and resources necessary to support their children's academic development. Parental education also affects educational aspirations. When children grow up in households where few people have attended college or entered professional employment, higher education may appear distant or unfamiliar. Therefore, adult literacy and continuing education can have indirect benefits for children. Improving educational opportunities for parents can strengthen the educational environment of the entire household.

Geographical Isolation of Tea Gardens

The geographical location of many tea gardens creates another important educational challenge. A number of tea estates are situated away from large towns and urban centres. Primary schools may be available within or near the plantation, but secondary schools, colleges, technical institutions and coaching centres may be located farther away. Distance creates additional costs. Students may need to walk long distances or depend on public transport. Transportation may be expensive or unreliable. These difficulties can become particularly serious during the rainy season or in areas with poor roads. The problem can be more severe for girls because parents may be concerned about safety when daughters have to travel long distances to attend school. Thus, geographical isolation can indirectly contribute to dropout and educational stagnation. Improving roads, public transport, residential educational facilities and access to secondary schools can significantly reduce this problem.

Lack of Secondary and Higher Education Facilities

One of the most important problems in tea garden communities is the transition from primary education to higher levels of schooling. A child may have access to a primary school but face considerable difficulties after completing the elementary stage. If there is no nearby secondary or higher-secondary school, the child must travel to another locality. This transition is a critical stage because students from economically disadvantaged households are particularly vulnerable to dropping out. Families may decide that the additional expense and difficulty of continuing education are not worthwhile, especially if employment is immediately available. Higher education presents even greater challenges. Colleges and universities are generally located farther away and require additional expenditure for transportation, accommodation, books and other necessities.

3. QUALITY OF EDUCATION

The availability of schools does not necessarily guarantee quality education. A school may exist physically but still fail to provide students with adequate learning opportunities. Quality education depends on trained and motivated teachers, sufficient classrooms, teaching materials, libraries, laboratories, electricity, sanitation, digital facilities and regular academic monitoring. Students from Tea Tribe communities may also require additional academic support because many are first-generation learners. If they experience difficulties in reading, mathematics or other subjects, the absence of remedial support can lead to poor performance and eventual dropout. Poor learning outcomes can also reduce students' confidence. If students repeatedly perform poorly in examinations, they may begin to believe that higher education is beyond their capabilities. Therefore, improving education requires attention to both access and learning quality. Schools must ensure that children not only attend classes but actually acquire the skills required for further education and employment.

Language and Cultural Barriers

Language is another factor that can influence educational outcomes. Tea Tribe communities are culturally and linguistically diverse. Children may speak a particular community language or dialect at home while encountering Assamese, English or another language in formal education. When the language of instruction differs significantly from the language used at home, young children may initially experience difficulties in understanding lessons. This

can affect classroom participation, reading comprehension and academic confidence. Cultural differences may also influence the relationship between schools and communities. If the curriculum does not adequately reflect the history and cultural experiences of Tea Tribe communities, students may feel disconnected from the educational system. A culturally responsive education system should respect local languages, traditions and histories while ensuring that students acquire proficiency in Assamese, English and other languages necessary for higher education and employment.

Digital Divide

Digital technology has become increasingly important in education and employment. Students now need access to smartphones, computers, internet connectivity and digital learning resources. However, the benefits of digital education are not equally distributed. Families with low incomes may not be able to afford smartphones, computers or regular internet access. Some tea garden areas may also experience weak connectivity. This creates a digital divide between students who can access online educational resources and those who cannot. The digital divide became especially important during periods when education depended heavily on online learning. Students without devices or connectivity could not participate effectively. Digital inclusion should therefore become an important component of educational development. Community digital centres, school computer laboratories, reliable internet connectivity and affordable access to devices can help reduce this inequality.

Gender and Education

Gender is an important dimension of educational inequality. Although girls' educational participation has increased, girls from economically disadvantaged households may still face additional barriers. Household responsibilities can affect girls more than boys. Girls may be expected to assist with cooking, cleaning, childcare and other domestic activities. In some households, economic difficulties may lead parents to prioritise boys' education. Early marriage can also interrupt girls' education. Once married, young women may have limited opportunities to return to formal education. Research on tea garden communities has identified low educational attainment among women as an important concern. The educational disadvantage of women has implications not only for employment but also for health, family welfare and the education of the next generation. Therefore, girls' education should be treated as a major development priority.

Relationship between Education and Employment

Education and employment are closely connected. Educational qualifications increasingly determine the range of occupations available to an individual. A person with limited schooling may have fewer options and may be concentrated in manual, informal or low-skilled employment. A person with secondary, higher-secondary, technical or university education may have access to a much broader range of occupations. For the Tea Tribe community, this relationship is particularly important because plantation labour has historically been a major source of employment. If young people receive better education and job-oriented skills, they can potentially move into occupations outside the plantation economy. In this way, education can become an instrument of occupational mobility. However, education must be linked to actual employment opportunities. Qualifications without relevant skills or labour-market connections may not produce substantial economic improvement.

Dependence on Tea Plantation Employment

Tea plantation employment remains central to the livelihood structure of many Tea Tribe families. The tea industry provides employment and has historically supported entire communities. However, dependence on one sector also creates vulnerability. When employment opportunities outside the tea industry are limited, individuals have few alternatives. The occupational pattern can become intergenerational. Children grow up in tea gardens, see their parents working in plantations and may eventually enter the same occupation. This does not mean plantation employment is inherently undesirable. The problem arises when workers have no meaningful alternatives. A healthy employment system should allow individuals to choose between plantation work, skilled employment, entrepreneurship, agriculture, services and other occupations according to their education and abilities.

Migration and Employment Mobility

Migration is becoming an important employment strategy for some members of the Tea Tribe community. Young people may migrate to towns and cities in Assam or other states in search of employment. Migration can provide access to jobs that are not available in tea garden areas. Recent research on occupational mobility among tea garden labour households in Assam has found evidence of movement from plantation employment towards alternative occupations and associated improvements in socio-economic status among those who successfully transitioned. However, migration also involves risks. Migrant workers may encounter insecure employment, inadequate housing, exploitation, lack of social security and separation from family. Therefore, migration should not be viewed as the only solution. The broader objective should be to provide people with genuine employment choices, both within and outside their home communities.

Government Programmes and Institutional Support

Government intervention plays an important role in improving educational and employment opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Government programmes can provide scholarships, school infrastructure, nutrition support, skill development, vocational training and employment assistance. The Right to Education framework has expanded access to elementary education, while various central and state programmes aim to support disadvantaged students. However, the existence of policies does not necessarily guarantee effective implementation. Students may remain unaware of available scholarships or face administrative difficulties in obtaining benefits. The gap between policy formulation and implementation is therefore a major issue. Government departments, schools, local authorities and community organisations should work together to ensure that eligible students actually receive the benefits for which they are entitled.

Major Challenges

The first challenge is poverty. Limited income restricts access to education and skill development. The second challenge is inadequate educational infrastructure. In some locations, access to higher levels of education remains difficult. The third challenge is geographical isolation. Distance from schools, colleges and employment centres can reduce opportunities. The fourth challenge is low parental education. First-generation learners may receive limited academic support at home. The fifth challenge is gender inequality. Girls may face household responsibilities, early marriage and other social barriers. The sixth challenge is limited occupational diversification. Historical dependence on plantation employment can restrict employment choices. The seventh challenge is inadequate skill development. Young people may complete schooling without acquiring market-oriented skills. The eighth challenge is weak career guidance. Students may not know how to navigate higher education and employment opportunities. The ninth challenge is the digital divide. Limited access to digital resources can create new forms of educational inequality. The tenth challenge is the gap between education and employment. Even when educational attainment improves, suitable jobs may not be available locally. These challenges must therefore be addressed together rather than through isolated interventions.

Recommendations

- **Strengthening School Infrastructure:** The first priority should be to improve educational infrastructure in tea garden areas. Schools should have adequate classrooms, sanitation, electricity, libraries, teaching materials and digital facilities.
- **Improving Access to Secondary Education:** Greater attention should be given to the transition from primary to secondary education. Where secondary schools are distant, transportation facilities, hostels or other residential arrangements can help students continue their education.
- **Preventing School Dropout:** Schools should identify students who have irregular attendance or poor academic performance and provide remedial support. Financial assistance should be provided to families where economic hardship is a major reason for dropout.
- **Expanding Scholarships:** Scholarships can reduce the financial burden on Tea Tribe families, particularly for secondary, higher-secondary and higher education. Information about scholarships should also reach students and parents directly because lack of awareness can prevent eligible students from accessing support.
- **Supporting First-Generation Learners:** Many students may be the first members of their families to pursue higher education. Such students require mentoring, tutoring and career counselling. Special academic support can help them overcome difficulties that might otherwise result in dropout.
- **Promoting Girls' Education:** Special attention should be given to retaining girls in secondary and higher education. Safe transportation, sanitation facilities, scholarships, hostels and awareness programmes can help reduce gender-based barriers.
- **Improving Digital Access:** Digital learning centres should be established in areas where individual households cannot afford computers or reliable internet. Schools should also provide students with opportunities to develop basic digital literacy.
- **Expanding Vocational Education:** Vocational education should be integrated with mainstream education so that students have multiple pathways after secondary school. Training should be based on local and regional employment demand.
- **Establishing Career Counselling** Career counselling should become a regular component of secondary and higher-secondary education. Students should receive information about universities, government employment, professional courses, technical education, apprenticeships and entrepreneurship.
- **Strengthening Skill Development:** Skill-development programmes should focus on practical and marketable skills. Training providers should also establish placement partnerships with employers.

4. CONCLUSION

The educational and employment problems of the Tea Tribe community in Assam are deeply interconnected with its historical, economic and social circumstances. The community has made significant contributions to Assam's tea economy, yet historical dependence on plantation employment has restricted occupational mobility for many families. Education provides one of the strongest possible pathways for changing this situation. However, educational improvement must go beyond simply increasing enrolment. Children must be able to remain in school, complete secondary education, enter higher or vocational education, acquire relevant skills and eventually obtain decent employment. At the same time, employment policy must go beyond plantation work. Tea garden employment will continue to be important, but younger generations should have the freedom to enter alternative occupations if they wish. Recent research on occupational mobility and livelihood diversification indicates that movement into alternative employment can be associated with improved socio-economic conditions.

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