

Gendered Vulnerabilities and the Quest for Social Inclusion: An Examination of Marginalisation among Women Tea Plantation Workers in Assam

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Abstract

Women working in tea plantations in Assam have always faced significant disadvantages. This is due to a combination of factors, including their gender, ethnicity, and social class, which collectively marginalise them in society and the workforce. The tea plantation industry in Assam heavily relies on women workers, who constitute over 60% of the workforce but remain marginalised. Despite their significant contribution, they face wage discrimination, sexual exploitation, and physical coercion. Their underrepresentation in trade unions further prevents their involvement in discussions concerning compensation and working conditions. The lack of Scheduled Tribe (ST) recognition has long denied them access to constitutional safeguards, educational reservations, and socio-economic benefits. Resistance from local tribal groups, who claim exclusive indigeneity, has further complicated this demand. They reject the Adivasis' claim to be the sole "sons of the soil" in the region, arguing that this status belongs exclusively to themselves. This paper explores the profound marginalisation experienced by women in Assam's tea plantations and examines existing social protection schemes aimed at improving their socio-economic conditions. The study relies on secondary data collected from government reports, academic literature, news articles, policy briefs, and other relevant sources. The study highlights that inadequate enforcement of labour laws has significant negative consequences for women plantation workers. Moreover, beyond existing challenges, the research reveals a troubling surge in human trafficking and violence against women within tea garden communities. To address this, the paper advocates for a social inclusion framework that champions human rights and gender equality, built on the principles of participatory democracy.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Women, Tea Tribes, Assam, Social Inclusion, Plantation, ST Status

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Introduction

The World Economic Forum (WEF) has released the 19th edition of its *Global Gender Gap Report* for 2025, ranking India 131st out of 148 countries. India ranks behind Bangladesh (24), Nepal (125), and Sri Lanka (130). The *Global Gender Gap Index* evaluates gender equality in countries based on four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (The Hindu, 2025). Gendered vulnerabilities in India are complex and context-specific, affecting women across diverse social and geographic settings. In urban slums, female-headed households often grapple with severe poverty and inadequate access to essential services (Nayak & Singh, 2020). In rural regions, women face heightened risks due to climate change that causes floods, drought, cyclones, etc. (Udas et al., 2021). Their challenges are intensified by deep-rooted social discrimination, economic hardship, and lack of political representation. Gender performativity continues to shape societal norms, reinforcing perceptions of women as inferior and perpetuating a culture where sexual violence is often normalised, affecting women across all social classes (Joy et al., 2015). Elderly women, particularly widows, endure further marginalisation due to poverty, social isolation, and a lack of institutional support, frequently resulting in their relocation to old-age homes (Kumar & Bhakat, 2020).

Tea plantation women are facing layered vulnerabilities due to low wages, precarious working conditions, poor healthcare, and limited social mobility, often exacerbated by their ethnic and class identities. Further, the gendered division of labour in tea plantations reflects a broader '*social division of labour*,' where tasks performed exclusively by women are often deemed less skilled. This perception leads to a lower status for women within the labour hierarchy. Even when women receive equal pay for the same work, they are frequently assigned roles considered less valuable, reinforcing their marginalisation within the plantation workforce (Hensman, 1999). Baruah (2018) has given a quick look at how the plantation economy functions as a political force that blurs the lines between public and private spaces. Tea gardens are workplaces for labourers but private property for management. These spaces, often portrayed as timeless and colonial remnants, are commonly featured in tourism imagery that romanticises women tea pluckers amidst lush landscapes. However, such representations glorify women's labour without addressing their lived realities or marginalised identities. The intersection of gender with debates on public/private, nature/culture, and production/reproduction reveals complex discourses surrounding women's work in the tea

plantations (bagans) in Assam. Gender discrimination remains a longstanding concern in the tea plantations of Munnar, Kerala, where women workers continue to face unequal pay, restricted opportunities for promotion, and challenging working conditions. Despite their strong contribution to the industry, women are often subjected to systemic exploitation and marginalisation (Kubendran, 2020). Research by Oxfam Research Institute on India's tea plantations highlights gendered vulnerabilities that plantation women face, including lower wages compared to their male counterparts, frequent harassment, and inadequate access to essential services such as healthcare and education. These disparities call for the urgent need for gender-sensitive labour reforms and institutional mechanisms that ensure dignity, equity, and improved livelihoods for women workers in the plantation sector (Oxfam International, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the vulnerabilities of women tea workers, particularly temporary labourers, highlighting their job insecurities and the gendered impact of the crisis (Barhoi & Dayal, 2023). Human trafficking is also a significant challenge for the tea tribe community, with many children and adolescents falling prey to traffickers who lure them with false promises of employment in other states. Young girls are increasingly vulnerable, with reports indicating that a substantial number are trafficked from tea plantation regions in Assam to other parts of the country (Ahmad, 2022).

Objectives and Methodology of the Paper

This paper explores gendered vulnerabilities as well as marginalisation experienced by women in Assam's tea plantations. The study also aims to identify pathways for social inclusion and empowerment of tea plantation workers in Assam. The study is descriptive in nature and relies on secondary data that has been collected from reports of *Oxfam India*, *Tea Tribes Welfare Department (TTWD)*, *Ministry of Women and Child Development*, *Government of India*, *Indian Tea Research*, reports of *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)* and *Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG)*. As well as official websites of Assam, books, newspapers, academic articles, etc, are analysed.

About Study Profile

The study covers the tea tribe's community (women) of Assam. The Tea-garden community of Northeast India, primarily concentrated in Assam, is a multiethnic and multicultural group descended from indentured labourers brought by the British from various regions of India between the 1860s and 1890s. They are officially classified as Other Backwards Classes (OBC)

in Assam and are often referred to as Tea Tribes. Assam is recognised as the cradle of Indian tea, boasting the largest tea cultivation area in the country. It contributes approximately 51% of India's total tea-growing land. As of 2022–23, Assam also leads the nation in tea production, accounting for 52% of the total output. Tea is primarily cultivated in the expansive plains of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys. Of the 3,47,201 hectares under tea cultivation in the state, the Brahmaputra Valley alone comprises 3,10,632 hectares (around 89%), while the Barak Valley covers the remaining 11% (CAG, 2024). They are primarily settled in regions with a high concentration of tea gardens, notably in the districts of *Upper Assam such as Charaideo, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Tinsukia*, as well as in the Northern Brahmaputra belt, including *Kokrajhar, Nagaon, Sonitpur, and Udalguri*. Additionally, significant populations reside in the Barak Valley districts of *Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj* (CAG, 2024).

Figure 1: Tea plantation workers at an estate located near Kalaigaon in Assam's Darrang district



Source: Internet (Wikiwand)

Historical and Socio-Economic Background

The origins of the tea industry in Assam trace back to the 1830s, following the British colonial annexation of the region. The colonial administration established a highly stratified plantation system that systematically marginalised the workforce, particularly the ‘*Adivasi*’ communities brought from central and eastern India. These workers, recruited primarily from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Bihar, and West Bengal, were transported an estimated 750,000 individuals between 1870 and 1900 to serve the labour demands of the burgeoning tea economy (Sharma, 2018). Once in Assam, they were trapped in a cycle of generational labour with minimal rights, limited mobility, and total dependency on plantation owners for their basic subsistence needs. The plantation system operated under a deeply entrenched “*paternalistic*” framework, where British tea planters wielded near-absolute control over workers' lives, blurring the lines between employer, landlord, and state authority (EPW Engage, 2019).

The descendants of these migrant workers, now known as the tea tribe community, constitute approximately 20% of Assam’s population, around 3.12 crore (30 million) people (Dutta, 2019). Despite their centuries-old settlement in Assam, they continue to remain socially, economically, and politically marginalised. Classified neither as Scheduled Tribes (STs) nor as Indigenous Assamese, they are excluded from crucial affirmative action benefits, including reserved quotas in education and employment. Resistance from local tribal groups, who assert exclusive indigeneity, has further complicated the Adivasi community’s demand for Scheduled Tribe status. These groups contest the ‘*Adivasis*’ claim to being the rightful “sons of the soil”, insisting that this designation pertains solely to themselves and not to communities brought in as colonial-era migrant labour (Lakra, 2024). This exclusion has not only increased their economic vulnerability but also led to a protracted identity crisis. *The All-Assam Tea Tribe Students’ Association (ATTSA)* has emerged as a key civil society voice advocating for the community’s inclusion in the ST category.

Women comprise over 60% of the plantation workforce, yet remain underrepresented in leadership or decision-making positions. Permanent workers are entitled to basic facilities such as housing, healthcare, rations, and maternity leave. However, casual and contractual workers are denied these benefits, deepening their precarity and economic insecurity (Sutradhar, 2015). Female labourers in tea plantations are required to stay away from their homes for a minimum of eight hours daily. Unlike their male counterparts, women often work longer hours and are compelled to increase their pace to earn higher wages. This results in

greater pressure on women to boost productivity, further intensifying their physical and emotional burden. Factory work is often perceived as unsuitable for women due to the heavy machinery involved and a lack of confidence among female labourers in such environments. However, women are generally more serious and dedicated to their work. Increasing their participation in factories could benefit the industry, provided they receive proper education, confidence-building, and skills training (Baruah, 2018). Plantation work is passed down through the generations. Since the colonial era, the method of plantation production has remained mostly unchanged.

The tea tribes have also faced social exclusion and ethnic violence. Assam's indigenous communities, such as the Bodo tribe, have often viewed tea garden workers as cultural and demographic outsiders. This has led to violent ethnic conflicts, most notably the 1996 Bodo–Adivasi riots, which resulted in the displacement of over 250,000 people in Kokrajhar and Gosaigaon districts (Azad, 2017). Many '*Adivasis*' were driven from their own homes and their land because of this violence. Similar battles resulted in hundreds of deaths and another wave of exodus from both populations. Internally displaced person camps for the adivasis were established in Joypur (Kokrajhar) and Runikhata (Chirang) for over ten years (Azad, 2017). These episodes of violence have not only devastated communities but also reinforced their marginal status in Assamese society.

Gendered Division of Labour and Workplace Discrimination

Women working in Assam's tea plantations experience marginalisation arising from the intersection of gender, class, caste, and ethnicity. The section below explores how labour is divided along gender lines and how women face discrimination in the workplace.

Everyday Vulnerabilities and Structural Inequities

Women tea workers are subjected to physically demanding labour regimes. Typically, they spend 12–13 hours daily engaged in strenuous work, such as plucking and carrying up to 30 kg of tea leaves, often while carrying infants and in extreme weather conditions (TISS, 2019; Dhanaraju & Das, 2019). These conditions are aggravated in the time the monsoon, when extended exposure to water causes skin irritation and finger injuries, yet work continues uninterrupted. The working environment inside the tea garden is not worker-friendly (GOI, 2017). Many of them live in decaying houses that lack necessary and basic living amenities such as power, hygienic bathroom facilities, water connections, and smokeless fuel for cooking,

among other things. Because there is a dearth of clean and ample water inside the garden, the habit of purifying water is nearly non-existent, and diseases such as cholera and typhoid are frequent. Moreover, increased incidences of respiratory illnesses and eye irritation, among women and children, are due to exposure to harmful smoke emitted while burning biomass fuel used for cooking meals. The State has installed public toilets in all tea estates, but open defecation is rampant, and such toilets go unused (Mishra, 2019).

Patriarchal Labour Structures and Wage Discrimination

The plantation system operates on a clear sexual division of labour. Tasks such as tea leaf plucking are feminised and considered suitable for women due to the supposed “*agility*” of their fingers, yet are devalued and labelled as low-skilled (Scott & Marshall, 2009). This gendered narrative justifies wage disparities and the marginalisation of women within the workplace hierarchy. Despite constituting most of the workforce, women rarely occupy supervisory or managerial roles, and often receive lower pay than their male counterparts for similar work (Duara & Mallik, 2019). While India has well-established legal frameworks as the *Plantation Labour Act (1951)* and the *Minimum Wage Act (1948)*, their implementation in Assam's tea industry remains grossly inadequate.

The tea plantations of Assam serve as a stark illustration of entrenched gendered and structural inequalities, shaped by both historical legacies and contemporary exploitative practices. Despite forming more than half of the workforce, women tea workers remain systematically marginalised within a patriarchal labour structure. Their roles are concentrated in the most physically demanding and lowest-paid positions (Banerji & Willoughby, 2019). These gendered divisions are not merely occupational but reflect broader power asymmetries embedded within the plantation economy.

Wage discrimination persists in both overt and covert forms, which has also been mentioned earlier, with widespread wage theft facilitated by exploitative managerial controls and imbalanced power relations between workers and plantation authorities (Saha et al., 2023). Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and subordination in these hierarchical settings, worsened by their limited access to grievance redressal mechanisms and lack of representation in decision-making roles (Duara & Mallick, 2019). Economically, the tea industry reflects an inequity between production and profit. While labourers struggle to meet basic living expenses with nearly 50% of households relying on below poverty line ration cards,

most profits are captured by brands and supermarkets, which appropriate up to 95% of the value chain (Banerji & Willoughby, 2019; Sabrang India, 2019). The colonial model of extraction and control laid the foundation for the present-day marginalisation of plantation workers, particularly women, who have remained at the periphery of both economic gains and institutional recognition (Behal, 2006).

Gender-based violence is pervasive within the tea garden ecosystem. The pervasive domestic violence, workplace harassment, and verbal abuse by supervisors reflect the patriarchal structures governing both private and public spheres in plantation communities. Domestic violence is often linked to alcohol abuse among male workers, while workplace abuse includes sexual harassment by supervisors (GOI, 2017; Dhanaraju & Das, 2019). Young girls are mainly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and many are trafficked under the pretext of employment in other states (Ahmad, 2022).

Representation, Identity, and the Politics of Visibility

Mangri Orang, also known as '*Malati Mem*', stands as a symbol of resistance and courage from Assam's tea tribe community. A pioneering woman freedom fighter, she sacrificed her life during the Non-Cooperation Movement, highlighting the community's historic role in India's freedom struggle (Kalita & Handique, 2021). Despite such legacies of bravery and leadership, political visibility for Adivasi women remains limited. Even today, the tea tribe continues to produce grassroots leaders and strong female voices, yet their representation in formal political structures is minimal and slow to gain momentum. As Borgohain (2020) notes, while Adivasi women possess distinct political awareness, their voices rarely find expression in public discourse or policy platforms. Women's representation in trade unions remains minimal. Although union dues are regularly deducted from their wages, most female workers are unaware of their roles or rights within these organisations (Oxfam India, 2019). Furthermore, early marriage, limited literacy, and adherence to traditional practices such as witch-hunting and black magic are constantly affecting women in society (Tamuli, 2018). The barriers to girls' education reinforce a cycle of generational poverty. Women are thus highly excluded from mainstream Assamese society and from within their socio-cultural contexts. Tea plantation women are frequently depicted in tourism brochures and development narratives as idyllic symbols of rural labour, plucking tea leaves against a backdrop of lush greenery. These visual representations, however, obscure the harsh realities of their lives and

erase the structural violence underpinning their existence. The glorification of women's labour often serves to sanitise and depoliticise their suffering (EPW Engage, 2019).

Inadequate Policy Implementation

The marginalisation of tea tribe women is increased by fragmented policy measures and poor implementation. Beneficiary selection for welfare schemes is often arbitrary, and a lack of awareness, coupled with low trust in service providers, prevents effective access. Moreover, women workers largely remain outside the ambit of mainstream socio-political life due to their socio-cultural isolation and limited civic engagement. The *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5)* 2021 reports highlight this exclusion: nearly 25% of women in Assam are married before reaching the legal age, and the state records high maternal and infant mortality rates. The government has taken steps to combat child marriage and improve maternal health, but progress remains slow (Karmakar, 2023). The high maternal mortality rate, widespread anaemia, and lack of access to safe drinking water and healthcare are indicators of a larger human development failure in tea plantation regions. These deprivations are not merely outcomes of poverty but reflect the state's selective development strategy, which benefits plantation owners while neglecting worker welfare. Moreover, the lack of ST recognition has long denied them access to constitutional safeguards, educational reservations, and socio-economic benefits.

The denial of paid maternity leave beyond three months (and only for the first child) and the lack of childcare facilities highlight the commodification of women's labour, where their reproductive needs are deprioritised despite their centrality to the workforce. This violates both national laws and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, revealing a gendered logic of capitalist accumulation that extracts maximum labour while investing minimally in the worker's well-being (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, 2021).

Government Interventions and Empowerment Schemes for Women in Assam's Tea Plantations

The tea industry in Assam, characterised by its labour-intensive nature and a large proportion of Adivasi women workers, remains one of the most socially and economically marginalised segments in the state. While the *Plantations Labour Act (PLA)*, 1951 mandates the provision of housing, healthcare, maternity benefits, and social security for plantation

workers, its enforcement has remained inconsistent across estates (PIB, 2021). In response to persistent violations and growing awareness of women's rights within the sector, both the Government of India and the Government of Assam have introduced a series of welfare schemes and policies aimed at improving the living and working conditions of tea plantation workers, with special emphasis on empowering women. One of the flagship interventions by the Indian government has been the *National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)*, which promotes the formation of *Self-Help Groups (SHGs)* to enhance the financial autonomy and collective bargaining capacities of both male and female workers. Concurrently, the Assam government launched a comprehensive awareness campaign on critical social issues such as family planning, legal literacy, health, and human trafficking, targeting the tea garden population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government's *Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)* mechanism, aligned with the *Jan Dhan Yojana*, facilitated the disbursement of *INR 8,000 each* to over 7.46 lakh tea workers under the "*Cha Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela*" (Karmakar, 2020). These cash transfers provided financial relief and were instrumental in mitigating pandemic-induced economic distress. To address educational disparities, especially among children of tea workers, the Assam government allocated substantial funds in FY 2022–23 for pre- and post-matric scholarships, built special schools and hostels, and provided free bicycles to all Class X students enrolled in government and provincialised secondary schools (The Hindu, 2023). Such measures aim to reduce school dropouts and increase access to higher education. Technology-driven empowerment has also been a key focus. The government started distributing smartphones among tea garden workers to integrate them into the digital and financial systems (Deb, 2021).

Targeted Schemes for Women Tea Garden Workers

Several welfare schemes have been introduced to specifically benefit women in the tea plantation sector:

- 1. Wage Compensation Scheme for Pregnant Women in Tea Garden Districts:**
Launched in 2018, this scheme provides INR 12,000 in four instalments to pregnant women, whether permanent, temporary, or non-workers, enabling them to meet their nutritional and health needs without compromising household income.
- 2. Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK):** Initiated in 2011, JSSK guarantees free maternity services, including caesarean delivery, transportation, diagnostics,

and medication for women delivering in public health facilities. The same services are extended to sick newborns up to one year of age.

3. **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY):** Aimed at addressing inadequate housing conditions, this scheme facilitates the construction of *pucca* houses within tea estates to replace the prevalent *kucha* dwellings.
4. **Weekly Iron Folic Acid Supplementation (WIFS):** This health initiative targets adolescents (10–19 years) to address anaemia through iron and folic acid supplementation via schools and Anganwadi centres.
5. **Swahid Dayal Das Panika Swaniyojan Achoni:** A skill development and entrepreneurship scheme that provides financial support and vocational training to tea tribe youth, with the broader goal of economic upliftment.
6. **Free Drugs Scheme:** Under the National Health Mission, this scheme supplies free medicines to 651 tea garden hospitals. Additionally, Mobile Medical Units (MMUs) were deployed in 442 gardens, significantly enhancing access to essential drugs and basic healthcare services.
7. **Public-Private Partnership (PPP) with Tea Garden Hospitals:** Through the National Health Mission, the Assam government partnered with private tea estate hospitals to improve healthcare services for workers and their families.
8. **Mukhya Mantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyan (MMAUA):** This initiative encourages entrepreneurship among rural women, including those from tea garden communities, by offering financial assistance, skill training, and mentorship.
9. **Orunodoi Scheme:** A direct cash transfer scheme that provides monthly financial support to economically disadvantaged women, including those in tea estates, to ensure minimum subsistence levels.

These actions show that the government is trying to bring together social security, healthcare, education, housing, and financial inclusion in its strategy to give women plantation workers more power. While there have been some good results, like more students enrolling in school, better access to maternal healthcare, and more people joining SHGs, the sector still has problems like low pay, gendered labour division, poor healthcare, and a lack of representation

in decision-making spaces. The following section will evaluate these enduring difficulties, incorporating feminist participatory action research and ground-level testimonies from Assam's tea plantations.

Pathways for Social Inclusion and Empowerment of Tea Plantation Workers

The following pathways highlight actionable strategies toward the empowerment objective:

1. Awareness Generation and Sensitisation: Raising awareness among plantation workers, estate management, local administration, and the larger society about the historical and contemporary injustices faced by tea garden women is a critical first step. Sensitisation campaigns must focus on legal rights, reproductive and mental health, gender-based violence, and access to existing welfare schemes. Community engagement tools, digital platforms, and educational initiatives can bridge the knowledge gap and promote informed participation in socio-political processes.

2. Strict Enforcement of the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951: The effective implementation of the PLA and related labour laws remains central to safeguarding the dignity and rights of tea workers. The State must ensure that management complies with regulations concerning occupational safety, minimum wages, housing, healthcare, education, and sanitation. Furthermore, regular audits and legal accountability mechanisms should be institutionalised to prevent exploitation and ensure that basic human rights are upheld.

3. Enhancing Women's Participation in Leadership and Decision-Making: Promoting the inclusion of women in the village-level committees, Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), trade unions, and state-level policymaking forums is essential for embedding gender equity in governance structures. Encouraging political literacy and leadership training among plantation women will enable them to articulate their demands and influence development agendas. This participatory approach ensures that policies reflect their lived realities and aspirations.

4. Gender-Transformative Approaches and Safe Spaces: A gender-transformative framework is necessary to challenge patriarchal norms and provide platforms for women to discuss issues like reproductive rights, mental health, domestic violence, and gender discrimination. Establishing support groups, counselling services, and legal aid

cells in collaboration with local NGOs and SHGs will enhance the resilience of women and promote healing and justice.

5. Social Cohesion and Inter-Community Solidarity: Given the complex composition of Assam's tea tribes divided across caste, ethnicity, and religion, efforts must be directed at building inter-community solidarity to overcome internal hierarchies and prejudices. Inclusive cultural events, inter-tribal youth programs, and participatory planning initiatives can foster a shared identity, dignity, and belonging among workers.

6. Empowering Women through Trade Unions: Women's active involvement in trade unions is significant for effective collective bargaining. Gender-balanced union leadership and gender-sensitive union charters can enhance women's ability to negotiate for fair wages, maternity benefits, and workplace safety. Unions must also take up issues of gender-based violence and occupational health hazards affecting female workers disproportionately.

7. Monitoring of Social Welfare Measures: To ensure accountability, the state government should set up independent monitoring bodies comprising civil society members, women representatives, and human rights activists to oversee the implementation of welfare schemes. Transparent reporting, social audits, and grievance redressal mechanisms should be made accessible and responsive.

9. Education and Health Infrastructure Strengthening: To ensure long-term transformation, government support for quality education and accessible healthcare in tea garden regions must be prioritised. Investments in infrastructure, qualified teachers, ASHA workers, and digital learning tools can catalyse generational change and improve life chances for tea tribe children, especially girls.

10. Recognition and Affirmative Action: The tea tribes of Assam, long demanding ST status, continue to remain outside formal affirmative action frameworks. Recent statements by the Union Tribal Affairs Minister suggest that the Centre is actively considering this status for six Assam communities (Assam Tribune, 2025). If implemented, ST recognition could unlock access to constitutional protections, reserved quotas in education and employment, and targeted welfare benefits, thereby substantially advancing the cause of social inclusion.

Conclusion

The condition of women tea plantation workers in Assam reflects the gender-based hardships they face due to their caste, class, ethnicity, and the lasting impact of colonial rule. The persistent gendered division of labour, combined with the invisibility of women's unpaid care work, has systematically constrained their access to education, economic independence, leadership roles, and public life. These structural limitations not only marginalise women socially and economically but also reinforce cycles of dependency and exclusion. Despite constituting a significant share of the plantation workforce, women remain underserved by state mechanisms, particularly in access to healthcare and social protection, leading to high levels of morbidity and maternal mortality. The colonial model of labour exploitation, reproduced in contemporary forms, continues to define the lived experiences of Adivasi women in Assam's tea sector. Addressing these challenges demands a multi-dimensional approach that centres women's voices, recognises care work as integral to the economy, and ensures equitable access to education, healthcare, and dignified livelihoods. Genuine social inclusion will require dismantling patriarchal and colonial legacies through gender-responsive policy interventions, labour rights enforcement, and the empowerment of women as agents of change within their communities. While nearly 50% of India's tea production originates from Assam, and the beverage loved worldwide has global recognition, including the observance of International Tea Day. As one of the world's most cherished drinks, the stark reality behind its production remains largely obscured. The lush green landscapes that yield the iconic tea conceal the everyday struggles, exploitation, and systemic marginalisation of the women who labour tirelessly in the plantations. Behind each morning cup lies a story of immense human cost, marked by the unpaid care burden, substandard living conditions, gender-based violence, commodification, and even instances of sexual exploitation. While multinational corporations and national brands reap enormous profits through the marketing of tea, the plight of female plantation workers remains largely ignored, with minimal accountability or redressal. This disconnection between the celebrated final product and the conditions of its producers highlights an ethical crisis, necessitating urgent introspection and structural reform in the global and national tea economies.

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