

## LABOURING BODIES: AN EMPIRICAL UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN ASSAM, INDIA

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### **Abstract:**

Throughout their lives, women encounter violence on different scales, in different contexts, and to varying degrees. Women from the underprivileged groups in society are far more aware of this. Women employed in agriculture and plantation industries suffer the fury of oppressive working conditions. Various investigations have shown significant incidences of violence against women in Assam's tea gardens. The poor working conditions prevalent in tea gardens have long been a source of concern for the working women there. India's tea industry, particularly in Assam, makes a significant contribution to the GDP of the nation. Due to their ability to do the most crucial operation in the manufacturing process—plucking tea leaves—women workers in the tea gardens are considered as crucial agents in this process. However, women's status in society is not positively correlated with this really important labour that they undertake. The vulnerability of women in the tea gardens poses a threat to their advancement. Despite being referred to be a „feminised industry“ by some scholars, the tea industry has not done enough to fairly treat the large number of women who work in it. The goals of government programmes are also to increase voter turnout in the tea gardens and provide little to no relief to the women workers. Thus, considering an array of patriarchal notions that are at play in the tea garden settings, this research paper attempts to examine gender-based violence against women in Assam's tea gardens specifically through an empirical lens.

**Keywords:** exploitation, gender-based violence, government policies, patriarchy, tea industry, women workers.

### **Introduction**

Violence is any act of perpetuating harm, both physical and mental on any individual or a group of individuals with a certain malign intention. According to Bushra and Lopez (1993), violence is “an assault on a person's physical and mental integrity”, which is seen at different levels in various social interactions. Gender related violence or Gender Based Violence (GBV) need not necessarily be perpetrated by men against women in all contexts and situations. GBV is essentially a result of severe power imbalances in the society, which is manifested mostly in the way men control the labour, body and behaviour of women. There are some instances of violence against women by women as enlisted by Bushra and Lopez (1993): “female genital mutilation, footbinding and the dispossession of widows...”

The Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women, 1993 has also defined violence against

women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”.

**Table 1: The tentative list with the forms of gender based violence:**

Battering	Denial of health care & Female Foeticide & Infanticide	Dowry Deaths
Emotional & Psychological Abuse		Female Genital Mutilation
Forced Population Control	Forced Prostitution	Intimidation at Work
Rape, including Marital Rape	Sexual Abuse of Female	Sexual Harassment
Trafficking in Women	Violence Related to Exploitation	Violence perpetrated or condoned by the State

The prevalence of violence, both physical and sexual, has been highlighted by the multi- country study conducted by the World Health Organization, wherein a range of 15% to 70% of such violence has been seen amongst women.

As per the National Family Health Survey-5 (2022), Assam ranks 7<sup>th</sup> with 34% of ever married women experiencing spousal physical, sexual or emotional violence in the age group of 18-49 years. This is above the national average of 32%.

**Table 2: Percentage of ever married women in the age group of 18-49 years experiencing emotional, physical or sexual violence in Assam (source: NFHS-5, 2022)**

Emotional Violence	Physical Violence	Sexual Violence	Physical or Sexual Violence	Emotional, Physical or Sexual Violence
11.8	31.3	7.3	32.2	34.3

The tea plantations in Assam are a site of both production and reproduction, where, the women workers have a very important task to perform. Plucking or picking tea leaves is solely done by women, as they seem to be the perfect ones to do so, given they possess very nimble fingers. In spite of this unquestionable demand for their labour, women workers in the tea gardens face the wrath of the society and the system through means like deplorable working conditions including physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse both in the gardens and at home. This paper seeks to look into the various aspects of gender based violence in the tea gardens of Assam, as perpetrated against the women workers.

The paper is divided into the following sectors: Section 1 discussed the relevant literature on gender based violence in general and gender based violence in the tea industry in particular, Section 2 deals with the methodology used in the study, Section 3 puts into place the findings and analysis of the study

and Section 4 puts forward the concluding remarks and recommendations.

## Review of Literature

One of the most contested spaces for any women is the home or the private sphere. The irony of the home is that it acts as a locus of both safety and danger, particularly for the women. Due to the unequal gendered power relations fostered by gender roles, women find themselves at the margins of household power dynamics. As mentioned by Bushra and Lopez (1993), “Worldwide, a high proportion of incidences of violence against women — between 10 and 80 per cent according to various estimates — take place in the home, making the home one of the most dangerous places for women. Discrimination against women operating at this level includes discrimination against girls in access to health and education, the operation of dual standards in evaluating the conduct of boys and girls, early and forced marriage for girls, exchange marriage, exclusion of female household members from participation in decision making, and exclusion of widows from the extended family. Such manifestations of discrimination foster an environment in which physical and mental abuse of women is seen as acceptable, even proper.”

Gender based violence takes various forms in various societies. It is a recurring phenomenon. Heise (1993) in her study has shown a cumulative picture of wife abuse in several societies. She uses Levinson’s analysis to highlight that out of 90 households in small scale and peasant societies, violence against wives by husbands is seen in 86% of the households. Mention is also made of the relation between domestic abuse and consequent health conditions arising thereafter taking the case of the United States of America. Heise mentions that as per studies around 2-4 million women are subjected to domestic abuse like battering each year and the health consequences arising out of this include severe physical injury in women, psychiatric complexities, suicidal tendencies and substance abuse (alcohol and drug). Heise also mentions of studies conducted in the developing world, where, domestic abuse has led to injuries and death of women in large numbers. A general correlation is seen between abuse, suicide and homicide amongst women in almost every part of the world. According to Heise (1993), “Since it often results in forced suicide and murder, gender violence is an important cause of female mortality”. Most suicide survivors and victims have been victims of abuse at home, particularly by their intimate partners. Homicide related to gender based violence is mostly prevalent in developing countries like India, whereby, “commercialization of dowry” (Heise, 1993) has led to a number of “accidental deaths and burns” among married women. Shame and honour associated with pregnancies borne out of wedlock is a cause of homicide of a lot of women in India.

Rape is one of the severe forms of gender based violence against women. Survivors of rape often know the perpetrators, who are in most circumstances, their close acquaintances. Heise makes an analysis of the same, whereby, she mentions that in the countries studied, that is, Peru, Malaysia, Mexico, Panama and the United States of America, around 60-78% of the victims of rape knew their perpetrators since a long time. Rape survivors suffer from a range of cognitive, behavioural and physical issues like difficulty in concentration, feeling of alienation and humiliation, increased risk of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases, etc.

Acceptance and reinforcement of culturally defined notions of masculinity and femininity serve as a

reason for women's subordinate position, thereby, increasing the risks of women being subjected to gender based violence. The process of socialisation also contributes to the same, where the two sexes learn and adopt the gendered ways of life. According to Bushra and Lopez (1993), "since both male violence and women's acceptance of it are learned, they can also be unlearned."

Development policies and programmes have induced discrimination and violence against women in the workplace, which has furthered their abuse at home. Current development models all over the world prioritize on increasing production at the cost of the empowerment of the labour force. This is very harshly seen in the context of the plantation industry, which is heavily dependent on its women labour. The plantation industry, also referred to as a „feminized industry“ employs the highest number of women in the organized sector in India. Within the plantation sector, the tea industry, being one of the biggest export oriented industries in the country, witnesses rising cases of exploitation and violence of its working class, particularly women workers, in its quest of generating more production and thereby, more profits. Exploitative conditions of work manifest in exploitative relations within the household, since tea gardens act as both workspaces and settlement for the working class. What is seen is thus, „*development induced discrimination*“ against women. The prevailing attitude among development planners is paralleled by some governments who turn a blind eye to large-scale prostitution and sex tourism because it provides a large slice of the national income. Similarly, trafficking in child brides, commercialised marriage arrangements, and other forms of indentured or slave labour are widespread, tolerated because they serve the interests of powerful and wealthy elites.

Dutch research body SOMO had conducted a study in one of the largest tea estates of one of the biggest tea companies in the world, the Kericho tea estate in Kenya owned and managed by Unilever. The study had highlighted the plight of women workers in the Kericho tea estate, where they are subjected to physical, psychological and sexual violence by both managers and supervisors. According to Largo and Wasley (2011), women workers in the particular tea estate are forced to render sexual services in lieu of getting lighter work or permanent work and to secure better housing facilities in the estate. Negating the order of the supervisor or manager for sexual favours means losing their job. As mentioned in the study, denying sexual advances by the male supervisors means getting too much of work or getting work in the lonely or dangerous plucking zones.

Kurian and Jayawardena (2013) have developed the concept of "plantation patriarchy" to describe the "controls on plantations that incorporated social hierarchies and gender biases..." Describing the condition of women workers in the plantations of Sri Lanka, Kurian and Jayawardena mention that low status and lesser entitlements were provided to the women workers by those in the centres of power. Of the studies conducted in tea gardens of India, Srinivasappa et al (2019) is important as it highlights the kinds of and degree to which women workers in the tea gardens of South India have been facing domestic violence. According to the authors, different forms of psychological violence, including verbal abuse like insults; physical violence like slapping, kicked or beaten, being pushed or having being objects thrown at them; sexual violence including forced sex. Prevalence of domestic violence was seen to be higher among the younger women workers,

those educated above the 10<sup>th</sup> standard, those belonging to higher socio-economic class, those belonging to joint families with five or more members and those women who got married before the age of 18 years. Consumption of alcohol by the spouse also led to higher incidences of violence against the women (Srinivasappa et al., 2019).

Choudhuri (2012) mentions that women in the tea gardens of India are easy targets of witch- hunting. Women are made scapegoats by men through the use of “rumour and conspiracy”, whereby the women accused as witches are perpetrated “horrific proportions of abuse, up to and including rape and murder” (Chaudhuri, 2012). In this process, men continue their authority and control over women’s bodies and the conduct of their behaviour.

Roy (2017) in her study on the women workers in the tea gardens of West Bengal mentions the importance of poverty and alcoholism as factors behind domestic abuse at home. Trafficking of young girls was also witnessed from the several case studies, without any hope of returning back to their homes, from Roy’s investigation.

## Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature, wherein tools like in-depth semi structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions are used. The key respondents, i.e., the women workers in the tea gardens were asked a set of questions on certain thematic areas. Respondents belong to a particular tea estate in the Jorhat district of Assam. The study has taken into account both primary and secondary data, collected from numerous journal articles and online resources, suitable to the study. Analyses of both have been provided in the subsequent pages.

## Findings and Analysis

### ‘Accidental Dowry Deaths’

In the tea garden studied for the purpose of research, it was found that a woman worker had to lose her life due to the menace of dowry and its demand by the husband. The brother of the victim mentions “Our father was ill and bed ridden during that time. My sister used to come home and ask our mother for taking certain thing from home. She always persuaded our mother. I did not like it. I used to scold her and say that her husband could not have all that he wanted. But mother used to let her take whatever she needed, sometimes money too because her husband is an alcoholic. She used to fear him. But since our father died, mother was also unable to give her any money. And one day, we are informed that she has died of an “accident” where she dies due to fire at home, but her house remains intact with minor damages. Unable to bear the loss of my sister, our mother died after some days too”.

### Naivety, Young Age, Rape and Murder

In one of the two cases that the researcher came across in the tea garden, a respondent has mentioned that some years back one girl was taken towards the bagan (garden) by the boys. She was not just raped but also killed. Later, her body was tied to a tea bush.

Another respondent recalled of a similar case “the woman was working in our bagan only. She was so beautiful, looked exactly like a cinema heroine. She was in love with a boy. She wanted to live her life

with him. Another boy was also in love with her. But because she was in love with the other boy, this boy did not like that. This boy one day told her that your lover has called you to meet him. She also believed. In those days, there were no mobile phones. So she went to that place. Did not think whether her lover had called her to meet or not. He did so many bad things to her inside the bagan. Inside the bagan if something bad happens then how would one know, if someone screams, how we would know? Here, we have the line houses, here if I scream then people will know. But in that side of the bagan, no one knows. She screamed so much, yet no one came. She was killed”.

### **Trafficking**

Trafficking is widespread among young girls and women in the tea gardens of Assam. Azeera Rehman in her report on one of the tea gardens in the Sonitpur district of Assam mentions about several such cases of trafficking. In one of her excerpts, the victim, a 16 year old girl, recalls, “I was tempted into going away with him [trafficker] as he promised me a job in an office because I knew how to read and write. The idea of having a comfortable life in the big city was too tempting to resist. We are poor so I fell into the trap” (Rehman, 2015).

The kind of work these young women are asked to do, once they are trafficked, is recalled by another 17 year old victim of the same tea garden who was sold in exchange of Rs 22,000 to an agency providing domestic help in Delhi “I was made to work in different households but was never paid anything. The money used to go to the agency.” As Rehman (2015) mentions, This victim was also sexually abused by her employer.

### **Physical Violence**

Women workers in the tea gardens of Assam suffer violence in the hands of the employers who are hesitant to provide them leave in case of medical issues. In the tea garden studied for the purpose of this research, it was observed that women are not provided any protective gear to wear to keep deadly insects away. They at times, rub kerosene on their feet, legs and palm to not get bitten by the insects. It is also well known that a day’s work is very important for the workers in the tea estates as most of them are poverty-stricken. But women workers in the research area fall sick due to cold and flu often. They are not provided any umbrella or raincoat and keep plucking tea leaves in the scorching heat of the summer and the rains of the monsoon. With Rs 205 received as daily wage, women workers in the research area have revealed that this money is very less for the consumption expenditure of the entire household. A consequence of this is seen in the lunch that the women have. It was observed that the women mostly bring plain rice and boiled vegetables or at times only a piece of bread to be eaten with some cold tea. This rips women of the necessary nutrients required to be consumed keeping in view the large numbers of hours they devote to work both in the garden and at home. Since most of the women workers get married at the a young age of 14 or 15 and bear a child by 20 years of age, they turn anemic due to malnutrition.

Referring to a collaborative study by UNICEF and the Assam Medical College, Rehman (2014), mentions that “of the 14 meals in a week, only two are nutritional in a tea tribe family.”

### **Sexual Violence**

Mazumdar (2016) in his study on Barpani tea estate, Nagaon highlights physical, visual and non-verbal forms of sexual violence against women. Physical forms include: incidental and unwanted physical touches, physical proximity at the workplace, bullying the female worker at the presence of other male worker. Non-verbal forms include: “stalking, lewd comments, songs and repeated requests for sexual favours (Maxumdar, 2016). An instance of visual form of sexual harassment has been mentioned whereby; one of the supervisors would send someone from the factory to the victim’s place to make her talk on the phone with him.

### Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Women workers are the backbone of the tea industry in every part of the world. Brought as slaves to help in the regular flow of labour to the industry so as to garner more profits, women started playing the role of effective and skilled agents in fostering the growth and development of the tea industry in India. Plantations or tea gardens are the locus of „production and reproduction“ for the women workers. They have always been an essential element in the production process because of their “feminine skill” (Gurung and Roy Mukherjee, 2018). The hands that pluck the tea leaves also bear the burden of crime and offences. Women’s bodies are still controlled by patriarchal notions of femininity in the plantations. Hence, there is a high need for different stakeholders to address the issues of increasing female labour and decreasing empowerment of women in the plantations.

#### Some of the recommendations are:

1. Grassroots women’s organizations should work towards greater awareness generation among the tea garden women, including setting up of helpline toll-free numbers, since mobile phones are present among most of the households in the research area.
2. Government should work in close liaison with such organizations as mentioned above, thereby providing a legal basis to the work to be done by these organizations. Government commitment through legislation with strict punishments to end all forms of gender based violence and support the survivors of violence could be a stepping stone in this direction.
3. Laws guaranteeing better rights to women in terms of inheritance, land and other property, employment, family and others fosters an environment where women’s rights are seen as basic human rights and as mentioned by Bushra and Lopez (1993) “foster positive public perceptions of women’s rights and dignity.”

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