

Assessment of Livelihood of Women Workers in Tea Gardens of Terai, Darjeeling District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract : Women workers of tea plantation are best known for their performance to collect "two leaves and a bud" from the tea garden to produce tea in the factory. In Darjeeling district, women workers consist of sixty percent of workforce and make a remarkable influence on the regional economy. It is observed that women workers directly influence the collection of tea leaves from the garden which assertively influences the production of tea in the factory. Women workers are very much attached and committed towards garden work. Low level of wage rate increase mainly poverty, malnutrition, and ill-health condition which are responsible for the low level of life standard of women workers in the tea gardens of Terai region of Darjeeling district. Data reveals the fact that conditions are good where facilities are properly distributed than the gardens where facilities are lacking. So, life and livelihood are shaped by these facilities provided to the women workers.

Keywords: Darjeeling tea gardens, Tea workers, Work participation and wages, Life and livelihood of women

Introduction

Darjeeling tea is the most celebrated beverage in the world which depends upon intensive human labour. Women are an integral part of this industry consists of sixty percent of labor force in Darjeeling tea industry. The role of women workers not only determines the production of the industry but also the socio-economic sector is shaped by the direct role of women workers. (Barker, 1884)The role of women workers from the plucking of "two leaves and a bud" from the garden to the role of women in society makes a valuable contribution to the development of the regional economy in the tea industry of the Terai region of Darjeeling district. Live and livelihoods are shaped by the facilities provided to the women workers in the tea gardens. Wage is the main driving force for women workers. Women workers are much more attached to the garden atmosphere. Facilities that are provided to the women workers make the life of them much smoother than the gardens which are in a crisis in terms of the facility. In this way, life and livelihood are shaped by

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the garden facilities for the women workers. Women workers are attached to the production of the garden and household chores, fetching the water and collecting firewood from the jungle. So, the development of women workers should be the primary concern of the tea garden authorities. (DasGupta, 1999). Improved women workforce can make an upliftment in the production level. So, an assessment of life and livelihood should be taken under primary concern. Enhancement in the livelihood can make the women workers more benefited and attached to the garden working environments.

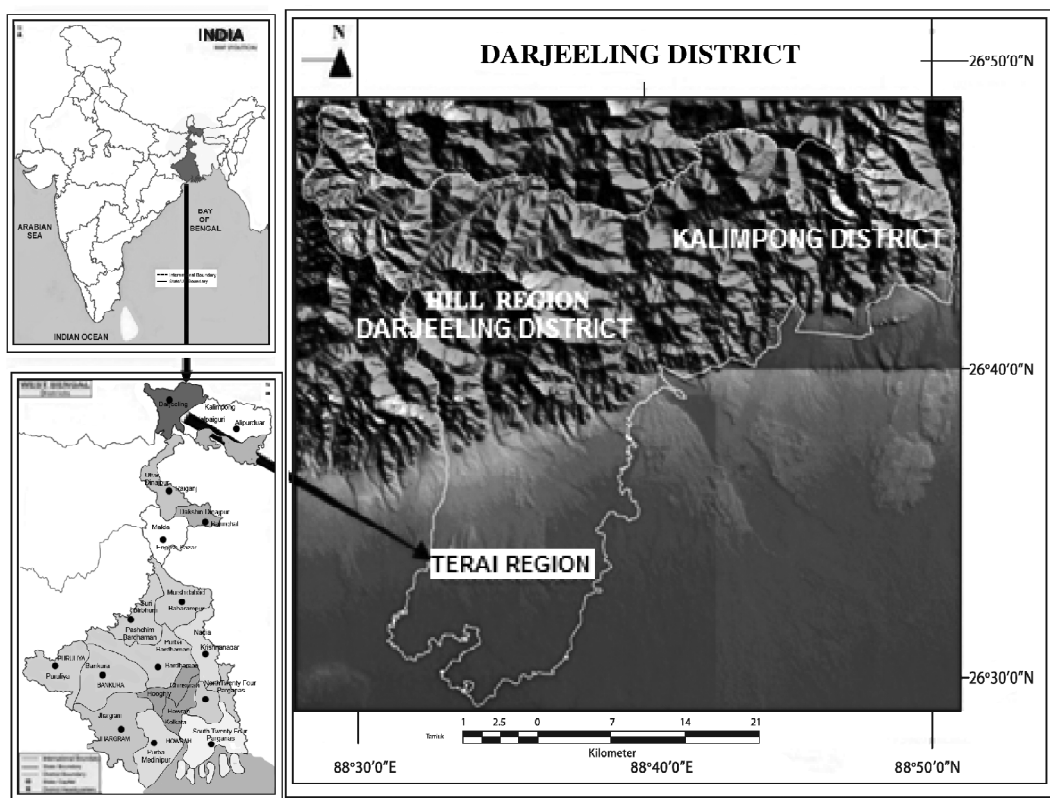


Fig. 1. Location map of Terai Region of Darjeeling District

The Study Area

Geographically undulating plain landscape in the south of Darjeeling foothills is known as Terai. This part is extending from the foot of the mountains to the northern border of the Dinajpur district (Fig. 1). It lies between $26^{\circ} 30' 48''$ and $26^{\circ} 49' 45''$ north of latitudes and between $88^{\circ} 8' 51''$ and $88^{\circ} 29'$ east of longitudes. Darjeeling Terai administratively constitutes under the Siliguri subdivision. Terai of Darjeeling District is bounded on the North by hill, South by Dinajpur district,

and East by Jalpaiguri district and West by the State of Nepal. Terai is geographically distributed with a length from North to South of 18 miles and a breadth East to West of 16 miles, containing a total area of 229.95 square miles exclusive of forest lands.

Annual Production of tea in Terai is 125.34 million kgs (2013-14) and 49.70 Thousand Hectors area of Terai is under Tea Cultivation (2014). There are 45 tea estates in Terai region. Among them, 15 Tea Gardens are taken under consideration. Name of those surveyed tea gardens are – 1.Atal, 2.Sanyashithan, 3.Kamalpur, 4.Bagdogra, 5.TTirrihannah, 6.Ord, 7.Nuxalbari, 8.Gaya Ganga, 9.Lohagarh, 10.Gungaram, 11.Sukna, 12.Mohurganj, 13.Kamala, 14.Kiran Chandra, 15.New Chamta (Fig. 2).

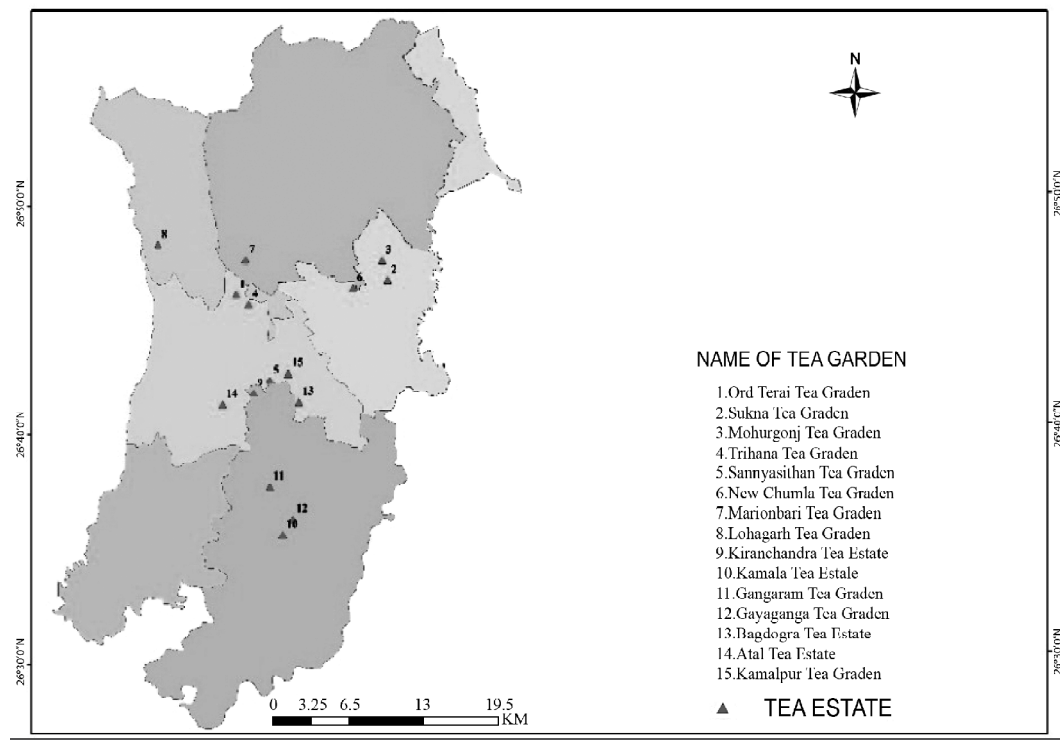


Fig. 2. Tea gardens of Terai region of Darjeeling District

Objectives

- To assess the life and livelihood of women workers in the tea gardens of Terai of Darjeeling district.
- To understand the standard of life of women workers in the tea gardens of the Terai area of Darjeeling district.
- To recommendsomeasures to improve the lives of women workers in the study area.

Methodology

Primary Data has been collected to obtain information about the life and livelihood of the women workers in Tea Gardens of Terai tea gardens. Fifteen Tea Gardens of Terai area have been surveyed on women plantation labourer to accrue diverse insights into the life and livelihood of women workers using a detailed structured Questionnaire. The survey was conducted during September, 2014 to August, 2016. Collected data have been tabulated, analyzed, correlated and interpreted according to the objectives. For the presentation of the data Cartographic Techniques have been used. Maps have been prepared on the GIS platform.

Discussion on Results

The Socioeconomic condition of Terai is influenced by the economic well-being of the tea labourers in various tea gardens (Bhadra, 1983). Women workers leave their footprint both in the region of the plantation as well as their domestic duties. Women workers are the main bearing in the plantation system. The women's work participation in tea industry in Bengal is much higher than in any other industry (Bhowmik, 1982). In most Asian plantations with family employment policy, thus socio-economically their importance becomes a pivotal issue for the plantation system. Their livelihood, associations, establishment all are controlled by the plantations authorities. (Raju and Bagchi, 1994).

Income

Source of income in the plantation system is daily wages which are distributed in the plantation weekly, or fortnightly or monthly. In West Bengal new wage rate is Rs. 132.50 for Terai region of Darjeeling District. But after a long history of wage discrimination now women workers obtained the same wages as male counterparts. (Basu, 1977). Daily wage is determined by the hours of work. Normally eight hours is a day and six days a week, women workers work on plantation. Generally women workers are assigned for their daily limit of plucking known as *Task*, limited up to 25 to 30 kgs. After completion of *Task*, extra plucking added extra wages to the women workers. The plantation system was included in the scheduled Employment under the minimum wage Act 1948. The Act required the state government to fix the minimum wage rates that payable to women workers are scheduled employments. Where minimum rates of wages had been fixed and notified by the State Government.

Besides wages, women workers also get subsidy in fuel, cereals and glossary. A detailed survey has been conducted which reveals the fact that the monthly family income of surveyed women workers (Fig. 3) varied from <3000 to >15000. In most of the cases it is observed that all the persons in a family are involved in plantation work. The survey reveals the fact that 23.90% of women workers' family income is below Rs. 3000. It is clear from the data that the family of these women workers only depends upon plantation work and women are the only earning member in the family. On the other hand, 53.22% of women worker's families earned Rs. 3000-9000 per month. In this income group, most women worker's husbands were also involved in plantation work, thus income level increased up to these levels. 10.98% of women workers reported that their monthly

income is under Rs.9000-12000 income group.8.99% of women workers reported that their family income per month is Rs. 12000-15000. The main cause behind this income is women workers and their family members involved inside the business like hotels, home staying, and labour outside of the garden. Many women workers reported that their husbands or son get outside of the state for better job facilities. Only 4.20% of women worker's family income is more than 15000. Women workers reported that their family members were involved in some govt. job like police, military, etc. In this way, the family income also increased at such a level.

So, it is quite clear from the data that 77.12% of the total plantation women workers have a wage range between Rs. 3000 and 9000 which is critically insufficient to run a family in the present market condition even where family members are minimum i.e. only husband-wife and a child. In Terai region 77.12 percent (23.90 % & 53.22%) women workers are in below income of 9000 Rs. monthly. 23.90 percent women workers are in the income group of less than 3000 Rs. and mostly it is found that women workers are single earning member to their family. So, the women workers do not have enough money for spending their livelihood in the tea estates. Therefore, the wage rate presently provided by the tea garden owners is significantly meagre.

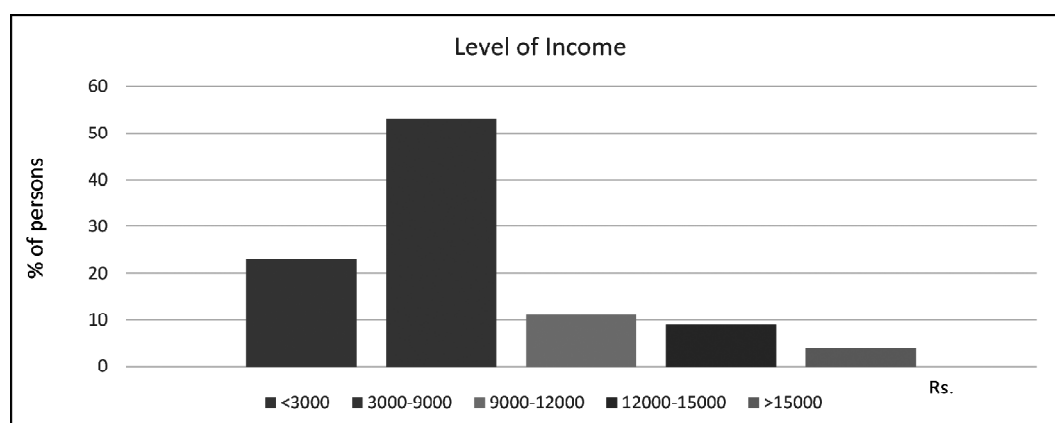


Fig. 3. Level of income of women workers of Terai

Facilities

Life and livelihood are shaped by the facilities provided to the women workers in the Terai tea gardens by the tea garden authorities. It is observed that the conditions of women workers are good where facilities are adequate in the gardens. (Misra, 1986).

Ranking of tea gardens have been prepared considering the facilities like ration, availability of quarters, house type, presence of bathroom, electricity, separate kitchen and draining system in the residential area (Fig. 4). It is observed that ration facilities are not equally distributed in all the tea gardens. Atal, ORD tea gardens have 100% ration distribution facility where Kamalpur, Marionbaree, Gungaram, Lohagarh, Kiran Chandra, New Chamta observed lacking in ration distribution facility.

Distributions of quarters are very good position in Atal, ORD tea gardens and the situation is bad in the New Chamta tea garden. Whereas other tea gardens like Gaya Ganga, Sanyashithan, Mahurganj, Marionbare have a moderate bad condition of quarters. Most of the house type in the bastee line, kulee line are semi pucca to kauccha, even in Atal, ORD tea gardens where all the facilities are inadequate condition there but the house is not good at all. In all the tea gardens presence of bathroom are below 50%. There are no permanent bathroom facilities at the working area. Some gardens provide temporary bathroom facility to the women workers at working place but they are not commendable at all.

Condition of electricity is good in all the gardens. Atal, ORD, Bagdogra, Mahurganj, Kamalpur, Marionbaree, have the 100% electricity facilities in the gardens. Surveys have been conducted to assess the condition of separate kitchen facilities in the tea garden of Terai region. It is observed that condition of Atal and ORD tea gardens are in a very good position, Bagdogra, Sukna, Mahurganj are in a good situation, Kamalpur and Marionbaree are in a moderately good position and Gangaram, Shanyshithan shows a moderate position while Kiran Chandra shows the moderately bad condition and New Chamta shows bad condition. It is observed that in all most all the gardens there is no proper drainage system. The situation becomes worst in the rainy seasons.

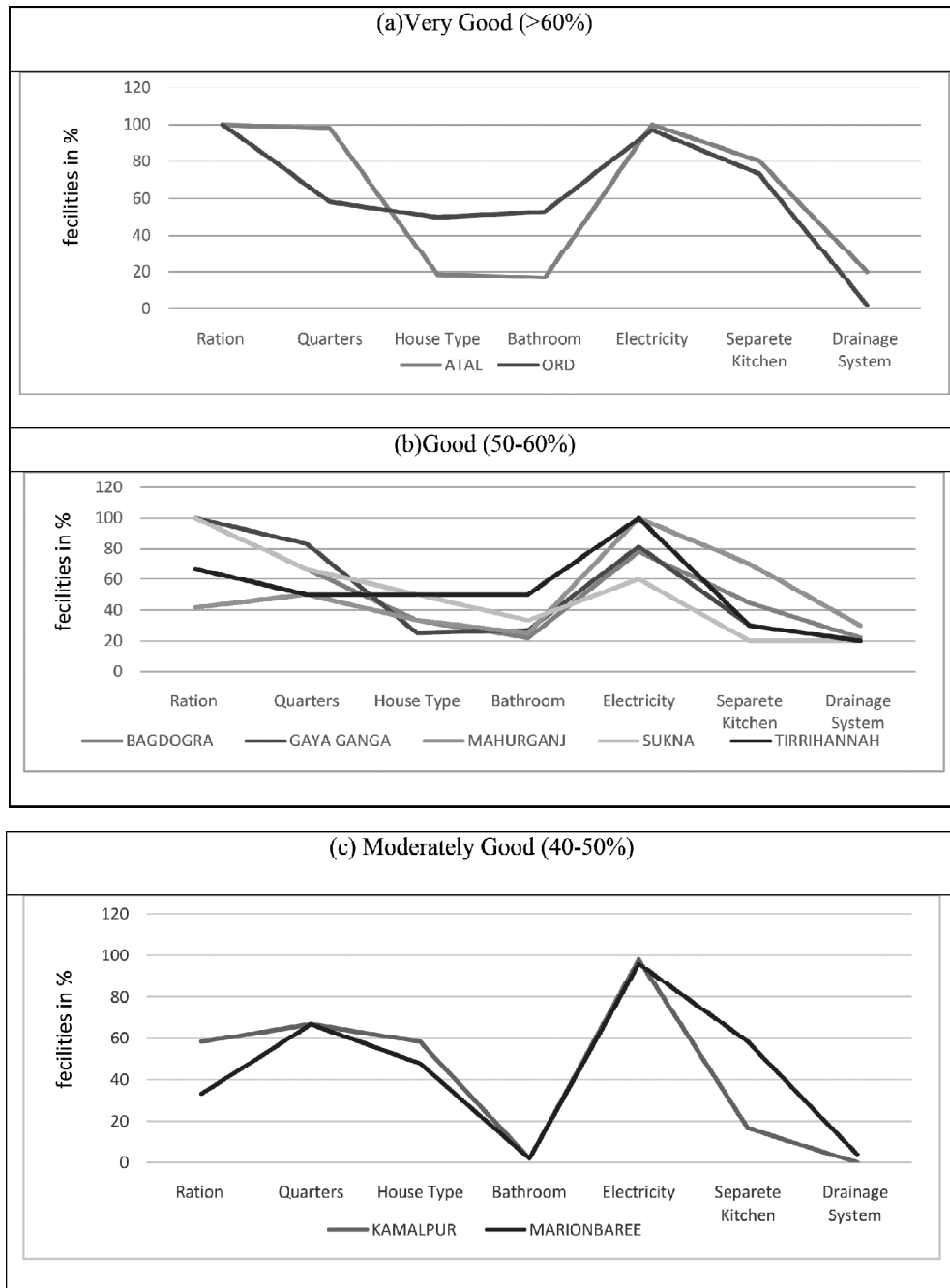
Surveyed tea gardens are ranked into categories (Table – 1) where it reveals that Atal and ORD tea garden are in very good facilities having 60% of all required amenities (Fig. 4a) Bagdogra, Gayaganga, Mahurganj, Sukna, and Tirrihannah tea gardens are in good (50-60%) position (Fig. 4b). Kamalpur, Marionbaree shows a moderately good position having the facilities of 40-50% (Fig. 4c). On the other hand, Gungaram, Kamala, Lohagarh and Sanyashithan tea gardens are in a moderate situation having all the facilities more than 30-40% (Fig. 4d). Kiran Chandra shows a moderately bad position having the facilities 20-30% (Fig. 4e). New Chamta is in a bad position having all the facilities are lacking, less than 20% (Fig. 4f).

Table 1. Facilities provided to the women workers

Ranks (in percentage)	Name of Tea Gardens
Very Good (>60)	Atal, ORD
Good (50-60)	Bagdogra, Gaya Ganga, Mahurganj, Sukna, Tirrihannah
Moderately Good (40-50)	Kamalpur, Marionbaree.
Moderate (30-40)	Gungaram, Kamala, Lohagarh, Sanyasheetan
Moderately Bad (20-30)	Kiran Chandra
Bad (<20)	New Chamta.

Source: Field Survey

Women workers play a vital part in both the working area and domestic province. Sincere attitude towards their work makes the life of garden society smooth and easy-going as a whole



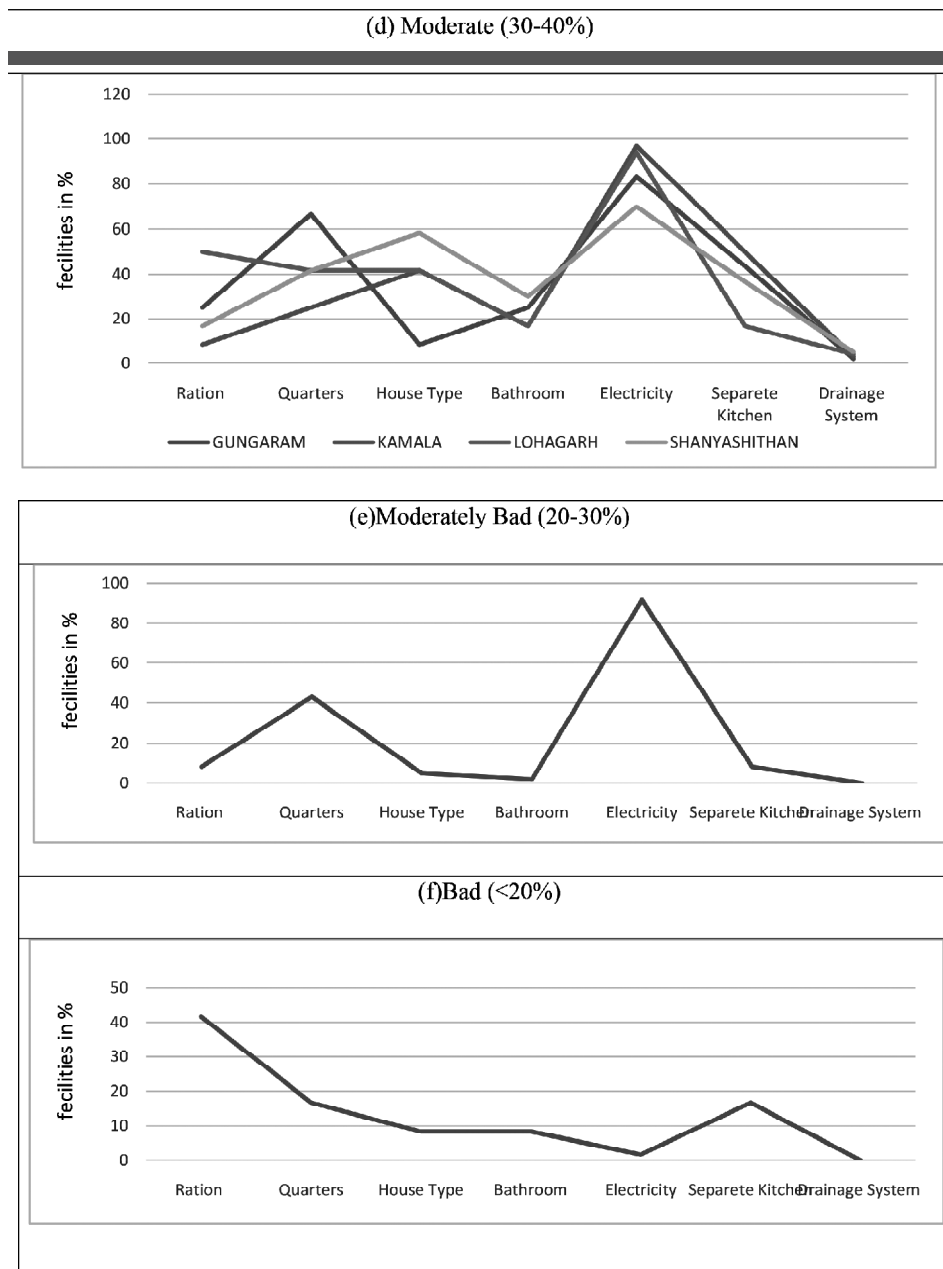


Fig. 4. Facilities provided to the women workers in Terai

Source: Field Survey

otherwise the life of planters becomes hampered and rendered to the phase of disablement. (Bhowmik, 1980). So, betterment in the life of women workers is the future for the betterment of tea plantation as a whole. The plantation tea industry differs from other industries because the workers in the former are family based and have been provided free residential quarters they are having permanently in the same quarters even after retirement. Their descendants get employment in the same tea estates. As a result, they have become permanent inhabitants of the garden for all practical purposes. So, life and livelihood are the full concern of the gardens authorities' in all the gardens of Darjeeling district. Facilities and regular distribution of amenities make the differences for the women workers. Situation of women workers are good where all the amenities are well distributed to the workers, on the other hand, running conditions are hampered if the women workers' conditions are not up to mark for the work in any garden. So, making the life of women workers smooth and easy going can enhance the condition of tea plantation better and upliftment in the production may also be increased by making the life of women upgraded.

Education

In the Sphere of industrial relations, the observations suggest that the women worker's education could be of great help to the workers to understand the problem of their own and the employers problem which could maintain cordial relation to the management authorities and the trade union members and the others officials as well. (Reddy, 1986) In the study area level of education accrue a good position. But when considering the plantation labour sudden fall in the level of education observed.

Detailed survey of the study area reveals the fact that women workers are more interested to pursue education than their male counterparts. There are visible differences in the nature of education among women and male working force. Males are not enough enthusiastic regarding their education while having many obstacles, women are very much conscious to achieve good education. There are various good primary and secondary Schools in Terai area. According to the plantation labour Act 1951 there must be School within the plantation because the workers' education has a significant role to play in bringing about a change in the outlook of the workers. Survey reveals the fact tea gardens of Darjeeling Terai have several primary school and sishushikshakendra under anganwadiproject. Atal, Bagdogra, Gungaram, Marionbari, Sukna, Lohagarh, and Gaya Ganga all these gardens have their primary School in running conditions.

Among the surveyed women workers (Fig. 5) 40.78% have completed primary level of education. Data analysis reflects the fact that majority of the primary education workers have become more enlightened and the degree of awareness is high. An age sex analysis of education among the women workers reveals the fact that most of the primary level educated workers are of 40 to 50 years age group. It is important to mention that the plantation system holds the first generation education. And most of the women workers are drop out from the school after primary education because they are involved in the plantation work generation after generation. Marriage is another important reason for their drop out because marriage at an early age is a trend in plantation society.

Among the surveyed women 3.22% of women workers have crossed junior high level of school i.e. they pursued their education up to class eight. After that, they left school because of continuing their job as a plantation worker. They did not complete their education but these women workers are very much conscious about their children's education than the workers having lower education levels. So education is an essential factor in bringing about a change in the attitude of the workers to a great extent. Only 1.1% of women workers passed secondary level. But still, work as labourer in the garden. 54.9 % of women workers are illiterates in the Terai area of Darjeeling district.

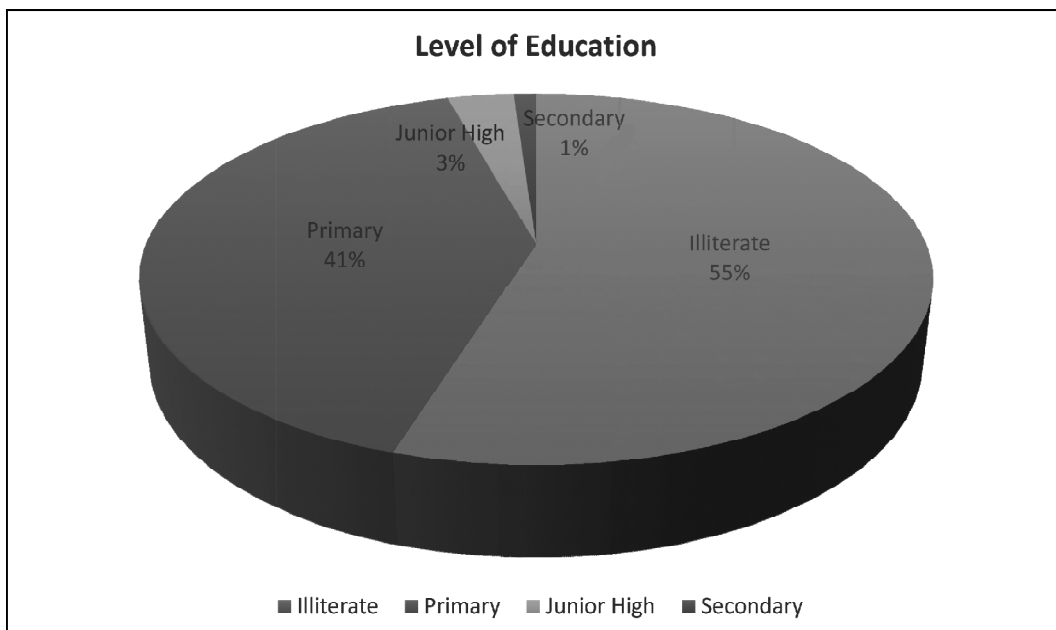


Fig. 5. Level of Education of Women workers of Terai

Household Condition

In the plantation the houses are built in 'Cooli lines', 'Barrack lines', 'Ucha lines', scattered even over the gardens. 30-40 houses in a line make a colony in the plantation system. In every line each house has its own compound. Most of the houses are of bamboo with thatched roofs and sides in the Terai area. A few houses have iron structures. Kitchen facility is one of the basic need for the garden workers. Lohagarh, Kamala, Shanyashithan, Tirrihannah, New Chamta, Kiran Chandra and Kamalpure etc most of the gardens don't have separate kitchen facilities. They cook in the open air in the day time and in bedroom at the time of Night. Kitchen is the most basic facility of a household. Sometimes garden authorities also make sanitary bathroom for the workers. But the amount of such allotment is not satisfactory at all. Therefore, most of the houses lack sanitary

bathroom facility. On the other side Terai regions are situated in the plain area where stagnant water in the household is a basic problem for them but still there is no planned drainage system observed in the tea gardens of Terai region. Mainly after Sajal Dhara project workers enjoy this facility in their garden. Atal, ORD, Kamalpur, Tirrihannah, etc. garden from Terai region are commented on by the Sajal Dhara project.

Conclusion

From the above findings, it is quite clear that almost all the tea gardens of Terai region do not provide even the minimum wage to the women workers by which sustainable livelihood satisfying the basic needs of the family are not possible.

The facilities which are provided by the tea garden authorities of the Terai region are inadequate (like insufficient ration, unavailability of Quarters, low grade house type, absence of bathroom water logging for poor drainage etc.) for many tea gardens which degrades the life standard and debarred the women workers from giving efficient service to the tea gardens as plantation labourers. This must lead to a fall of production in the tea gardens.

Education facility in the tea garden environment of the Terai region is not up to the mark or is not given importance by the tea garden authority. Education makes the women workers aware of their right, work responsibility and family health, hygiene, children's' education etc. This awareness in turn will give benefit to the development of tea gardens.

Needless to mention that, women workers of plantation background can easily adjust them in the plantation society. Their commitment to work is at a high level even more than their male counterpart. In regard to the 'permanency against turning over to other garden' and 'extra leaf-wage' they are apparently more committed. Women workers remain absent only from their work due to certain unavoidable circumstances such as child care, fetching the water, collecting the fuel etc. But the responsibility of women workers regarding plantation is very much assertive which is boon for the working environment of the tea gardens. Therefore, steps should be taken with multidimensional thoughts for the betterment of the quality of life and livelihood of the women workers which will ultimately help to achieve a better running condition of the tea gardens of the Terai region of Darjeeling district. Followings are some of the recommendations that can ensure the livelihood of women workers in Terai region of Darjeeling district:

- Plantation Labour Act should be reviewed and modified. The rate of daily wages should be increased to the minimum standard.
- For the betterment of the housing condition, gardens should appeal to the local governing body to take initiatives for providing housing facilities to the plantation workers like what has been done for the poor people by the local government for the construction of sanitary latrines or drinking water facilitation works done by Sajal Dhara project.
- Evening school, educational camp should be taken under special consideration for the betterment of the education of women workers.

- For enhancing the life and livelihood condition basic facilities should be offered at an optimum level.

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