

Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in Tea Tourism and Farming in India

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Abstract- Tea farming and tea tourism are significant components of India's agricultural economy, particularly in Assam, West Bengal (Darjeeling, Dooars), Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. Women form more than half of the workforce in these regions, yet they face systemic challenges of wage inequality, lack of ownership rights, poor working conditions, and limited opportunities for leadership. This paper focuses specifically on the Indian context, analyzing the contribution of women in tea farming and tea tourism, identifying barriers to gender equality, and exploring empowerment initiatives that can enhance socio-economic outcomes. By integrating available data and case studies from India, this study highlights the importance of gender-inclusive practices for sustainable development in the Indian tea sector.

Keywords: Tea, Tourism, Agricultural, Women

I. INTRODUCTION

India is the second-largest producer of tea globally, employing more than 3.5 million people directly in tea plantations (Tea Board of India, 2021). Women constitute nearly 55–60% of the workforce in tea gardens, with their presence particularly strong in plucking and sorting activities. Despite this dominance in numbers, women often remain confined to low-paid, labor-intensive roles and excluded from managerial or decision-making positions. In tea tourism, especially in Assam and Darjeeling, women play vital roles in hospitality and cultural representation but are underrepresented as entrepreneurs. Addressing gender inequalities in the Indian tea industry is not only a matter of social equity but also critical for boosting productivity and ensuring sustainability.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the role of women in tea farming and tea tourism in India.
2. To identify key challenges faced by women in achieving equality in the Indian tea sector.
3. To assess existing policies and initiatives aimed at women empowerment in tea regions of India.
4. To explore gender-inclusive strategies that can enhance productivity and community development in India's tea industry.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Gendered Division of Labour in Plantations

Historical and contemporary scholarship shows that women are concentrated in the most labour-intensive tasks—especially plucking—while men dominate machine-intensive and supervisory roles (Chatterjee, 1995; Labour Bureau, 2012). National and industry data typically place women at 50–60% of the plantation workforce, yet they occupy a small share of decision-making posts (Tea Board of India, 2021; Rasaily, 2019). Studies attribute this segmentation to entrenched gender norms and hiring practices that value women's "dexterity" in plucking but discount leadership potential.

2. Wages, Living Conditions, and Decent Work

Multiple assessments document persistent wage gaps and substandard housing, water, and sanitation in Indian tea estates. An Oxfam briefing on Assam highlights shortfalls against living-wage benchmarks and links low pay to chronic under nutrition and indebtedness among households, where women bear the brunt due to their concentration in lower-paid roles (Oxfam, 2019). ILO analyses similarly underline gaps

in reliable wage data and call for strengthened monitoring of employment conditions in tea (ILO, 2021). Journalistic and civil society investigations have periodically revealed poor compliance with housing and health provisions mandated for plantations.

3. Health, Nutrition, and Care Burdens

Programmatic evaluations in Assam show that women workers' nutritional outcomes improve when estates and local markets increase the availability and affordability of diverse foods and when income stability rises. Evaluations of Healthy Diets for Tea Communities report diet diversification and nutrition-sensitive behaviour change where supply and demand-side interventions were combined (GAIN & ETP, 2024). Studies also draw attention to the double workday for women—paid fieldwork plus unpaid domestic care—which constrains their mobility and participation in training and governance.

4. Safety, Harassment, and Gender-Responsive Systems

Gender-based violence and harassment are documented as key barriers to empowerment. Initiatives such as the Women's Safety Accelerator Fund introduced estate-level grievance systems, supervisor sensitisation, and community awareness, reportedly reaching tens of thousands of workers across Indian tea (IDH, 2022). UN Women's global frameworks emphasise safer public and workplace spaces and collective organising for prevention and redressal—recommendations that align with emerging practice in Assam.

5. Collective Action, SHGs, and Digital Inclusion

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and federation models feature prominently in the literature as vehicles for savings, credit, and enterprise development. Evidence from Assam indicates that SHGs can diversify women's incomes (crafts, food processing, micro-tea tourism) and strengthen agency over earnings. Digital tools piloted in Assam—such as mobile applications for confidence building, financial skills, and service access—have been documented to improve uptake of entitlements and financial literacy among women estate workers (ETP, 2023).

6. Certification, Buyer Initiatives, and Value-Chain Governance

Sector reports discuss how certification schemes and buyer-led programmes (e.g., Ethical Tea Partnership collaborations) can catalyse improvements in safety, nutrition, and worker voice. However, scholars caution that impact varies by estate governance, enforcement capacity, and the extent to which worker committees include women in meaningful decision-making (ILO, 2021; ETP, 2023). Sustained gains require alignment between estate management, unions, women's groups, and public regulators.

7. Tea Tourism and Women's Entrepreneurship

Academic and grey literature on tea tourism in India is emergent. Early studies from Darjeeling and Assam suggest that women-led homestays and guiding services generate supplementary income and social recognition, especially when bundled with handloom/handicrafts and culinary experiences. Barriers include limited access to credit, digital marketing, and compliance processes, reinforcing the need for SHG federations and district facilitation.

8. Intersectionality and Adivasi Communities

Assam's tea workforce is largely Adivasi, with layered disadvantages arising from historical migration, linguistic marginalisation, and precarious access to services. Gendered risks intersect with caste/tribal identity and poverty, necessitating tailored empowerment approaches that address documentation, education, and social protection alongside workplace reforms.

9. Legal-Policy Landscape

Key statutes shaping women's work in plantations include the Plantations Labour Act, 1951 (and subsequent labour codes), the Maternity Benefit Act, the Code on Wages (2019), the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020), and the POSH Act (2013) on workplace sexual harassment. The literature consistently notes that outcomes hinge on enforcement quality, transparency of welfare funds, and active participation of women in estate-level committees.

IV. ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIAN TEA FARMING

- In Assam, women account for nearly 60% of plantation workers, primarily engaged in plucking, which is one of the most labor-intensive tasks.
- In Darjeeling, women are central to maintaining the global reputation for high-quality teas, yet they rarely own estates or lead cooperatives.
- In Tamil Nadu's Nilgiri Hills, women work as both tea pluckers and in small-scale tea processing, though they often face wage gaps compared to men.
- Across India, women contribute significantly to productivity and quality assurance but remain excluded from land ownership, with less than 10% of women workers owning tea-growing land.

V. WOMEN IN INDIAN TEA TOURISM

- Tea tourism in India is expanding, particularly in Assam, Darjeeling, and the Nilgiris, where tea estates are diversifying into eco-tourism, homestays, and cultural heritage tours.
- Women often serve as cultural ambassadors, cooks, artisans, and hosts in these ventures. For instance, in Darjeeling, several women-led homestays have emerged, allowing women to earn independent incomes.
- However, women entrepreneurs in tea tourism face challenges such as lack of access to credit, limited marketing networks, and cultural barriers that discourage female ownership of businesses.

VI. CHALLENGES TO GENDER EQUALITY IN INDIA'S TEA SECTOR

1. Wage Disparities: Women in Assam and West Bengal earn wages significantly lower than men, with reports showing a 20–25% gender wage gap (Government of India, 2020).
2. Land and Property Rights: Tea estates are typically owned by companies or male family members, leaving women with minimal land rights.
3. Poor Working Conditions: Plantation reports highlight inadequate access to healthcare,

sanitation, and maternity benefits for women workers.

4. Limited Leadership Roles: Women represent less than 5% of supervisory or managerial positions in Indian tea estates.
5. Workplace Harassment: Studies have documented cases of sexual harassment and unsafe working environments, particularly in isolated plantation areas.
6. Education and Training Gaps: Women workers often have lower literacy rates, restricting their access to capacity-building and leadership training programs.

VII. EMPOWERMENT AND EQUALITY STRATEGIES IN INDIA

1. Policy Interventions: The Plantation Labour Act and subsequent labor reforms seek to improve wages, maternity benefits, and working conditions, though enforcement remains weak.
2. Self-Help Groups (SHGs): In Assam and Darjeeling, women-led SHGs have improved household income and given women a platform for decision-making. Between 2015–2020, SHG participation increased household earnings by 18%.
3. Skill Development Programs: NGOs such as ActionAid and UN Women have conducted training for women in tea-producing regions, promoting entrepreneurship and financial literacy.
4. Tea Tourism Cooperatives: In Darjeeling, community-based cooperatives involving women have successfully integrated tea tourism and cultural promotion, creating sustainable livelihoods.
5. Government and NGO Partnerships: Initiatives under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) have supported women entrepreneurs in tea-growing states through microfinance and training.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In India, women are the backbone of the tea industry, contributing significantly to both farming and tourism. However, systemic gender inequalities hinder their full potential. Data from Assam, Darjeeling, and Tamil

Nadu clearly demonstrate that empowering women leads to higher household incomes, improved community development, and sustainable industry growth. Strengthening legal frameworks, expanding SHG and cooperative models, and promoting women's entrepreneurship in tea tourism are key to bridging gender gaps. Ensuring gender equality in India's tea sector is not only a matter of fairness but also a crucial strategy for economic resilience and sustainable development.

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