The Position of Elderly People in the Tea Garden Community of Assam: A Socio-economic Overview

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Abstract: The elderly people of the tea gardens are living a good life having good economic measures provided by the tea garden management as well as the government. But we should also focus on the socio-cultural matters relating to the elderly people of the community. The family and the society from which the old aged and elderly people belonged to have crucial responsibilities to take to support them in socio-cultural and health related matters.

Keywords: Tea garden, old aged, elderly, problems

Introduction:
The life of an individual has a cycle on the basis of time. According to World Health Organization, at the biological level, ageing results from the impact of the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage over time. This leads to a gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity, a growing risk of disease and untimely death. Generally, the elderly population of a country is counted from the age of 60 years. Beyond biological changes, ageing is often associated with other life transitions such as retirement, relocation to more appropriate housing and the death of friends and partners. The places of birth, social environments, nature of the family, sex, ethnicity regarding and of the aged people always lead to the opportunities and inequalities at that age. It is assumed that old aged people are frail, dependent and a burden to the society.

The phenomenon of ageing is universal in nature. In each and every society it is seen. The perspectives and conceptions of the people regarding ageing are different from society to society. In India also, the phenomenon of ageing exists. The aged population in India is currently the second largest in the world. Before the independence, the life expectancy of the average Indians was below 40. During the 1951-60, the life expectancy has risen to the average of 44.96 years for the average Indians. By the end of the decade 1961-70, the life expectancy at birth of an average Indian has risen to 52.6 years. Due to the advancement in the medical facilities, there is seen the rise in the average of life expectancy (Soodan, 1975). Perhaps, due to this rise, the problems and issues associated with ageing has also risen. Again existence of mass poverty, growing trends towards nuclear family, greater life expectancy and deterioration of cultural values and norms are engendering stumbling blocks on the part of the aged to cope with the changing environment (Bhatia 1983).

Assam is one of the important states of India. According to the 2001 census about 6 per cent of the total population of Assam were senior citizens (60 years or above). The proportion of elderly person is high in rural areas than in urban areas of Assam. In 1961 the total elderly population was 5.09 lakh while it rose to 20.7 lakh in 2011. In the tea garden areas, the condition of the people is not in a good situation. From British era to till date, the situation of them improved not like what was expected. There are various issues related with the various sections of people like the issues of elderly people in the tea gardens. Still the conditions of the elderly people of the tea gardens are not improved so much. Although, they are getting some benefits from the tea garden management as well as the government. But we should also focus on the socio-cultural matters relating to the elderly people of the community.

Studies Related to the Elderly people and Old aged:
In a report published in 2018, the news portal The Times of India mentions that due to the economic loss of the company Tamil Nadu Tea Plantation Corporation Limited (TANTEA), the retired workers of the company were not getting their retirement benefits since last two years after retirement from the work. So, with the help of financial revival package from the government, the management managed to distribute the benefits to the workers and the retired workers attained the financial security at that age. Nair (2014) in his article “Ageing in India - a Conceptual Clarification in the Background of Globalization” mentions that the conception and the perspectives of the people regarding the concept of ageing have changed due to the effect of globalization. Ageing is socially constructed and also social reality. “Elderly were considered as a social phenomenon in India till the early 1980’s. But now they are looked as an economic phenomenon as the society is moving from humanistic (social) to materialistic (economic)”. Healthy Ageing, Active Ageing, Ageing with confidence, Happy Ageing etc is today’s concepts of ageing. Agarwal et. al. (2016) in their article “Population Aging in India: Facts, Issues, and Options” mentions that the older people often suffer from non-communicable diseases and multi-morbidity and mental health issues can be seen among them. There is increasing feminization in expectancy in birth between the older age groups. The life expectancy gender gap has been widening in India. The life expectancy at birth among females is increasing than that of the male persons in India. Rahman et. al (2021) in their article “Health and Wellbeing of Indigenous Older Adults Living in the Tea Gardens of Bangladesh”, mentions that almost 9% of the world’s total population were estimated to be the aged 65 years and above in the year 2019. High Income Countries have experienced an impact due to the old age population of their countries and the low and the middle income countries are going to be the epicenters of the old age population. Same case is also in Bangladesh. It is estimated that 40% of its total population will aged 60 years or above by the year 2050. They study the indigenous older people living in the tea gardens of Bangladesh. They found from the selected tea gardens.
that a majority of respondents were suffering from the some type of chronic diseases. Almost half of the respondents were suffering from visual difficulties, locomotion difficulties, gastrointestinal problems, hearing difficulties, malnutrition. So from their studies they found that the older people in the tea gardens are suffered by various socio-economic, health problems and lack of knowledge. In an article “Health Care and Hygiene Practices of Older People in Tea Garden: A Study Conducted in Lackatooarah Tea Garden of Sylhet District”, Pal et.al. (2016) mentioned that the issue regarding the old age population is going to be the emerging issue due to the improvement in health care and life expectancy in Bangladesh. They conducted a study at Leckatooarah tea garden of Sylhet district and tried to study the health care and hygiene practices of older people in the tea garden area as well as to identify how the cultural patterns of tea garden areas affect the health of the older people. They found from their study that Loneliness is the major problem of the older people when they lose one marital partner. Majority of the older people in the tea garden suffer from one or more diseases. The major health problems are headache, skin diseases, fever, cough and cold, gastric/ulcer, toothache, diarrhea, jaundice, and dysentery, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, asthma, depression, mental stress, feelings of insecurity. Hossain (2019) et.al in their article “Self-Assessed Health Status among Ethnic Elderly of Tea Garden Workers in Bangladesh” mentions that the increase in the number of the elderly people in the tea gardens creates problems in the health status. They studied the tea gardens which are under the Sylhet division of Bangladesh. In their study they have found that more than 90% of the elderly had suffered from multi-morbidity. They found that female and unemployed employed were in more risk to suffer from multi-morbidity and those who were illiterate elders were also at risk. They found that the ethnic elderly who were suffering from difficulties of seeing, getting up, standing, remembering and other disabilities were in more risk of suffering from multi-morbidity. Jaarsveld (2020), in his article “The Effects of COVID-19 among the Elderly Population: A Case for Closing the Digital Divide” mentions the social, political, economic and psychological effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the elderly people of the world. According to the author, the elderly people have not got equal advantages to access the technological measures to mitigate the effects of the situations. The elderly people has been worst affected by the virus as well as lockdown measures, “has seen the least benefits from these digital solutions. The age based digital divide describes a longstanding inequality in the access to, and skills to make use of, new technology.”

**Historical Background of the Elderly People Living in the Tea Garden:**

“The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old” (Das, 2015). It is known that most of the workers working in the tea gardens were the inhabitants of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh etc. Now the population is ten times more than the numbers of the earlier. “In the year 1837, the first experimental tea estate was established at Chabua of the district Dibrugarh of Assam” (Das, 2015). After that, the establishments of the tea estates were taken place at the several places of Assam. The great need of the workers for the tea gardens made the Britishers to import a large numbers of workers to Assam. “Different groups were recruited from different places, e.g. the Mundas & Gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumi from Bengal & Bihar, Oraons from Bihar & Orissa, Goulas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu” (Kar, 2005). So, there were two groups of people in the workers community. One is the tribal from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, a part of Madhya Pradesh and a major portion of Odissa, bordering areas of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. Another group is the caste from plains of Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and very few from the plains of Tamil Nadu. The elderly people of the tribes and various castes had various cultural, social, political, economic importance in their communities. But after the arrival of them in the tea gardens, the social, cultural, health status of them were lost. Because they were only treated as the workers by the Britishers. No matter how they were, each individual had to work. There were not enough houses, health facilities, and food for the workers at that time and the old people and the children were the worst sufferers.

Initially, an agency opened in Rangpur district of Bengal in 1851 and 329 laborers were brought to Kachar tea estate for the first time and then another 400 in 1859 from Chotanagpur, Ghazipur, and Banaras. In the year 1859, for the purpose of recruitment of laborers, the Planters’ Association was formed (teamworld.kkhsou.in, 2019). “Condition of recruitment were inhuman during the period of two years from 15th December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 recruits from outside of whom 11 percent died on the way and also brought 84,915 laborers from the year 1863 to 1866 (Guha,1977). During the 1960s, there was acute labour demand and the recruiting cost was very high. So Sardari System was such that the “sardars” or some old employees were told to go back to their villages and bring their family members and acquaintances that were willing to work. So, the many elders during that time were recruited as the Sardars and the system was very cheaper. They recruited the workers and held a number of workers under them. They were respected persons among the workers and of them obey the Sardars (Varma, 2017). The Bengal Administrative Report of 1967-68 shows that a total number of 22,600 laborers were imported from outside Assam in 1867 compared to 11,633 local laborers (Annual Report on the Administration Report of Bengal Presidency, 1867-68).

The condition of the workers during the time of importation was deplorable in nature. The tale of the workers who were recruited in the tea plantation of Assam were the tale of torture, exploitation, inhuman treatment, deprivation till India attained freedom in 1947. These migrated laborers were subjected to slave condition when they settled in the North East tea garden mostly situated far away from their native places. The culturally and economically uprooted laborers were the easy victim for exploitation. So, it is estimated that the older persons were the worst sufferers of the inhuman treatment, exploitation. The mortality rate of the laborers working in the tea gardens was very high in nature due to which, life expectancy was very low. The people could not get enough health facilities, safe diet. Between the year 1882 and 1901, the average annual death rate for adult laborers was 3.93 %. As there was more number of death rates among the adult workers, so it is clear that there were less numbers of elderly people. As the mortality rate even the ages of them was also very low. These kinds of things had challenged their day to day life during the colonial period. According to Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906, the mortality in tea estate at this time was appalling and according to the Committee of Enquiry in 1906 out of 84,915 laborers landed in tea district between 1st May 1863 and 1st May 1966,
over 30,000 had died by 30th January 1866. The importation of the laborers increased but the death rate was also increased at the same way.

The negligible size of ‘free’ and ‘voluntary’ migrants during one hundred years (1860s to 1960s) of migration corroborates the conclusion drawn by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906: that the Assam Valley tea plantations were not an attractive or popular destination for employment. Women and children were paid less than the male workers or the labourers, which in the long run helped the employers to keep the wage bill low. More than 3 million migrant labourers were recruited and transported to Assam’s tea plantations between 1860s and 1947, and of these over 2 million to the Assam Valley alone. A vast majority of these migrants worked in the plantations under conditions of generational servitude both during and after the indenture period. Even those who managed to move out into the neighborhood or to villages around the plantations never the less remained in dependent relationship with the plantations (Behal, 2014). Hence, after the completion of the contract, only a few workers had managed to live without the influence of the plantation and they lived with the native villagers. Those who were in dependent relationship in spite of being lived in the villages were getting basic amenities, facilities are not known. Although, it is also not known properly that whether the elderly people availed proper health facilities by the planters or not.

During the periods of importation of the people as the laborers, there arose a social assimilation among the laborers of various tribes and castes or communities which was comparatively less in nature. But in case of history of tea garden community though they were forced migrated to plantation industry in Assam & other part of North East tea garden estates, the process of assimilation also with the main stream so was very difficult for the laborers to practice their own culture, because, the purpose of the laborers was only to work and earn money. The processes of social assimilation and integration were slow in nature and their cultures were also different. There were some castes whose status was somewhat higher than the other castes that were capable to offer water to the Brahmans. Because of that, these groups refused to mix up with the other lower caste and tribal groups. The daily lives of the labourers remained confined within the socially and culturally insulated world of the ‘coolie lines’, of which they themselves left no record. The migrant labour communities never allowed the memories of their social cultural traditions and practices to be marginalized or erased. While they grieved for their dead and deserted ones, the labourers also celebrated festivals, marriage and childbirth ceremonies in their traditional, cultural and social forms- dancing; drinking and music were being the integral parts of these. As the elder people always took part in the social and cultural practices of their respective communities, so they held respectful positions in their communities. The role and status of them was very unique in these criteria.

The work experience and the nature of servitude under the indenture and post-indenture labour regimes in Assam impacted the life-cycle of the plantation labourers. Through these ways it became a generational employment. Everyday life and work on the plantations was scheduled on ‘garden time’. The women experienced a worse treatment in their everyday life. They were exploited physically and mentally and were paid less than the male counterparts during the colonial period. The women were the worst sufferers and they were not getting enough facilities. It was clear that at that period the women at the older were suffering more. Although the life of all the workers was very painful, they had to work by hook or by crook. The ‘coolie lines’ were the places where the labourers or the workers lived. “Their living and working spaces were constantly under surveillance by ‘Chowkidars’ (Guards) appointed by their employers. Low wages, intensive labour, physical coercion, high mortality and low rate of reproduction were the main features of labour life in the Assam tea plantations.” During the holidays, the labourers went for shopping to the haat. The folk songs, folk dances were the sources where they reflected their painful experiences, descriptions of exploitation, love, grief, protest, etc.

Current Situation of the Elderly and Old Aged Persons in the Tea Garden Society:

There are various provisions of the Government of Assam for the welfare and the security of the retired tea garden workers. Saikia (2014) in his book “Asomot Chah Khetir Etibritta” mentioned that the Government of Assam has passed some laws and regulations for the benefit of the elderly retired workers of the tea gardens. These are Assam Tea Employee’s Provident Fund Act, 1955, Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972. These acts provide special economic security to the retired workers of the tea gardens, so, that they can pass their older age with a safe condition. Nabakumar Baruah in his article “Chah Hilpot Paritukhik Prodan Aain (Payment of Gratuity Act) published in a magazine “Seoj Prakash” (2010), described about the rules-regulations, conditions for the workers related with the Payment of Gratuity Act 1972. Gratuity means the providing an amount of something to the workers worked under the employers as an offer or a gift for working given after leaving the work. The Assam Tea Employees Provident Fund Organization (ATEPFO) is a governmental non-profit organization which secures the economic security of the retired tea garden workers of the tea plantations. This organization offers benefits and pensions to the workers who are retired from their long years of work (attpf.nic.in). Generally, a person retires at the age of 60. Assam Tea Employee’s Provident Fund Act, 1955 and the Payment of Gratuity Act, 1972 are the acts which secure the life security of the workers during the old ages. Through these acts, the authorities provide an amount of money to the worker which is deducted from the worker’s salary during the duration of work (Saikia, 2014).

In a report mentioned by a news portal Business-standard.com published in Press Trust of India (2015), the Assam government assured a plan to provide a house to the retired workers of the tea gardens of the state. The additional Chief Secretary to the Chief Minister of Assam MGVK Bhanu to PTI that the ownership of the land and house belong to the plantation management and the government would assure a package of Rs.25, 000 and free land to build the houses. So, if the plan would be implemented then the elderly workers would live in a somewhat good condition. Then their condition would be improved.

Sushil Kurmi (2008), a writer elaborated a few remarks on the older people of the tea gardens in his book “Chah Gasar Maje Maje”. He mentioned that older people were working for the payment of same wages as given to the teenage workers during the last decade in some tea estates. At Borgang tea estate it was seen and no one complained about this. In this book he also mentioned the role of the elderly people in the cultural practices of the tea gardens. Ear piercing of the two to three years old kids is a common thing which is done by the grandmother of them. In the ‘Gram Puja’ celebrated in the tea gardens during the summer season for the
protection of the village or the tea garden area, the older people of the villages or the gardens perform the rituals by maintaining fasting. The role of the elderly people in the culture of the tea garden community is abundant. Same in the ‘Karam Puja’ also which is celebrated during the rainy season. There are three types of ‘Karam Puja’- Burhi Karam, Jitiya Karam and Raas Karam. The older person known as ‘Karam Burha’ tells the story about the Karam Devta (deity) in this celebration. In the marriage ceremonies in the tea garden areas, the elderly persons perform some of the practices. They get respectful position in these rituals. There is a story that why the Karam Puja is celebrated. According to the ‘Puran’ (an old Hindu Scripture), There lived an old man named Kali Devsharma. He had two sons. He went out from the home for renunciation and divided the whole property between the sons. But after a period of time the elder son fell in poverty. After returning from his younger brother’s field by working, he found that some of the people were worshiping ‘Karam Gaach’ (a kind of tree). When the people started worshiping it, the elder son whose name was ‘Karam’ was getting rich. So, from that period of time, it is said to be celebrated among the people. So, in the story we can see that after a particular age, a person gives up responsibility towards the family. These kinds of stories in more or less manner affect elderly people belonged to have crucial responsibilities to take to support them in socio-cultural and health related matters.

Moreover, the old aged and the elderly people of the tea gardens take crucial parts in the marriage ceremonies, death ceremonies, birth ceremonies and other socio-cultural practices. Most of the religious rites of these ceremonies and practices are performed by the elderly people of the community.

So, it can be said that the elderly people of the tea gardens are living a good life having good economic measures provided by the tea garden management as well as the government. But we should also focus on the socio-cultural matters relating to the elderly people of the community. The family and the society from which the old aged and elderly people belonged to have crucial responsibilities to take to support them in socio-cultural and health related matters.

Conclusion:
The elderly people and the old aged people are the experienced section of the society. The government as well as society can take enough roles to improve their standard of living. The cycle of life is crucial matter and everyone will have to delve into it. So, by taking steps and measures in consideration, we can change the view of the society. In the tea garden society and in the modern world also, it is often seen that many families do not properly take care of the old aged people. It is a harsh trend. Otherwise it will be generational in the coming years. It is often seen that there are various misconceptions and prejudices regarding the old aged people on the matters of work, contribution to the welfare of the society. Old aged people can also engage into work related activities if he is capable of. They can take developmental measures for the betterment of the society.

Works Cited