



Socio-Economic Barriers to Education among Tea Tribes: A Study of Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam

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ABSTRACT

The socio-economic status (SES) of tea tribes significantly influences access to education, shaping their opportunities for upward mobility and social development. The tea tribes of Assam, despite being integral to the region's economy, face socio-economic challenges that hinder their access to quality education. This study examines the impact of SES on educational access among the tea communities of Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam. Using a mixed-methods approach the research explores key socio-economic determinants such as income levels, employment patterns, literacy rates and access to educational infrastructure. Findings indicate that economic constraints, irregular employment and limited awareness about educational opportunities create significant barriers to schooling. Additionally, gender disparities and socio-cultural factors further exacerbate educational inequities within the community. The study highlights the role of government interventions, NGO initiatives and community participation in addressing these challenges. It concludes that improving economic



conditions, providing financial aid and strengthening educational infrastructure are crucial for enhancing access to education in tea garden communities. The findings highlight the urgent need for holistic policy interventions to bridge educational inequalities and improve the socio-economic conditions of these marginalized communities.

Introduction- Education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic progress (UNESCO, 2015). However, access to quality education remains a persistent challenge for marginalized communities particularly those residing in tea estates (Nambissan, 2010). The tea industry in Assam, renowned for its global significance employs millions of workers, many of whom belong to marginalized communities (Baruah, 2008). These tea garden workers and their families often grapple with poverty, limited access to resources and social exclusion (Saikia, 2011). Education serves as a critical tool for breaking the cycle of poverty yet access remains unequal (Tilak, 2002). Tea garden communities in Assam, including those in Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, have historically faced socio-economic disadvantages that hinder their educational opportunities. Low wages, seasonal employment, poor living conditions and limited access to educational infrastructure contribute to high dropout rates and low literacy levels among children in these communities (Bhattacharya, 2013).

The socio-economic status (SES) of a household plays a crucial role in determining educational access as factors such as income, parental education and employment stability influence a child's ability to attend and complete school (Coleman, 1966; Sirin, 2005). Additionally, gender disparities, early child labour and socio-cultural perceptions towards education further exacerbate these challenges (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011). While government schemes and non-governmental initiatives have attempted to improve educational access (MHRD, 2019), many structural barriers persist, limiting the effectiveness of these efforts.

This study aims to explore the relationship between socio-economic status and educational access among tea garden communities, focusing on the Lalpahar Tea Estate. By examining the key socio-economic determinants and their impact on schooling patterns, the research seeks to highlight the challenges faced by children in these communities and identify potential policy measures for improving educational access and retention. The study emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions that address economic hardships, infrastructural deficiencies and social barriers to education, ensuring a more equitable future for tea garden workers and their families.



Social Background of the Respondents- The respondents of this study belong to the tea garden labour community residing in and around Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, in the Tinsukia District of Assam. The social background of these respondents reflects the typical socio-cultural profile of the Assam tea tribes, shaped by historical migration, occupational stratification and community traditions.

Ethnic and Caste Composition: The majority of respondents are members of the Tea Tribe community, often referred to locally as Adivasis or Tea Garden Tribes. This includes ethnic groups such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon and other tribal sub-groups historically brought to Assam during the colonial period as indentured labourers. These communities share a distinct cultural identity with a mix of tribal traditions and Assamese influences.

Age and Gender Structure: The respondents consist of both male and female tea garden workers, typically ranging from young adulthood (18 years) to older age groups (60+ years). A relatively balanced gender distribution is seen, although women constitute a significant proportion of workers, especially in plucking operations. The labour force shows a broad age spectrum, reflecting both experienced older workers and a considerable number of young adults engaged in wage labour.

Marital and Household Status: A large number of respondents are married with households often comprising extended family members including spouses, children and elderly dependents. Nuclear family arrangements are common with a few joint family patterns.

Educational Attainment: Education levels among the respondents vary with a noticeable majority having primary or upper primary education. A smaller proportion has completed secondary education. Limited access to quality educational facilities and economic constraints are key reasons for low literacy and high dropout rates, especially among female respondents.

Occupational Profile: All respondents are linked to tea estate work either as plucking labourers, garden helpers or daily wage earners associated with estate operations. Apart from estate work, some respondents engage in petty trading or seasonal migration to big cities and towns for additional income. The dependency on estate employment highlights the limited livelihood diversification within the community.

Socio-Economic Status: Most respondents belong to the low to lower-middle economic strata. Household income primarily depends on daily wages from tea estate labour. Access to formal credit or stable alternative employment is limited. Land ownership among respondents is minimal; many depend on T.E. small plots and cultivate kitchen gardens for supplementary food.



Cultural and Linguistic Traits: Respondents typically speak regional tribal dialects along with Assamese and Hindi. They retain many indigenous cultural practices such as festivals, folk music and communal rituals. Religious practices include Hinduism and Christianity are common.

Social Mobility and Aspirations: Younger respondent express aspirations for better education and diversified employment beyond tea garden work. Increased awareness about rights, education and mobility has influenced social attitudes, especially among youth and women, leading to gradual socio-economic shifts within the tea tribe community.

Review of Literature- This review synthesizes existing research on how SES influences educational opportunities, retention rates and learning outcomes among tea garden communities with a focus on factors such as poverty, cultural barriers, gender disparities and government interventions.

Several studies highlight the precarious economic conditions of tea garden workers which directly affect their children's access to education. According to Sharma (2018) the majority of tea plantation workers belong to the economically weaker sections of society with meagre wages and poor living conditions limiting their ability to afford education. The study emphasizes that financial instability leads to high dropout rates and low enrolment in secondary and higher education.

In a similar vein, Das and Gupta (2020) argue that the absence of parental education in tea garden communities further exacerbates the problem. Parents with low literacy levels struggle to guide or encourage their children's education, resulting in a cycle of educational deprivation.

Gender disparities in educational access within tea garden communities have been extensively documented. A study by Barman and Dutta (2017) found that while both boys and girls face challenges in accessing education, girls are particularly disadvantaged due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities and social norms that prioritize male education. The authors note that cultural beliefs regarding the role of women in tea garden communities contribute to lower female literacy rates and reduced participation in higher education.

Various government policies and non-governmental initiatives aim to bridge the educational gap among tea garden children. According to Singh (2019) the introduction of midday meal schemes, free textbooks and scholarship programs has improved enrolment rates but retention remains a significant challenge. Many students drop out after primary school due to financial burdens, lack of infrastructure and the need to contribute to household income.



A study by Mishra and Roy (2021) highlights the role of NGOs in promoting education in tea garden regions. These organizations have introduced community learning centres, skill development programs and awareness campaigns to encourage education. However, the study notes that structural barriers such as language differences, poor teacher-student ratios and inadequate school facilities continue to hinder progress.

Language and cultural identity also play crucial roles in shaping educational access among tea garden communities. As per the findings of Baruah (2016) many children in tea gardens come from diverse ethnic backgrounds with distinct linguistic traditions, making it difficult to adapt to the mainstream education system. The lack of multilingual teachers and culturally inclusive curricula further alienates these children, leading to disengagement from formal education.

The link between health, nutrition and education in tea garden communities is another critical area of research. A study by Choudhury et al. (2022) found that malnutrition and poor healthcare services among tea garden workers significantly impact children's cognitive development and school attendance. Frequent illnesses, anaemia and inadequate sanitation facilities contribute to absenteeism and reduced academic performance.

The reviewed literature highlights the multifaceted impact of socio-economic status on educational access in tea garden communities. While economic hardship, gender biases, cultural barriers and health issues hinder educational attainment, government and NGO initiatives have made some progress in addressing these challenges. Future research should focus on sustainable policy interventions and community-driven solutions to ensure inclusive and equitable education for tea garden children.

Objectives of the Study- The objectives outline what the researcher intends to explore, examine or establish through the study. The objectives for the current study are as follows-

1. To examine the socio-economic profile of respondents with special reference to education, income levels and occupational structure.
2. To assess the level of access to education among children of tea garden households, focusing on enrolment patterns, dropout rates and gender disparities in educational attainment.
3. To identify and analyse the major economic, social and cultural barriers affecting educational continuity among tea tribe children.



Significance of Study- The current study holds significant importance for multiple stakeholders including policymakers, educators, social workers and the tea tribe community itself. The study will provide an in-depth analysis of the socio-economic challenges faced by tea tribe communities in accessing quality education. This research will contribute to designing targeted interventions that can help bridge the educational divide between tea tribe children and the general population. The findings of this study can serve as a valuable resource for government agencies, NGOs and policymakers to develop inclusive educational policies and welfare programs specifically aimed at uplifting tea tribe communities for overall developments.

Statement of the Problems- Education is a fundamental right and a crucial driver of socio-economic development. However, the tea tribe communities of Assam, including those in Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, continue to face significant barriers to accessing quality education. Despite various governmental initiatives and policies aimed at promoting education among marginalized communities, tea tribe children remain among the most educationally disadvantaged groups in the state. The socio-economic conditions of tea tribe families play a critical role in shaping their educational opportunities. Persistent poverty, low wages, lack of awareness, child labour, language barriers and cultural factors contribute to high dropout rates and low literacy levels. Many families prioritize immediate economic survival over long-term educational investment, leading to a cycle of generational disadvantage. Furthermore, gender disparities, early marriage and social norms often prevent girls from continuing their education. Limited access to higher education and skill development opportunities further exacerbates the problem, restricting the socio-economic mobility of tea tribe youths. This study tried to examine the socio-economic barriers that hinder educational attainment among tea tribe children in Lalpahar Tea Estate and explore possible strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Method of the Study- This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively examine the impact of socio-economic status (SES) on access to education among tea garden communities in Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam. The methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methods to ensure a holistic understanding of the issue. To obtain reliable and diverse insights, the study employs both primary (Interviews, FGDs and Observations) and secondary (Books, Journals, Reports etc.) data collection methods. The study followed an exploratory research design to explore the relationship between socio-economic factors and educational access.

Sample & Tools used- A simple random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different socio-economic groups. The study selected all the 70 Households from the tea garden



community. The respondents include school-going children and dropout students, parents and teachers, community leaders and management personnel. Interview Schedule, Focused Group Discussion and Observation were utilized for the current study.

Analysis of Data and Interpretation

A survey was conducted among all 70 households of the Tea Estate with a total population of 260 people of which 106 male, 114 female and 40 children below 0-6 years (18 boy child and 22 girl child) in Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong representing a diverse sample of the community.

During the period of the study, the researchers interacted with the respondents and obtained the following information relevant to the study and are mentioned below.

Socio-Economic Background

Educational Qualification of Respondents: 60% of respondents had not completed primary education or illiterate, followed by 32% had completed primary education and only 8% had completed high school.

Income Levels: 70% of families had an average monthly income of less than ₹5,000, followed by 20% earned between ₹5,000 and ₹10,000 and 10% exceeded ₹10,000 monthly. With an average monthly household income of ₹5,000-₹7,000, most families prioritize basic necessities over education.

Occupational Structure: 85% of the primary earners were tea garden labourers, followed by 10% engaged in small-scale businesses and only 5% Self-employed.

Access to Education

School Enrolment Rates: 80% of children between age 6–14 years were enrolled in schools, followed by 20% were not enrolled due to financial constraints and domestic responsibilities.

Dropout Rates: 27% of children dropped out before completing primary school, followed by 41% discontinued after primary education and only 32% pursued education beyond the 8th grade.

Gender Disparity: Girls face higher dropout rates due to cultural expectations, early marriages and domestic responsibilities. Boys are often preferred for educational investment, reflecting entrenched gender biases. 60% of school-going children were boys followed by 40% were girls with a higher dropout rate among girls (60% compared to 30% for boys).



Barriers to Education

Economic Challenges: 70% of respondents cited financial hardships as a significant barrier and 15% pointed to the cost of education-related expenses (books, uniforms, etc.).

Cultural and Social Factors: Cultural norms and traditional practices often limit the community's perception of the value of formal education.

Seasonal migration for labour during peak plucking seasons disrupts children's education. 30% attributed child labour as a reason for school dropouts and 25% cited early marriage and household responsibilities, particularly affecting girls.

Perceived Benefits of Education

65% of respondents believed education could improve their children’s socio-economic mobility. However, only 20% felt they had sufficient resources to provide uninterrupted education to their children.

Below Table is a summary of Results in Percentages

Indicators	Percentage
Respondents without primary education	60%
Families earning < ₹5,000/month	70%
Occupational structure- Tea-garden labourers	85%
Children enrolled in schools	80%
Children who drop out before grade 8	68%
Boys in schools	60%
Girls in schools	40%
Economic challenges as a barrier	70%
Belief in education's benefits	65%

Source- Field Survey

The findings highlight a strong correlation between low socio-economic status and limited access to education. While a majority of the community recognizes the transformative potential of education, systemic issues such as poverty, gender bias and inadequate infrastructure impede educational attainment. Financial instability remains the predominant barrier, exacerbating gender disparities and perpetuating a cycle of poverty.



Discussion- The impact of socio-economic status on access to education among tea garden communities remains a critical issue, particularly in marginalized regions like Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam. This study highlights how low income, irregular employment and socio-cultural factors collectively hinder children's access to quality education. The findings reveal that financial constraints force many children into early labour, leading to high dropout rates and limited educational attainment. Additionally, gender disparities and a lack of awareness about the importance of education further exacerbate the problem. Addressing these socio-economic disparities requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving government agencies, educational institutions, civil society organizations and the tea industry itself. Ensuring equitable access to education is not just a developmental goal but a necessary step toward social justice and long-term socio-economic transformation.

Findings to Sociological Theories

The findings of the survey conducted among all the 70 households of Lalpahar Tea Estate can be effectively interpreted through major sociological theories, particularly Social Stratification Theory, Human Capital Theory, Cultural Deprivation Theory, Gender Theory and Structural Inequality Theory. These theoretical perspectives help explain how socio-economic conditions systematically shape educational access and outcomes among tea tribe communities.

Social Stratification Theory: Social Stratification Theory explains how unequal distribution of resources, power and opportunities creates hierarchical social positions that influence life chances. The findings reveal that 85% of households depend on tea garden labour and 70% earn less than ₹5,000 per month, placing the community at the lower end of the socio-economic hierarchy. This structural positioning restricts access to quality education and reinforces intergenerational inequality. The high dropout rate of 68% before grade 8 reflects how children from lower socio-economic strata experience constrained educational mobility, validating the theory that social class strongly determines educational outcomes.

Human Capital Theory- Human Capital Theory views education as an investment that enhances future productivity and economic returns. Although 65% of respondents believe education can improve socio-economic mobility, only 20% reported having sufficient resources to support uninterrupted schooling. This gap highlights a key limitation of Human Capital Theory in marginalized contexts; economic survival takes precedence over long-term investment in education. The findings show that immediate income needs, child labour (30% cited as a dropout reason) and education-related costs (15%) reduce households' ability to invest in their children's education, resulting in early school discontinuation.



Cultural Deprivation Theory- Cultural Deprivation Theory suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds lack the cultural resources needed to succeed in formal education systems. The survey shows that 60% of respondents are illiterate or have not completed primary education, limiting their ability to guide, motivate or support their children academically. Traditional beliefs and limited exposure to formal education reduce the perceived value of schooling, particularly beyond the primary level. This explains the sharp decline in educational continuation after elementary education and supports the argument that cultural and educational environments at home significantly influence academic outcomes.

Gender Theory and Feminist Perspective- Gender-based analysis reveals deep-rooted inequalities in educational access. The findings indicate that boys constitute 60% of school-going children while girls represent only 40% with a higher dropout rate among girls (60% compared to 30% for boys). Early marriage (25%) and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affect girls, reflecting patriarchal norms that prioritize male education. Feminist Theory helps explain how gender roles and cultural expectations restrict girls' educational participation, reinforcing gender inequality and limiting women's future socio-economic empowerment.

Structural Inequality Theory- Structural Inequality Theory emphasizes how institutional and systemic factors perpetuate disadvantage. While 80% of children are enrolled in schools, high dropout rates indicate that access alone does not ensure educational retention or success. Economic vulnerability, seasonal migration during peak plucking seasons, inadequate educational infrastructure and limited state support interact to disrupt schooling continuity. These structural constraints demonstrate that educational disadvantage is not merely an individual or household issue but is embedded within broader socio-economic and institutional frameworks.

Thus, the findings establish a strong correlation between low socio-economic status and restricted educational attainment among tea tribes in Lalpahar Tea Estate. Despite widespread recognition of education's benefits, persistent poverty, gender bias, cultural constraints and structural inequalities limit educational participation and continuity. The application of sociological theories emphasizes that educational barriers are systemic and multidimensional, reinforcing a cycle of poverty and social exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires integrated interventions that combine economic support, gender-sensitive policies, culturally responsive education and structural reforms to ensure equitable educational opportunities for tea garden communities.



Limitations of the Study-The study on Socio-Economic Barriers to Education among Tea Tribes of Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam encountered several methodological and field-level constraints.

- Some respondents showed reluctance to disclose financial information, particularly regarding income and expenditure due to fear, mistrust or lack of clarity about the purpose of the study. This may have affected the accuracy of certain economic data.
- The interview process was more time-consuming than anticipated as respondents required extended interaction and explanation due to low literacy levels and unfamiliarity with formal surveys.
- A major constraint was the inability of several respondents to adequately understand or respond to research questions, especially those related to education policies, long-term benefits of schooling and income-related queries.
- The high level of illiteracy among respondents also resulted in limited cooperation at times, necessitating simplification of questions and reliance on verbal explanations.
- Furthermore, the small sample size restricted to one tea estate limits the generalizability of the findings. While the data provide valuable insights into the local context of Lalpahar Tea Estate, they may not fully represent the diverse conditions of tea tribe communities across larger regions of Assam.
- Despite these limitations, the study adopts a systematic and data-driven approach that offers meaningful insights into the socio-economic barriers affecting educational access and retention. The findings thus provide a credible foundation for context-specific and evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at improving educational outcomes among tea garden communities.

This methodological framework ensures a robust, data-driven approach to understanding the impact of socio-economic status on education in tea garden communities and provides a foundation for evidence-based policy recommendations.

Conclusion- The impact of socio-economic status on access to education among tea garden communities remains a critical issue, particularly in marginalized regions like Lalpahar Tea Estate, Tipong, Tinsukia District, Assam. This study highlights how low income, irregular employment, lack of educational infrastructure and socio-cultural factors collectively hinder children's access to quality education. The findings reveal that financial constraints force many children into early labour, leading to high dropout



rates and limited educational attainment. Additionally, gender disparities and a lack of awareness about the importance of education further exacerbate the problem.

Despite various government initiatives the persistent challenges emphasize the need for targeted policy measures. Strengthening financial support for education, improving school infrastructure, enhancing teacher quality and promoting community awareness are crucial steps toward bridging the educational gap. Empowering tea garden workers through skill development and better wages can also create a more stable environment for children's education.

Addressing these socio-economic disparities requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving government agencies, educational institutions, civil society organizations and the tea industry itself. Through promoting inclusive and sustainable educational policies, it is possible to break the cycle of poverty and uplift future generations within tea garden communities. Ensuring equitable access to education is not just a developmental goal but a necessary step toward social justice and long-term socio-economic transformation.

The socio-economic status of tea garden communities in Lalpahar Tea Estate significantly affects their access to education. Addressing the systemic barriers requires a multi-pronged approach involving financial support, infrastructure development and community sensitization. By bridging these gaps, policymakers can empower these communities, ensuring that education becomes a catalyst for their socio-economic transformation.

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