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Factors Hindering Tea Tribe Community of Assam in Accessing Social Security Schemes: A Study

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The Government of India has introduced four labour codes – the Code on Wages, Social Security Code, Industrial Relations Code, and Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code which are supposed to replace the 29 labour laws. Since 90% of India's workforce is in the unorganized sector, the Government of India wants to ensure than all informal and unorganized workers benefit from minimum wage and social security laws through these four codes. The Social Security Code empowers the Centre to notify various social security schemes for the benefit of all workers, organized or unorganized. The tea tribe community of Assam is one of the most vulnerable groups in the state while they produce 53% of India's total tea production. This paper is an attempt to understand the factors that affect access to public and social protection schemes, information on them, enrolment, and linkages of the tea tribe community. This paper attempts to bridge the gap on information needed for the implementation of the Social Security Code on the tea community of Assam and how the new Code might benefit the community.

Keywords: *Tea tribe, Assam, Social security, Labour code, Vulnerability*

1. Background

The tea garden community, also known as Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by the Government, is one of the most vulnerable socio-economic groups in the state of Assam. The community constitutes 20 per cent of the state's population of 3.5 crore and plays the most important role in the production of tea in India, producing about 53% of the total tea production of the country. As such, their contribution to the economy of the state and the country is significant. Despite this, the community remains one of the most vulnerable communities in the state as well as the country, socially, economically, as well as politically.

We can define socio-economic vulnerability in terms of vulnerability to multiple stressors and shocks, including abuse, lower standard of living, socio-economic exclusion, and natural hazards. The myriad ways the tea community remains socio-economically vulnerable can also be understood by looking at the housing conditions of the tea workers, which are dilapidated while toilets are non-existent. Most workers do not have access to safe drinking water and water-borne diseases like typhoid and cholera are fairly prevalent. According to a news report in 2018, one-third of 170 tea plantations of Dibrugarh did not have toilet facilities for tea workers despite being mandated by the law. It is noteworthy that Dibrugarh is

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India's largest tea-producing district, with some 25 per cent of its population living in estates. As per the Plantation Labour Act, tea estates are mandated to provide 8ftx 6ft bath-cum-latrine to every labour quarter[1].

Similarly, the political vulnerability of the tea community of Assam has a long history. The tea workers of Assam have been facing identity conflict ever since their arrival in the region. The demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by the tea tribe is not a recent struggle. Their struggle can be seen as one of assertion of identity as well as a political claim for citizenship rights. Organisations such as the All Assam Tea Tribe Students' Association (AATTSA), the All Adivasi Students' Association of Assam (AASAA), and tea workers' unions have played an important role in this struggle of identity assertion. The struggle has also been critical of the role of government as well as political parties (Sharma and Khan, 2018).

Why is it important to talk about the vulnerabilities of the tea community? Research has seen that the deplorable socioeconomic condition of this community has been a cause for their further exploitation (Sharma 2012). This can be further understood by analyzing the wage rate of the tea workers of the state. The wages of the tea workers are below the minimum wage for Assam's unskilled agricultural workers. The workers earn wages lower than the minimum daily wage (the tea workers earn Rs 157 per day while the minimum daily wage in Assam is Rs 240). Research has shown that only half of the tea workers have access to BPL ration cards. One-third of the tea workers experience recurrent debt. The tea workers have not seen a hike in their wage in the last 15-20 years.

The problem concerning the social welfare of the vast number of tea workers constituted one of the major considerations of the Assam Government since independence (Pio, 1990). In order to achieve socio-economic development of the tea garden community and provision of basic and need based entitlement and social protection support, the Government of Assam has been implementing welfare schemes through a separate Directorate viz. the Directorate for Welfare of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, Assam since 1983-1984 for speedy implementation of welfare schemes. In 2004, the State government created the Tea Tribes Welfare Directorate in 2004 as Administrative Department with a multi sector strategy with a basket of welfare schemes in the areas of education, health, sports and youth welfare, culture, agriculture, skill development, public health and social welfare constitute the major concerns of the Tea Tribes Welfare Directorate (TTWD, Assam). Similarly, the Tea Board of India (under Ministry of Commerce & Industry) has come out with critical schemes and welfare programmes for the tea community (Tea Board, India).

In July 2019, the State Chief Minister focused on the socio-economic acceleration of Tea Tribes Community and stated that the implementation of welfare schemes

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[1]　Bose, P.R. (2018, June 14). *Assam Tea Workers Yet to Have Access to Toilets.* The Hindu Business Line. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/assam-tea-workers-yet-to-have-access-to-toilets/article24166007.ece

has to be expedited so that the tea tribe community across all segments enjoys the benefits of the schemes (The Sentinel, 2019). That along with expeditious implementation of the welfare schemes, awareness generation among the grass root level members of the tea tribe community holds the key for the success of the government schemes (The Sentinel, 2019). Unless the beneficiaries are made conscious of this aspect, the purpose of social security programme is likely to be remain under fulfilled. (Pio, 1990).

2. What Can Vulnerability Do to a Community?

Vulnerability is a trap, where one kinds of vulnerability leads to another. Inability to access public schemes can lead to further vulnerabilities and this has been the case for the tea community in Assam. There is a lack of wider socio-economic-institutional arrangements in the absence of which have contributed to a poor and difficult access to basic amenities, services and entitlements by and for the tea garden community in Assam.

It is seen from past research that in situations of vulnerability, the socio-psychological state of minds is pushed deeper in silos and silence with no confidence or will to seek remedies or entitlements where the surroundings are appeared to have played a vicious role in distancing the vulnerable from the mainstreams. The common challenges as identified and faced by the lay tea tribe community member are ones that includes inconsistent or incomplete policies regarding eligibility, unscientific and unplanned enrolment of beneficiaries, inability to identify and enroll members, lack of portability, lack of under-standing of the schemes, affordability, lack of trust in service agencies and local authorities and officials, and unfavorable timing and situational reasons. Past studies have largely identified factors in absence or lack of working conditions, lack of basic amenities and services of and for the tea garden working community without much focus on limitations around access to government schemes, social protection measures so critical of strengthening the capacities of tea households and supporting their decent living needs.

It is, thus, important to understand why the tea tribe community faces issues in availing public schemes and social protection information meant for them. This paper offers an in-depth understanding the access barriers of the tea community in availing public schemes information and enrolment and how the Social Security Code can benefit the community.

3. Brief overview of Public Schemes for the Tea Tribe Community

One of the prime arguments in favour of public schemes has been its ability to protect citizens of vulnerable and poorer segments. It is seen that schemes help in reducing vulnerability across the life-cycle of vulnerable population in such a way that the benefits are continuous and cumulative in total impact and also provide a regular and predictable household income (Cain, 2009).

There are two sets of public schemes targeted to reach out to the tea tribe communities in the State – (1) Special and focused schemes by the Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate (TTWD), and (2) Universal schemes by other State departments and Central government run schemes. The geographical context of the tea tribe community residing in a distinctly designated tea estates owned, run and managed by tea estate owners and corporate, makes a special case of distinctness of the community and their socioeconomic conditions and hence special provisions for empowerment of the community and their mainstreaming efforts.

In order to achieve socio-economic development of the tea tribes people, the Government of Assam have been implementing welfare schemes through a separate Directorate viz. Directorate for Welfare of Tea & Ex-Tea Garden Tribe, Assam since 1983-1984 for speed implementation of welfare schemes (TTWD, Assam). The mandate of the TTWD has been listed across a wide range of priorities and issues that it seeks to undertake for the overall development and empowerment of the community.

The TTWD over the years have been focusing on key need based areas and accordingly formulating schemes to deliver at community level. The schemes priority includes - Awareness Programme on Child/Human Trafficking, Family Planning, Legal Awareness, Health etc., Coaching for Higher Studies, Distribution of Power Tiller under Foigs, Financial Assistance for Higher Studies, Furniture and Furnishing Material for Tea Tribes Boys and Girls Hostel, Grants to Patients Suffering from Cancer and Malignant Disease, Grants to Women SHGs, Insurance Premium @ Rs.12.00 to 10.00 Lakh Beneficiaries, Post-Metric Scholarship for Tea and Tea Gardens, Pre-Metric Scholarship of Tea Garden etc., Promotion Sports and Youth Welfare Activities, Purchase of Training Materials/Equipment, Rural Water Supply, and Training of ANM for Self-Employment (TTWD, Assam). Guidelines of various schemes are also being put on the site for reference.

The department is also working on an Online Application System for scholarships to make the supply and demand process more streamlined. In October 2018, the State Chief Minister launched the Wage Compensation Scheme for Pregnant Women in tea gardens of the state. Under the scheme, each pregnant woman in tea gardens will get a sum of Rs 12,000 so that she can take better care of herself and her unborn baby without compromising the livelihood of her family. An amount of more than Rs 55 crore had been allotted in the State Health Budget for the financial year 2018-19 for this scheme which will benefit nearly 48,000 pregnant women every year. All temporary, permanent or non-workers living within the tea garden areas will be eligible for the scheme.

There are also grants for young meritorious students from the community for pursuing higher education. Grants have been given for pursuing entrepreneurship by the young people. 10,000 tea tribe youths will be provided one-time grant of Rs 25000 for encouraging entrepreneurship and one-time grant of Rs 10,000 would

also be provided to the meritorious students of the community who have passed HSLC and HS examinations with success (The Assam Tribune, 2019).

There are schemes to include housing aspect of the community as well. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the government will provide housing benefits that are at par with PMAY benefits subject to the garden authorities' willingness to provide long term lease in the name of the tea garden workers.

The universal schemes of other departments that equally covers and ought to cover the tea tribe community includes Mamoni scheme meant for pregnant women to encourage pregnant women to undergo at least 3 ante-natal checkups which are helpful in identifying danger signs during pregnancy with small financial aid (Assams Info, 2015); Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) with the objective of reducing maternal and neo-natal mortality by promoting institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women (HFW Dept. Assam).; the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) run by the Panchayat and Rural Development Department. One key aspect that comes to the fore is in such universality of schemes made out to reach the tea tribe community is, such practice has led to the proliferation of narrowly targeted interventions often administered by different government agencies, which are increasingly difficult to coordinate (Cook, 2009).

4. Methodology

The paper uses data from qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. The data collection was done in two parts. These were – (1) key informant / participant interviews via semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, and (2) focus group discussions (FGDs). The purpose of FGDs was to know the perceptions and views of stakeholders, especially the tea tribe community members, on the access aspects of public schemes and benefits for the tea tribe community and to identify the barriers they face in regard to schemes information, facilitation, grievances and end benefits including any issues pertaining to scheme service providers. Each of the potential target groups was stratified by sex (male/female) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Target Groups for Focused Group Discussions

Targeted population	Number of groups
Tea garden workers	12
Front line service providers and staff	6
Tea tribe district and Panchayat level members and staff	6
Total	24

For the key informant interviews, the stakeholders were identified by secondary content and information review and grouped into broad categories such as the Garden Managers, Welfare Officers, Sub-divisional Welfare Officers, Chairman of Sub-divisional Beneficiary Selection Committee, TTWD senior officers, NGOs, SHGs, community opinion and traditional leaders of the tea garden communities. Key informants from each of these categories were identified and interviewed (Table 2).

Table 2
Category of key informants

Category	Number
Sub-divisional Welfare Officers	6
Scheme managers	5
Additional District Deputy Commissioners in charge of Tea and Ex-tea tribe welfare	3
Director of Tea Tribe Welfare Department	1
Chairman of Sub-divisional Beneficiary Selection Committee	6
Social welfare officers	1
Panchayat Presidents, Secretary (with tea tribe community majority population)	12
NGO / CSO representatives	8
Member of Legislative Assembly	1
Community leaders/opinion leaders	12
Total	**55**

The data was collected in six selected tea tribe prominent districts including the two largest districts with tea tribe population of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in upper Assam region. These selected districts presented facts and incidences of information and entitlement exclusion for the community, along with lower level of key socioeconomic indicators like health and hygiene, safe drinking water, school dropouts, unemployment, and widespread ignorance and apathy. This also has related relational connect with the normal non-tea garden community residing in the same Panchayat and villages and problems therein. The exclusion scenario includes both that are forcefully excluded as well voluntary excluded population due to lack of interest or apathy.

The selection of these districts was informed by their concentration of tea tribe population, state geographical divisions and distinctions, and high level of representation of tea tribe leaders, associations and agencies involved. Generic underdevelopment of the tea tribe community within these districts has been another determinant for selection.

5. Results and Findings

Our research found that constraints in accessing information are cultural, social, as well as economic. These have been categorized as shown in the figure below.

Figure 1
Schematic of Results: Themes and Categories
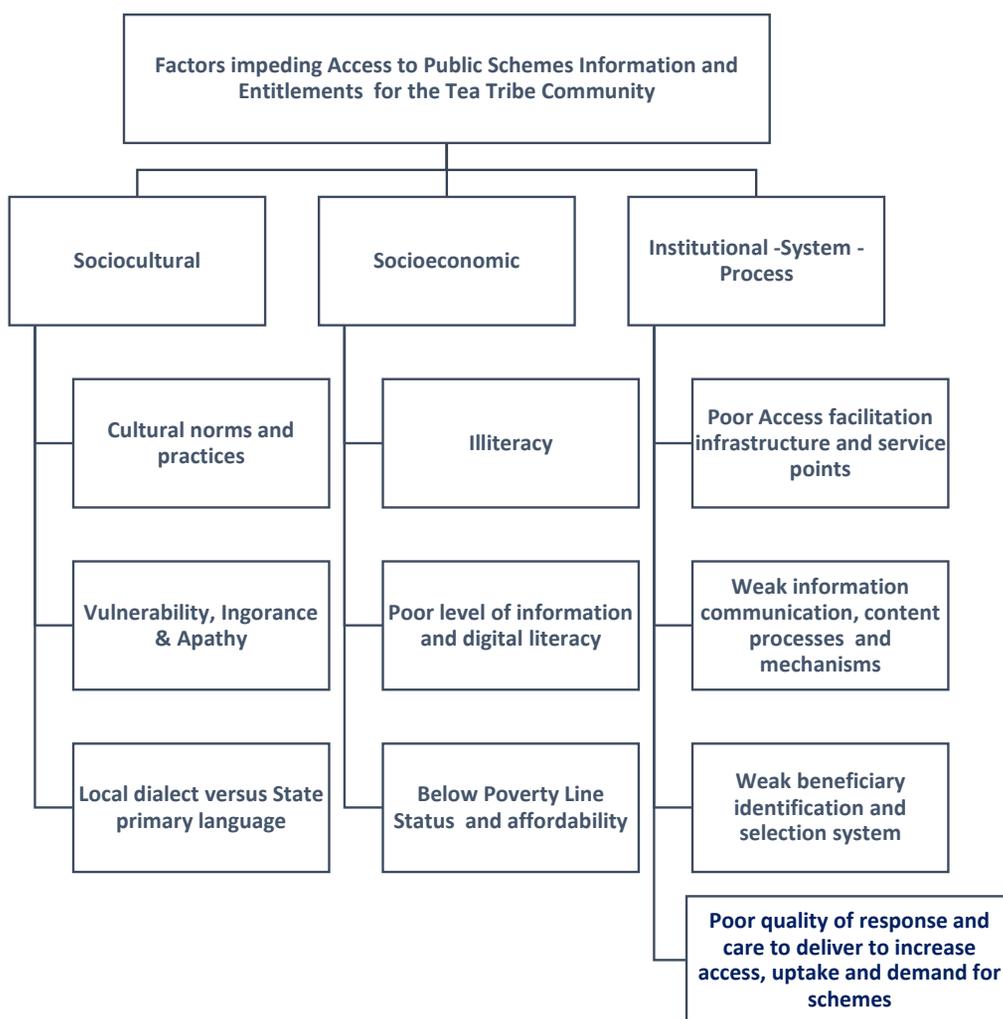
Socio-cultural Factors Hindering Access

- **Cultural norms and practices**

Past literature has seen that social and cultural norms in the form of closed social behavior can be a major constraint in accessing schemes and benefits. This was seen to be true for the tea community of Assam as well. A male tea garden worker from Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur District, Assam, describes a situation:

"We have been living in such remote and closed world for ages. We are not smart or our behaviour and communication abilities are still not developed to go out and interact with somebody from outside our community. In that case, you cannot expect the workers to go out and search for information, services and benefits from agencies and authorities, who are managed by people from largely Assamese community."(FGD-Dhekiajuli, Sonitpur, Assam).

The tea tribe communities have been a working class of tea garden labourers and families, residing in enclosed tea garden boundaries in garden lines (colonies). The formulation and display of social behaviour in an inter-community or society context and intra versus wider social context has been by and large restricted and controlled due to overall social, economic reasons largely 'managed' by tea garden management and authorities. In such closed behaviour context, the expectations from the broad community to come out, engage and interact with 'outsiders' as in service agencies, authorities and seek information, entitlement and benefits is a limiting one.

Following some of the old practices also inhibits access to schemes and entitlements. For example, going for home delivery of new born instead of institutional delivery limits a family to get institutional benefits for the pregnant women, new born child and the mother. Young girls cannot easily go out of homes and look for entitlement information and benefits as they are generally asked not out to venture out of homes.

- **Vulnerability, Ignorance and Apathy**

The results show that, issues of health conditions, remoteness of garden and residence, high level of ignorance of developments around including government programmes and provisions, situation of information poverty and flow, apathy in indifference to schemes and benefits and overall social and community environment in which the tea tribe community resides have restricted access to schemes in real time and contexts. The high level of alcoholism amongst the garden workers (the male folks) with local brew and supply have also affected families and increased vulnerability. A higher level of illiteracy, high level of school dropouts, garden work terms and conditions and prime working hours from morning till evening on daily wage basis are other vulnerability indices especially for the women who constitute the prime labourwork force.

The following quotes describe the vulnerability of the poor during discussions in male and female focus groups:

"My man doesn't work. He does nothing. I work in garden and have to go daily to work from morning 7 am to evening 4 pm. Where do I get time to look for schemes information and benefits? Whatever I hear from others or fellow workers, I try to access." (IDI – Singri Tea Estate)

"We stay in a remote location. Whatever scheme comes or not, we don't know even. And no body informs us also." (FGD-Jorhat).

"The parents go to work in garden in the morning. The children have a choice to go or not to go to school that opens in later hours and there are no one at home to ensure that they goes to school. Out of 10, 5 children do not go to school on regular basis. In that case, how the children or the family can get benefit from any scheme." (IDI, Panchayat President, Dibrugarh district).

- **Language and Dialect**

Assamese is the major lingua franca of Assam. It is the primary language in official communication as well along with English language mode of information and communication for programmes and activities. The tea garden community speaks, understands and communicates in 'Sadri' a garden specific local dialect in an intra and inter mode of information and communication within and amongst the tea gardens, though Assamese is used intermittently. Almost all correspondences and communications in print and documents are in English and Assamese language, wherever it seemed feasible based on layers of services being designed, executed and delivered. The higher level of illiteracy and lack of even functional literacy for many has acted as a barrier in understanding any communication or documents, review those and process the same for their own benefits. There have been instances when applications sought along with set guidelines are not well understood and in the process, applications filled incorrectly along with irrelevant documents are submitted to avail any particular scheme and eventually applications getting rejected. This is how a district level Sub-divisional beneficiary selection committee Chairman observed the situation:

"The level of ignorance among the normal and average garden resident worker is high. Recently, we have asked for applications for SwahidDayal Das Self Employment Scheme under Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate of Assam. While we were scrutinizing the documents required along with the application forms, we realized that many applicants have submitted wrong documents along with incorrect and incomplete application forms. Either they have not gone through the scheme details or did not understand the scheme provisions. In that case, the applications are bound to be rejected and the uptake for the scheme will be low."(IDI, Chairman, Selection Committee, Jorhat Sub Division).

Socioeconomic factors hindering access

The vulnerability of the tea tribe community and their access to critical public schemes and social protection benefits has equally being limited by key socioeconomic factors. Despite having relevance and urge to get scheme benefits, there are these barriers that have slowed down the uptake and demand for schemes and benefits, both specific to the community as well as universal schemes and programmes. In order to streamline and strengthen access for the community and

mainstream their needs and solutions, it is important that sustainable measures and mechanisms are developed and followed to reduce and remove these barriers towards community development and empowerment. We have identified three socioeconomic factors in today's context that has restricted access and enrollment to schemes and benefits for the tea tribe community: 1) Illiteracy, 2) Information and Digital Illiteracy, and 3) Below Poverty Line Status and Affordability.

- **Illiteracy**

Illiteracy is quite as high as 70 percent in a tea garden or estate. Most of the workers are in middle age or towards older age and retirement age and the level of ignorance and written or functional literacy is poor for these segments. Adding further, there is direct proportionate link between women constituted the larger work force as well as high level of illiteracy in them. Add to this the large level of school drop outs before they reach the 5th or 6th standards have little room for real and functional literacy levels who can add value to their lives as well as others. In such a scenario, the basic need to access information, process the same for consumption and following few basic formal and institutional processes by themselves is a distant challenge that have added the access gaps to avail schemes benefits. This is another reason why still many workers are still ignorant about various garden management related entitlements and provisions as well as provisions under Plantation Labour Act, 1950. With this comes, the always and persistent incapacity and under confidence to approach, seek information and question things which may not be or felt unjust and improper. Two discussants have this to share:

> *"Our reading writing is very less. We find it difficult to read through and understand any document and details. Whatever our garden Sardars and leaders or ward members tell us we follow accordingly. We also pay some money to get few office things done. At times we find helpless." (FGD, Lakhimpur)*

- **Poor level of information and digital literacy**

If illiteracy is a barrier towards empowerment and development, then the information and digital illiteracy should be considered as next level barrier towards empowerment in an information and digital society and economic environment driven by knowledge factor. As our society is moving towards digital based social and economic networking, transactions and activities, the governments and agencies are also driven towards Information Communication Technology based measures and mechanisms to further decentralize and democratize reach of public programmes and benefits with new measures in accountability, transparency and neutrality. Local authorities and service agencies are using technology to manage public information and content and facilitate linkages and access to welfare benefits digitally and online. This has required that even the common of the common man have basic awareness, knowledge and functional skills to access information and resources in and through digital means and platforms. The level of information

and digital literacy is a grey area in and within the tea garden communities. Except for few youngsters who have enrolled in some private professional short term courses, the wider majority is still out of the new information and digital revolution, related skills and knowledge and availing opportunities and benefits using this emerging networks and tools. An official has to share this observation related to this bottleneck:

> *"We run scholarships programme for the tea tribe youth. We have online application system wherein potential applicants have to apply for scholarship benefits online while uploading all relevant documents and testimonials. However, we are finding it difficult to have proper demand and uptake for our scholarships. The reasons we have identified are in poor and low connectivity in tea gardens and lack of provisions and skills and capacities to access our online facilities and apply for scholarships. This is a challenge we are constantly facing." (IDI, Official, Tea Board of India, Guwahati)*

In this process, the much advocated and pushed Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) and access to public benefits are impeded and not taking place. High level illiteracy, ignorance, apathy and absence of basic pre entitlement documents and identities have affected availing schemes benefit and eventual DBT transfers as sign of a empowered citizen with digital identity and source of strength.

This wide lack of usage of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and digital means and platforms both from demand side and supply to strengthen and improve the above processes and efforts are affecting overall demand, uptake and access of benefits. On demand side, it was understood that community members, especially the youth, are not using or visiting the Department or the District Administration website to get an update of schemes and provisions and approach officials accordingly. They are either not aware of such provisions or doesn't know how to access them. As two of the FGD participants shares their views as follows:

> *"We do not visit these and see what's there (websites) and we do not know to see them. Someone has to teach them how to see and get information and provisions about schemes," (FGD participant).*

A young man who has passed his 12th exam and was asked about scholarships provisions and applying it online, he has to share this:

> *"I did not get any scholarship and I am not aware of what it is. We do not know how to make online about applying scholarships. Nobody knows," (FGD participant).*

- **Below Poverty Line Status and Affordability**

The vulnerability in the tea tribe community majorly stems from several economic reasons and this explains why many from the community are not having timely access to public schemes information and benefits. The total tea garden population constitutes the vast Below Poverty Line (BPL) category and constitutes one of the centrally listed Other Backward Class (OBC) groups. It is accurate to describe the

tea garden population as very poor because they do not have the financial means even to open a bank account with minimum balance, with their earnings as low as INR 167 per day. Going by the definition, the poor cannot afford the very basic necessities of life and a natural consequence they are also excluded from availing any scheme benefits if it involves direct and indirect costs and that below their paying capacity. The distance to access and enquire schemes related information and benefits necessitates losing a day's wage and along with transportation costs involved to the nearest Panchayat or a bank office or health centre works as a big deterrent to venture out and look for scheme related information and opportunities in time. Few participants explain this predicament:

"Many of the workers still do not have bank accounts. Workers find it difficult to open an account with minimum deposits due to their financial constraints and living on daily wages, and therefore they are not eligible to get government benefits including Direct Benefit Transfer benefits. We are trying to work out a solution with the banks." (IDI, Chairman, Sub-divisional Beneficiary Selection Committee, Dibrugarh)

"We have to go to work daily or else we do not get our wages and other benefits like ration. We cannot go to office and get our work done in one day and we cannot go again and again or else we lose our wages and income for living. And who will give money for our travel?" (FGD, workers, Jorhat)

Institutional-System-Process factors impeding access

There exist a number of institutional-system-process wide gaps that find their root in the political, historic, and economic structure of communities and are reinforced by local institutions, administrative designs and layouts and local infrastructure that impact on access to schemes and benefits. Consequently, these factors also impact on the process of enrolling, uptake and demand for schemes and eventual end benefits. Our data analysis reveals four system oriented structural functional factors that have restricted access to schemes and benefits in real time and context: 1) Poor Access facilitation infrastructure and service points, 2) Weak information communication, content processes, mechanisms; 3) Weak processes in identification and selection of beneficiaries; and 4) Poor quality of response and care to deliver to increase access, uptake and demand for schemes.

- **Poor access facilitation infrastructure and service points**

Poor information facilitation and support infrastructure and facilities at community and Panchayat level are noted to exclude many from having adequate access to schemes and benefits. As one former President of a Gram Panchayat stated:

"The long distance of gardens and villages, as well as a lack of information, facilitation and support system at Panchayat and community level are the primary reasons why

many from the tea garden population and others are excluded from getting access to schemes and services" (Past GP President, Jorhat).

This is how one scheme manager at district level puts it:

"We are supposed to register beneficiaries with schemes and enable getting benefits after due diligence but if in the community there is no facility to access information, guidelines, documents, support to process those, and one need to scramble to get these basics, that is how the impediment to access schemes come in"(Dibrugarh).

Lack of access to information and support facilities in tea garden areas because of absence of community or Panchayat based systems and mechanisms in a largely population based that is out of mainstream, vulnerable, illiterate and ignorant subsequently discourage enrolment in the schemes and benefits. Lack of even the basic identity documents that are prerequisites for access also hinders enrolment and uptake. This is how a district level NGO head observed the situation:

"In tea garden areas there are no such facilities at public level that can handhold and facilitate the population for getting access to entitlements and address the very many issues they have in accessing them. Without such facilitation on a sustained basis, the community will continue to have difficulties in timely and smooth access of various government benefits (NGO head, Dibrugarh).

- **Weak information communication, content processes, mechanisms**

The study shows apparent weaknesses in the way information and communication are sent out, information and content processes and mechanisms being pursued, systematic problems, and absence of sustained mechanisms and platforms, all in order to reach out to the entitled communities with critical scheme information and benefits. In other words, the issues are observed in the larger context of governance framework followed or adopted towards entitlement services access and delivery, and more from demand versus supply side. While the public authorities at State department level including the Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate (TTWD) have been actively pursuing a pro-active approach in programmes announcement, new schemes formulation and budgetary provisions, yet the challenges are noticeable as to how and why the announcements and intentions are not actually reaching on the ground. This is in turn affecting budget allocation and provisions on annual basis in designing and implementing schemes for the community every year. There are two aspects to this.

In regard to the universal schemes involves the district administration and its departments, once the details are in from the State authorities. The district departments issues notifications and circulars that is further sent down to Block and Panchayat offices. The role of the block and Panchayat administration has been narrowed down over years related to managing and dealing with specific schemes and entitlements except for dealing with including MNREGA, PM

Awas Yojana, 14th Finance Commission related infrastructure works directly by Panchayats. The usual process understood is notices and circulars published in newspapers and in State and district administration websites, printed circulars sent to district level agencies and at block and Panchayat level, who are further supposed toworkfurther on disseminating and enrolling beneficiaries for various schemes with given timeline and conditions.

Here, the challenges arises in the tea tribe community either not aware or informed about the circulars and notices by visiting websites or reading newspapers, due to their illiteracy and ignorance levels, or neither there exists concentrated and dedicated means and platforms at Panchayat level or even in garden level to make them aware and inform about various welfare schemes and help in facilitation. In this case, many land up in district offices, traveling distances, enquiring about any schemes announced for them.

A tea community unemployed youth puts the situation this way:

> *"We do not get information about schemes, forms or details at local level or Panchayat. So, we travel to district offices to enquire about any new arrival of schemes. We are not aware of any circulars or notices in internet and how we can afford to get hold of newspaper to know such announcements. If we are lucky, we get information from our peer group or community people," (Local Tea community youth).*

Even at Panchayat level, for the tea workers, it is nearly difficult to visit the Panchayat offices to inquire about schemes and provisions with not so responsive and friendly office environment and office staff not 'timely' available in many instances.

> *"Even if we go to Panchayat, we do not get to know properly about schemes or benefits. They tell us to read few notices on the outside board, and we cannot read and understand them. The people in the Panchayat also do not talk to us properly or have time," (A tea garden worker).*

Some members in the tea community felt that any arrangements within the garden area would be better than running around for information and other details. This is because they could get easily, have time to walk into the garden facilities and know about schemes and seek help. Otherwise, they would continue to face such problems. This is how an opinion leader and male participant in the FGD describe the situation:

> *"The government announces many schemes for us. But it is not reaching us. Until and unless we have community level facilities and support to get those benefits, how can we hop around places to get information and benefits? This we lose our interests to get and avail the benefits," (opinion leader).*

"We do not know how and where to go and seek help and support for schemes. Earlier, we used to go once or twice to Panchayat office. Since we did not get proper

response, we cannot keep going regularly as we have to work daily in gardens. We still rely on our Sardars or ward members to share us with any information about benefits. But then again, we need this document, that document to submit applications. If we do not have, we do not apply and do not get anything. Local level support and facilitation will help us," (FGD, tea workers).

Many of the discussants from the tea tribe community are either unaware or ignorant about the existence and role of the Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate (TTWD) as well as the Sub-divisional beneficiary selection committee. The awareness level would perhaps depict a sense of ownership and responsibility on the part of the community as well as to how and why it needs to engage and participate with interest and solidarity with the efforts of these institutions for the overall welfare of the community. This could highlight one aspect that perhaps there is required further push to populate and augment the visibility and promotion and reach of these institutions in the needs and access for entitlement benefits of the tea tribe community at local level. As one male participant shares his view:

> *"We are not aware of the activities or role and functions of these institutions. If they come in the midst of us and visit us often, then only we will know and can cooperate in their works," (FGD, male participant).*

Delays and rejections in getting applied scheme benefits also contribute in the low participation, interest, demand, enrolment and uptake rate. Some respondents explain that they had applied with PM Awas Yojana and ration card but had not received any thing till date. Regarding ration card, not having the card has acted as a barrier in getting other scheme benefits like free ration or opening a bank account. According to some, they have been explained that their applications had been sent to higher offices and this accounted for the delays. This was a source of concern to this group of men and women. Two FGD participants shared this concern in two separate FGDs:

> *"We registered for Awas Yojana but we have not yet got any update or house benefit. We enquired with Panchayat ward member and President but they have told us that the applications are being processed. Its now long time that we have applied; we may not get this time also," (FGD Participants).*

"We do not have ration cards and what we do now. They are also saying that it is not being issued now. How we will get our free ration items and we cannot get other benefits as they ask for ration card proof. This is a problem for us," (FGD participant).

> *"I do not have a bank account and our people in garden was saying that bank account is necessary to avail benefits and get money in account from government. But how can we open one? They are saying we have to deposit Rupees 500 to open an account. How can we pay that amount? We are daily workers and earn and spend daily basis and no savings," (FGD, participant).*

"We have done with our applications for ration cards but still have not received ourcards anytime we ask him [the agent] he says it is not ready so when you go you have to pay. That isa problem for us" (FGD, Registered but yet to received Ration card. Dhekiajuli, Sonitpur).

"I have opened bank account and got passbook. Don't know they are saying that it is closed now and it is not working. I am told that it is closed as I was not running the account and I do not have money to run it. I have to apply again. , what can I do about it? I just give up" (FGD, opened account but not functional).

- Weak processes in identification and selection of beneficiaries

Related to this information communication and system lag observed is specific to the tea tribe welfare directorate and related bodies and activities is wider gaps in identification, selection, enrollment of beneficiaries in real time and space.. In order to achieve socio-economic development of tea tribes, there are Sub-divisional Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe Beneficiary Selection committees to implement the welfare schemes as envisaged by the Directorate for Welfare of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, Government of Assam. The Directorate share and disseminate about various scheme provisions through its department site and through regular notices and circulars to district level Sub-divisional welfare office and officer (usually a State administrative service official) and sub-divisional level Beneficiary Selection Committees and its Chairman and members. It is the Sub-divisional office and the Committee that is and supposes to play an instrumental role in sharing and disseminating schemes information, provisions, identification and enrollment and selection of beneficiaries for schemes in a year. While a small percentage visits the sub-divisional office to inquire about schemes and provisions, it is the Committee and its members who tries hard to further disseminate about schemes through various garden level workers, Sardars, Panchayat ward members and party workers (as Committees have political affiliations). But even these doesn't seem to work to the best to enroll and select beneficiaries and increase uptake. This is how a Sub-divisional Level Chairman of Beneficiary Selection Committee observed the situation:

"We receive information and communication with documents in paper and pen from Directorate office. We discuss the same at Sub-divisional level with members and officer concerned. We make action plan to implement the schemes and we take responsibility including our members to reach out to community with information and provisions at Garden or Panchayat level. Despite our best of our efforts, we cannot reach to the maximum target population with information and details and in time. On many occasions, we receive application beyond the dead line as well. Also there are many wrong submissions of documents, wrongly filled application forms which get rejected. This means either we have not been successfully able to reach out and make people aware and understand properly or there are incapacities in the community to read and understand various scheme provisions and apply correctly.

> *We certainly need to fill these gaps but I don't know how to go about," (Chairman of a Beneficiary Selection Committee, Jorhat).*

Alternatively, potential beneficiaries get hold of junior or middle level office staff and keeps in regular touch over telephonic conversations to continue the enquiry process who becomes in a way of intermediaries to 'facilitate' at office level.

A tea tribe welfare manager of a tea association office at district level states it this way:

> *"I try to help people in my own way. They come to me on regular basis and inquire about new schemes and forms. Alternatively, they are also in regular touch over the phone to know if any new scheme has arrived", (tea tribe association staff)*

In this process, the involvement of the tea garden management or welfare officers or the front line garden Sardars (lead workers) in becoming a reliable, trusted and friendly link to facilitate public schemes entitlements is not strongly visible. Consequently, all these have its impact on low and poorly informed beneficiaries, time lapses, and low enrollment and eventually excluded from entitlements.

A tea estate manager puts narrates this way: *"There are no doubts that government has made a lot of schemes, but the real thing is how many have actually benefitted. Whatever scheme is available has to reach the people. There are more schemes benefits like PM Awas Yojana required in my garden, but not available. I suggest to Government that whatever government scheme is being implemented in tea gardens, proper and detailed guidelines and instructions should also be given to garden authority. Only then will we understand and we can guide and convince the workers of the garden properly."(Tea garden manager, Jorhat)*

- **Poor and Weak Response Mechanism and quality of care**

It has been observed and also heard that there has been weak response mechanism and attitudinal issues that restricts and have resisted positive and upward mobility of the tea tribe community members to approach and seek for rightful entitlements, information, benefits and grievance redress. While structures and institutional setups intimidates a normal person in approaching rightful place of service delivery, the attitude and response presented therein adds up as the twin threat to encourage and motivate citizens to approach service agencies and get dues. And this is perhaps a bigger challenge for the vulnerable tea workers community and working class with a distinct socio-lingual and cultural identity in Assam, in a subjugated and under confident and dependent living environment.

Due to attitudinal and systemic factors, there is a general perception among the tea tribe community members that because of their distinct socio-economic status and background from a working class background, they do not get good responses or quality of care in their access, demand and benefits from public schemes or welfare programmes. This perception discourages members of the community

from approaching and enrolling with schemes and programmes. According to a community leader, more than majority from their community are introvert, under confident and subdued mindsets and they give up once they think that they are done with going to offices or inquiring about schemes and benefits with no result. This is how the community leader describes the situation:

> *"There are complaints of people from the community going to Panchayat office or sub-divisional office and banks and not being properly responded to or attended, or waiting for so long before being summoned or attended to,"(community leader).*

> *"Some of the complaints that when they are referred and go to the district or regional hospitals for government provisioned free treatment they are treated badly and are not duly attended and because of that, they are not well treated and sent home anyhow and they continue to have health problems, " (community leader).*

But from the perspective of the local authorities and service providers, the situation is somewhat different. They face constraints in manpower and office facilities which undermine their capacity and quality to respond and serve the citizens with time and attention. Time and strict deadlines to implement schemes and enroll beneficiaries, lack of proper guidelines and details about schemes, incomplete and wrong filled applications, delay in file movements, applications, processes, approvals and long gestation period also affects their credibility and trust factor in the eyes of the local community, being at the forefront of services delivery and entitlements. A district level front line staff ex-plains some of the shortcomings in regard to specific delivery of tea tribe welfare schemes, which account for this:

> *"We are short of manpower and I am only one dealing at sub divisional level and looking after 3 sub divisions in this district. I am doing all sorts of job like attending beneficiaries, enrollment, application collection, coordination, verification, documentation, data entry, and submissions in state office. We do not have sufficient consumables and are out of stock in no time. Above that, there are applications coming in bundles to us through sub-divisional welfare office committee members, that are mostly wrongly filled and inaccurate and then we have the pressure from above to complete application process in given deadlines. It is a very difficult situation for us to manage things. I have raised these issues many times with our committee chairman and sub-divisional welfare officer," (IDI, Sub-divisional welfare office staff).*

6. Conclusion

The paper finds that the access to public schemes information and entitlement benefits is determined by key socio-cultural factors, socio-economic factors, and institutional factors.

Because of their very nature of closed social behavior and norms due to closed, restricted and controlled garden based living ecosystem in all their overall social, economic reasons largely 'managed' by tea garden management and authorities,

it is very necessary that critical and life empowering schemes and benefits are provisioned for access and delivery within the gardens in regular basis or near the garden vicinities to increase demand, uptake and grievance redress by the service agencies, authorities in a serious, organised and concentrated manner with quality and care. Regular workers entitlement camps in gardens with local service agencies and authorities addressing their needs, especially for the women garden workers who are otherwise 'absorbed' in their work based on strict daily wages and cannot afford to venture out and seek entitlements will help to overcome vulnerability and ignorance and reduce community apathy towards government programmes and actions. Being a highly illiterate population with local dialect conversations and not majorly into formal written and communication in either Assamese or English language, as is the current practice in all official correspondence and announcements, and to overcome this, there is all the more reason that community specific solutions and mechanisms are created and ensured to link the community with public schemes, benefits and grievance redress. Role of local tea tribe dedicated community facilitators, identified, trained and engaged by local authorities, will be critical in bridging the gaps.

An approach with care, respect and last mile inclusive support for the tea tribe community, workers and families working in gardens can serve as effective pathways to the inclusion of all segments of the community into public scheme and welfare benefits inclusion programmes of the government. Although the findings show a low level of information and awareness of schemes and benefits, the absence of community level institutional support and facilitation support serve as a major barrier to exclusion from various public scheme benefits in real time, space and context.

Special measures related to enhancing functional literacy skills through special camps, information and digital literacy activities and programmes will overall build community capacities to explore, source and process public scheme and entitlement related information and opportunities with focus on women and youth. In our view, issues of vulnerability raise the dialogue on the economic dimension where the lack of material resources further alienates the tea tribe community from fully participating, demanding and increasing uptake of various public scheme benefits. Wider time gaps, multiple follow ups, multiple visits, taking off from garden work and loosing wages for public scheme access, transportation time and costs are a major deterrent to access which explain why tea tribe communities are widely ignorant and not having public schemes benefits in a streamlined and institutionalized manner. We find that time and costs associated with travel to offices of Panchayat and service agencies and local offices are highly restrictive for workers and family members in tea gardens. Also, the fact that members of the community are asked to pay indirect and cut money to avail benefits is an issue of concern.

Consistent with this framework, our data shows the inadequate and meager distribution and provisions for infrastructure resources along with the underlying issues raised by vulnerability and difficulties. Inadequate and absence of basic infrastructure facilitation provision is not only a key issue in access to schemes and entitlements, but the tea garden communities largely out of mainstream social and economic development and processes, and underserved worsens the exclusion and constraints faced by community members in accessing welfare benefits. Further, the inherent weaknesses in the schemes delivery design and distribution roll out and implementation at community level and its effect on uptake of demand and uptake cannot be overlooked. The schemes delivery and governance has wider scope to work on its gap areas including in its key message delivery to community members, whereby the vulnerable tea garden community have forgotten that the schemes are built on solidarity and therefore perceive the whole delivery system as one which looks out for individual benefit rather than a collective benefit.

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