

---

## Geriatric Social Work Practice: A Case Study of an Elderly Woman Tea Plantation Worker

---

Dr. Barsha Kalita<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. Kaivalya T. Desai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, NERIM Group of Institutions, Guwahati, Assam.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Assam University, Silchar, Assam.

**Received:** 10 April 2021

**Accepted:** 15 July 2021

**Published:** 13 August 2021

**Abstract:** *The tea Industry of Assam is one of the lead producers of tea employing a large number of people. The labourers, even though forced to migrate from different parts of India, gradually became a part of Assam. But their life is full of untold sufferings and exploitation. Women tea plantation labourers are further suppressed and abused. Moreover, elderly women in tea plantations suffer from various socio-economic problems. Except one time financial benefit, they do not receive further help from the management after their retirement which force them to lead a life of neglect and dependency. They often become victims of abuse and mental trauma. In this scenario, a social worker can help and support them in leading a life without depending on other. They can provide guidance, support and help them by linking them to the various government benefits as well as through individualized social work practice. This paper is an attempt to understand the issues faced by an elderly woman in tea plantations through a detailed case study. Further it presents an example of geriatric social work practice in tea plantations.*

**Key words:** *Elderly, Tea Plantation, Case Study, Geriatric social worker.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tea Industry is one of the major industries of India. After British annexed Assam, it discovered the tea plantation as the new avenue for investment of capital and exploitation of resources. However, with the growth of tea plantations, the need for labourers increased. Due to lack of local labourers, labourers were imported from drought stricken tribal areas of central India. Initially slavery was practiced, which gradually changed to indentured and *Dhubri* system (Chatterjee & Das, 1981). Over the years, the condition of the labourers has improved to a certain extent but still these people struggle to meet their basic needs. They are deprived of safe drinking water, crèches, schools, health facilities, sanitation, proper housing facilities, low wages and delays in payment of wages. Workers face various social, economic as well as health problems in tea plantations (Borah, 2013). The condition of



women and elderly tea plantation workers are further deplorable and need immediate attention. Tea plantation is another site of patriarchal society where women do not have any special identity. Women are socialized in such a way that they accept their exploitation without protest. Their ignorance, lack of skills and non-assertive nature makes them submissive both at the place of work and in family life (Bhadra, 1985). Moreover, elderly people in tea plantations have to suffer from various socio-economic problems and health issues along with neglect and deprivation. After their retirement they get a lump-sum amount in the name of provident fund, they lose ownership of the house allotted to them; they struggle to manage basic expenses, fail to access health facilities and have to lead a dependent life.

In a study conducted titled, “The health and well-being of older people and their families in the tea estate of Sri Lanka” (2005), it was depicted how elderly people in tea plantation suffer from various social problems like lack of security, neglect by children, dependency, losing their voice, giving up comfort, conflict with youth and children, feeling lack of respect and developing frustration. Further they also fail to satisfy their needs, become destitute, lose ownership of house, get abused, are forced to look out for work and lose support or help. Elderly people in tea plantations also suffer from various health issues due to their food habits, life style and hard work throughout their life. These factors also take a toll on their mental and emotional health (Perera & Holmes, 2005). Thus, there is a need to understand the issues and problems of elderly people in tea plantations since there is hardly any study emphasizing on the situation of the elderly. The elderly people in tea plantations need social work intervention for leading a dignified life, free from deprivation and abuse.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on a research that attempted to understand the life of elderly tea plantation labourers within a gendered space. Further the paper attempts to highlight the plausible role that social workers can play by helping them cope with their everyday challenges, and by providing emotional and physical support. Thus, in order to get an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of elderly woman tea plantation labourer, a qualitative approach was adopted. Case study method was adopted to collect data. Case study helps to examine contemporary real-life situations. It provides a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions. Unstructured, open-ended interviews were conducted to collect data from the elderly woman tea plantation labourer. An in-depth field study and prolonged interaction helped in interacting with the woman, who opened up about her joys and sorrows. Further, a field diary was maintained to record the observations. This paper highlights the case study of one elderly woman tea plantation labourer.

The study area selected was Durrung tea estate of Sonitpur District in Brahmaputra Valley. The main population of the area comprises of *Assamese, Bengalis, Gorkhas* and *Adivasis*. Adivasi community is composed of *Mundas, Santhals, Kurukh, Gonds, Kharia, Bhumij, Tanti, Saora* and dozens of motley group of tribes which forms a significant portion accounting for nearly one-third of the district's population or if taken as a whole the largest community in the district with over 600,000 people. The sample of the study was selected from Durrung Tea estate of Sonitpur District.



### **Findings of the Study**

The findings have been depicted through a case study of a 65 years old woman tea plantation labourer of Durrung tea estate. The case reveals the issues faced by elderly women in tea plantation labourers in general as well as some specific to this particular woman.

Reena is a 65 year old retired woman. She is an old frail lady who walks around the labour lines with the help of a walking stick, draping a white *saree* over her bare body. Years of working have led to her hunch back and she finds it difficult to stand straight. Her ancestors were brought from Jharkhand but she has never been there. Being a daughter in her family she never received education. Due to non-availability of schools in close proximity and lesser emphasis on girls' education, her parents never felt the need to send her to school. Rather she was taught the household responsibilities which her parents felt will lead to her happy married life. At the age of 15 she was married off to her husband who was a permanent worker at that time in Durrung tea estate. She was too young to understand about marriage and her memory does not have much recollection about her marriage. But she clearly remembers that it was an arranged marriage without her consent. Her parents did not ask her opinion before getting her married since they did not think it was necessary. At a young age she had to undertake the responsibility of her family. Her in-laws were supportive and thus she did not find much problem in adjusting to her new life. Initial discomfort, stress to manage household responsibilities and fear of committing mistakes gradually reduced. Her husband was much elder to her so he used to understand her. After few years of her marriage, she gave birth to a daughter then to a son. She had a happy family though occasional challenges did come in their lives. After her son's birth she decided to join work and in consultation with her husband and in-laws she joined as *faltu* labourer. After few years her father-in-law expired and soon afterwards her mother-in-law also expired. Her mother-in-law was a permanent worker, so after her death, she got the permanent post. Since then she had been working in the garden for more than thirty years.

Years of working had made her apt in plucking and also added lots of memories. When she joined work, there were plenty of tea leaves and at times she used to collect up to 100 kgs of leaves. But with time due to change in weather the quantity of leaves reduced. Along with plucking she also used to do other work like cutting stems, cleaning drain, digging land, etc. Earlier the managers were also very strict and sometimes used to scold without any reason but managers kept on changing and at present the manager does not deal with the labourers directly. She has retired now. It has been five years since retirement. She transferred her permanent post and the house provided from the management to her daughter. She is presently staying with her daughter, son-in-law and four grandchildren. Her husband expired few years back due to illness and her son left her home. Regular conflict with her daughter-in-law was the major reason for son's separation from the family. He stays separately with his wife and children, and does not have any contact with her. This incident has left a deep impact on her life, as in a patriarchal society, having a son and still staying with daughter is perceived as a burden by her.

When she started working in the garden, she used to get around Rs. 2-3 weekly. But over the years her wages increased. Along with wages she also used to get various provisions like housing facility, ration, firewood and provident fund benefits. At the time of retirement she got a lump sum amount of Rs 3-4 lakhs which consist of provident fund,



gratuity and onetime retirement pension. She did not get the amount immediately and had to go many times to get the amount after her retirement. With the amount that she received at the time of retirement, she added two rooms to her one room house. She also constructed a ring well as earlier they had to fetch water from neighbour's well. Some amount of money she saved in her bank account, which she uses to buy essentials and for the needs of her grandchildren. Over time her money is almost finished and now she is depended on her daughter and son-in-law to fulfill her needs. She spent her whole life managing responsibilities, taking care of her family, doing household work and working whole year but post-retirement her life changed. She gets bored as she does not have much work to manage. She spends most of her time now in roaming around the labour lines. She feels blessed to have four grandchildren who give her company and help in reducing her boredom to a certain extent. Two of her grandsons and one granddaughter go to school where as one grand-daughter goes to *anganwadi*. She adores her grandchildren and loves to spend time with them. When they go to school and her daughter and son-in-law go to work, she feels time has stopped. She is not used to sitting idle as she always had a busy schedule. She had to get up early in the morning, manage household work and then leave for work. She never got time to rest. These long years of hard work had taken toll on her health and now illness has gripped her. She constantly suffers from back pain and leg pain. She also gets easily tired and feels weak.

Reena has handed over almost all her responsibilities to her daughter and son-in-law after retirement. The household decisions are mostly taken by them. She herself does not speak much on these issues. Even decisions regarding household expenses are taken by them. Sometimes they seek her opinion on certain things. All her life she had taken enough responsibilities, so she does not feel the need to interfere much. The only responsibility she has now is to take care of her grandchildren when their parents are at work. But she loves this responsibility as they keep her occupied. She gets lonely when she has to stay alone. Earlier she also used to manage household work but her daughter has freed her from it. Her daughter manages most of the household work before going to work. Reena contributes whatever she can to make their life easier but now she does not have much to do. She had done what she could do for her children. Her neighbours and friends perceive that she led a holistic and happy life, as she completed all her responsibilities, and has a loving family who take care of her. But is this the reality?

She is content but there are few things which have gripped her. She feels lonely, she feels frustrated and she feels that she is a burden on her family. She also feels like having her son back and playing with her grandchildren, but she is aware that it might never happen. This saddens her and makes her feel more dependent on her daughter. Financially also she is dependent on her daughter. Reena also failed to avail certain benefits as she is not aware of government schemes, acts and policies for the welfare of the elderly. She only has a ration card in her name which helps her in getting fixed ration at a subsidized rate. She does not receive widow pension, rather does not even have an iota of an idea about it. She feels if government has made certain schemes for their benefit, they should be made aware of it.

Although she is not neglected by her daughter, but still she is leading a life of dependency. Her needs and other requirements are taken care of by her daughter. Her grandchildren love



her. Overall she is aware of her future life which she has to spend in dependency, ill health and solitude.

### **Role of Geriatric Social Worker**

Geriatric social workers help find solutions for older adults and families that address the personal, social, and environmental challenges that come with aging. Geriatric social workers' main priority is maintaining and enhancing the quality of life of elderly clients. This may include developing an understanding not only about the physical complications of aging, but mental health, cultural barriers, and organizational challenges faced by the elderly. They help families by gathering information about the array of services available to them, coordinating care across various health systems, facilitating family support, and providing direct counselling services (e-caring, 2012). Geriatric social workers also help elderly individuals adjust to and cope with the problems they may experience. These professionals help make sure that the needs of their elderly clients are met, each and every day. Before that they first assess each client in order to determine exactly what their needs are. They also help them with financial issues, medical care, mental disorders, and social problems. It also helps them determine what their clients' abilities and limitations are. The social workers can then work on a plan to help meet the needs of their clients. This usually involves helping clients utilize services that they may not have known about or that they may have found confusing or complicated. For example, a geriatric social worker who finds that a client is struggling financially may help that client either find part-time employment or apply for financial assistance, depending on that client's abilities and limitations.

There are various NGOs working for the welfare of tea plantation society. But in Durrung tea estate, there is no NGO working for the benefits of the labourers. However, there is an urgent need of geriatric social workers who can work with the elderly population of tea plantation sector. Elderly in tea plantation society suffer from various problems like financial issues, neglect, health issues, malnutrition, abuse, etc. so, they need a helping hand to overcome their problems and lead a life of respect, free from wants and dependencies. However, their issues vary and so a geriatric social worker can utilise the principles of casework such as individualisation and self-determination in dealing with individual cases. Social casework is a method of helping people individually through one-to-one relationship. It is a professionalised activity whose focus is to help people in distress who cannot help themselves (Mathew, 1992). Social worker must assess the needs and requirements of the elderly and provide them with the required information and help them decide what they want to do. Social worker must respect their decisions. The tea plantation labourers lead a simple life; they have spent all their lives within the garden. So, a social worker while working with them must respect their feelings and opinions.

In Reena's case, a geriatric social worker can use the four components of case work i.e person, problem, place and process to organise their thoughts about the client, her situation and required social work intervention (Perlman, 1957). Social worker should assess the client, her strength and weaknesses and look at various dimensions of the client (physical, emotional, psychological, social and economic) that affects the client's situation. Then the social worker should assess the client's problems by interacting with her and by



trying to understand the issues faced by her. Social worker should build a good rapport to better understand her problem. The problems faced by Reena are mainly loneliness, feeling burdened upon her daughter and son-in law, financial dependence on her daughter and health issues of back pain, leg pain, weakness and constant tiredness. So, after assessing the problems of the client social worker should assess how the government and non-government organisations can provide benefits to the client. What facilities will prove beneficial to the client can be evaluated. After assessing the person, problem and place, social worker should assess the process of helping the client. Social worker in Reena's case can adopt the counselling method, give information, link clients to resources available and help them access appropriate treatment facilities. By focussing on these four components of case work, social worker can understand the problems of the client and help her deal with it. Reena had worked whole life and fulfilled all her responsibilities of work sphere and household, but after retirement when she failed to contribute financially or help in household work, she started feeling like a burden on her daughter. In this case social worker can first try to understand why does she think so or does her daughter or son-in-law ever made her feel like a burden on them. Social worker must emphasis on her contribution, how she takes care of the grand children in absence of their parents and it is a great relief for them to know that their children are safe. Social worker can make her realize her importance in the family, her contribution to the family by being a constant supporter, a guide, a care taker of the children and a guardian. Reena also feels lonely after her retirement since her family remains busy with their work. She does not blame them because she herself has spent a busy life all these years trying to manage work sphere as well as household work. So, social worker can provide her counselling; spend some time with her sharing her joys and sorrows. Social worker can make her understand that it is inevitable for an elderly to feel loneliness due to reduced connection with friends and relatives or inability to actively participate in community activities. Social worker can encourage her to visit her friends and neighbours, participate in community functions which take place within the community. This may help her to feel less lonely.

At present Reena is also financially dependent on her daughter and son-in-law, so social worker can help her by providing awareness about various financial assistance schemes like widows pension and help her in utilizing it. Reena also do not have BPL card, so social worker must help her in getting a BPL card, which will also help her to access widow pension under Indira Gandhi National Widows Pension scheme. Most of the time widows like Reena fail to utilise benefits of various schemes and services because of lack of awareness, so by providing awareness social worker can help them in getting financial assistance.

Regarding her ill health, social worker can assess her health issues by discussing with her and her family members. With consultation with the doctor of garden hospital, make a treatment plan. Social worker can provide her awareness about the health issues, causes and treatment options. Social worker can also assist her in getting health benefits and health pensions which will help her to get free treatment. Social worker can help access the benefits under Atal Amrit Abhiyan scheme under which those under BPL can get health insurance for 437 illnesses. Thus, it can be said that there is an urgent need of geriatric social worker who can work with elderly population of tea plantation society. These labourers remain bounded within the garden. Mostly women labourers suffer from various



forms of exploitation, abuse and oppression. The elderly women suffer from neglect, abuse and have to depend on others for day-to-day needs. Therefore, in such a scenario, a geriatric social worker can help them in accessing various resources and lead a life without being dependent on others free from neglect and abuse.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Tea plantation labourers lead a hard life. They have to struggle for their basic needs. Women tea plantation labourers are also significant part of the plantation sector, but they never received due recognition and appreciation. Those women after their retirement further have to live a life depending on others. Due to their isolation and ignorance, they fail to access most of the benefits and schemes. In such a scenario, a geriatric social worker by focusing on the four components of case work can better understand the clients and their problems which will also help to make an intervention plan to resolve their issues. Social worker can help them by providing awareness, help them in accessing various benefits and schemes and provide them emotional support and guidance. Overall, they can help the elderly to lead a life free from neglect, abuse and dependency.

### **4. REFERENCES**

1. Bhadra, M. (1985). Women Workers in Tea Plantations. *Indian anthropologist*, 15(02), 93- 114.
2. Borah, N. (2013). The rights of women workers in the tea gardens of Assam. *The Clarion: Multidisciplinary International Journal*, 2(2), 128–131.
3. Chatterjee, S., & Das, R. (1981). Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16(44/46), 1861–1868.
4. Mathew, G. (1992). *An Introduction to Social Case work*. Bombay: Tata Institute of Social Science.
5. Perera, R. & Holmes, W. (2005), The health and well-being of older people and their families in the tea estates of Sri Lanka. Centre for International Health Burnet Institute. Retrieved from <http://silverinnings.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/srilanka-sr.citizen-info.pdf>
6. Perlman, H.H. (1957). *Social Casework: A Problem Solving Process*. London: University of Chicago Press.
7. E-Caring. (2012), What does a geriatric social worker do? Retrieved from <https://www.healthworkscollective.com/what-does-geriatric-social-worker-do/>
8. Start a Geriatric Social Worker. (n.d). Retrieved from <https://careersinpsychology.org/become-a-geriatric-social-worker/>
9. End Notes