

Factors Determining Access to Public Schemes Information and Entitlement Benefits for the Tea Tribe Community: A Qualitative Study in Assam



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Abstract

Background: There have been efforts to undertake critical measures and steps by the State Government of Assam for improving social and economic conditions of the vulnerable tea tribe community in recent years, the community producing 53% of India's total tea production. A slew of public schemes have been designed and being delivered by the State Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate in regular intervals, as well as schemes and delivery at State inter-departmental levels in tea tribe areas. However, the access to government scheme, social protection measures have been a major access related demand and supply centric challenges at community level. Earlier studies have looked at wider issues of working conditions and provisions in basic facilities for the workers community. However, it is recognised that this qualitative study will add nuances to the deeper issues of identifying key areas in access related challenges to critical and life empowering social protection and welfare schemes by the tea garden community in Assam and improving demand and uptakes.

Methods: Minimally structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at the garden, Panchayat, block, district, and State levels. Focus group discussions were also undertaken at the community level. Inductive and content analytic approach was used and transcripts were analysed to identify and define factor determinants that explain barriers in access to public schemes information and entitlement benefits. Qualitative research method was used to collect data through in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) in six districts of Assam.

Results: The results are presented in three broad themes: sociocultural, socioeconomic and institutional –process-systemic factors. Sociocultural factors identified were 1) cultural norms and practises; 2) vulnerability, ignorance and apathy; (3) Dialect and language. The socioeconomic vulnerability included: 1) Illiteracy, 2) Absence of information and digital literacy; 3) BPL and Affordability issues. Institutional-Process-System-wide factors were 1) Poor access,

facilitation, infrastructure and service points; 2) weak information, communication, content processes and 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.

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Conclusions: Mapping the interplay of these dynamic relations between the social protection and welfare programmes, the tea garden community as client and service providers, the study identifies critical factors at the access level, access specific service provider level, policy and programme making level, and client level (reflective in household and community level institutional arrangements) that affect access to public and social protection schemes information, enrolment and linkages with critical scheme benefits. Our findings inform a number of potential solutions in

the area of access to schemes and entitlement benefits and resources to expand coverage, increase choices, uptake and demand and meeting the needs of the garden community in a sustainable, time bound, accountable and transparent manner.

Keywords: public scheme, Tea tribe, socioeconomic, Barriers to access, Qualitative study

Background

The tea garden community, also known as Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, who are recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by the Government, is one of the vulnerable socio-economic groups in Assam State. The vulnerability and backwardness is more evident and distinct due to their unique cultural identity, by now deep rooted in tea economy and industry as synonymous. The community constitutes 20 per cent of the State's population of 3.5 Crore and has been playing the most important role in tea production of the State, producing about 53% of the total tea production of the country, and contributing significantly to the economy of the State and the country.

The myriad levels of vulnerability of the tea garden community in Assam has its own socioeconomic, cultural and institutional settings spread across more than half of 33 districts across the State. The socioeconomic condition of this community is most deplorable and has been a cause for their further exploitation (Sharma 2012). It is not surprising that the chorus for demanding Schedule Tribe (ST) status has become a political war cry between groups and parties representing the tea garden community (Dutta, 2019). The glaring evidence of poor living conditions and access to basic needs and entitlements is such that the community depends on tea for shelter that comes

against low wages (INR 167 a day) and supply of cheap staples. This in contrast to what the community is demanding (INR 351) and what other States are providing to tea workers (Kerala, INR 310, Karnataka at INR 263 and Tamil Nadu at INR 241 and thus the continuous agitations and demand for hike in wages is a regular phenomenon (Dutta, 2019), that is fundamentally linked to meeting basis needs and perennial failures to realize the same. The community considers itself as a major vote bank for parties even though majority of these voters are living without minimum electricity, pure drinking water, primary healthcare and education for their children and without decent dwelling units.

For the tea tribe community, tea gardens comprise the one and only major local economic, social, cultural ecosystem. This results in high degrees of dependence of labour and livelihoods on tea production, a sector which has historically been built around deeply entrenched unequal labour practices, and an excluded, isolated world of existence, cut off from mainstream social, economic and institutional arrangements. The inequalities and marginalisation are visible unto this day and cited to an unfair economic system and inadequate National and State administrative impetus for ensuring equitable and fair working conditions and has certainly abetted exclusion of the community from mainstream entitle-

ments and facilities. The effective implementation of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 that lays responsibility of provision of basic services like education and health upon the employers, is seen to continue to wriggle in political and administrative cogwheels is a fact well noted and raised through multiple voices and concerns. The role of the plantation owners assuming control over the lives and livelihoods of the workers who work in their gardens is being viewed to have played a non-facilitative and regressive role in restricting access to mainstream social protection and welfare programme benefits. And together with driving down wages and working conditions have contributed in further vulnerabilities in high maternal mortality rates, high prevalence of stunting and wasting among the children, deaths due to preventable diseases, and high levels of illiteracy. No doubt, this abject deprivation and exploitation has fuelled trafficking of children, especially young girls who are often sold as domestic help to well-off families in Border States like Arunachal Pradesh (Sarma, Sumit Kr. 2019).

Relatedly, in financial year 2018, the Indian tea industry recorded the highest ever production and export of tea – an increase of 6% from 2016-17. During the same year the value realisation increased by 9.33% (Ghosal, 2018). The country ranks second and fourth in the world for tea production and export respectively while being

the largest consumer of tea (Tea.in, 2019). It accounts for 31% of the tea production in the world and has managed to retain its leadership position in the world tea trade. Since independence in 1947, tea production has increased by 250% with the increase in land use for production by 40% (Tea.in, 2019). In contrast the working and living conditions within the tea estates have increasingly plummeted downwards signifying serious violations of human rights through structural exclusion from basic services (Oxfam, 2019). Being labour intensive, this burgeoning industry is carried on the shoulders of a labour force many of whom have inherited the job as a result of historical social-economic exclusion. Overall, this kind of situations has time and again indicates to a larger situation of exclusion of the community, lack of capacities and wherewithal to access basic services and entitlements.

An environment and social performance audit performed by CAO (Office of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman) for IFC (International Finance Corporation) and MIGA (Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency), members of the World Bank group, found high-levels of malnutrition and ill-health as a result of poor working and living conditions (CAO, IFC, and MIGA. 2016). The study, conducted on the tea estates owned by Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited, found that work-

ers were impoverished and suffered from malnutrition due to low wages. Further, improper work practices like failure to pay overtime and excessive demands for the high volumes of tea per worker further add to debilitating work conditions.

The problem concerning social welfare of 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 basic and need based entitlement and social protection support, the Government of Assam have been implementing welfare schemes through a separate Directorate viz. 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 stated that for the socio-economic acceleration of Tea Tribes Community, implementation of welfare schemes has to be expedited and stressed on percolation of information regarding government schemes to the grass root level 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 frustrated (Pio, 1990).

One key observation is this. The problems faced by the plantation labourers during pre-independent or early independent period were considerably different from the contemporary problems. Along with the emergence of privatization, liberalization, and globalization, new challenges have been posed before the plantation. The profitability of many tea plantations has reduced greatly and a large number of sick tea plantations have come into existence. Many of these sick plantations even fail to pay regular wages to their labourers. In such a situation, the social security provision apart, the labour faces an uncertain and unpredictable future (Pio, 1990).

The above descriptions overall reflects to 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 established that in a situation of vulnerability, the socio-psychological state of minds are 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 understanding 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.

The study relies on an inductive approach to construction of category and an information and content analysis framework to better understand the major reasons why tea tribe community members' issues facing to avail public schemes and social protection information, enrollment and benefits and uptake of schemes meant for them. There exists literature on access and delivery related to social welfare programmes and demand behaviour and quantitative methods but very few using qualitative methods. The results will offer a more in-depth understanding of what these access barriers to avail public schemes information; enrolment and uptake are and help in providing the basis for finding out practical solutions to the barriers and remove the same.

Brief overview of Public Schemes for the Tea Tribe Community

The crucial consideration is 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. Not to ignore the key fact that these schemes 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 corporates, makes a special case of distinctness of the community and their socio-economic 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 mandate includes - To accelerate the socio economic development of the Tea Tribes of Assam; To enhance the gainful employability of the tea tribes manpower; To gear up the activities for spreading out institutionalization of education at different level viz. primary/secondary and higher; To coordinate with other development departments for providing basic amenities like health and hygiene, sanitation, safe drinking water, electricity; To monitor and assess all development works undertaken by various departments in areas inhabited by tea tribes and ex-tea tribes; To create awareness among women for creating women Self Help Groups in coordination with various organizations including voluntary organization; To monitor and coordinate with the management of the tea gardens for providing eco-friendly working environment; To develop appropriate network between the Government departments and the other various organizations with a view to enabling the speedy disposal of matters relating to tea garden tribes (TTWD, Assam).

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.

Interestingly, the department is also working on an Online Application System for an scholarships to make the supply and demand process more streamlined. There were 25 major activities listed to be taken under Scheme-wise Budget Provision for the Financial Year 2017-18 by the Department and 30 major activities for the Financial Year 2018-19. For these two years, more than half of the activities were related to individual entitlement based schemes and benefits proposed.

In end of 2016, barely after six months of coming to power, the current Assam government promised a course correction. "This government will work for the tea community and the beginning will be made in the January 2017 budget," said the then Labour Minister. Having started with a financial inclusion programme following demonetisation, the government is preparing the blueprint for social inclusion of the community (Pratim Ranjan Bose, The Hindu, 2018) and parts of the programme may be announced in January. A meeting of labour, health, education and finance ministers as well as top bureaucrats discussed ways to involve all MLAs from tea garden areas and prepare garden-wise action plan to develop roads, build hospitals, schools and others.

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. "This is a historic initiative of the state government which will be able to considerably bring down the mortality rate among the pregnant women of the tea community of the state. Assam's identity is synonymous with its tea gardens but the large working labourer population in the tea gardens have not been given

access to quality healthcare.” (Manogya Loiwal, India Today, 2018). 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. As per the scheme, the first instalment of Rs 2,000 will be provided during the Ante-Natal Check-up (ANC) registration within the first trimester, second instalment of Rs 4000 during the sixth month of the pregnancy, the third instalment of Rs 3000 during delivery at a government-approved health institution and the fourth instalment of Rs 3,000 during the sixth week post-delivery.

further, the State government announced special welfare schemes for the tea tribe communities of Assam in the 2019-20 budget. It included an expanded list of beneficiaries that include those who have been left-out under the Chah Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela (Tea Garden Financial Incentive Mela) in 2018-19 and thereby releasing the second tranche of INR 2500 to each tea worker in their accounts as one time financial assistance. Earlier, in the year 2017, the Government had launched the Chah Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela to further incentivize and strengthen the efforts for financial inclusion of the tea tribe community. The plan is to augment this process of enrolling all

these active bank accounts under the Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Yojana (PMJJY) and the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY). One of the critical helplines that the Government of Assam has extended to the female workers is the provision of wage compensation during pregnancy and motherhood and therefore, the Government has deployed 88 mobile medical units in the tea garden areas. The Government will provide rice, which is presently provided at the rate of Rs 3 per kg under NFSA, free of cost to 4 lakh families in the tea garden areas covering a total of 20 lakh beneficiaries and a pilot implementation of this will begin from March 2019 (The Sentinel, 2019). The government shall plan to provide 2 kilograms of sugar per tea garden family per month free of cost keeping in mind salt was a metaphor for colonial oppression and exploitation and the practice of consuming salt with tea has led to a number of medical complications among the community including numerous cases of hypertension, heart attacks, eclampsia etc. leading to higher mortality rates (The Sentinel, 2019). The Government also planned to launch a scheme for the youth in the tea garden areas to provide skills training to 10000 youth belonging to the tea tribes so that they can set up small businesses and augment the family income. Subsequent to the skill training, a one-time grant of Rs. 25,000 to this group of 10,000 youth belonging to the Tea Tribes community during the

Financial Year 2019-20 was planned for setting up small businesses and the government allocating Rs 40 crores for this scheme under the Tea Tribes Welfare Directorate. The government shall also induct 500 girls from the tea tribe community during the year 2019-20 in Auxiliary Nurse Midwifery (ANM) and General Nursing and Midwifery (GNM) training programmes and provide a monthly stipend to these young girls. The Government also has decided to provide free medicines, as listed in the Essential Drugs List, to 300 tea garden hospitals. In addition to the announcements made on the Health sector, the Government also plans to provide all the school students of the tea gardens breakfast, evening tea and free uniform in addition to hot cooked mid-day meals which will help improve the attendance and retention of the students in the schools. The Tea Tribes Welfare Department will implement this scheme jointly with the Elementary Education Department.

As an incentive for continuing their education, the Government will be providing Rs 10,000 for every matric pass student per year for pursuing higher education. 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. "To start with, we will implement this scheme in 10 tea gardens, covering approx. 5000 households and thereafter expand it after improving it based on the learnings. For all those workers who already have a pucca house, we will provide a grant of Rs.1 Lakh under this scheme for carrying out refurbishment and repair works and I have allocated an amount of Rs. 50 crores in the Tea Tribes Welfare Departments budget for this Scheme," claimed the Finance Minister (The Sentinel, 2019).

The State Chief Minister reiterated his Government's commitment to uplift the social and economic conditions of the tea worker community and stated that the Centre and the State governments had undertaken a series of schemes in this regard (The Assam Tribune, 2019). Assam is known globally because of Assam Tea, but the people who actually produce tea had remained neglected for the last seven decades since India got independence. He said that State and the Central Governments have joined hands with a committed zeal to uplift the socio-economic conditions of the tea workers in the State (The Assam Tribune, 2019). Informing about various schemes being implemented by both Central and Assam Governments for the development of the tea tribe community, Sonowal said that 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).

In September 2019, the Chief Minister formally launched the 'Free Drugs Scheme' for 651 tea garden hospitals of the state at a National Health Mission programme. During the launch, the Chief Minister stated that "Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) service in 442 tea gardens with 80 MMU vehicles and wage compensation of Rs 12,000 to each pregnant woman of tea garden areas had been some of the initiatives of the state government towards ensuring better health for the tea tribe community," (Business Standard, 2019) Reducing the burden of pocket expenditure of tea garden population and making quality drugs accessible to them stands among the prime reason behind the launch of the scheme.

The State government announced host of sops for state's tea tribe in February 2020 including a one-time grant of Rs 10,000 each to students from the community, who cleared classes X and XII examinations under Simon Sing Horo Special Scholarship scheme; a grant of Rs 25,000 each as one-time financial assistance to start their own business to help 15,000 youths of the community in self-employment under Swahid Dayal Das Panika Swaniyojan Achoni (Swahid Dayal Das Panika Self Employment

Scheme); for the workers employed in the state-owned Assam Tea Corporation Limited, upgrading their 'kutcha' houses to pucca houses with Rs 1.3 lakh each to be later extended to cover workers of all tea gardens in the state (Kalita, 2020).

The critics and social inclusion observers have their own views on the above welfare announcements time and again. The critics including the State political opposition have welcomed such moves for the welfare of the community, but are critical of announcing various monetary grants which has the risks of dividing the society "with the sole motive of garnering votes", instead of making people independent and self-reliant (Kalita, P. TNN, 2020). The political nature of above announcements and provisions are also being pointed out as budgetary provisions for the schemes in developing countries are often dependent on political negotiations, and the terms of many of these schemes may be altered each time there is a change of government (GCAP, 2010).

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 Surak-

sha 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).

In case of the TTWD scheme of things, the various scheme benefits and services are supposedly to be provided to tea tribe community members through over 24 district level Sub-divisional Welfare Offices across the State run by Sub-divisional Welfare Officers, who calls for applications, and based on the applicants and after due scrutiny by the Sub-Divisional Beneficiary Selection Committee select the beneficiaries and submit the lists to the Directorate. The Chairman, State Level Advisory Committee for Tea Tribes Welfare Department approve the lists submitted by Beneficiary Selection Committees. While the Sub-divisional arrangements are available at district level, there exist no such identified mechanisms or facilities to avail TTWD schemes and benefits further down at block to Pan-

chayat to garden level, to aid access and delivery. In this case, there are no such facilities that may be required to meet quality stands with regards to a specified number of qualified staffs or workers, availability and quality of community level facilities to support and facilitate uptake of the scheme benefits right from information to benefits as well as monitoring to ensure that procedure and the administration of schemes have been appropriate and comply with the accepted practice and methods. Any emphasis on quality of care in access and delivery of schemes provided at facilities is not an existing sight in the access and delivery of public schemes in and around the tea garden communities. In regard to other universal schemes access and benefits, it is through the usual District, Block and Panchayat level arrangements and personnel as generally exists and visible including ASHA, Anganwadi, ANM, Rojgar Sahayaks and others.

Methods

Study design

This study is designed as a descriptive method with a qualitative approach with content analysis from field observations and field participants. The qualitative 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 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

Study setting

The qualitative study took place 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.

Sampling, Enlistment and Engagement

We used a purposive sampling strategy to guide the study in knowing the access determinants of schemes information and benefits, which sought to identify groups of individuals relevant for the purpose, more from community point of view. Findings from the news and literature review and stakeholder mapping provided the required inputs for the formation of the focused groups. In each of the 6 districts, a total of 4 focus group discussions were conducted with the overall total of 24 FGDs. The FGDs conducted were stratified into male-female, female-female and male-male groups. Informed consent from each of the participant individual was acquired prior to discussions which were held in local language. There were no financial incentives to participant to be part of the discussions and sharing views and inputs. A total of 55 stakeholders in six districts were interviewed through key informant interviews. The process of engagement, identification, tool readiness, interview, discussions and quality review spanned over 8 days in each district. The approach was such that the study was scheduled district wise, moving from one to another. Qualitative data analysis was on-going throughout the study period, with regular transcription of conversations and interview content

and further review for accuracy and authentic information.

Data collection

Interviews for the study were conducted between August and November 2019 by two researchers including the author. The two researchers were familiar with the tea garden issues and local context as well customs and cultural norms, and were fluent in the local language used. The researchers did secondary review and got oriented in qualitative methods in key principles of research ethics that guides social research including respect and ears to respondents, respect for hearing than questioning, transparency, consent of participants, and trust and justice. Interviews were conducted in local Assamese language or in Hindi or English based on the convenience of the respondents.

Consent and Ethical considerations

Verbal and written consents were obtained from participants before the interviews and FGDs. The participants were informed and explained in prior about the study objectives, risks, purpose, confidentiality, no non-commercial or unethical purpose, right to refuse participation. Clarity was provided to participants on any aspect of the study and the purpose for the exercise being undertaken. Brief syn-

opsis was also shared to participants who sought or asked for.

Data analysis

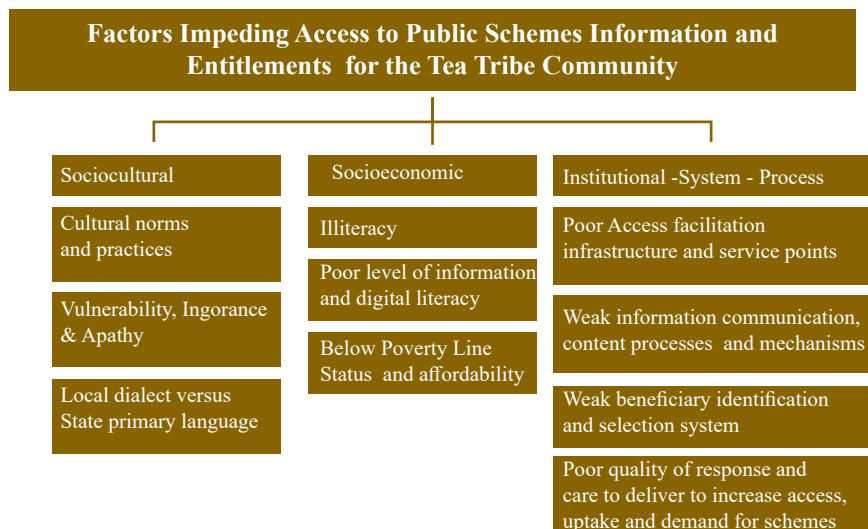
The data collected from interviews and FGDs was analyzed using inductive approach to category construction and a content analysis framework (NHIA, 2013). In qualitative method of content analysis, inductive content analysis one of the methods that is used to develop theory and identify themes by studying documents, recordings, other printed and verbal material (Hsieh H-F , 2016). Themes for analysis emerge from the raw data, information and content through repeated review, examination and comparison of data. For this study, interview transcripts were reviewed for content pertaining to barriers to access to public schemes information and end entitlement benefits by eligible tea tribe community members through focused group discussions and key informant interviews. Based on the reviewed content, a coding system was developed that represented common topics identified in the transcripts review. The codes were refined, fine-tuned and sharpened during the data analysis period, along with new interviews and analysed transcripts. This process of refining continued until new interview data did not change the definition or scope of the set of codes. The interview transcripts reviewed were used for analysis using the QRS NVivo 10, a

qualitative software analysis package and the data was coded for analysis in Microsoft word. The coded data and information were scrutinized, grouped, and re-grouped to arrive into major patterns that can indicate underlying theme or explanation for barriers to access public schemes. From this process, descriptive and relevant categories were developed to identify the factors which were then classified with a “name” to describe a basis of explanation for the observed phenomenon. Data triangulation was used to revise, refine and validate these categories. Triangulation was necessitated as data was collected using more than one method and possible due to multiple interview sources that contributed in developing a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Results and Findings

The qualitative content analysis generated nine categories in the study findings which were developed and are presented here under three broad themes: 1) sociocultural factors, 2) socioeconomic factors, and 3) Institutional-System-Process related factors that restricts access to public schemes information and entitlement benefits in real time and context and generate desired uptakes and demands (see Fig. 1). Some of the field example(s) from the dataset were selected that best explain the categories and are presented in quotes in italics and between quotation marks.

Figure 1: Schematic of Results: Themes and Categories



Sociocultural factors limiting access

For the tea tribe specific and universal schemes to be relevant as empowering mechanisms to mainstream the community, there is need to design and adopt strategies that reduces the sociocultural barriers that hinders the vulnerable community to get actual scheme benefits reaching and benefitting the community. There are sociocultural factors underlying the flow of why and how the schemes can be accessed and benefitted from. We identified three sociocultural factors that contributed in lack of timely and better access to schemes and benefits: 1) Cultural norms and practices, 2) Vulnerability, Ignorance and Apathy, and 3) Use of local dialect and State primary language.

Cultural norms and practices

Culture in the form of closed social behavior and norms is identified as a major constraint to accessing schemes and benefits. 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 over-

all 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.

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).

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 labour work 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 Swahid Dayal 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 to work further 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 anything 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 our cards anytime we ask him [the agent] he says it is not ready so when you go you have to pay. That is a 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-divi-

sional 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 explains 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).

Discussion

Our study revealed key factors contributing to uneasy, difficult and weak access, demand and uptake for critical public schemes information, entitlement benefits and grievance redress for the vulnerable tea tribe community in tea tribe majority districts, blocks and Panchayats in Assam. For this study, the qualitative content analysis generated in ten categories which were developed and are presented here under three broad themes: 1) sociocultural factors, 2) socioeconomic factors, and 3) Institutional-System-Process related factors that restricts access to public schemes information and end

entitlement benefits in real time and context and generate desired uptakes and demands..

Here, based on our findings, we present potential interventions that could help achieve the necessary conditions for improving and strengthening access to public schemes information and benefits for the tea tribe population and community members, increase their participation and demand for scheme benefits for the 20 per cent of the Assam State’s population who are dependent on tea gardens for life and livelihood. These findings as noted in analyzing the discourse between tea tribe and local community members, opinion leaders, local authorities, people’s representatives at Panchayat level, district officials and service providers have produced an understanding of a phenomenon which have been broadly echoed and reflect in other studies and mainstream media. We also believe that some of the institutional-system-process wide factors we identify are not due to the absence of access means and mediums, but they have continuous underpinnings unique to supply and services delivery side in manpower limitations for outreach and delivery, resource allocation shortfalls, infrastructure and operational bottlenecks, lack of skills and capacities to innovate and deliver, absence of public centric digital approach and applications and absence of schemes and entitlement convergence at community level outside of

the departmental or sectoral purview. This may broadly explain why the tea tribe communities continue to face difficulties with access to appropriate schemes and awareness and benefits in socio-economic and entitlement exclusion contexts. Some studies have shown that proximity to public welfare programmes and benefits and service providers is a key determinant of choice, demand, uptake and empowerment among vulnerable groups and communities reporting denial and exclusion.

We find that the access to public schemes information and entitlement benefits is determined by key sociocultural factors: 1) Vulnerability, Ignorance and Apathy, 2) Cultural norms and practices, and 3) Use of local dialect and State primary language.

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

camp 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.

We have also identified three socio-economic 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. 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 losing 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.

We also identified key institutional-system-process wide gaps 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 beneficiary identification and selection system; 4) Poor and Weak Response Mechanism and quality of care.

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.

The community-based ideology from which various schemes are created, especially from the Tea Tribe Directorate perspective, was built is missing from the responses from community members. Clearly, solidarity and entitlement-sharing messages have been missing in the information and communication processes and systems and also in media. Effective and adequate identification and selection processes of beneficiaries and maintaining the same will equally hold the key solution in targeted and focused way of empowering the community. Specific to the tea garden primarily women workers, the increasing feminization of the work force, mainly in the informal sector, means that strategies targeting women can then have a higher impact and multiplier effect than strategies that do not particularly target women (Kabeer, 2008).

The administrative challenge with the volume of beneficiary targets and volume of applications which are processed manually and the lack of human and operational resources to manage targets and schemes have contributed to gaps in quality for

applying, demand and uptake for schemes and benefits. Local authorities and service providers are lacking the needed funds to manage administrative and office supplies. Poor and challenging service provision signals existing and potential beneficiaries not to approach and seek information and benefits.

Reliable, timely, accessible and good quality scheme and entitlement services will stimulate trust in the government and institutional services delivery and the schemes which will ultimately influence positively on the uptake and demand for benefits and care must be taken to efficiently rollout these empowerment and inclusive measures. For instance, the heavy instances of MMR and CMR in tea gardens and unemployment and resultant social and economic impact in tea gardens and overall families seeks a clear measure that the success of schemes design and delivery within the overall public schemes delivery institutional systems lies in its promotion, engagement and educational campaigns within the tea garden communities. Effective information and communications have been identified as crucial in the public schemes and benefit uptake and decision and pursuit; and therefore this is an area which requires improvement to enhance understanding of the schemes design, delivery and access mechanisms and the policy and programme reforms within the overall setup.

Here, another key aspect is the lead taken by the generic Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate Office in provision entitlements for the tea tribe community wherein more than majority are women work force. Considering that the Directorate is taking the lead, gender considerations tend to be a lower priority, as illustrated by the limited integration of a gender perspective into working practices, weak linkages to gender focal points and a lack of funding for capacity-building for programme implementers on these issues (Homes and Jones, 2010). This is one area that requires adequate attention and tailored approach in reaching out to the vast majority of tea tribe women labour work force and their families.

By now schemes including social protection measures have become common as part of support system for the tea tribe community; however there are issues of fragmentation, effectiveness, integration and consistency (Rodriguez, 2014). Often, analyses of income support schemes or programmes focus exclusively on technical aspects, that is, the key factors for consideration are the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme including examining administrative capabilities (including resource mobilization capability), programme selection and design as well as management and delivery mechanisms, amongst other areas (Rodriguez, 2014). However, the problem lies not in the actual design, but rather it is the

policy-making process that needs to be improved. Further, these schemes are not implemented in isolation and therefore critical to look at these programmes within the political, social and economic processes that shape national development strategies. These processes generate factors that potentially affect the impact of various schemes and programmes and, ultimately, whether they contribute or hinder development (Rodriguez, 2014). Also, in order for universal social protection to be a viable policy option, not only is strong political will and commitment required, but countries must have high levels of institutional capacity and integrity in state agencies to advocate for and implement social protection systems, including income support schemes (de Neubourg, 2002).

The study faced some limitations that are to be considered. The study applied FGD and interview techniques as methods of investigation and findings. Both these methods have their own shortcomings and limitations but have effectively contributed in key study findings. The FGD method lacks depth information in getting the results and yet it is a tried and tested tool for collecting data on opinions, perceptions, values and beliefs on areas of investigation in a participative mode. The FGDs helped to gain insight by the respondent individuals with regards to the key challenges to access to public schemes information, seeking and enrolment in various

schemes was needed in this study in order to draw out the bottlenecks in improving access to public schemes information and entitlement benefits.

The informant interviews collated helped to triangulate the data from the FGDs conducted in field visits. However, it was necessary to be guarded against making any generalisations of qualitative interpretations of the interviews and FGDs interfering in study findings and descriptions. Instead, the qualitative data was derived and collated with an inductive approach, as it was considered as the best fit to identify major patterns that explain barriers to access, demand, enrollment and uptake of critical public schemes by the tea garden community. The risk remains in this approach in leaving out key issues and topics which are not revealed through the interviews and FGDs. Irrespective of this,, this qualitative inductive approach remains one of the most commonly used method to collate and classify opinions and perceptions for study purpose as was the case in the current study.

Conclusion

The study identifies some major fundamental access related factors responsible for creating barriers and challenges and exclusion from public schemes as reflected in the discourse of the stakeholders and community members involving the tea garden

community, but acknowledges that these are intertwined and can be understood from social, cultural, economic, institutional and system-wide perspectives. The issue of socioeconomic vulnerability, ignorance and apathy and poverty are very important in the decision to access, demand and enroll for schemes and benefits. The tea garden community members lack access to economic resources required for better living. Without access to information resources or facilities because people are living in so difficult social and economic settings, it becomes difficult for them to access and enroll in public schemes. Although, the schemes are largely free for them, there has been a huge challenge in reaching out, receiving timely and relevant information, enrolling and identifying who the core beneficiaries for particular time and period, are and there is anecdotal evidence to show that the range of beneficiary reach out in schemes have been within the range of known ones and 'party workers'. Also, issues relating to poor community level access and facilitation infrastructure often pointed out on the unjust and impractical provisions increases the vulnerability of such disadvantaged groups.

By acknowledging and understanding the key barriers to schemes access and uptake, we can begin to explore the need and value of some of the potential solutions to improve public schemes and social protection

information access and entitlement benefits by the tea tribe community at local level. The Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate is in the process of introducing new schemes and key solutions to overcome some of these challenges. The problems associated with the implementation, reach out and enrollment of schemes may undermine the efforts of authorities and agencies and beneficial effect leaving in its wake misconceptions of what the changes are meant to achieve in the long run. Implementation and interventions should therefore consider the important role of community based information, facilitation and support structures in the community access, demand and applying for schemes and benefits. Measures that include making access to schemes information, facilitation more convenient, accessible and affordable by ensuring that the tea garden communities have good such facilities and skilled community personnel and good arrangements that now can link and connect them with critical schemes linkages and grievance redress in case of not receiving benefits and issues therein. Increased, regular and robust use of Information Communication Technology tools, platforms and solutions including social media for community engagement, reach out and enrollment in most decentralized and friendly ways with messages that are simple and easy to understand will make access to schemes and enrollment more positive and happy experience to people. There has aris-

en the need more to ensure that social security programme has got to be made truly comprehensive, integrated and all pervasive to encompass within its fold the entire society, to achieve the ultimate objective (Pio, 1990), mainstreaming social, economic and development inclusion of the tea tribe community.

There are measures required to overcome fragmentation of programmes and implementation, need to take stock of existing schemes and programmes and centralize all the relevant information and resources aimed for the tea tribe community, through conducting a mapping of scheme types, eligibility criteria, beneficiaries and implementation arrangements as well as monitoring and evaluation systems. In many of the cases, this exercise will be challenging and will require design and deployment of appropriate information management systems bottom up and top down mutually congruent, to assist the entire flow system. To achieve its full potential of tea tribe inclusion, mainstreaming and real empowerment, it is important that these reforms cut across all responsible line departments and agencies.

Examples reveal that the domestic political economy often plays a key role in governments' decisions to adopt a particular programme (Kabeer and Ainsworth, 2010). Examining these considerations is important

for two main reasons: they can affect the design of the scheme (choice of instrument, consultative mechanisms, etc.), and, more importantly, they can have a major impact on the institutionalization and mainstreaming of the scheme or programme, and consequently, its sustainability (Kabeer and Ainsworth, 2010).

The inclusive need and approach for social and economic inclusion of the tea tribe community vis-à-vis the mainland communities and socio-economic groups, by the authorities and agencies concerned cannot be overstated. The “most vulnerable” can only be sustainably and effectively protected if that protection is seen as being part and parcel of a social security system aimed at universal coverage. This implies two things: that protection of the “most vulnerable” is not dealt with at “the end of the line”, as a residual and specific element, but rather as an integral part of a global process; and that protection of the “most vulnerable” is based on the establishment of social rights (of workers and/or citizens), which may be specific but are not granted for all that as a favour or as charity (Lautier, 2006).

Therefore, we call for further research to explore what and how the local community service providers be playing their role effectively; what and how the local community provisions, structures and institutions needs to be revisited to be more inclusive and

responsive; what and how the role of the tea garden management and welfare officers needs to be evaluated and revisited in playing a robust and effective role in facilitating access to public entitlements; how and what the process and approach in scheme design and implementation would be appropriate for lasting impact; what information communication processes are needed to strengthen demand and supply side in entitlement access and delivery, and more from the point of informing, educating community members and individuals in relation to access, demand, enrolment and uptake in time bound schemes in order to expand coverage, saturate demands and ensure sustainability of the schemes and benefits for those for whom meant for.

Abbreviations

CSOs: Civil Society Organisations; TTWD: Tea Tribe Welfare Directorate; NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations; NSAP: National Social Assistance Programme; JSY: Janani Suraksha Yojana; ANM: Auxiliary Nurse Midwife; MMR: Maternal Mortality Rate; IMR: Infant Mortality Rate; PMAY: Prime Minister Awas Yojana; GNM: General Nursing and Midwifery; IGNOAPS: Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Schemes; IGNWPS: Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Schemes; AABY: Aam Admi Bima Yojana; ASHA: Accredited Social Health Ac-

tivist; DBT: Direct Benefit Transfer; ICT: Information Communication Technology; MNREGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

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- The generally used term for the tea garden community is ‘tea tribe’ community which is more a political identification emerged stronger in political narratives and movements, rather a socio-cultural terminology. Of late there have been efforts to confer Schedule Tribe status to the community, but still not conferred at the time of writing this paper.



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