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## Education Status of Women Workers in the Tea Industry of Darjiling: A Geographical Analysis

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**Abstract:** *This work is based on a reconnaissance survey of the education standard of the female workers of two selected tea estates of Darjiling district, namely Phoobshering and Orange Valley Tea Estate. The study was conducted mainly upon questionnaire survey to obtain the status of literacy as well as overall education level among the female workers. The result shows that there exists a high disparity among the male and female workers in terms of literacy and education levels. The proportion of female workers with basic education is remarkably lower among the females as compared to the males. The pattern of social outlook as well as the lack of attention paid by the estate authorities was found to be responsible for this condition.*

**Keywords:** *Reconnaissance survey, questionnaire survey, literacy, disparity, basic education, social outlook*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Lying in the lap of the Lesser Himalayan range Darjiling town has a unique and picturesque landscape and the beaming warmth of the inhabitants add charm to this beautiful hill station. Darjiling is a home of a number of exuberant tea gardens with exotic and picturesque locations attracting many visitors. The tea industry of Darjiling owes mainly to its ideal climate with showery monsoon and nipping winter and its topography with certain gradient of slope and affordable labour force add to the advantage. Major section of rural population of this region is dependent on the tea industry for their livelihood in spite of the fact that tourism is also a major source of income for the people living in the towns. Today Tea industry in Darjiling is considered to be the largest organized sector in terms of employment. Hence a lot of man power has been deployed in the gardens. It is believed the growth of population of Darjiling is mainly credited to the tea gardens. At this time many cases of migration, mainly through necessity and in outlook for a better opportunity in the tea gardens were noticed. In spite of meagre salary the employment benefits provided by the gardens with free housing facilities along with the family, medical benefits, ration distribution for everybody lured the workers in the work. The tea gardens of Darjiling owes its origin to Dr Campbell when he first started with the experimental plantation in 1840s and with the success of this experimental plantation the tea industry gradually flourished in this region. Since then there has been a lot of employment generation in the region, many of the labourers of this industry are the migrant workers who have settled in the gardens permanently through generations having employment for both male and female workers. It can be seen the proportion of women workers is larger in comparison to the male workers. The female workers, although greater in number are not found to be sufficiently educated as compared to their male contingent.

### 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Although in tea industry female labour force is greater in number as compared to the male labour force it is found that there is a vast disparity in educational status among the male and female labours. The male population is found to be more educated than the female labourers. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To study the literacy level among the female labourers of Phoobshering Tea Estate and Orange Valley Tea Estates.
- To examine the causes of low literacy rate among the women labour force.
- To assess the trend of education among the female workers for the future generation.

### 3. DATA BASE

This work is based mainly on primary data generated through by field survey. Selected sample size was considered for the tea estates and the data were generated by door-to-door survey upon systematically framed questionnaires

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to study the educational status of the women labourers, the methodologies adopted are as follows:

1. **Study of Background History:** The historical background of Darjeeling tea industry was studied from different literature available from the library, books, articles
2. **Pattern of investigation or Survey:** During the field investigation the pattern and character of the Orange Valley and Phoobshering Tea Estates related to the life, economy and educational patterns of the people have been studied carefully using primary and secondary data, made available from different Government and Non-Government offices and from personal Survey.

The Survey has been divided in to the following steps:

##### **a) PRE-FIELD SURVEY**

Prior to visiting the Darjeeling town and its surrounding areas the existing Literature of Published Government Report, Official information were minutely looked upon to prepare a complete field work programme. Photographs were taken as the records of the different aspects of this area.

##### **b) FIELD SURVEY**

During the field survey I have put emphasis on questionnaire survey for which purposeful schedule was framed before. Field survey and personal survey has been done for compilation, correlation and evaluation.

##### **c) POST-FIELD WORK**

This step includes analysis of the data and information collected; these were processed statistically and in the computer through appropriate Software packages. This helped interpretations of the information, existing scenario about the educational status.

#### **5. ROLE OF FEMALE WORKERS IN THE TEA INDUSTRY**

Female workers are considered to be the soul of the industry. Outside the industry they have to maintain family and take every responsibility to keep the family structured. They play the role of a mother, a wife and a daughter. In order to perform these roles they need to drill and groom themselves. For women education plays a vital role to carry out these fundamental responsibilities of the family without much trouble. Knowledge gained through proper education makes one confident about one self. Women being a manager have to make a lot of speculations in order to manage the house sustainably.

As mentioned above, the tea plantation industry is a highly labour intensive industry. A lot of labour is required in the process of tea manufacturing. It provides employment to a large section of population. Work in plantation is basically manual in nature and women are preferred for working in the. Thus it is mostly women centric industry. The female workers have to manage both the house hold chores as well as earn livelihood through tea leaf plucking. They are considered to be very hardworking section. Even in such sloppy terrain and slippery slope of the tea gardens they pluck tea leaves without much complain and hesitation. Also tea leaf plucking is an art and it requires a lot of patience. In the garden female labours are considered to be more patient than the males and the garden owners prefer them in the garden work. In order to gain such patience and balance in life education plays a vital role.

During the survey in the two tea gardens it was observed that the level of basic education among the female workers was markedly low. In order to improve this condition *The Plantation Labour Act* has come into effect which was formulated in the year 1951 with the intention to improve the working conditions of the labourers and to protect the interest of them against exploitation by the owners. Healths, medical facilities, working hours, formation of unions of workers were the main highlights of this act. Better working conditions with proper sanitation, welfare of female workers and their children were also of the prime concern. In spite of this female workers largely remain deprived of basic education.

**6. EVALUATION OF LITERARY STATUS OF THE FEMALE WORKERS**

In order to study the literacy level of the female workers two tea gardens in Darjiling, namely Phoobshering Tea Estate and Orange Valley Tea Estate were selected on the basis of accessibility and convenience.

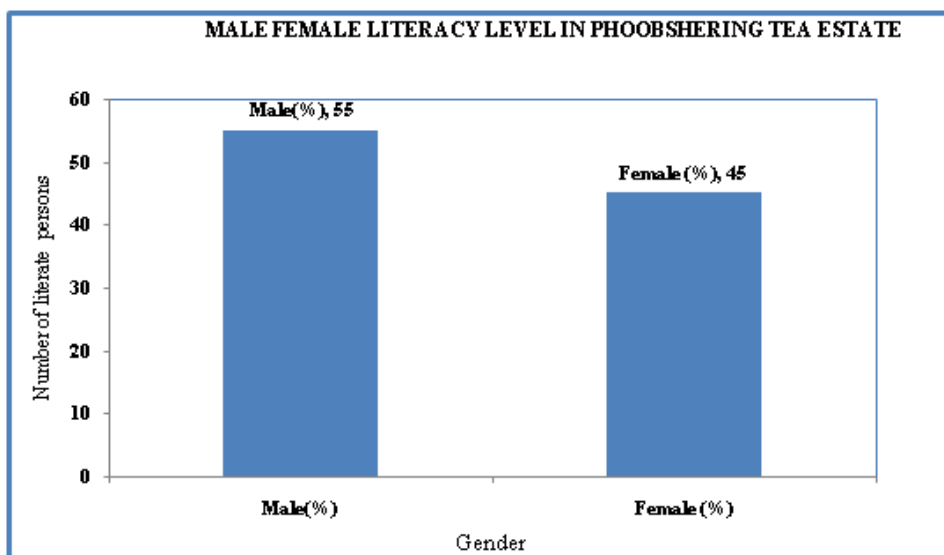
Phoobsering Tea Estate is located in the western part of Darjiling covering an area of 240.52 hectares of land at an elevation of 1,000 to 2,000m. The estate is owned by the Chamong group of companies. It produces the best varieties of first flush tea. The garden owes its name to its first Sardar (Supervisor). Out of the total of 721 workers 465 are female and 256 are male workers. This shows the large disparity in the number of male and female workers. In order to work out the literacy difference between the Male and Female workers a total of 90 households were surveyed. The primary data generated by field survey on the education standard of male and female workers is given below.

**Table 1:** Male Female literacy levels among the workers in Phoobshering Tea Estate

Sample size: 90 female workers

| No. of households surveyed | Total no of literate workers | Male | Male literates (%) | Female | Female literates (%) |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|------|--------------------|--------|----------------------|
| 90                         | 134                          | 73   | 55                 | 61     | 45                   |

Source: Data generated from the field through door to door survey



**Figure 1:** Male Female literacy level in Phoobshering Tea Estate

The result of the survey, as presented diagrammatically shows that there is a large disparity between the male and female workers in terms of literacy level with female literacy level is markedly lower.

A further survey was carried out to observe the proportion of different levels of education among the female workers and the result is given below.

**Table 2:** Levels of education among the female workers

Sample size: 90 female workers

| Level of education            | female | %    |
|-------------------------------|--------|------|
| Only Illiterate               | 45     | 50%  |
| Primary level                 | 28     | 31%  |
| Secondary level               | 12     | 13%  |
| HS and above                  | 5      | 6%   |
| <b>Total Nos. Interviewed</b> | 90     | 100% |

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

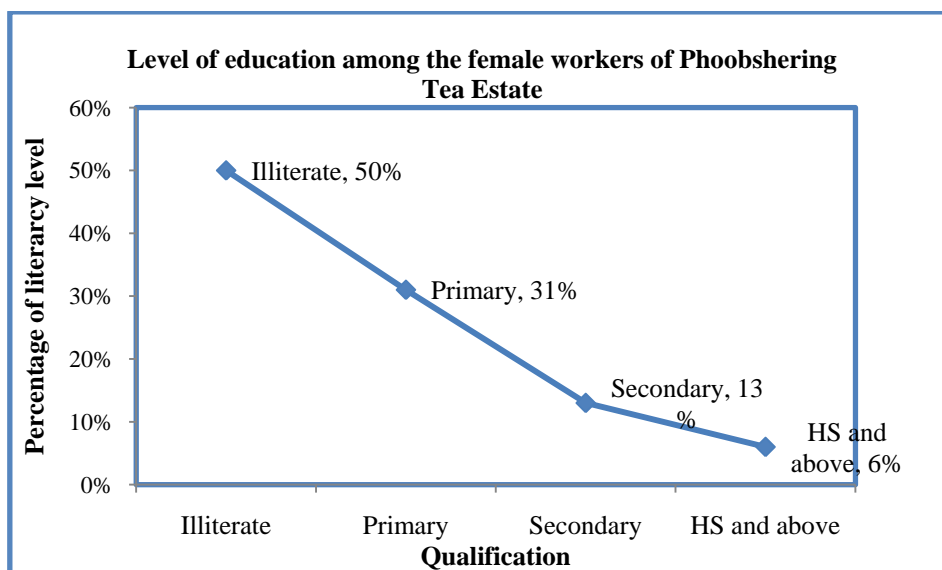


Figure 2: Level of education among the female workers in Phoobshering Tea Estate

It can be seen from the above data the trend of educational level declines from primary to higher secondary level and above. Out of the total 90 female investigated upon 50% were illiterates and they never attended any school, 31% have education up to primary level, 13% have education up to secondary level and only 6% has qualification above this level.

Similar Survey was conducted in Orange Valley Tea Estate. This tea estate is located to the west of Darjiling toen at an elevation of 1,500 to 2,000m covering a total area of 189.90 hectares of land. It is owned by the Bagaria Business Private Ltd and produces the best varieties of Darjiling and orthodox tea. The estate has a total employee of 567 out of which 204 are male and 363 are female workers.

Through the questionnaire survey on the literacy level the following data were generated:

Table 3: Male and female literacy levels among the workers in Orange Valley Tea Estate

| Total house hold surveyed | Total no of literate labourers | Male | Male (%) | Female | Female (%) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|------|----------|--------|------------|
| 90                        | 156                            | 92   | 59%      | 64     | 41%        |

Source: Data generated in the field through door to door survey

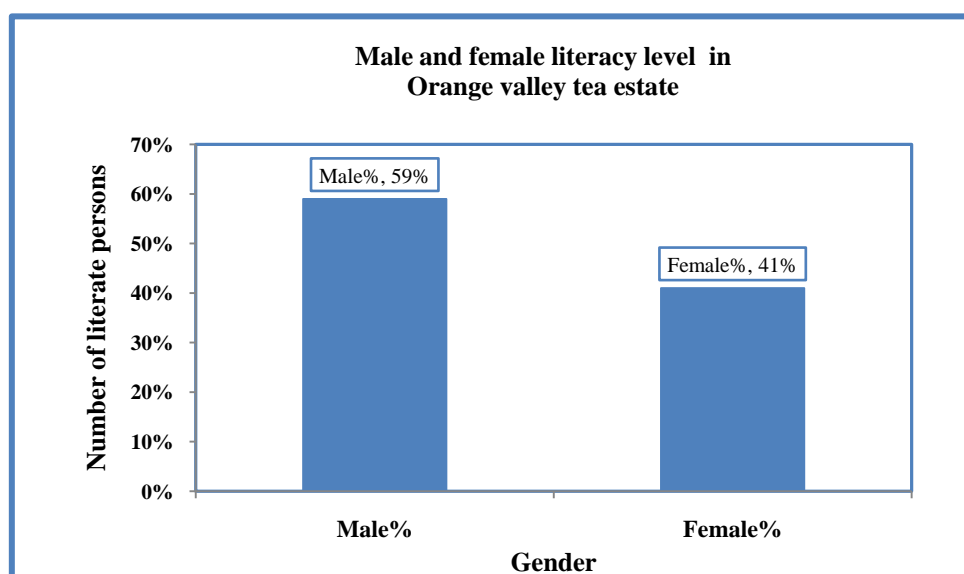


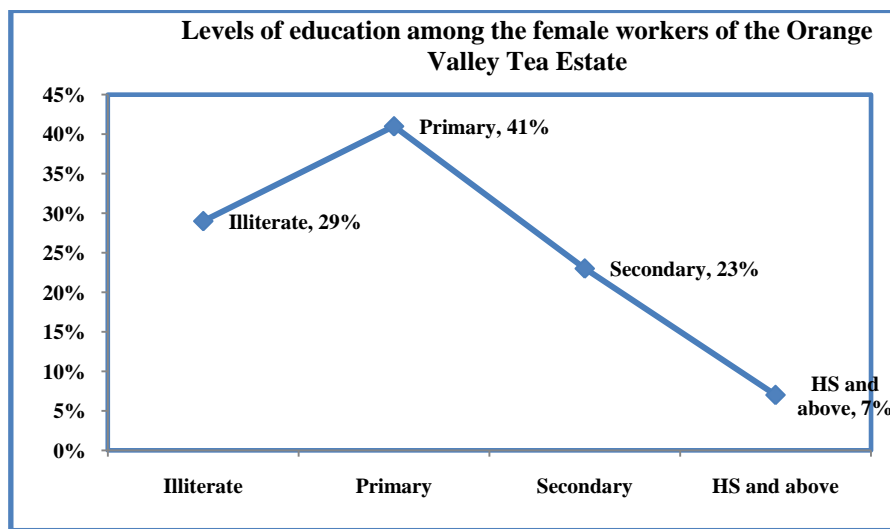
Figure 3: Male female literacy level in Orange Valley Tea Estate

From the above report it can be seen that among the 90 households 156 people were literate out of which 59% were Male and 41% were female. The data generated on the levels of education among the females is presented below.

**Table 4:** Levels of education among the female workers of Orange Valley Tea Estate

| Level of education            | female | % (of female |
|-------------------------------|--------|--------------|
| Illiterate                    | 26     | 29           |
| Primary                       | 37     | 41           |
| Secondary                     | 20     | 23           |
| HS and above                  | 7      | 7            |
| <b>Total Nos. Interviewed</b> | 90     | 100%         |

Source : Data generated in the field through door to door survey



**Figure 4:** Levels of education among the Female workers of the Orange Valley Tea Estate

A picture slightly different to that of the Phoobshiring Tea Estate was found here, which shows 26% were illiterate and 64% were literate. Out of the total 90 female investigated upon 29% were illiterates and they never attended any school, 41% have education up to primary level, 23% have education up to secondary level and only 7% has qualification above this level.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above study reveals some important facts about the quality and levels of female education the tea estate studied on sample survey. As per the existing rule each and every child of the workers' family residing within the tea garden premises, has basic right to have education. According to The Plantation Labour Act the children of the labourers should be provided with basic educational facilities. The tea estates surveyed, i.e., Phoobshiring and Orange Valley Tea Estates have some arrangements for basic education in their garden institutions. Phoobshiring has two primary schools, and Orange Valley has three primary schools. All the schools in the estate premises are government aided and education is free up to primary level. In order to pursue higher education at the school level, the children have to find schools outside the estate premises.

Considering the literacy rates across the two tea estates it is revealed that the literacy level is markedly higher among the males as compared to the females. This is mainly because of the fact that the tea estates are not socio-culturally very developed areas and still has a rural outlook in the life style; the girls are married off at a tender age and most of them join the tea estate work as tea leaf pluckers at very early age, as it is a women centric industry.

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