

WOMEN WORKERS IN TEA PLANTATION: A STUDY ON THE WORKING CONDITIONS AND LABOUR WELFARE IN BALIJAAN TEA ESTATE, DIBRUGARH DISTRICT, ASSAM

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Abstract

In terms of tea production, Assam is widely recognised as a leading state, which has made a substantial contribution to the overall economic success of the nation. Without the work of women, the tea plantations and exquisite gardens of Assam would be impossible. Women play an essential role in the tea plantation industry. The health and safety of these ladies are of the utmost importance when it comes to the present day. An investigation into the working conditions and welfare of workers at Balijaan Tea Estate, located in the Dibrugarh District of Assam, is the subject of this study. The objective of the research is to evaluate the working conditions and effectiveness of the law, as well as the differences in how it is implemented. Through the use of questionnaires and interviews, data were collected from 70 women workers. According to the findings, female workers have concerns about their working conditions and welfare provisions. A key cause for worry is the fact that they have a limited understanding of labour regulations, which leads to a lack of awareness of the gap between the laws and their rights. In spite of this, a significant number of employees have expressed their contentment with the maternity benefits that the company offers. The findings shed light on the discrepancy that exists between the law that is intended to improve working conditions and the implementation of such legislation. In order to overcome these gaps and create a healthy working environment, some solutions

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include improving the implementation process and establishing certain mandatory standards for employers is necessary.

Keywords: Women workers, Working conditions, Legislation, Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh.

INTRODUCTION

The tea industry of Assam is considered one of the most influential sectors towards the economic growth of Assam. Dibrugarh is known as the Tea City of Assam. In the tea plantation sector, the workers are the migrant labourers who come from the different states in India, especially Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. In this study, the focus is given to women workers because women worker is considered a major working force in the tea plantation sector, as they are basically engaged with the tea leaf plucking task and some other related activities. Women in every society face different kinds of obstacles, and these groups of women workers are also not free from these obstacles. Due to the existence of a patriarchal form of society, female is dominated by the male community, and this orthodox concept is entering the field of profession. While talking about the status and the working conditions of the women workers in the tea plantation, they are living in a very vulnerable condition. There are lots of issues related to their basic facilities and rights related to labour welfare provisions. The concept of labour welfare is a very significant concept of the welfare state, without which the progress of society becomes stagnant. In Dibrugarh District, Chabua is a place where the first tea garden was established. In this study, the Balijaan Tea Estate is the area of study. Located in the high-quality belt of the Tingri Circle, Dibrugah District, this estate earned the nickname “Balijan High” due to the high quality of CTC and Orthodox that it produces. The estate is renowned for bright CTC cups and very stylish and tippy orthodox. The welfare measures which are provided by the garden authority are very limited according to their requirement as a worker.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There is still a big disconnect between policy and practice, especially among the workers of the tea gardens, even with extensive laws aimed at protecting women workers and providing a conducive environment at work. With an emphasis on encouraging labour welfare practices, this research attempts to determine the disparities and gaps as well as the actual effects of this legislation on women's safety and well-being.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the working conditions of the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh District and

2. To assess the impact of Indian legislation on the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh District from the point of view of labour welfare.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Are the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh, working in favourable working conditions?
2. How effective is the Indian legislation towards the labour welfare and protection of the women workers of Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh District?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ashish Mittal¹, in his research paper on “*Migrant Workers in the Tea Plantation Sector*”, discusses about the poor standard of living and unfavourable working conditions of migrant workers, especially in the Indian tea plantation sector. The Indian tea industry is heavily dependent on migrant labourers and plays a vital role in the economy. The working group is in extremely bad shape, and it is imperative that things improve, especially for the female employees. The majority of India’s tea plantations are found in certain rural and underdeveloped areas. These plantations’ migrant workers endure subpar living and working conditions, including low pay, starvation, and scant medical care.

Mridhusmita Duara & Sambit Malick², in a study on *Women Workers & Industrial Relations in Tea Estates of Assam Female Laborers in Assam*’s highlighted that the tea plantations of Assam are experiencing marginalisation, a pronounced sexual division of labour and substandard working conditions, with attributable to little governmental participation and inadequate social welfare initiatives for the workers. This study analyses the marginalisation and subjugation of female labourers in Assam’s tea plantation sector, focusing on the sexual division of labour, patriarchal influences, trade unions, sexual harassment, and inadequate working conditions. Women comprise almost 50% of the overall labour in Assam’s tea

¹ Ashish Mittal, “Migrant Workers in the Tea Plantation Sector”, 74 (1) *Occupational Medicine* (2024). available at: https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/74/Supplement_1/0/7706720?login=false (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

² Mridhusmita Duara & S. Mallick, “Women Workers & Industrial Relations in Tea Estates of Assam”, 55 *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations: Economics & Social Development*, 15-26 (2019), available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sambit-Mallick/publication/333892562_Women_Workers_and_Industrial_Relations_in_Tea_Estates_of_Assam/links/5ecc12a892851c11a88a89c9/Women-Workers-and-Industrial-Relations-in-Tea-Estates-of-Assam.pdf?__cf_chl_rt_k=IXMpXniqiCA6fJtv5K_apTNGVEbIy5pzq82Y8AwxfbE-1737626864-1.0.1.1-jkRitSDdpklBBVn3rq3cHIIEsT_p_YApTEVdp8A5Z94 (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

plantation business. However, they are continuing to be excluded from several facets of the tea business. This research seeks to examine the interplay of gender and class, as well as workplace disparities and the industrial relations context inside tea plantations. The researcher finds that the involvement of the State is very inadequate towards the social welfare initiatives, which contributed towards the deplorable working conditions, particularly the health risks faced by female workers.

D. Kalyani and D. Sumathi³, in a study on *Occupational Attributes and Its Impact on Health Among Tea Plucking Women Workers of Assam*, the women who harvest tea leaves in the state of Assam were the subjects of the research, which investigated their socio-economic backgrounds, working conditions, and the possible health impacts of their labour. The Dibrugarh and Jorhat districts in Assam were used to choose a sample of one hundred tea plucking women workers. The selection process was carried out using a random sampling approach. Between April and June 2021, the data was gathered. The women who picked tea were full-time labourers who received a modest income of Rs. 1160 per week. They were employed in the tea picking industry. 82 % of the respondents picked more than twenty kilograms of tea leaves on a daily basis, whereas 56 % of the respondents picked tea leaves that weighed less than 20 kilograms. A total of 69% of the respondents utilised a basket in addition to other personal protection equipment when picking tea leaves, and 31 % of them exclusively used a basket to pick tea leaves. However, despite the fact that the majority of tea plucking women workers (63%) had difficulties with the basket as a result of its transportation, 94 % of the women workers experienced physical discomfort both during and after their work period. This is because they are required to stand for the whole of their shift while carrying a large basket full of tea leaves. As well as the possible adverse consequences on their health, the women who pick tea leaves in the state of Assam are subjected to working conditions.

Nayana Borah⁴, A study conducted on *the rights of women workers in the tea gardens of Assam, analyses the circumstances of female labourers in the tea plantations of Assam*. The

³ D. Kalyani & Sumathi Dhandapani, "Occupational Attributes and Its Impact on Health Among Tea Plucking Women Workers of Assam", 51 (2) *The Journal of Research ANGRAU*, 1-190 (2023), available at: <https://doi.org/10.58537/jorangrau.2023.51.2.12>

⁴ Nayana Borah, "The rights of women workers in the tea gardens of Assam", 2 *The Clarion-International Multidisciplinary Journal*, 128-133 (2013).

aim of this research is to assess the extent of enjoyment of workers' rights among female employees. Workers' rights are a relatively recent component of the contemporary notion of human rights. The International Labour Organisation was established to safeguard workers' rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man. The Constitution of India and similar documents address workers' rights. All workers across all sectors, both organised and unorganised, including those in the tea business, must possess workers' rights. The researcher finds that the condition of female labourers in the tea gardens is very bad. They are denied several labour rights. Furthermore, many individuals still lack awareness about workers' rights. They are encountering many socioeconomic challenges.

Khandakar Shahadat and Shahzad Uddin⁵, in their article on “*Labour Controls, Unfreedom and Perpetuation of Slavery on a Tea Plantation*”, investigate labour regulations in Bangladeshi traditional tea plantations. According to this study, workers face social and economic challenges, and the rules that are put in place for them are also inconsistent. The “coolie” system of labour-manager relations has created a captive workforce that is isolated from the general workforce. In the end, this is similar to the system of slavery or bonded labour. Tea enterprises adhere to a very strict system; the old-fashioned sunset-sunrise working hours, maximum engagement, and restricted opportunities for advancement to managerial positions serve as ongoing reminders of the system of forced labour. This study presents an organised and unambiguous picture of modern slavery.

Porag Pachoni in “*Labour Welfare Practices in Tea Industry with Special Reference to Harmutty Tea Estate of Assam*”.⁶ According to the workers' opinions, the welfare practices towards the workers remained largely unsolved, despite the fact that the Tea estate had created and put into effect social, health, and safety standards for labour welfare. There was considerable variation in the interviewees' levels of satisfaction with drinking water, urinals and bathrooms, and medical facilities. This is a result of inadequate implementation in health facilities and the respondents' lack of understanding. A dismal picture was presented by the poll on labour welfare procedures in the tea business, which focused especially on

⁵ Khandakar Shahadat and Shahzad Uddin, “Labour Controls, Unfreedom and Perpetuation of Slavery on a Tea Plantation”, 36 (3) *Work, Employment and Society* (2022). available at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/09500170211021567> (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

⁶ Porag Pachoni, “Labour Welfare Practices in Tea Industry with Special Reference to Harmutty Tea Estate of Assam”, 5 (1) *Prati Dhwani the Echo* 75-83 (2016) available at: <http://www.thecho.in/files/Porag-Pachoni.pdf> (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

respondents' opinions of several welfare services. There is greater satisfaction with the educational and transportation amenities. Despite the government's creation and execution of a number of welfare laws, the estate does not successfully apply them.

Dr Suraj Tamang⁷ provided a comprehensive analysis of tea plantations and their workforce in the Dooars region in a study titled "An overview of tea gardens and labour situation in Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district." The study was divided into three main parts: an examination of the historical background of plantation workers, an analysis of government programs aimed at improving the welfare of the labour community, and an investigation of the revenue generated from plantations. The study found that the area of the plantations had somewhat increased, that the number of people living there had been steadily increasing, that unemployment had increased, and that female worker participation had increased.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This research used a mixed-methods approach to provide thorough insights into the effects of Indian laws on the protection of the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh.

Population and Sampling

The study focused on women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh. A total of 70 participants were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure representation from different sectors such as manufacturing, services, and agriculture.

Data Collection Instruments

A structured questionnaire was designed using a 5-point Likert scale i.e, SD-Strongly Disagree, D-Disagree, N-Neutral, A-Agree, SA-Strongly Agree) to assess perceptions of health and safety legislation among the participants. The questionnaire included items related to occupational health protections, working conditions, overall well-being improvement, safety measure implementation, sense of safety, and procedures for reporting safety concerns. Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to gain

⁷ Dr. Suraj Tamang, "An overview of tea gardens and labour situation in Dooars area of Jalpaiguri district", 4 (9) *Golden Research Thoughts* 1-7 (2015) available at: <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V5ISSUE4/IJRPR25133.pdf> (last visited on: Sept 27, 2025).

qualitative insights into their experiences, challenges faced, and suggestions for improvement regarding workplace health and safety.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed through questionnaire data to extract themes related to participant experiences and perceptions regarding health and safety legislation.

COLONIAL LEGACY AND IMPORTANCE TOWARDS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TEA PLANTATIONS IN ASSAM

The British colonial legacy had a significant impact on the discovery and expansion of the tea industry in Assam. The monarch of this country came to engage in trade and expanded their power in all sectors of the economy through the East India Company. For Britain, the discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam was a significant political and economic turning point. An important turning point with significant political and economic ramifications for British colonial ambitions in India was the discovery of the tea plant in Assam. A British East India Company employee named Colonel Letter noted the Assamese tribes' tea-drinking customs in 1815. Additionally, the Assamese Singphoo tribes call it "Fanap."⁸

Similarly, David Scott, the Assamese political agent, was also very interested in the region's tea industry. The British East India Company then showed a keen interest in learning more about the different types of plants that may be found in the Brahmaputra Valley. However, a British East India Company official named Major Robert Bruce made his way to Assam. Major Robert Bruce made the discovery that the tea plant existed in Assam in 1823. In order to supply the British Company with tea plants, he made an arrangement with a Singphoo chief. Major Robert Bruce is credited with identifying the tea plant in Assam.⁹

The Assamese people were frequently taken advantage of by the colonial government during the lengthy period of British colonial rule. It also signaled the beginning of Assam's colonial relationship of domination and reliance on the colonial authority. The Yandaboo Treaty, signed in 1826, gave the British East India Company complete control over Assam. The British government then began diverting Assamese economic surplus to England through a

⁸ R. N. Chakravorty, *Socio-Economic Development of Plantation Workers in North East India*, 30 (N.L Publishers, 1997).

⁹ *Ibid.*

number of strategies. In this way, the British company established the tea-planting industry in several Assamese regions. The British corporation made enormous profits from this industry. In fact, Assam becomes the “Cradle of the Tea Industry.”¹⁰

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDYING WOMEN WORKERS IN TEA PLANTATIONS

In the tea plantation sector, women are considered the heart of the tea plantation. While talking about the workers engaged in the tea plantation sector, the women workers cover the major part.

In general, Assam is divided into two areas: the Assam Valley and Cachar. Dibrugarh district, which has a sizable tea-growing region, has maintained the highest rate of growth among Assamese districts, with an area under tea of 44.65 percent. Assam's small-scale tea producers are now a major contributor to the state's economy. Assam has 68,465 tiny tea estates, according to the state Industry Department's latest “Survey Report and Data Bank on Small Tea Growers.” Approximately 25% of the state's total tea production comes from these small growers. Over 4300 small tea growers in Assam provide almost 9% of the state's total yearly crop, according to the Tea Board of India.¹¹

Workers in tea gardens, particularly women who pick tea leaves, are members of a presumed marginalized population that has been making economic contributions to their families and the country as a whole. Women's participation in earning activities is seen as a cooperative tool for empowering them and improving their lives overall, particularly in terms of increasing their sense of self-worth, dignity, resilience, and freedom of choice. However, it is unclear if economic activities strengthen women's sense of self or their ability to speak up for themselves in order to secure their development.¹² Women are regarded as the backbone of

¹⁰ Biraj Jyoti Kalita, “Historical background of the tea industry in Assam” 4 (1) *Res Rev Int J Multidiscip* 548-550 (2019).

¹¹ Gazala Bhoje, “A Historical Review on Tea Plantation”, 7 (5) *International Journal of Research in Engineering, IT and Social Sciences* 21-26 (2017), available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/631438775/A-Historical-Review-of-Tea-Plantation-pdf> (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

¹² Aktar Hajera, Zafrin Ahmed Liza & Nazira Aktar, “Paid Employment and Empowerment of Women Tea Plantation Workers: A Qualitative Inquiry”, 6 (3) *South Asian Journal of Social Studies and Economics*, 9-18 (2020), available at:

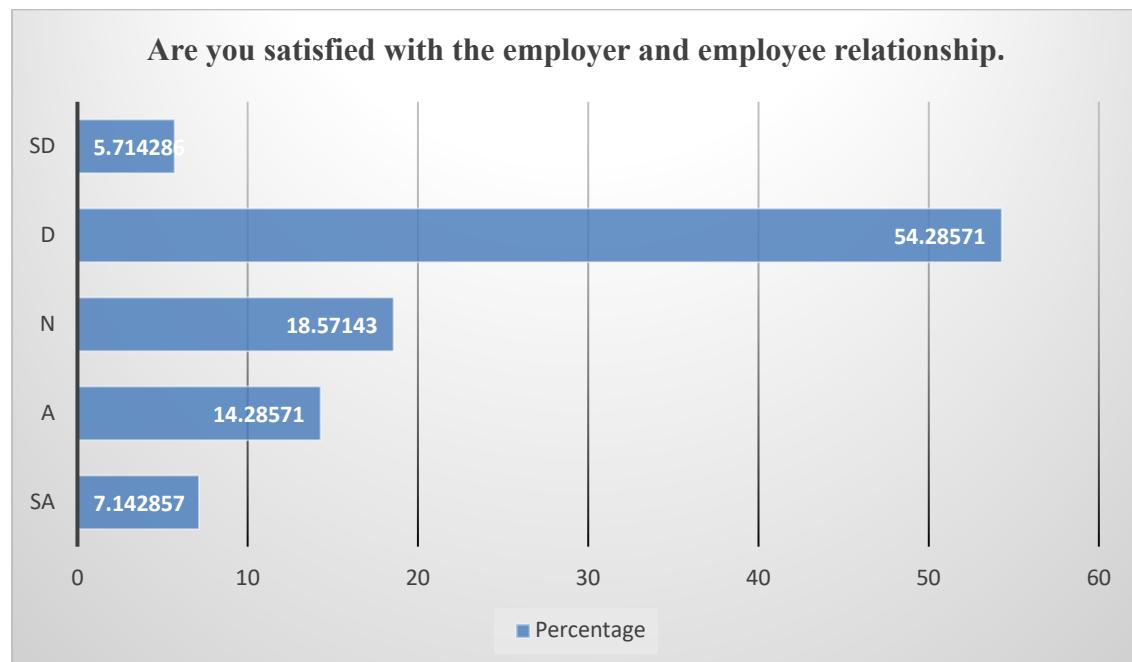
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341384682_Paid_Employment_and_Empowerment_of_Women_Tea_Plantation_Workers_A_Qualitative_Inquiry (last visited on: Sept. 27, 2025).

the tea plantation industry. Women make up the majority of workers in the tea plantation industry when discussing this sector.

Result and Discussion

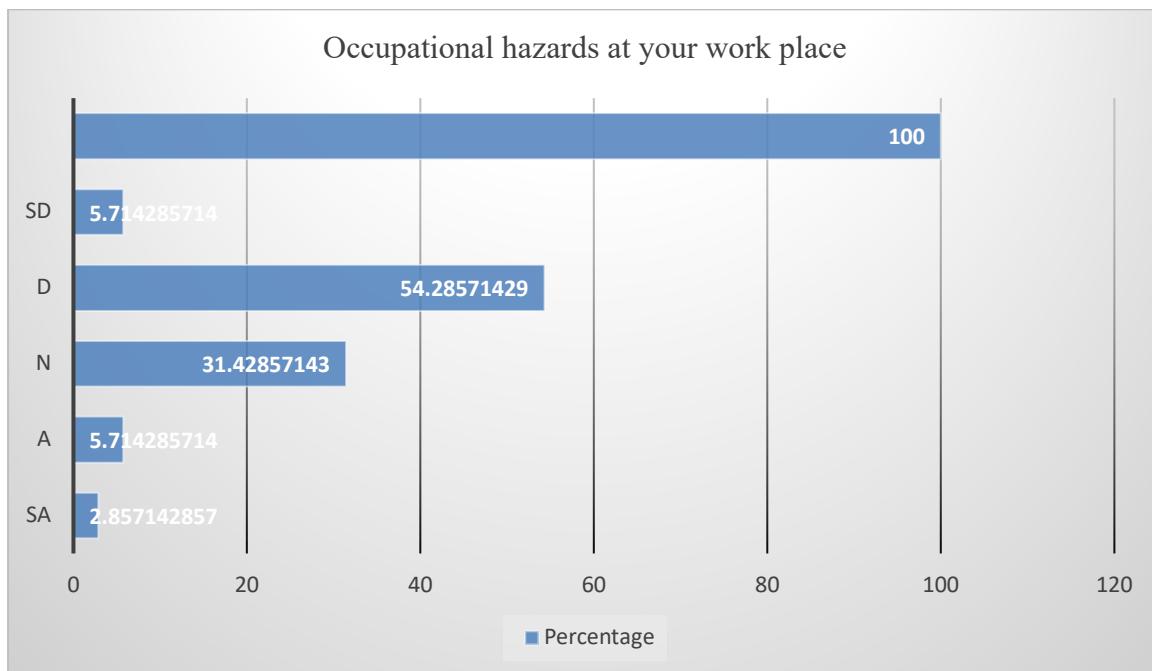
1. To study the working conditions of the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh District.

Fig:1



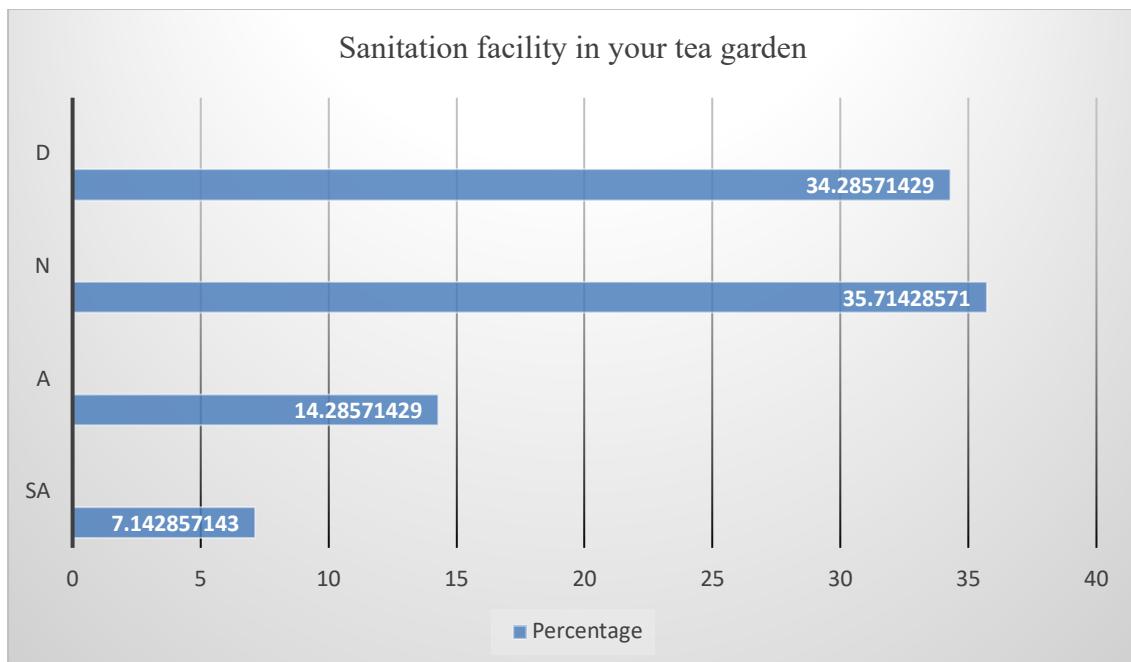
The employer-employee relation is a major factor in labour law. A sound relation between these two is very important for the growth of the organisation. The table indicates the response of the women workers in the Balijaan Tea estate. The respondent group 54% responded D (Disagree), and 6% of the selected population responded SD (strongly disagreed). Whereas 7% of the sample population strongly agreed, 14% agreed, and the 19% responded neutral.

Fig :2



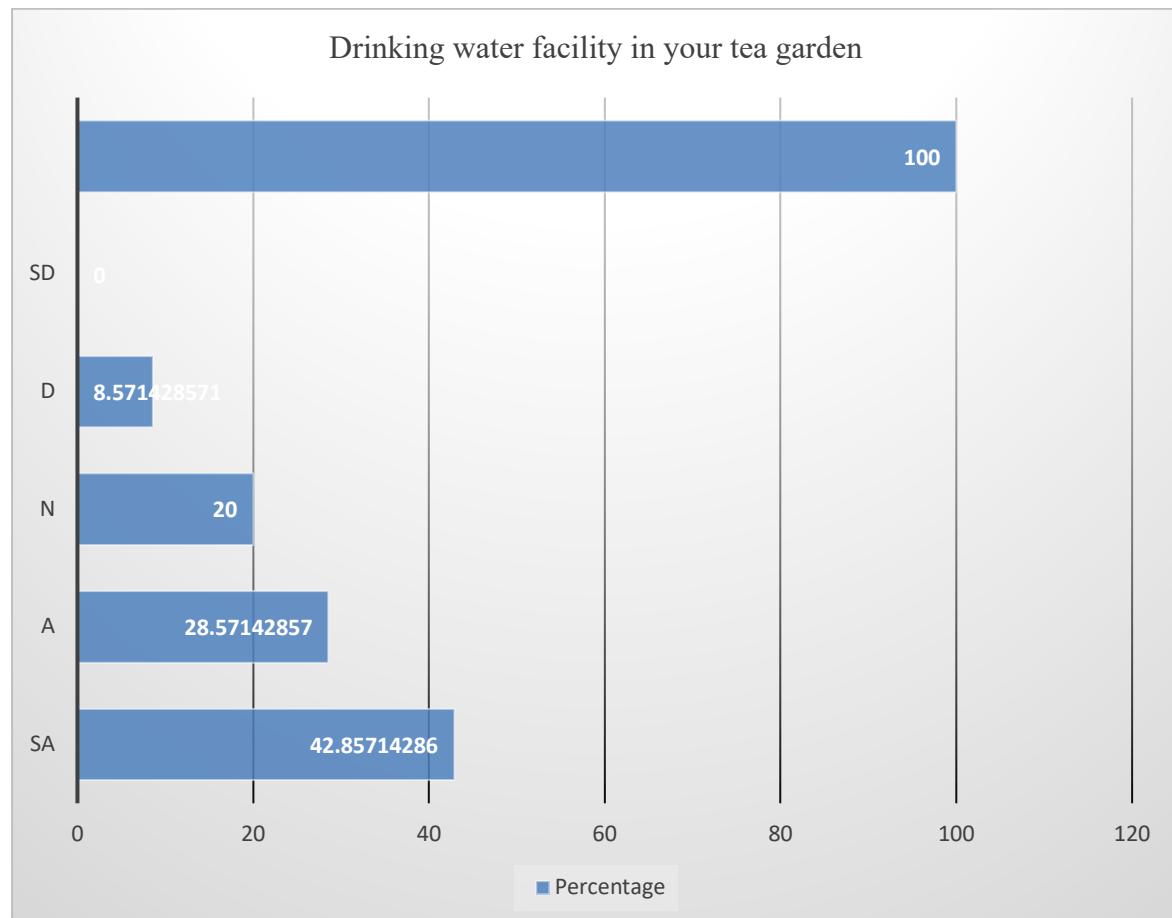
The Balijaan tea estate showing good graph regarding the occupational hazards 54% of the people expressing that they are not facing any occupational hazards. The 6% of the population responding SD (strongly disagree) rest 31% are responding Neutral and the rest 6% and 3% are responding agreed and strongly agreed.

Fig 3:



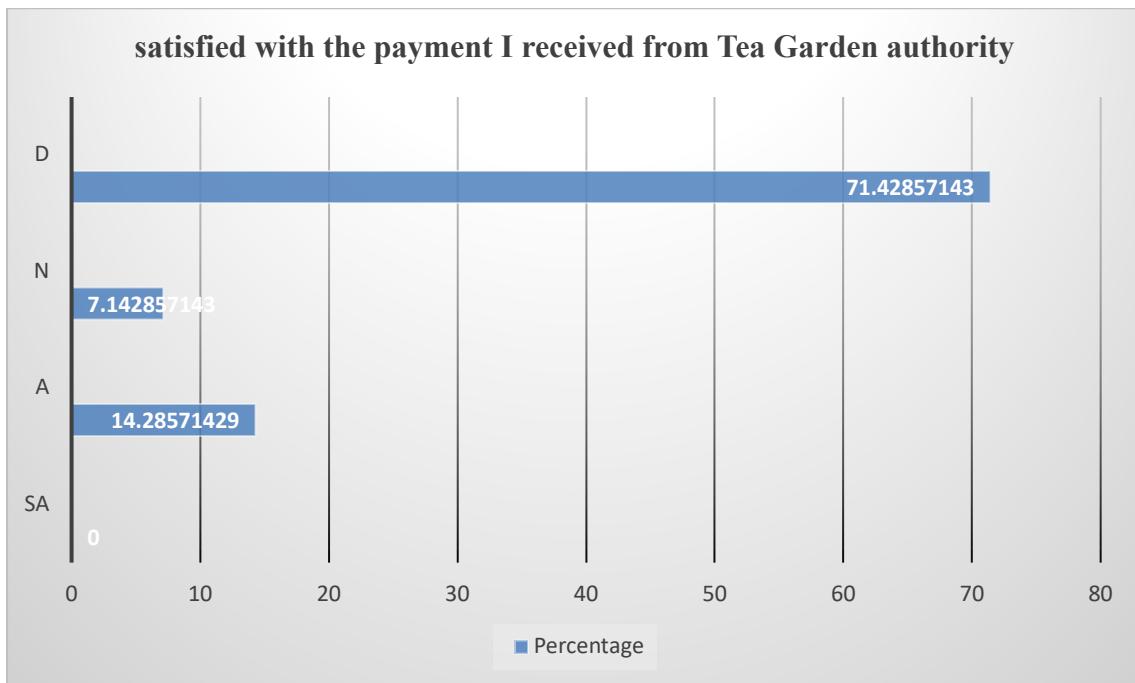
The women workers in the Balijaan tea estate showed a good response in a graph regarding the occupational hazards 54% of the people expressed that they are not facing any occupational hazards. 6% of the population responded SD (strongly disagree), 31% responded Neutral, and the remaining 6% and 3% responded Agree and Strongly Agree.

Fig :4



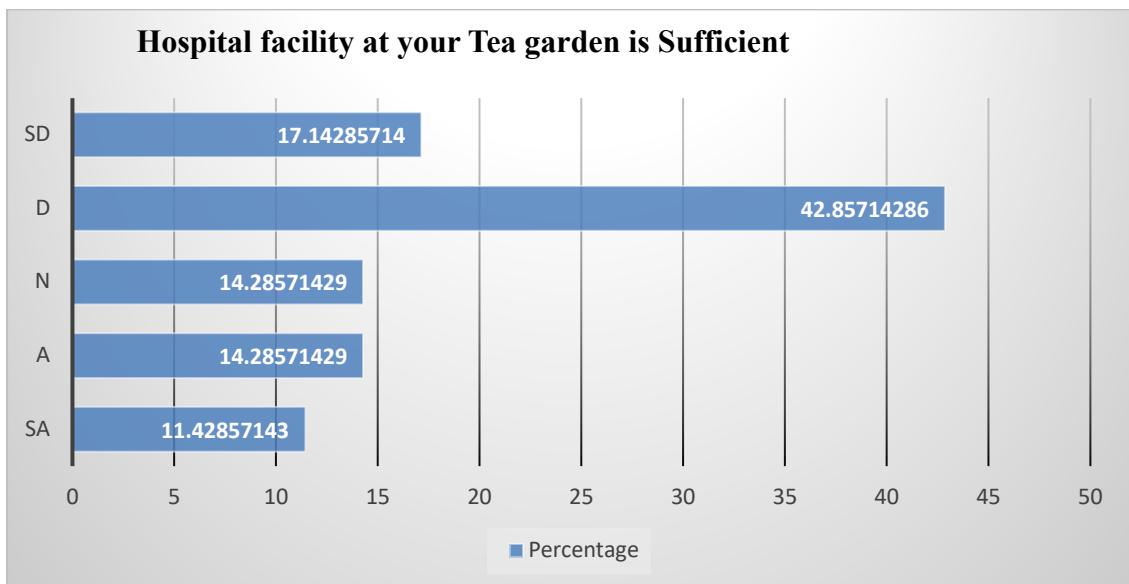
The women worker in the Balijaan tea estate showed their response to drinking water facilities in the tea garden, with 43% strongly agreed and 29, % agreeing, 20% neutral, and only 9% of respondents disagreed on the statement.

Fig:5



When the response related to the payment they have received are recorded 71% of the responded disagreed, they are not satisfied with the payment received. The amount they are received is very nominal and possible to cover all the expenses of the month. The 7% of the respondent are neutral and 14% of the respond population are agreed with the statement.

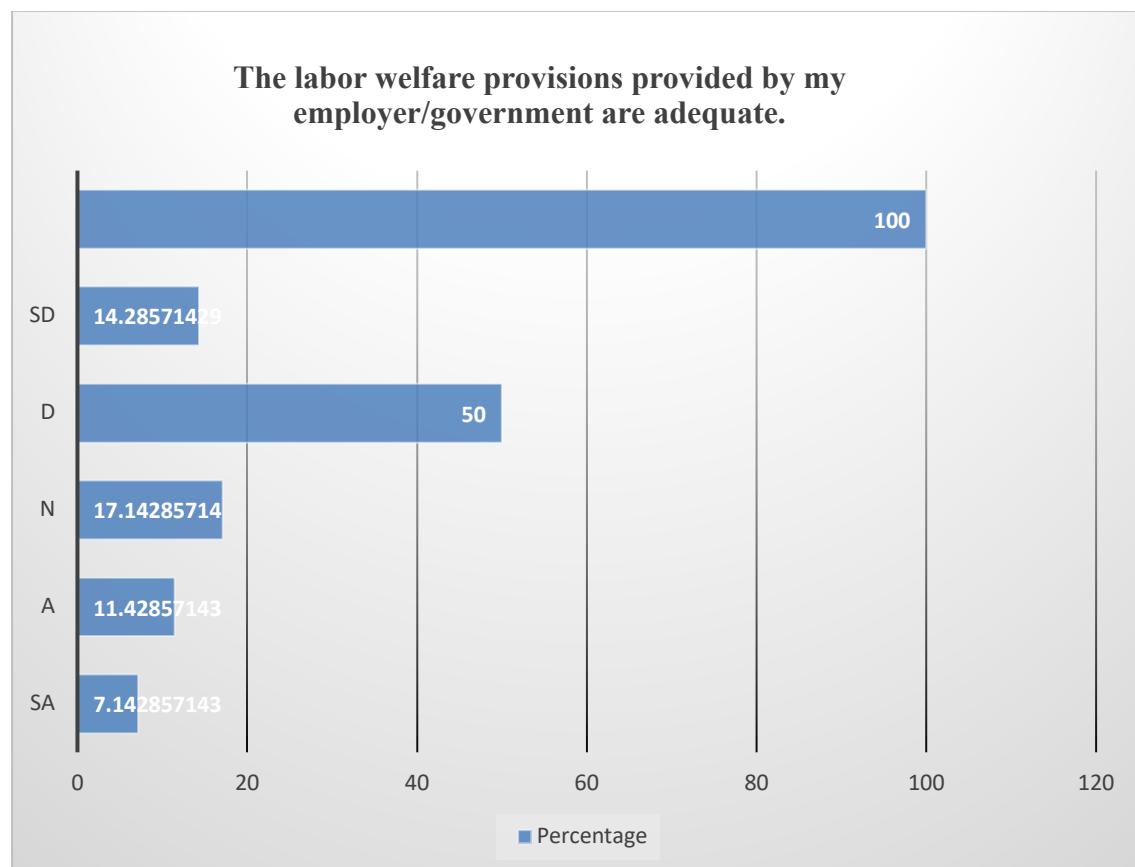
Fig:7



The hospital facilities in the tea garden are not satisfactory, as 43% of the respondents disagreed 17% of the respondents strongly disagreed. The rest of the 14% of the students are neutral, and only 14% of the respondents are responding as agreed, and the remaining 11% of the respondents reacted strongly agree.

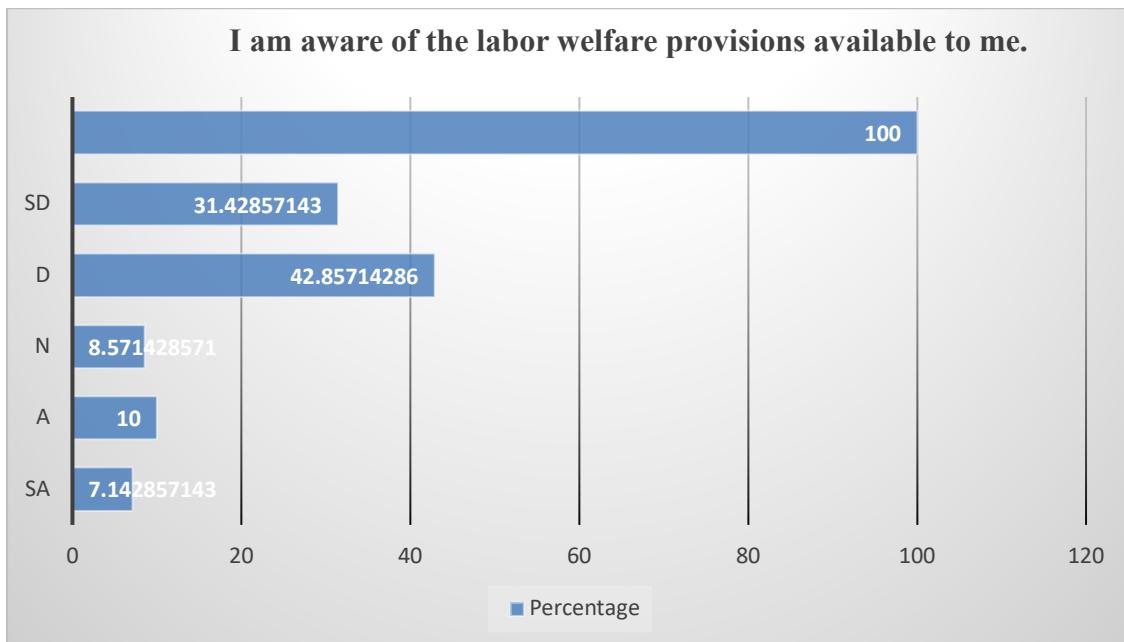
2. To assess the impact of Indian legislation on the women workers in Balijaan Tea Estate, Dibrugarh District, from the point of view of labour welfare.

Fig;8



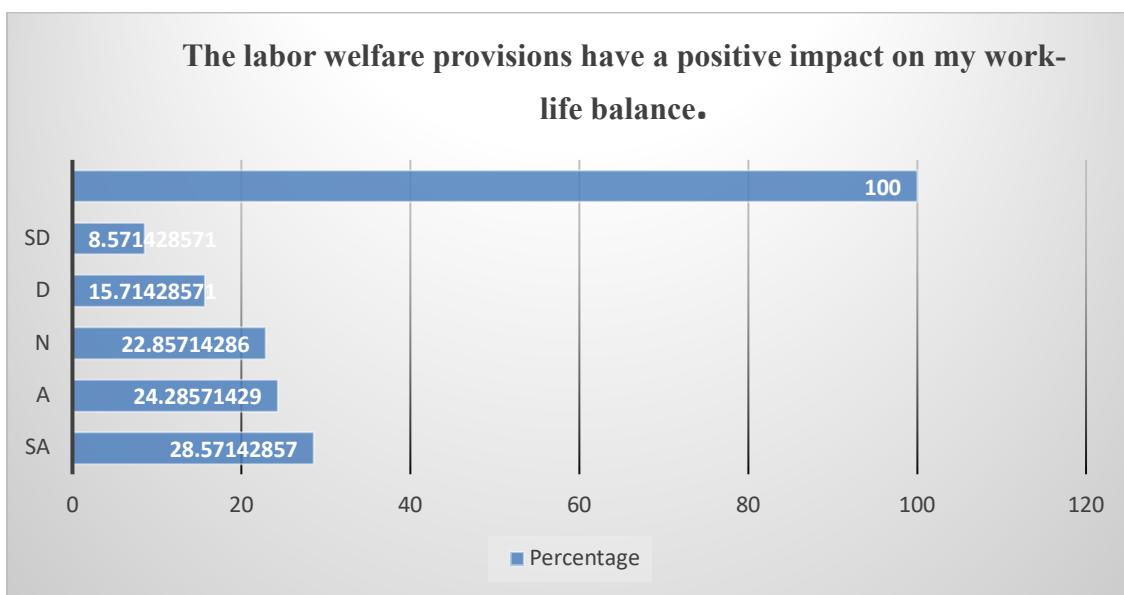
The women workers showing their response on the labour welfare provision 50% of the respondent express the view as disagreed and 14% of the respondent responded as strongly disagreed, the rest of the 17% of the women expressing neutral views and 11% and 7% of the sample population responded agreed and strongly agreed respectively.

Fig:9



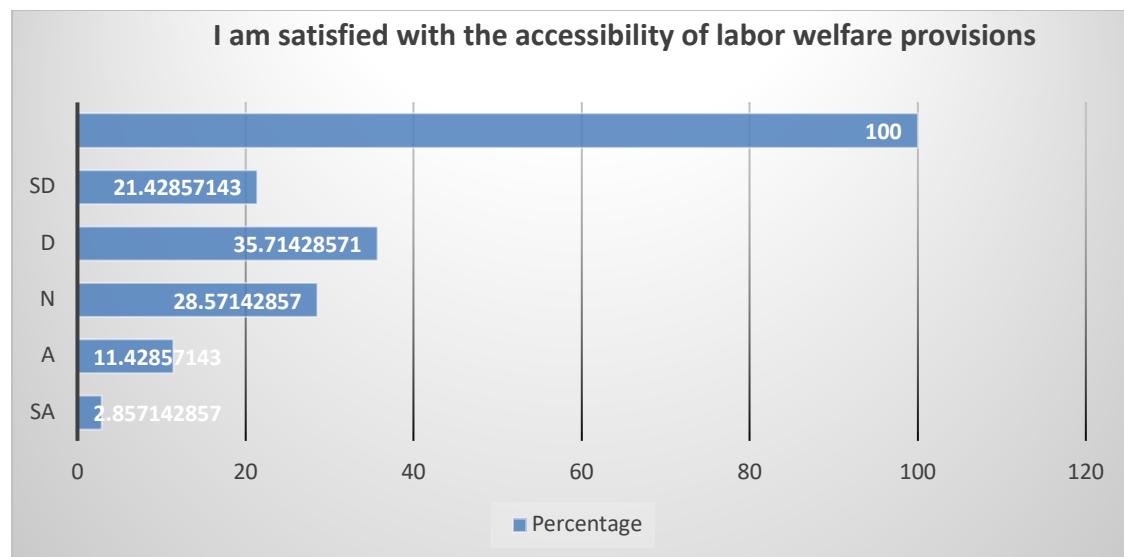
The most crucial part to know about is the awareness among the women workers on the labour rights and labour welfare provisions available for them. The data shows that 31% and 43% of the population showed their response as “strongly disagreed and disagreed” respectively. The rest of the 9% population are neutral, and the 10% agreed and 7% population strongly agreed that they are aware of the labour welfare provisions available for them.

Fig:10



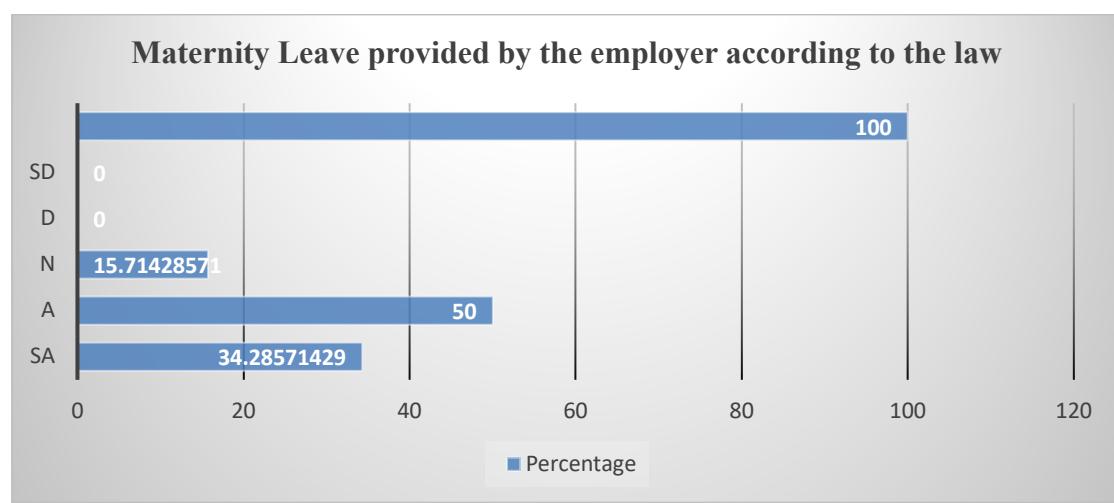
The labour welfare provisions and its positive impact on work life balance among the women worker of the Balijaan tea estate observed a mixed response where 9% and 16% of the population shows their response strongly disagreed and disagreed. The rest of the 23% population are neutral and the 24% agreed and 29% population strongly agreed that they are aware about the labou welfare provisions available for them.

Fig 11



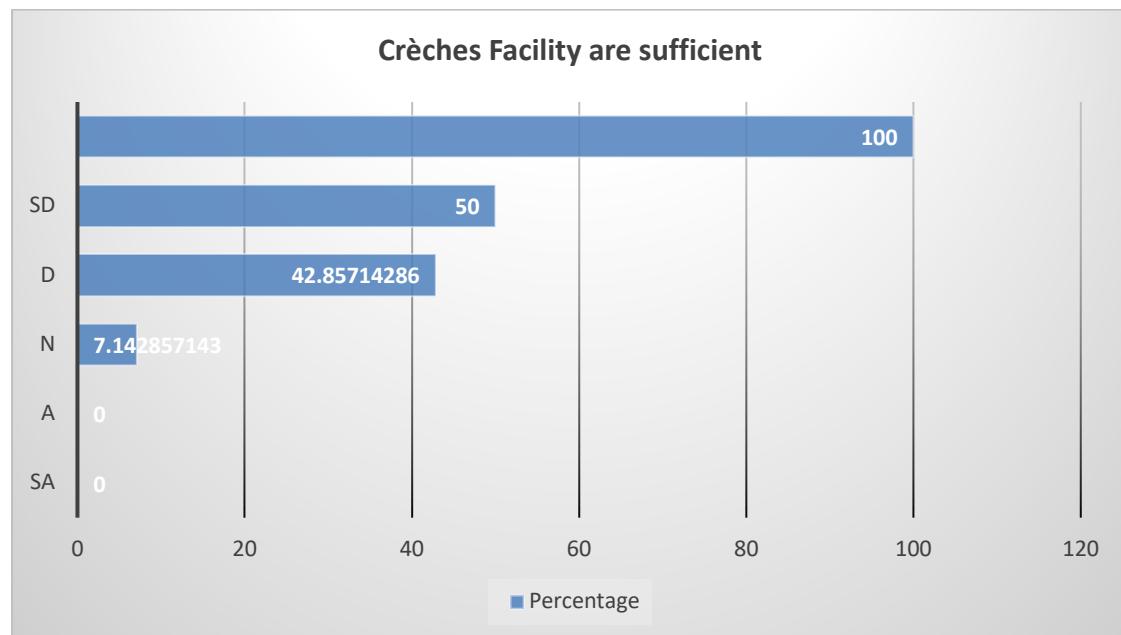
The figure shows the accessibility of the labour welfare provisions where 21% respondents reacted SD (strongly disagreed), 36% of the sample population responded Disagreed, 29% of the sample population responded as Neutral, and the 11% and 3% of the population responded as Agreed and Strongly Agreed.

Fig:12



The women workers in Balijaan tea estate responded positively to the maternity leave provided by the employer to them. 16% of the respondents were neutral, but 50% and 34% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed, respectively.

Fig:13



When the data is collected for the Creches facilities 50% and 43% of the respondents expressed strongly disagree and disagree, and 7% are Neutral. That means there is no creche facilities available in their tea garden. The women mothers face a lot of problems for this reason.

Findings

- The working conditions of the women workers in the Balijaan tea estate are not satisfactory. There is a communication gap between the employer and employee. From the data, it can be established that the women workers are not satisfied with the employer-employee relationship,
- The majority of the women workers are not satisfied with the sanitation facilities in their garden. But they are responding positively towards the drinking water facilities available at their tea garden,
- The Balijaan tea estate showed a good position in terms of occupational hazards; the majority of the sample respondents agreed that they had not faced any occupational

hazards. Only 3% of the sample population strongly agreed that they had faced occupational hazards,

- The garden is lacking proper hospital facilities. The workers are facing problems due to the unavailability of doctors and other medical staff,
- The women workers are not satisfied with the salary they have received more than 71% of the sample population disclosed that they are not able to fulfil their basic needs with this salary,
- The implementation of the labour welfare provision is not up to the mark. The workers are not aware of the welfare measures available for them more over there is very limited accessibility towards women's labour welfare,
- The study finds that the women workers are receiving maternity benefits from the employer according to the law, and
- The most disappointing part is that the tea estate does not maintain any creches; as a result, the mother workers are facing lots of issues, and sometimes it creates an imbalance in working life and personal life. 93% of the respondent population showed dissatisfaction in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The Baijaan tea estate is one of the major tea gardens of Dibrugarh District, where the major market for the employees is the women. From the data, it can be concluded that working women are facing certain issues related to the working conditions, low wages, and employer and employee relations. The implementation of the labour welfare measure in the tea garden is not up to the mark. The women workers are not aware of the labour welfare provisions for the protection of their rights. The tea garden workers are one of the segregated parts of society; they are very isolated, and due to low connectivity with the outer world, they are suffering backwardness.

SUGGESTIONS

- There must be a proper communication mechanism established to deal with the issues between the employer and employees of the garden.
- The salary scale should be revised as per the law available. The concept of living wages should be introduced.

- The creche facility is to be provided by the employer, and it should be properly maintained to meet all necessary requirements.
- The garden hospital should be maintained properly, and the appointment of required staff should be made.
- Proper awareness must be raised for the labour welfare measures for the workers, with effective implementation and proper reporting authority.