

Proposal for Short term Media Grants: What Happened to the Refugees and Migrants in the Covid Year of 2020

Work Health and Labour: ASHA Workers in Tea Plantations of Assam

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Introduction:

The proposed study would look into the nature of work of ASHA workers in the tea plantations of Assam. Through the work and efforts of ASHA and Anganwadi workers the study would try to understand the public healthcare system in place in the tea plantations of Assam, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and try to understand how questions of health and work of plantation workers are addressed and the role of ASHA workers in the community healthcare infrastructure. The district of Biswanath in Assam would be the area for the research. There are 27 Tea Plantations in the district with 113 ASHA workers and 127 Anganwadi workers working in the tea plantation. The ASHA and Anganwadi workers are a part of the tea workers community and in very rare cases are also employed as casual workers in plantations as tea pluckers or factory workers.

Through the paper I wish to explore how ASHA workers working in the tea plantations are dealing with the health crisis of women plantation workers during the Covid-19 pandemic where the healthcare system is already dwindling and scope for being moved to central hospitals in cities remained limited given provisions of the lockdown. In such times of crisis the work of ASHA workers proved to be exceedingly difficult and the added stress of the pandemic specifically affects the women workers as they are the one who along with working in the plantations also do the household work and care work at home. The salary cuts and ration shortage meant the women workers in the family were the ones who had to cut down on meals and this would come to have bearings on their own health, immunity and well being. The women plantation workers already have persistent ailments of anemia, low nutrition, high blood pressure to name a few. (Rasily, 2014) The current health crisis can prove to be an additional burden on the health of women plantation workers. The paper would attempt to trace the question of work, livelihood and health of women workers through the work and efforts by ASHA workers in the tea plantations of the Biswanath Charali district of Assam and understand how the idea of work and livelihood gets configured for women frontline workers during the global pandemic.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To understand the health crisis and healthcare infrastructure in place in the tea plantations of Assam during the Covid-19 pandemic by assessing the role of various factors in effective diagnosis, control and treatment, such as the presence of a Primary Health Centre and

infrastructure, work done by frontline health workers like ASHA and Anganwadi workers, implementation of home isolation programmes for Covid-19 positive patients and migrant workers, the role of government bodies, the tea plantation management and the communities efforts in collectivising against the spread of the virus.

2. To trace and understand the nature of work and challenges faced by the ASHA and Anganwadi workers in the tea plantations of Assam in light of the Covid-19 Pandemic and look into the efforts of the frontline workers to improve their work environment.

3. Examine the dynamic of care work and healthcare in tea plantations of Assam through the works and efforts of women care workers like ASHA and Anganwadi workers.

4. Understand the structural aspects of work and employment for women frontline and care workers in terms of their wages, recognition of work, the way they spend their time at home and at the field/workplace and understand how it shapes their life, livelihood and relationship to work.

5. To specifically engage with and address the health crisis faced by women plantation workers and its interlinkages with the nature of their work and employment and understand the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on their health conditions and health seeking behavior of the tea plantation workers.

6. To engage with the situation of returnee migrants in Tea Plantations of Assam, the reception of their return by the community, government agencies and tea plantation management as the fear of the migrant workers as carriers of the virus loomed large. Try to understand the migrant workers' prospect of work on return and their return to old jobs and the dynamics of care work and quarantine by their families and the ASHA workers in the community.

Methodology and Anticipated Timeline:

Ethnographic interviews and conversations would be employed to conduct the research. A first-hand data from field-work and a qualitative and ethnographic exploration into health and illness would be undertaken to understand what ill-health or disease means in the personal and social lives of the women workers and ASHA workers. The lives and narratives of the women frontline workers would be an important site of study to understand how they comprehend and negotiate questions of health and healthcare. The voices and narratives of women frontline workers and especially ASHA workers are completely sidelined and ignored and this study would attempt to understand how the women health care workers are conceptualizing and thinking about their work and lives in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first part of the research would be employed compilation of a literature review on the question of health and work in tea plantations of Assam and understand the role of ASHA workers and history of the healthcare infrastructure in tea plantations of Assam through

secondary literature and existing documentation. This would be followed by preparation of an interview schedule keeping in tune with the research questions and objective of the study. Selection of tea plantations for the study from the district keeping in mind the nature of the tea estates – Privately owned by Corporations, Privately owned Proprietor Tea Estates, Tea Estates through Public Private Partnership (PPP) and Small Tea Growers would be done. This time would also be used in reaching out to the ASHA workers in the selected tea estates. The on-site research and engagement would be an ongoing process and a preliminary engagement with the ASHA workers has already taken place and would continue through the months of research in a spaced out manner as trust and continued engagement is established over the course of the study. The third phase of the study would be spent cleaning and sorting out of data collected and sharing of experience and insights along with further analysis of narratives and interviews followed by compilation of report and the writing of the research paper.

Preliminary Study of the field:

A preliminary inquiry on the question of health and work of women tea plantation workers through the work and efforts of ASHA workers from a small division (Kolapani division) of a private tea estate of the Biswanath district revealed a lot about the precarious health conditions during Covid-19. In their experience the ASHA workers narrated that the women workers continue to suffer from low hemoglobin, low blood pressure and weakness especially during pregnancy. In their assessment the long hours of working in the sun through the day without any rest and the low intake of a nutritious diet are primary reasons for such a health crisis of women workers. The notion of rest and the inability to procure ‘rest’ as women work in the fields and at home, remained a persistent narrative in describing the conditions of health and work of women plantation workers. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified this crisis as initial wage cuts and the loss of work during the lockdown meant that the earnings of women workers and their families has taken a hit and the ration and food supplies have also dwindled. This has further affected the nutrition intake of women workers as the ASHA workers reported that women in their families are the last to eat during meal time and the pandemic, initial wage cut, low ability to buy rations has come to lower down their nutrition intake.

Contractual or temporary workers have faced serious problems as the loss of work has meant increased stress and the precarious work with unstable income which hurts the health seeking behavior of the workers as well. Temporary or *phaltu* workers given the nature of their employment do not get to avail the facilities and benefits of the garden hospital or dispensaries which are for permanent workers and the garden staff. Here the work of ASHA workers and such Community Health Workers is of primal importance as they are the ones who take care of the process of immunization of children, doing regular health checkups, awareness, providing basic medication, especially iron and vitamin tablets to pregnant women, conducting different tests and monitoring the community’s health through survey and regular house visits. House visits are extremely important in their assessment in providing care and checkups to pregnant women workers and their newborn infants.

The Covid-19 pandemic has expanded the work of ASHA workers, where the onset of the pandemic geared them towards conducting surveys of the health of people, undertaking the task of awareness about the Covid-19 virus and safety precaution. They have also been charged with the added responsibility of keeping a track on workers who have returned home post the onset of the lockdown and are to prescribe home quarantine and keep extensive record of their health and travel history. The Tea Tribe community of Assam constitutes a significant portion of migrant workers who travel to different states in search for work. The lockdown unleashed a serious crisis of a loss of work and employment around the country and thus began the long journey back home for migrant workers. Each ASHA worker is given the responsibility to monitor the coming in of migrant workers and they take on the task of taking care of them as well. One of the ASHA workers said that initially in the first phase of the lockdown all those coming from outside the tea estate were made to stay in quarantine centers but now they are being advised a 14 day home quarantine. ASHA workers would work with the Mothers club members and Anganwadi workers in distributing ration to them, but now as the services have been discontinued by the government they sometimes give rice and some basic ration from their own household to the families of the home quarantined migrant workers.

The workload of ASHA workers especially in Tea plantations has increased significantly. The tea plantation management, the government agencies and the local healthcare infrastructure seems to be dependent on the work done by ASHA workers and any kind of community health care work or organizing task within the tea plantations is put on the backs of ASHA workers. The ASHA workers continue to face challenges even in terms of delays in wage and the unavailability of protective gear. The study would attempt to look into the challenges faced by the ASHA workers and explore how they are dealing with the health crisis.

Research outcomes/ Deliverables:

The research outcomes would be in the form of a research paper and a project report based on the study, data survey and ethnographic interviews of the question of health and work in tea plantations of the Biswanath district of Assam. The deliverable would also further include a photo essay on the work and efforts of ASHA workers who are working as frontline workers in the tea plantations of Assam.

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