



The Estate They're In

How the tea industry traps women in poverty in Assam

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About Traidcraft Exchange

Traidcraft Exchange is an international development charity which uses the power of trade to bring about lasting solutions to poverty. It runs development programmes in South Asia and Africa, works directly with businesses to improve their supply chains, and does advocacy and campaigning in the UK to promote justice and fairness in international trade. It works closely with specialist fair trade company Traidcraft plc. Traidcraft Exchange is a registered charity, no. 1048752.

About this report

This report was written by Tom Sharman of Traidcraft Exchange using evidence gathered in Assam by an independent journalist and their team. It was published in May 2018.



Executive summary

There's nothing like a nice cup of tea. But the women who pick it on estates in the Indian state of Assam are trapped in poverty with no easy way out.

Tea grown and harvested in Assam is a key ingredient in many blends sold by UK tea companies, prized for its unique malty flavour.

Yet the women who pick it are not so prized. Wages are pitifully low, living conditions have deteriorated and progress has stagnated.

The owners of tea estates have a legal duty to provide 'in kind' benefits to their workforce including housing, schools and health facilities under Indian law, as well as a cash wage.

But evidence gathered by researchers working for Traidcraft Exchange found that on estates that are believed to supply UK tea companies:


- 🌿 A culture of surveillance and control by management goes unchecked
- 🌿 Wages – agreed across the Assam tea sector – are below Assam and Indian minimum wage levels
- 🌿 Housing is often leaky and in a state of disrepair
- 🌿 Sanitation is minimal or non-existent with open defaecation the norm when working
- 🌿 Local health facilities often lack medicines and staff and better ones are far away
- 🌿 Food rations are insufficient and of poor quality

Tea remains one of the most popular drinks in the UK with 165 million cups drunk every day.

The 'Big 6' UK brands – PG Tips, Twinings, Tetley, Yorkshire, Typhoo, and Clipper – together comprise about 70% of the UK tea market with annual sales of around £500 million and all use tea grown in Assam as part of some of their blends.

They know about the conditions for women working on tea estates in Assam but aren't doing enough to change them.

As a first step the big UK brands should be transparent about which estates they buy from. Publishing their list of suppliers would help open up the secretive world of tea-buying. It would shine a light on exploitation and mean that consumers – and more importantly women workers in Assam – could hold tea estates to account.



“My grandfather worked. Then my father. After dad my mother worked. After her I am working.”

Anonymous woman

A word on Traidcraft Exchange’s methodology

We heard from organisations supporting workers in Assam about the appalling conditions, low wages and lack of alternatives for workers on tea estates. The agreed wage levels and poverty statistics are already in the public domain. We visited a few estates which, based on our research, are likely to be supplying the UK market. However, because the UK tea brands do not disclose which estates they buy from, we cannot be absolutely certain that this is the case. If the brands are confident that conditions are significantly better on the estates which they source from, then they should publish the names and addresses of those estates and allow workers and independent local groups to verify this. At this stage, and in order to protect the workers we spoke to from reprisals, we are not publishing the names of the estates we visited.

Introduction

Nestled in the north-east of India and bordering Bhutan and Bangladesh the state of Assam is almost synonymous with tea. Around the time of India's independence in 1947 Assam was one of the richest states in India but today it is one of the poorest. Both Assam's rise and its fall can be explained in part by the development of the tea industry, first by the British colonial power, and later by the owners of tea estates and the big brands they sell to.

Today around one-tenth of the world's tea is grown in the tea estates of Assam.¹ Nearly one million workers and their families are directly dependent on the tea industry for their livelihoods. Most of the workers who pick the tea are women.²

We didn't choose to focus on Assam by accident. There are three good reasons for us doing so:

- ✦ **Poverty:** Assam is one of the poorest states in India and tea workers in Assam are amongst the lowest paid in India
- ✦ **History:** Britain created the system of tea estates when it was the colonial power in India. British companies, who have been buying from Assam for decades, have a moral responsibility that they should not ignore
- ✦ **Consumer power:** Britain is a nation of tea drinkers and tea grown in Assam is a key ingredient in tea blends. Because of this the British public and the UK tea brands have the power to help improve the lives of tea workers in Assam

The UK tea market remains healthy with the Big 6 UK brands making annual sales of around £500 million. This is sustained by the continuing demand for tea – with 165 million cups drunk every day.

British consumers are easily able to afford to buy tea – it is not a luxury product. Yet those at the other end of the supply chain – the women who pick the tea – are trapped in poverty with no easy way out.



Our evidence gathered from different Assam tea estates paints a dispiriting but consistent picture. Agreed wage levels are not sufficient to support families. Living conditions are appalling. And a culture of surveillance and control by tea estate managers keeps the workforce subdued.

The solution is complex and multi-layered and improvements will require a range of actors to work together.

But complexity should not be an excuse for inaction: business-as-usual will not lead to higher wages and better living conditions for women in Assam.

An important first step that the UK brands could take right now is to tell consumers which tea estates in Assam they buy from. Transparency like this would help open up the secretive world of tea-buying. It would shine a light on exploitation and mean that consumers – and more importantly people in Assam – could hold tea estates to account.

Why Assam? Part 1: poverty

"I pluck leaves. I start work at 8am, we work for 8 hours. For 8 hours of work, the wage we get is too little, for difficult work."

Anonymous woman

Assam is one of India's poorest states and has a population of 31 million people, roughly half that of the UK. Poverty levels declined rapidly between 1994 and 2005 but progress since then has largely stalled, making achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals a remote possibility.³

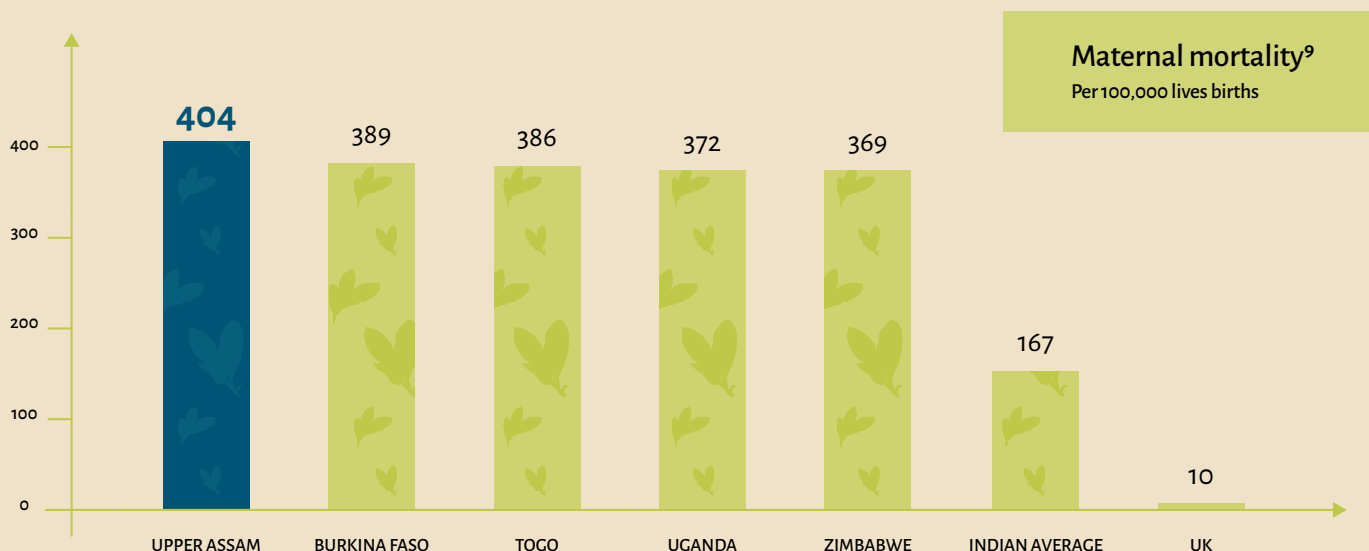
A number of indicators make for particularly depressing reading:

✦ Maternal mortality in Assam is the worst in India with 300 women dying per 100,000 live births.⁴ This compares with an Indian average of 167 and a UK average of 10.⁵

✦ Maternal mortality is even worse in tea estate areas reaching 404 deaths per 100,000 live births – comparable to levels in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

✦ 1 in 3 people in Assam live below the Indian poverty line – a higher rate than most other Indian states and significantly above the Indian national average of 1 in 5.⁷

✦ Poverty is being reduced more slowly in Assam than in most other Indian states – with meagre progress since 2005.⁸



Tea estate workers

Wages on tea estates are set on an Assam-wide basis through a formal process every three years, which usually includes tea estate management and a nominated trade union. The current cash wage is 137 rupees per day. Additional 'in-kind' benefits include services such as housing, sanitation, health facilities and primary schools. Subsidised food rations are also provided.

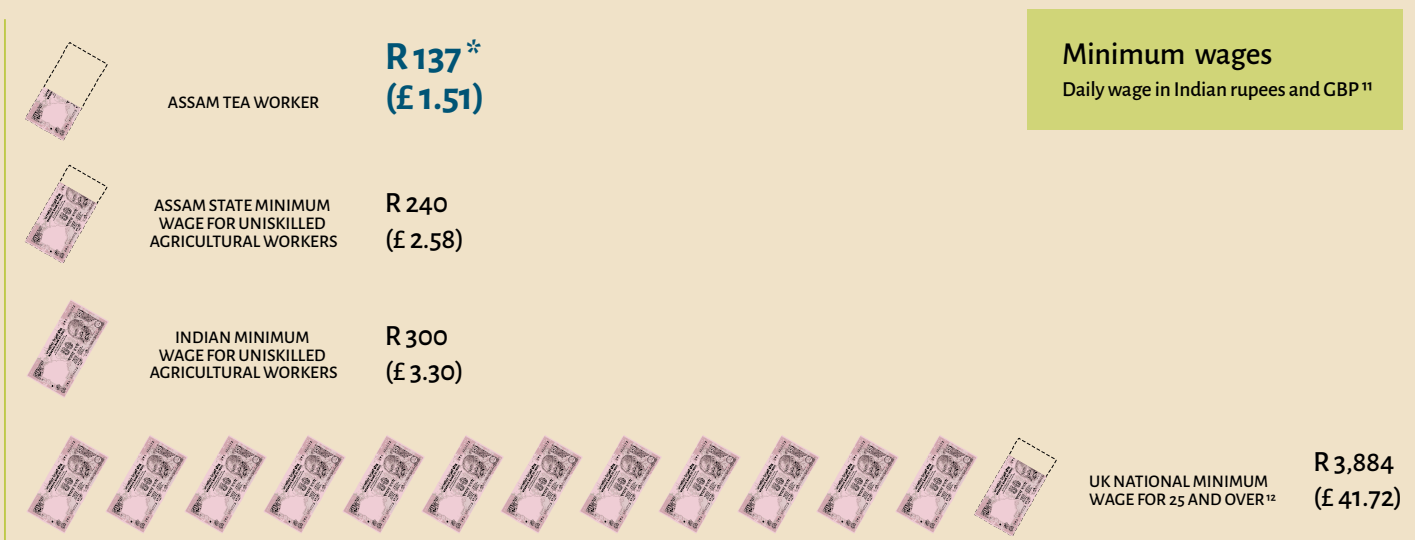
The low level of the cash wage, which is significantly below the Indian national minimum wage of 300 rupees per day for unskilled agricultural workers¹⁰, is justified by tea estate owners who point to the 'in kind' benefits they are obliged to provide.

However, our research suggests that these services, some of which are crucial, are not delivered at all, or are delivered poorly. Women have to use their meagre cash wages to pay for services which should be provided by the tea estate. This often involves making hard choices for their families between sending their children to a decent school, eating properly, accessing health services promptly, spending money repairing their homes, or the regular expenditure of buying clothes and shoes.

It also means that workers find themselves in debt.

"In the plantations, I work for a wage of 137 rupees. I have been working since 2003. Working for daily wage of 137 rupees. We don't get the benefits we are supposed to get from the garden. We go to the plantation, work for 8 hours... come home. There is no proper housing facility. In the plantations, we have to work in the rain and we don't get to stay properly at home too. They don't repair the houses. We register complaints to the management, they note it down, but that remains in the register, they give no importance."

Anonymous woman



Minimum wages
Daily wage in Indian rupees and GBP¹¹

* Cash wage. 'In-kind' benefits are provided in addition to this.

Why Assam? Part 2: history

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, focusing on her eyes and forehead. She has a red bindi with a gold and silver ornament on her forehead. The image has a torn paper edge effect at the top.

“The house is broken, it is a house from the British times.”

Anonymous woman

“Government agents procure their men by a regular system of recruiting established throughout the thickly-populated districts (some people unkindly say that the business bears an uncommonly near resemblance to kidnapping) so that the supply hardly ever runs short in a case of emergency. The great drawback to this method of furnishing a garden with labour is the expense..”

A Tea Planter's Life in Assam by George M Barker, published Calcutta, 1884¹³

Most of the women who work in tea estates are descendants of tribal communities brought to Assam from other Indian states by the British in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They live within the estates in designated settlements called ‘labour lines’.¹⁴

The Indian Plantations Labour Act

The Plantations Labour Act (PLA) of 1951 gave tea estates a special status in Indian law. Under the Act the owners of tea estates are required to provide services to their workforce that elsewhere would be provided by the government.

When the PLA was first passed the Indian government was seen as unable to provide basic services to its citizens working in Assam. But the then-wealthy tea industry did have the money to provide services to their workforce, many of whom they had dislocated from their original homes.

Recognising that times have changed the Indian Government is currently reviewing the PLA. In the meantime workers living on tea estates remain dependent on the estate for their most vital services.

The workforce

Many adult workers are illiterate, due to the insufficient provision of educational services on estates. This limits their ability to access work in other locations – if they could afford to travel - and also limits their access to information.

Many workers also struggle with ongoing health problems, due at least in part to a combination of malnutrition, poor working conditions and insufficient health services on the tea estates, combined with their inability to pay for health services outside of the tea estate, and the difficulty and cost of travelling to faraway towns where hospitals are located.

The tea estate management

The culture of the tea sector accepts and promotes paternalism on tea estates. For example, the tea estate managers control:

- 🌿 Worker status: whether someone is designated a ‘permanent’ worker or not and whether someone will get temporary work when it is available
- 🌿 Work environment and working procedures
- 🌿 Housing
- 🌿 Water and sanitation services
- 🌿 Creche and primary school facilities
- 🌿 Health facilities on the estate
- 🌿 Access by independent organisations
- 🌿 Access to credit

The effect is that tea estate managers have excessive control over workers and their families’ lives and this makes it very difficult for workers to speak up, for fear of being victimised or penalised by tea estate management.

A potted history of tea plantations in Assam

1837

First English tea garden established at Chabua in Upper Assam

1840

Assam Tea Company begins commercial production of tea in the region run by indentured labourers

1947

India becomes independent from the British Empire

2018

Assam tea sector employs around 1 million workers on 800 tea estates.¹⁷ Assam is in the bottom 7 poorest states in India

1838

First consignment of Assam tea arrives in London; the Assam Company is formed¹⁵

1840s - 90s

Industry grows, aided by workers from other parts of India, forcibly removed from their homes and transported to Assam to work in tea gardens¹⁶

1951

Indian government passes the Plantations Labour Act, the legislation that administers the Indian tea sector and sets out the rights of workers and the responsibilities of estate owners. Assam is in the top 5 richest states in India

The state of the UK tea market

Tea remains one of Britain's most popular drinks with 165 million cups drunk every day. Coffee comes some way behind on 70 million cups a day.¹⁸

The 'Big 6' UK brands - PG Tips, Twinings, Tetley, Yorkshire, Typhoo, and Clipper together comprise around 70% of the UK tea market with annual sales of around £500 million. All use tea grown in Assam, either as a speciality tea or as part of a blend.

Unilever, Tata, and Twinings are significant global players, estimated to account for around one-fifth of the world tea market.¹⁹

Cost of tea at point of sale

The average unit price of a standard tea bag is currently around 2p. However, for speciality black teabags some consumers are consistently willing to pay around 10 times this price.²⁰

Tea consumption in the UK²¹



Number of cups of tea drunk every day

165 million

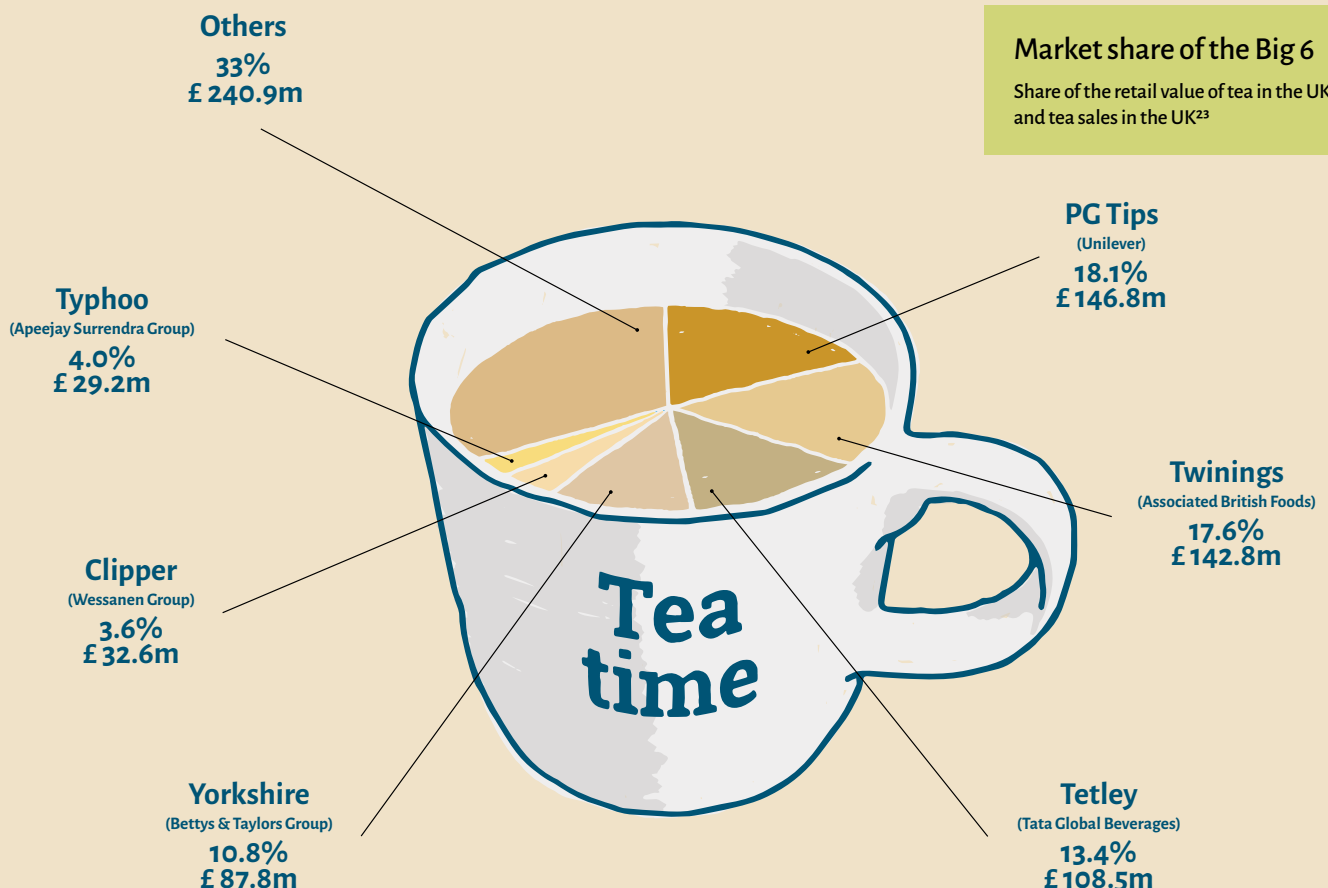


Number of cups of tea drunk per year

60.2 billion

Market share of the Big 6

Share of the retail value of tea in the UK²² and tea sales in the UK²³



Our evidence gathered from Assam tea estates



Traidcraft Exchange asked a team of journalists to help us gather evidence from Assam's tea estates. We gave them a list of estates to visit, which our analysis suggested were supplying the big UK tea brands. We did not seek to visit 'the worst' or 'the best' tea estates in Assam – we wanted to get a snapshot of conditions that the women who pick the tea we drink in the UK live with every day.

Our evidence showed the following:

1. A culture of surveillance and control by management goes unchecked

A common theme that emerged from our visit to the tea gardens was just how scared workers were of the estate management. Women were afraid to speak out for fear of losing their jobs despite experiencing poor living conditions, sometimes for many years. Outside audits were described as cosmetic exercises where life for the workforce might improve temporarily for the benefit of inspectors before returning to 'normal'.

The lack of access to the tea estates from Indian civil society, journalists, and other 'outsiders' helps ensure that abuse of power goes unchecked and improvements unimplemented.

"The company says we are taking care of you, but when there are inspection visits, they don't allow us to speak up. Neither they [inspectors] can come to us, nor are we allowed to go to them."

Anonymous woman

"When auditors come for inspection, the workers are taught to say about the facilities they get. Workers are afraid to speak with them face to face. We're nervous and can't tell them the truth. We have to say we get everything. Out of fear, we say that we get all the facilities and that everything is ok."

Anonymous woman

"When auditors come, the management would warn us, 'Don't show up. It is not for you to see. Stay aside.' And we are warned not to show up or speak to the inspection team."

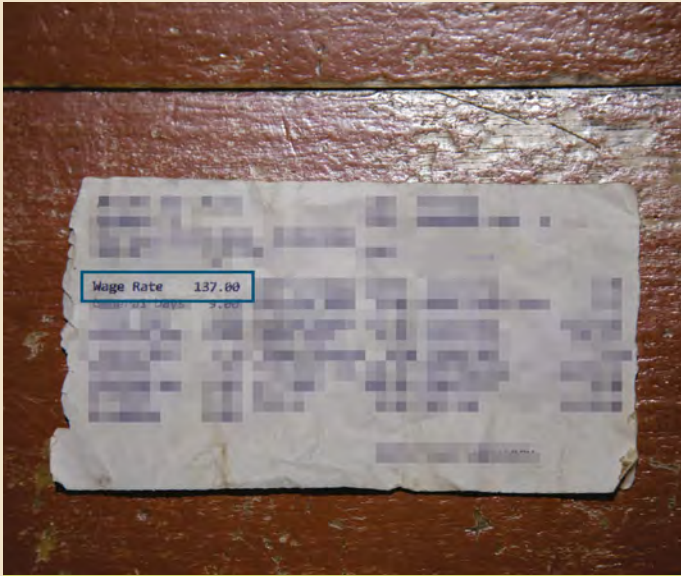
Anonymous woman

2. Wages are below Assam and Indian minimum wage levels

Low wages on tea estates in Assam have been a longstanding problem. The workforce gets a wage composed of both cash and 'in kind' benefits – a requirement of the Indian Plantations Labour Act which sets out legal obligations for tea estate owners. The cash component is 137 rupees per day – about £1.50.

However, the minimum wage of unskilled agricultural workers in Assam is 240 rupees per day and the Indian minimum wage for unskilled agricultural workers is 300 rupees per day.

This discrepancy means that women working on tea estates are paid significantly less than those working in other areas of agriculture, for what is difficult and skilled work.



A pay slip from a tea estate worker

“I pluck leaves. I start work at 8am, we work for 8 hours. For 8 hours of work, the wage we get is too little, for difficult work.”

Anonymous woman



“In the plantations, I work for a wage of Rs 137. I have been working since 2003. Working for daily wage of Rs. 137. We don't get the benefits we are supposed to get from the garden.”

Anonymous woman

3. Housing is often leaky and in a state of disrepair

The estate management is obliged under Indian law to provide decent housing for its workforce. Yet the poor quality of such housing was a common theme raised by the workers we spoke to. Houses are often extremely old and leaky and the management appears unwilling or unable to make the necessary repairs.

“The house is broken, it is a house from the British times. The house is in bad condition. We got tired of making requests. The house is old. We are scared, but we have no option but to stay. It's the company-given house, if the company doesn't repair it, what can we do.”

Anonymous woman

“I had gone 6/7 times to the management with problems of broken house, leaking ceiling. It is inconvenient to stay. The management registers complaints in the book. They assure us saying, “We'll do it today / tomorrow.” They write down but there is no repair. We face problems like this.”

Anonymous woman

“It's been more than 5 years since I had complained about the house. It's not repaired yet. During rainy season, it becomes difficult for us and children to live in the house. Where do we go if it rains at night? If we complain for a year and they don't repair even after 5–6 years, where will we stay? This ceiling that you see --- there is nothing on the roof.”

Anonymous woman



“The latrine is broken, it's makeshift. When we register a complaint for repairs, they say they will come, they will come, we get tired of requesting it, but they don't come.”

Anonymous woman

“They do construct toilets, but not properly. The toilets do not last beyond 1 year. Some get damaged in 6/7 months. The toilets don't last long. So people have to defecate in the open.”

Anonymous woman

“There is no toilet anywhere in the place of work in plantation, so we have to urinate/defaecate in the plantation. There is no toilet structure anywhere in the plantation. The only structure is the tea leaves weighing house.”

Anonymous woman



4. Sanitation is minimal or non-existent with open defaecation the norm when working

The lack of proper toilets throughout estates is a major threat to good hygiene standards. Some workers do have toilets in their homes, although these are often in a state of disrepair. But there are no toilets at all in many of the areas where the tea picking takes place despite the fact that women consistently work for 8 hours or more each day.

5. Local health facilities often lack medicines and staff and better ones are far away

The tea estates do have medical facilities which their workforce can use and these are known locally as 'hospitals'. However, they more closely resemble a GP's surgery or clinic and often lack vital medicines and staff. Health facilities outside the estate are generally better but are hard to get to and are expensive.



A young boy with a high fever lies on the floor at the main entrance of the tea estate hospital, as he waits to be admitted for treatment

“We can't rely on [plantation] hospital. Depending on hospital won't work. We have to go for check-up outside to doctors [private practitioners/clinics/pharmacy] if we want to get well. Relying on hospital alone will not cure. We have to use our brains and explore how we can survive the illness.”

Anonymous woman

“Our hospital is also not good. If you go to the hospital here, they say there is no doctor, we can't treat you. Now we have to go to these other hospitals, wherever you go, they are far.”

Anonymous woman

“This year alone, there were about 13..14...15... 20 cases, since January this year till now. Many people have died. People are just laid on bed in hospital, unattended and without proper treatment.”

Anonymous woman

6. Food rations are insufficient and of poor quality

Food rations are a key component of the 'in kind' benefits workers on tea estates receive. But the quality of the food provided is highly variable and often substandard.





“They don't even provide us good quality tea. Whatever is deemed wasted is given to us. If we consume that, we fall ill.”

Anonymous woman

Overall

The overall picture is one in which the women working on tea estates experience poverty wages and substandard living conditions and endure a culture of surveillance and control to keep them from speaking out.



“The rice grain that we get contains stones. The wheat flour is stale, acutely bitter in taste. We get stomach ache if we eat. It's not eatable. We go and report it in the office. Then we get good ration for one fortnight and then from next salary day, we get the same stale ration.”

Anonymous woman

“We get flour, but it's of bad quality. Whether it good or bad we have to eat it.”

Anonymous woman

What UK tea brands are doing to effect change in Assam

The Ethical Tea Partnership²⁴ – a membership group of UK tea brands - is undertaking various activities in Assam. These include working to improve girls' education in tea estates as a means through which to combat child trafficking.²⁵

UK brands have also undertaken their own individual initiatives:

- ✦ Yorkshire have given grants to provide safe drinking water on four estates and have helped to form and support Community Development Forums.²⁶
- ✦ Tetley have looked at improving living and working conditions on estates, commissioning a study and a development plan. This has seen progress in construction and training.²⁷
- ✦ Unilever are working to improve women's rights, improve diet and hygiene, and replace hazardous chemical pesticides on tea estates.²⁸
- ✦ Twinings are working to improve sanitation, nutrition, and provide clean energy to tea workers.²⁹

However, these Corporate Social Responsibility projects tend to deal with the symptoms of poor wages and living conditions rather than the cause and can perpetuate a top-down approach to improvement on tea estates.

An unthinking delivery of some of these activities effectively subsidises the tea estates because others are paying for services that tea estate owners are meant to be delivering under the Plantations Labour Act. Instead it is vital that industry purchasing practices and the business model of tea estates is taken into consideration when assessing what can be done to improve conditions.

UK tea brands can support better conditions for tea workers in Assam by engaging with tea estate owners to find a way forward to ensure that women are paid decent wages and experience good living conditions.

The role of standards

All of the big 6 UK tea brands have in place either their own code of conduct, a certification scheme, such as Rainforest Alliance or Fairtrade, or they use the Ethical Tea Partnership's standard. These schemes set out the requirements that brands expect their suppliers to follow in relation to workers' rights and a range of other ethical and environmental considerations.

These codes and schemes vary in terms of the aspects of the problem that they cover. Some, such as Fairtrade, require payment of a minimum price and a social premium, most schemes require workers to be able to organise freely and some require progress towards payment of a living wage. These are all extremely important. This approach can also be helpful because an independent organisation will visit what are isolated locations and will assess conditions.

While such schemes are a useful part of a brand's response to challenges, it is important that they are not a substitute for a company taking responsibility for their role in tackling conditions in their own supply chains. To address deep-rooted, complex, systemic, sector-wide problems, such as those in Assam, certification needs to be complemented by other approaches.

Greater transparency is therefore critical as it would enable workers and local civil society organisations, as well as consumers, to know what standards the different UK brands expect suppliers in Assam to achieve and to hold them to this.

Why transparency could be a game-changer

Publishing a list of suppliers might not sound dramatic but it has the potential to be a game-changer for women working in Assam.

There are four good reasons for UK tea brands to do so:

1. Empowering workers and local organisations

The experts on what pay and living conditions are really like on tea estates are the men and women who work there. By publishing their supplier lists UK tea brands would let the workforce in Assam know which tea estates and factories are covered by their codes, as well as by Indian law.

Local civil society would be empowered to organise in tea estates, knowing that this was supported by the buyers, as well as by Indian law.

2. Treating consumers with respect

The British public is increasingly concerned about the way the products it consumes are made. Publishing the details of tea factories and estates that supply a UK tea brand shows the consumer that there is nothing to hide.

3. Rewarding and recognising improving practice

Publication helps to demonstrate and recognise improving practice amongst tea estates.

4. Falling into line with global trends

Publishing lists of suppliers is increasingly seen as industry best practice across sectors.

- ✦ Primark – a sister company to Twinings in the Associated British Foods group has already published the names and addresses of over 1,000 clothing factories in 31 countries.
- ✦ Unilever – the owner of PG Tips – has already published the names and locations of more than 1,400 palm oil mills in its supply chains.



Conclusion and recommendations

Poverty pay and appalling living conditions will not be eradicated on tea estates in Assam overnight.

The solution is complex and multi-layered and improvements will require a range of actors to work together. But complexity should not be an excuse for inaction: business-as-usual will not lead to higher wages and better living conditions for women in Assam.

We have the following recommendations to help make change happen:

For the UK tea brands

Start by being transparent about which tea estates and tea factories you buy from

Publishing your list of suppliers would help open up the secretive world of tea-buying. It would shine a light on exploitation and mean that consumers – and more importantly workers in Assam – could hold tea estates to account.

The names and addresses of tea factories and estates that you purchase from should be published in a single place, easily accessible on your website and updated at least once per year.

Where possible additional information should be included too: the daily minimum wage on the tea estate and your assessment of what a living wage should be.

This would show whether workers are being paid a living wage and, if not, what the wage gap is.

For UK consumers

Don't stop buying or drinking tea from Assam but do ask questions

A boycott of tea from Assam at this point will not help the women who pick it. On the contrary it would be likely to push workers further into poverty as estates struggle to find buyers for their tea.

Do ask the big brands to use their power to improve the lives of women working in Assam. As a first step ask them to publish the names and addresses of the tea estates they buy from.

For tea estates in Assam

Open yourselves up to scrutiny

If you are to thrive in the future you will need to change the way you do business.

Tea estates should not be closed spaces cut off from the normal rules of accountability. Civil society groups, journalists and auditors should have free and unimpeded access to the estates and their workforce.

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Who picked my tea?



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