

CHAPTER - IV ✓

WOMEN AS PLANTATION WORKERS

✓ This chapter deals with the working life of the women workers of the Chandmoni Tea Estate. Here I shall discuss women as plantation workers, their traditional occupational background, process of their recruitment in the plantation, nature of plantation work they perform, wages and other occupational facilities which they enjoy, their attitudes toward the plantation work and commitment, their participation in the trade unions and relations with the management, etc. All these will help us in understanding the women as plantation workers and nature of their adjustment to the working environment of this agro-industry.

OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Traditional Occupation of the Workers

✓ Tea plantation is an agro-industry where both agricultural and industrial working environment exist. In such an industry recruitment of labourers were largely made, particularly in the plantations of Assam and Dooars and Terai regions of West Bengal, from Adivasis of the neighbouring states. Most of these Adivasis were poverty-stricken illiterate villagers who had no experience of industrial occupation.

There were also a few Hindus among the early recruits who were equally poor and ignorant. As tea industry is agro-based and located in rural areas workers with rural background are expected to adapt better with the working environment of the industry with a consequent effect upon lessening the conflict between home life and working life? Naturally the question of adaptation of women workers to this industry is a major concern of this thesis which will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters.

The tea plantation workers generally have an agricultural background. Though they are considered as industrial workers they have vast differences with the other industrial workers in India. The latter group of workers generally occupy a working status which is considered as superior to those of the former. The plantation workers generally differ from the population of surrounding regions also. Almost in all plantations the workers live in semi-isolation from the outside world. This was more true in earlier times than it is today. Since the passing of the Plantation Labour Act in 1951 the contact of the plantation workers with the outside world has considerably increased, yet, by and large, socially they move within the framework of their plantation society. This feature, together with the preponderance of Adivasi workers, have given a special character to the plantation workers not found elsewhere in other industries. In Chandmoni Tea Estate out of 515

workers 464, i.e., 90.10 per cent are non-Hindu Adivasis and only 51 workers, i.e., 9.90 per cent belong to Hindu caste groups. Among the women workers 205 out of 221, i.e., 92.7 per cent hail from Adivasi communities and the rest 16, i.e., 7.3 per cent are Hindu castes. From this it appears that when the plantation had began its expansion programme a higher proportion of Adivasis instead of Hindu castes were attracted to this type of industry. As tea industry requires no previous work experience and education both men and women are admirably suited for it particularly for the various types of garden work. However, there is no significant difference between Hindu and non-Hindu Adivasi workers in terms of their industrial background and level of education.

(Employment of women and children in large number is a striking feature of all tea plantations. In fact, the unit of recruitment is the family. All members of a family—men, women and children are provided with work. In proportion to men, women are generally employed in larger number in tea plantations, as has been pointed earlier, than any other organised industry. Being akin to agriculture, plantation work and its environment seem to be more congenial to women than that in a factory or a mine.)

✓The bulk of the Adivasi workers in Dooars and Terai plantations are descendants of the Adivasi immigrants from Chotanagpur. They form more or less homogeneous group

despite their different Adivasi origin. They are commonly referred to as Madesia. The plantation workers of non-Adivasi origin are drawn from various Nepali and Bihari caste groups.

In regard to the traditional occupations of the plantation workers two occupational groups may be found : agriculturists and non-agriculturists. Agriculture was the traditional occupation of the Oraons, Mundas and Kherias. Among these plantation workers it is ^a feature that the cultivating communities consider themselves superior to those of the non-cultivating groups.¹

The traditional occupation of the Oraons is [✓] agriculture. The Oraons consider it derogatory to engage themselves in occupations such as weaving, basketry or wicker work, pottery and working in iron. They necessarily require the services of other tribes and castes to supply their few needs. Lohars¹ make plough-shares and other tools and implements; Baraiks generally weave ^{Daxi} clothes; Turis, Mahalis and Ores weave or plait baskets; and Ghasis play music at the social festivals of these Adivasi communities. Besides, there are few other Adivasis living side by side with the Oraons. They are Mundas, Kherias, Kor^gwas and Asurs. The Mundas and Kherias stand on the same level of culture as the Oraons.² These three Adivasis

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1. Bhowmik, S., Class Formation in the Plantation System, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981, p. 108.
 2. Roy, S.C., The Oraons of Chota-Nagpur, The Brahma Mission Press, Calcutta, 1915, pp. 68-75.

are traditionally agriculturists while the rest of the communities are non-agriculturists.

✓ Among the Adivasi population of the tea plantation there exists a system of occupational hierarchy which plays an important role in their social life. Such a hierarchy seems to have given rise to a superior-inferior complex which determines the pattern of day to day social interactions. The traditionally cultivating Adivasis of Chotanagpur consider themselves superior to the non-cultivating Adivasis and scheduled castes. These superior groups do not interdine with the inferior groups. The Oraons, Mundas and Kherias being agriculturists consider themselves superior to the other non-cultivating and scheduled castes who render various services to them. The former have commensal relations among themselves but do not interdine with the latter.

Among the Hindus there are Bengalis, Biharis and Nepalis. There is one Bengali Brahmin whose traditional occupation was priesthood. Biharis have a few caste groups in this plantation. Among them there are four Brahmin families, one each of the Kurmi, Khusbaha, Routh, Hazam and Muchi. Traditionally the Brahmins are priests, the Kurmis and Khusbahas are agriculturists, Rouths live on trading and Hazams are barbers and Muchis are shoe makers. Generally women of the Bengali and most Bihari castes do not participate in their economic activities which are essentially the works of menfolks. Most

of the Nepalis are traditionally agriculturists except a few like Kamis (blacksmith) and Thamis who were traditionally the traders.

(In the Nepali community the Brahmins occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy, and along with the Chhetris they form a bulk of the influential and wealthy people of Nepal. The main occupation of the Brahmins and Chhetris is farming and government services. The Brahmins also act as family priests. Like all other agriculturists, the Chhetris also mainly live in rural areas of Nepal. Majority of the Chhetris are farmers. Pradhans are one of the groups of the Newar caste system. They belong to Shrestha caste who are traditionally merchants. The Rais are commonly known as the Kiranti people of East Nepal. They cultivate both dry and wet fields. In addition, they grow various types of vegetables. The Rai women take part in agricultural operations. But among the Brahmins, Chhetris, Pradhans, Kamis and Thamis women usually do not take part in agricultural operations. The Pradhans, Kamis and Thamis are traditionally merchants, blacksmiths and traders respectively.

It is, therefore, seen that most of the Adivasi women who form the bulk of the female workforce of the plantation are with an agricultural background. Comparatively, the

3. Bista, D.B., Peoples of Nepal, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1980, pp. 1-35.

Hindu caste women who are not from the agricultural castes have joined the work force in a much smaller number. Only in the recent years there has developed a tendency among these women to accept a job in the plantation, if available. This is obviously due to "dire economic needs" as some of them told me.

A striking feature of the labour force in this plantation, as elsewhere, is that employment of women and men is almost equal in number. The reasons are : (1) recruitment of workers is generally on family basis, (ii) plucking is more efficiently done by women workers as it is similar to those of agriculture and women workers mostly hail from rural areas who do not feel any difficulty in this work and (iii) migration of workers with their families create obligations to the management to provide wage work to the family members of the workers.

Recruitment of Women Workers in Plantations

It has already been mentioned that both men and women are recruited more or less in equal proportion in tea plantations. The recruitment policy in plantation does not follow any disparity in recruiting men and women workers. However, recruitment of women workers is a part of general recruitment process which has deep historical roots. I shall briefly mention this process below.

At the beginning of tea plantations the employers had to depend entirely on various sources and agencies for the

recruitment of workers. There were some recruiting agents in Assam, Sardars were in north-east India except Assam, and Kanganies were in South India.⁴ Though origin of tea plantation labourers of Assam and West Bengal, except the hills of Darjeeling district, was same, the process of recruitment in the latter region differed from that of the former. Tea industry in Assam started in 1839 while in Terai and Dooars of West Bengal it started in 1866 and 1874 respectively. The planters of Terai and Dooars had the knowledge of labour recruitment process of Assam, and they could avoid the serious mistakes committed by the employers in Assam.

There was acute shortage and unsatisfactory character of local labourers in Assam plantations in 1839. In 1841 the Assam Tea Company first attempted to import labourers from the tribal belt of Chotanagpur. In 1859 the Tea Planters Association was formed to regulate the recruitment process of tea labourers in Assam in an organised manner.⁵ Recruitment was done mainly through the Arkattis who employed dubious means to recruit the simple tribals. The Arkattis were mainly from Baraiks and Ghasis who were landless craftsmen living in the

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4. Report on the survey of Labour Conditions in Tea Plantations and Tea Factories in India, 1961-62, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour-Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India, 1966, p. 22.
 5. Griffiths, P., The History of the Indian Tea Industry, Weidenfel and Nicolson, London, 1967, p. 269.

neighbouring regions of the tribals like Oraons, Mundas, Santals and Kherias. Sometimes the Arkattis were Hindus and Muslims also. The hard working, poverty stricken tribals of Chotonagpur were suitable for tea gardens as they were also the cheapest labourers available to the employers.

However, recruitment through contractors in 1863 was unsatisfactory. Recruitment was also done through the garden authorities themselves. This was often done through the garden Sardars, who were often sent to the recruiting districts.⁷ These two methods of recruitment of labourers through Arkattis and through garden Sardars were often followed by the plantation owners for collecting labourers. The Sardars of the gardens were sent to the recruiting ground in the recruiting season (generally began after the rains in October and ended in February). It was easier for the Sardars to induce the new recruits to show the advantages of work and the prospects of ultimate settlement on independent holdings. The Sardars would look around among his countrymen for anyone willing to go to "Bhutan" for work. After collecting a few they would take them to the recruiting agents who would advance them the necessary money to return with the coolies. The Sardars were usually accompanied by a garden supervisor who always kept an eye over them.

6. Dalton, E. T., Tribal History of Eastern India, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 1973, p. 161.

7. Griffiths, P., op.cit., p. 271.

8. Bhowmik, S., op.cit., pp. 55-56.

The recruited labourers were then sent to various tea plantations in an inhuman condition. Basic health and sanitation facilities were not provided to them. Thus a few of them survived. This proved expensive for the planters and the Workmen's Breach of Contract (Act No XVII) Act was passed in 1859. This act rendered the labourers liable for prosecution for any breach of contract and they had to sign a bond for working in the tea garden for specific time period. In 1861 the government appointed a committee for enquiry into the migration of labourers to Assam and Cachar. The result of which was the passing of Inland Emigration Act in 1863. That was amended in 1865, permitting a few concession to the plantation workers like reducing their contract period into three years from indefinite period and giving some kind of protections to them.

Dooars was annexed from Bhutan in 1865 and the European planters found a new tea growing region there. In 1874 Assam was separated from Bengal. In the Darjeeling hills no recruitment problem existed. Population of Nepal was rising rapidly and the economic pressure forced them to come out. Thus a good number of Nepalis were compelled to migrate from Nepal and settled in Darjeeling district, and gardens of this district recruited all these labourers without formalities.

9. Griffiths, p., op.cit., p. 269.

10. Ibid., p. 277-278.

In the Terai region tea cultivation was expanding very rapidly, and though upto 1873 there had been no importation of labourers, the demand for labourers was just beginning to exceed supply.¹¹

There was 56 gardens in Darjeeling district in 1870, 44 gardens in hills and 12 in Terai having a total labour force of 8,347. After four years the number of garden increased to 113 and the number of labourers increased to 19,424.¹²

Labourers in the Terai and Docars plantations were always 'free' in the sense that they were not put under any kind of contract and could leave at their will. One of the reasons may be that the planters of Terai and Docars had the advantage of knowing the recruitment system of tea labourers in Assam and could avoid the mistakes committed by them. In Terai and Docars three types of recruitment system were prevalent. The most popular was the Sardari system and others was Arkatti system. The third one was the recruitment through local agents of some private agencies in the recruiting districts. The manager of the garden generally sent a Babu (clerk) to the recruiting areas who contacted these agencies and selected the workers. These agencies made some agreements with the labourers and the garden concerned. The workers were given various false promises by the recruiter that the labourers would be given light work and plenty of paddy land in the garden. The planters also recruited annually unindentured labourers from Chotanagpur, Santal Parganas, Chaibasa and from the neighbouring

11. Ibid., pp. 274

12. Hunter.W.W., A Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol X (Reprinted), D.K.Publishing House , New Delhi, 1974,p.166.

regions through the garden Sardars. In order to recruit labourers, the planters had established an organisation called the Tea Districts Labour Association with its headquarters in Calcutta. The machinery of recruitment and forwarding was provided by this association which also recruited on behalf of its members for the Dooars and Terai plantations in Bengal though no legislation to this effect existed in the state. Seventyseven per cent of the tea industry in north-east India recruited labourers through this association. ¹³ The Tea District Labour Association had its recruiting agents in the recruiting districts and to whom the Sardars would report for assistance.

Thus the recruitment was carried out through the recruiters who were known as Garden Sardars, Resident Sardars and Local Recruiters. The first two worked as the agents of the tea estates from which they had been sent to recruit, while the recruiters were agents of the Tea District Labour Association.

The Christian missionaries had their own Labour Bureau, Catholic Labour Bureau at Ranchi, to help the Tea District Labour Association who also took a share as recruiting fees for their funds. Thus in Dooars the permanent labour force grew from nearly 103,000 in 1913 to 150,000 in 1919. ¹⁴

13. ILO, Recent Development in Certain Aspects of Indian Economy - V, International Labour Office, New Delhi, 1960, p.6.

14. Griffiths, P., op.cit., p. 285.

Assam, Dooars and Terai might differ in method of recruitment but in both cases there was the problem of labour enticement. The employers who had less labourers would seek to entice labourers from their neighbouring gardens and they had spent considerable amount for it. The recruited labourers were usually given a few rupees in advance. The cost of recruitment for workers from Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas in 1944 was twentyfive rupees per head before the Second World War and thirtysix rupees per head after the War. The Sardar's commission was three rupees per recruited workers.¹⁵

In 1889 a somewhat elaborate set of rules provided inter-alia that workers leaving one estate for another without permission must be turned out or sent back. Sixtyfive per cent of the gardens in the membership of Dooars Planters Association signed the agreement. In 1920 a reciprocal arrangement was made with the Terai Gardens which had its own rules since 1908.¹⁶ In 1959 recruitment from outside Assam had been reduced and the Tea District Labour Association was dissolved.

It was found that in north-east India there was no longer the problem of shortage of labour. There is now an almost settled labour force in the area and instead of sending agents to distant places the employers could recruit workers directly. In fact there was some pockets of surplus labour

15. Bhowmik, S., op.cit., p. 59.

16. Griffiths, P., op.cit., p. 186.

force. The Nineth session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations reviewed the policy of recruitment of labourers for Assam tea gardens in August, 1960 and decided that no fresh recruitment should be made from outside Assam except with the permission of the government and that movement of labourers from surplus to deficit areas within Assam should be encouraged with the help of special Employment Exchange. In other cases, tea estates recruited relatives of their workers or engaged ordinary-labourers from adjoining villages to cope with the rush of work.

In the Terai region a few garden recruited their labourers through the Tea District Labour Association but in most cases recruitment was mainly through the Sardars or through some private agencies or through the families already employed in the gardens. A major portion of such labourers were the migrants from Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas. Others were the local labourers or the migrants from Nepal.

Recruitment in Chandmoni Tea Estate

It has already been mentioned that the Chandmoni plantation is located in the Terai region of Darjeeling district. Therefore, recruitment system in this plantation conforms to that of the Terai region and slightly differs from that of the Dooars region. In Chandmoni labourers were originally from Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa

and Nepal. A significant portion of them consists of non-Hindu Adivasis like Oraon, Munda, Kheria, Malpahari, Korwa, Lohar, Baraik, Ghasi, Mahali, Turi and Bhokta.

Recruitment of workers in this plantation during the pre-independence period was done mainly through the Sardars. Only a few recruitment were done through some private agencies. Migration to this garden was primarily family based. Before 1940 when there was labour scarcity both husband and wife were recruited together as workers. That time this plantation preferred to recruit couples from various Adivasi societies as they were easily available on low wages. However, some individual labourers were recruited also who had come in quest of plantation jobs or who had come to this garden as wives of the workers. Christian Churches played an important role in the labour recruitment process. The bulk of the Christian labourers had already been converted to Christianity in their native places and they were advised by their Church authority to migrate to the tea districts for jobs. A Roman Catholic Church was established in 1891 in Mallaguri which is very near to Chandmoni Tea Estate. This Church had a direct role in the supply of labourers in Chandmoni.

Some of the labourers of Chandmoni had previously worked in other plantations of Dooars who came here for better wages and facilities as there was disparity in wages in Dooars and Terai. Some women who came to Chandmoni from other plantations through marriages were gradually employed as workers as

"permanent dependants" of their husbands. A few others came here to live with their relatives and gradually settled here.

In 1952 Rastriya Cha Mazdoor Congress (RCMC), the Congress sponsored labour union, was started in this tea plantation and consequently the Tea District Labour Association was dissolved in 1959. Since then recruitment of labourers in this plantation was made through the RCMC union. The union not only played important role in the labour - management relations by mutualising tensions but also took an active role in labour recruitment. These new recruits were often the "bona-fide dependants" of the workers of Chandmoni plantation. So the new recruits from outside was totally stopped after the establishment of trade unions in the garden.

Among the existing workers of this plantation 123 had come from various places like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Nepal and Bangladesh. Eighty of them belong to various Adivasi communities and 43 to non-Adivasis. This immigrant population either came to this garden themselves in search of jobs as workers or they were brought by some Sardars who were later recruited by the plantation authority as workers. Some of them who could be considered as "parmanent dependants" of the workers were also recruited as labourers. A good number of them came from different gardens of Terai and Dooars or from the neighbouring regions. They were either recruited through the Sardars or directly by the plantation authority. Only a few workers of the plantation were recruited through some

private agencies in Ranchi. There are 6 labourers who were recruited through this process of whom 4 are male and 2 are female. Among the other workers 105 male and 97 female were recruited through the Sardars. Twenty one male and 9 female workers were directly recruited by the plantation authority. Besides, there are recruitment of 120 male, 113 female and 36 child workers through the unions. This recruitment was made either to fill the vacant posts or to absorb the "bonafide dependants" of the workers in lieu of the deceased or retired relatives. Sometimes a few recruitments through the "paddy land demand" ¹⁷ was also done. In this garden so far 108 male, 75 female and 20 child workers were recruited in the vacant posts and a few newly created posts through the unions for filling up the "permanent dependant" as well as "bonafide dependant" vacancies. One male, 11 females and 5 children were recruited in the vacancies created through the "paddy land demand" by the union. Nineteen male, 27 female and 11 child workers were recruited in the vacant positions created by their deceased or retired relatives.

Nature of Women's Work in the Plantation ✓

It is very significant that sometimes women workers

17. Recently the management had taken back the paddy land given to the labourers for cultivation. This was the part of the expansion programme of the tea estate undertaken by the management. The labour unions demanded recruitment of one person from each family which was affected due to this expansion programme. The vacancies created in this way was known as "paddy land demand vacancies".

outnumber men in the plantations. In regard to the various jobs of wage-earners on which women are employed it may be said that in a plantation there is no rigid classification of workers. The entire working force of the plantation is divided into two broad categories -- garden labours and staff. The bulk of the working force constitutes the first category and those in the second are very few in number. All operations connected with plantation are allotted to the garden labourers. When a woman is appointed as a garden labourer, she may be required to attend any type of work that may be assigned to her by the management. Generally plantation operations on which women work are plucking, weeding, transplanting, etc. Adivasi women are never found to be appointed to posts relating to the managerial, executive or administrative work nor are they employed in the clerical or allied positions. Practically the women workers here have no promotion facilities. We shall later on discuss this problem in some details. In every stratum of the plantation hierarchy men have monopolised more responsible positions, which are often better paid.

Types of work

In the Terai plantations tea bushes are allowed to grow a maximum height of three feet. In the natural process a tea bush can grow upto a maximum height of eighteen to twenty feet. But in a plantation tea bushes are kept to a stunted

growth of about three feet as such a height gives the largest number of plucking points. The other factor is that such a height is convenient for the men and women workers of the garden as plucking is done by hand. The plucked leaves are comprised of two leaves on either side and a bud in between.

The daily wage workers of the tea plantation perform all types of manual work such as plucking of leaves, weeding, hoeing, manuring, forking and cleaning the soil, pruning the tea bushes in winter, taking care of nursery bed of young tea plants and cleaning the tea stalks in the factory (Table : 23). Most of the labourers employed for plucking (Patti-tepai) are women. The men workers also pluck leave occasionally. Then men workers are often engaged in hoeing (Thali-pharua), cleaning the ground around the bushes (Khulni), spraying of pesticides, and so on.

The period from May to November is generally regarded as the busy season in the tea plantation. July to September is the peak period of the plucking season and the workers specially the women workers can earn ^{extra} ~~entire~~ wages from plucking over the required norm. December to March is the slack season in plantation. During this period the earning of the women workers as well as the average earning of the labour family remains generally lower. During the slack season in winter the volume of work as well as working hours reduce considerably. Women workers of the plantation remain busy at

Table : 23

Sex-wise classification of plantation work

Operations in garden and factory	Periods in month	Sexes of workers
<u>Garden operations</u>		
1. Filling of vacancies of tea bushes	January - May	Men, Women
2. Transplanting	January - March	Men, Women
3. Manuring ×	February - May	Men,
4. Tipping	March - April	Men, Women
5. Plucking	March - December	Men, Women
6. Spraying pesticide ×	April - September	Men
7. Pruning	October - January	Men, Women
8. Weeding	Throughout the year	Men, Women
9. Hoeing	Throughout the year	Men, Women
<u>Factory operations</u>		
10. Machine operating	March - December	Men
11. Withering	March - December	Men
12. Rolling	March - December	Men
13. Fermenting	March - December	Men
14. Drying	March - December	Men
15. Sorting ✓	March - December	Men, Women ✓
16. Packing	March - December	Men

least for a large part of the year, while the men workers can enjoy leisure when work in the plantation is over. In some cases, the women workers in the plantation work even longer hours than the men. In the north Indian tea gardens, the work system for men is that of "task-work", which means that when the task set for the day is done, the work is over. Normally four to five hours are needed to complete the work under the system. While women workers employed in plucking at "piece-rate" are to work for seven to eight hours in order to earn the minimum daily wage. The plucking season generally begins with the early rains in March and ends either in November or in early December. The plucking gives the highest yield during July to August when rainfall is heavy. The plucking of the early monsoon is supposed to produce the best quality of tea.

After the plucking is over the bushes are pruned. Such pruning is made from six inches to eighteen inches. The pruning can be divided into light, medium and deep on the basis of the height of the pruning. Pruning of the tea bushes is a very important task in the garden. The yield of the oncoming season depends on how the bushes are pruned. So such pruning is done by the efficient men workers of the garden. Light and medium pruning (Kalam-kata) are only done by young and efficient women workers. But the deep pruning is only done by the efficient men workers as it requires both efficiency and physical strength. The men workers also perform other hard

work such as deep-hoeing, digging and spraying of pesticide and weedicide. The work in which women are generally employed are plucking of leaf. They also do weeding, manuring, light hoeing (Thali-pharua), collecting the seeds of the shade trees, forking (Jillohi) and preparing nursery beds. In many work in the plantation the women workers are as efficient as the men workers, and it is believed that in some work such as plucking the women workers are more efficient than the men. In plucking the women workers score over the men workers both in efficiency and quality of leaves plucked. The men workers also pluck tea leaves, but it is generally found that the quality as well as quantity of leaves plucked are not as high as those of the women workers. There is a reason behind it. The plucking of good quality of tea leaves requires patience, and for this the women workers are more suitable than the men workers. Other factor may be that the men workers prefer the work which requires greater physical labour, such as hoeing, digging, etc. However, the women workers in the plantation are always given light work. During the peak season, i.e., from April to November they remain busy in plucking, and during the slack season they are employed in light and medium pruning, forking and weeding. Pruning in plantation can be considered as semi-skilled work. Only young and efficient women workers are allotted for pruning. However they are very few in number. In the factory of the tea plantation

aged and weak women are employed in picking out the stalks (Chunai) from the tea leaves. Sometimes the aged men and women workers are engaged in making nursery seed beds. The women and adolescent workers perform^{ed} the same type of work. Children are generally given light agricultural work such as removing creepers and parasites from the tea bushes, light digging, collecting the seeds of shade trees, etc.

Generally a work in the plantation is done in groups. Under the supervision of Daffadars or Sardars the workers are divided into several groups. A group is consisted of about fifty workers either men or women. The Daffadars generally supervise the plucking of leaf in the plantation. The Sardars supervise the other work. The work is generally allotted in gangs or Patti. Some are allotted to plucking leaves while others to hoeing, etc.

The system of work and working hours ✓

✓ The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which applied to non-factory workers of plantation lays down the maximum weekly working hours for adults at 54 and for adolescent and children at 40. It also prescribes that after five hours of work a worker must be allowed to have an interval for rest of at least half an hour. ✓ The period of work of an adult worker inclusive of intervals for rest and the time spent for waiting for work on any one day shall not be spread over more than 12 hours. ✓

According to a review of the working of the Plantation Labour Act for the year 1957, normal weekly hours of work were 24 in Bihar, ranged between 39 and 51 in Uttar Pradesh and between 37 and 47 in West Bengal. ¹⁸ ✓ The Act provides for a day of rest in every period of seven days, and for the payment for work done on a day of rest. The Act also provides for grant of leave with wages at the rate of one day for every twenty days of work for adults. ✓ For adolescent and children the rate is one day for every fifteen working days. Accumulation of leave is allowed up to a maximum of 30 days. In some cases, women workers work even longer hours than the men.

In tea plantation a worker is allotted to a certain piece of work which he or she has to complete within a given period of time. This is known as Thika. The Thika tasks are fixed either in terms of bushes or Dangs or Nals. A Nal or Dang is an area of 12 square feet and roughly 3000 Nals comprise an acre. The tasks assigned to women and children for their Hazira are proportionately less than the men. The amount of each of the tasks which the workers perform are discussed here. Approximately 8 to 16 Nals of land is given to a man worker, for deep hoeing in a day. A man is required to complete light hoeing in about 40 to 48 Nals of land in a day. The deep pruning operation is to be done in 60 to 72 bushes in a day by a man worker; he has to perform light pruning in about 60 to 120 bushes in a day whereas he can perform forking and

weeding of 160 to 240 bushes within the same time. However, a woman worker has to do light pruning in about 60 to 100 bushes or forking and weeding in about 160 to 200 bushes in a day. In the Thika in which a woman worker is engaged in plucking has to pluck a fixed amount of tea leaves. In Chandmoni Tea Estate the amount of leaves to be plucked by a labourer vary from 15 to 22 kilograms per day. The minimum fixed quantity of leaf plucking varies from season to season. The manager and the Bagan-babu decide the minimum quantity of leaves to be plucked. The men and women workers have no say in this matter. They pluck more and can earn more by over plucking. In the Thika where other types of work are to be done, a labourer work on a specific number of tea bushes in the garden as mentioned earlier or on a specific area of the tea estate. After completion she is paid a wage for her tasks or Thika which is known as Hazri. If a worker is engaged in plucking he or she will get an incentive of 10 paise for every kilogram of leaves plucked in excess to Thika of a fixed amount of leaves which varies from 15 to 22 kilograms in a day from season to season. Over plucking is commonly known as Dubly. During pruning, every adult and efficient worker is allotted a specific number of tea bushes which he or she has to prune. In the slack season some of the workers are engaged in miscellaneous work which cannot easily be measure on a piece rate basis. Such work are repair of roads and bridges, erecting

fences, etc. for which they are paid on time basis. These work are generally done by men workers and they are given basic wages for work of 5 to 6 hours. Again, early in the plucking season there will not be sufficient flush on the tea bushes to enable the pluckers to earn their basic wages if the plucking like Chhatni-patti or Ticca is adopted. In the Ticca plucking early in the season there may be a danger if the plucking of leaf is done indiscriminately, because it may spoil the flushing surface of the tea bushes. Like in all other tea plantations the workers of the Chandmoni Tea Estate also get payment on the time basis for the first few rounds of plucking usually called tipping. The time required to spend on this work is generally 6 to 7 hours a day. Similarly towards the end of the flushing season also plucking on time basis is followed. Other workers engaged in the plantation are herdsmen, water-carrier (Paniwalla), etc. All of them are men workers.

The wages of the women workers ✓

The daily wage workers are paid on the basis of time as well as piece rate work. Normally they are to work eight hours in a day and six days in a week. A worker is paid for his or her minimum daily wages (Hazri) for this work. He or she is given a specific amount of work which he or she has to complete during the working hours.

Wages in the plantation industry varied from place to place according to the employment, market condition and living standard in the areas where the plantations were located. It also varied on the basis of supply of labour in tea plantations. In north India average daily earnings of women and men unskilled labours differed by only some 5 to 15 per cent, and the differences in wage rates for similar work was sometimes even smaller. In south Indian plantations, sex differentials in wages were considerably larger.¹⁹ Plantations were included in the Scheduled Employment under the Minimum Wage Act, 1948. The act required the State Government to fix the minimum rates of wages payable to employees working in Scheduled Employments. Where minimum rates of wages had been fixed and notified, the State Government had to review these rates at least once in five years, and the employer was bound by law to pay every employee engaged in Scheduled Employment under him wages at a rate not less than the minimum rates of wages fixed for a particular class of employees.²⁰ The payment of Wage Act of 1936 made it compulsory for the employer to pay the agreed minimum wage. The 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference held in July, 1957 agreed that the workers in all major industries should not only have a

19. Indian Labour Statistics, 1962, p. 55.
Indian Labour Year Book, 1965, pp. 51-52.

20. ILO., New Delhi, 1960, op.cit., p. 19.

guaranteed minimum wage but a need-based minimum wage. The tea plantation wage board was appointed in December, 1960.

In plantations of the Terai region including Chandmoni Tea Estate the first interim increment of wage was introduced among the daily-rated workers in 1962. The recommendations of the Central Wage Board were declared on 1st April, 1966. In Terai plantations twice there was an interim wage increment of 8 paise and 6 paise for both men and women workers. The increment was same in case of plantations of Dooars. Thus just before the final recommendations, the wages of tea plantation workers in Terai stood at Rs.1.95 for men, Rs.1.81 for women and Rs.1.07 for children whereas in Dooars it stood at Rs.1.98 for men, Rs.1.84 for women and Rs.1.07 for children. In the plantations which are less than 500 acres in size workers get wage 3 paise less than the normal wages. The board recommended that wages for men, women and children be increased by 13 paise, 10 paise and 7 paise respectively from January, 1966, and a further increase of 2 paise for men and women and 1 paise for children from 1st April, 1966. In this garden according to the Terai Planters Negotiation Act, August, 1966 wages increased by 12 paise for men, 9 paise for women and 6 paise for children. The difference between the wages of men and women workers increased from 14 paise to 17 paise. Thus the new wage for the workers was the "need-based wage" and the standard formula for fixing such need-based minimum wage was to consider 3 units

of consumption for every adult men worker.

From 1966 to 1975 wages gradually increased either through the recommendations of bipartite meetings or through the demand of the trade unions of the plantation workers. In plantations of the Terai region as well as in Chandmoni Tea Estate from 2nd September, 1969 to 31st March, 1970 the wages were Rs. 2.39 for men, Rs. 2.22 for women and Rs. 1.29 for children. From 1st April, 1970 to 30th June, 1971 it was raised to Rs. 2.48 for men, Rs. 2.31 for women, Rs. 1.33 for children and from 1st July, 1971 to 31st May, 1972 the wage was raised to Rs. 2.71 for men, Rs. 2.54 for women and Rs. 1.45 for children. From 1st June, 1972 to 30th June, 1973 the wage was raised to Rs. 2.94 for men, Rs. 2.77 for women and Rs. 1.56 for children. The wage for adolescent was similar to that of women. The wages of the plantation workers in Dooars then stood at Rs. 3.00 for men, Rs. 2.83 for women and Rs. 1.50 for children. In April 1973, the Second Minimum Wage Fixation Committee for Tea Plantations was appointed by the State Government. This committee finalised the minimum wages in July, 1977.

The wages in plantations were gradually enhanced and the wage differentiation between men and women workers continued. In between the period July, 1973 and June, 1977

21. Report of the Central Wage Board for Tea Plantation Industry, Government of India, 1966.

there was an increase of 15 paise for adult men and women workers and 7 paise for children. There was again an increase of 25 paise for the adult workers and 12 paise for children during the period from July, 1974 to June, 1975. The wage was then Rs. 3.34 for men, Rs. 2.77 for women and Rs. 1.76 for children. Again there was an interim increase of 45 paise during the period between July, 1975 and March, 1976. In between the period from April, 1976 to June, 1977 there was again an increase of 45 paise. Then the wage reached to Rs. 4.24 for men, Rs. 4.07 for women and Rs. 2.21 for children workers. In the meantime the second Minimum Wage Fixation Committee finalised the minimum wages on 24 July, 1977. In between July, 1977 and June, 1978 there was again an increase of Rs. 1.00. The wage for men was Rs. 5.24, for women Rs. 5.07 and for children Rs. 2.73. Between July, 1978 and June, 1979 there was again an increase of interim wages of Rs. 1.00. The Dably was then enhanced from 8 paise to 10 paise per kilogram for extra leaf plucking.

The wage difference between men and women workers was abolished in December, 1976. But many of the employers in Terai and Doonars refused to pay equal wages even after the equal wage for equal work Act was passed. In Chandmoni Tea Estate it was not implemented upto July, 1979. We have seen that since the beginning of the plantation industry there was wage difference between men and women workers. This difference had gradually been reduced during the post-Independence

period mainly through implementing the Minimum Wage Act.

The Indian Tea Planters' Association (ITPA) is in favour of maintaining the wage difference between men and women workers in plantation. They think it necessary because the work-load for women workers is always less than that of men. The Thika assigned to women workers is always lesser than that of men workers. The ITPA thinks that if workers are given equal wages irrespective of sex and at the same time different workloads are allotted to them, it will be a discrimination against men. ²² However, this discrimination is still maintained in the plantations of the Terai and Doars region. In Chandmoni Tea Estate, in the Thika in plucking tea leaves for men was 25 kilograms and for women workers it was 22 kilograms in a day during the peak season of 1979.

The Dearness Allowance forms a part of the revised wages of the plantation workers fixed under the Minimum Wages Act. Besides, a plantation worker gets ration at concessional rates. Annually a worker receives 5 quintals of fire wood whereas a sub-staff get 6 quintals. Some protective uniforms which are essential for working in the plantation are also supplied free to the workers. Apron and umbrella are such articles. Each workers receives from the authority a blanket once in every two years free of cost.

22. Bhowmik, S., op.cit., p. 94.

Housing and creche facilities

Earlier the labourers were recruited from the remote villages of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, and they were brought along with their families. This provided the owners not only with a steady source of supply of labour but also they could exercise a close control over the workers.

In the tea plantation of Dooars, the houses are built in 'barrack lines' scattered over the gardens. In the lines each house has usually its own separate compound, though in many cases the houses are built quite close to each other in rows. The houses in the tea plantations of the Terai region are similar to those of Dooars. In Darjeeling houses are built clustered on terraces. In tea gardens all the houses are rarely pucca made of brick walls, cement floors and tin, tiled or asbestos roofs. A large proportion of them yet remain thatched hovels with mud or bamboo walls though as per the terms of Plantation Act, 1951 these should have been made Pucca. In Chandmoni Tea Estate there are both Kaccha and Pucca houses. Almost all the houses have a small fenced compound which is used as a kitchen garden for growing vegetables, maize, etc. Those who possess cattle build cattle shed near the house. Usually the Kaccha houses are repaired once in two years. Materials such as bamboo and straw are supplied by the owner of the garden.

In every plantation where fifty or more women workers are employed the employer is required to provide and

maintain a creche for the children who are below the age of six years. In Chandmoni Tea Estate there is a creche with two female attendants who generally look after the children of the workers. On demand of the workers the management has arranged for the free supply of milk and Muri to the children. But most of the workers do not like to keep their children in the creche. They say "The atmosphere is very bad and food, milk, water, etc. are not properly supplied by the management".

Health and sanitation facilities

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 has a provision for adequate supply of drinking water in the plantation particularly at the work sites, and also for the proper storage of water and cleanliness of well or reservoir constructed within the plantation. This Act also provides for sanitary latrine in every plantation on the basis of one latrine for every fifty acres of the area under cultivation. However no such latrine has yet been constructed for the workers of the Chandmoni Tea Estate. For drinking water seven wells have been constructed by the management so that at least one well is allotted to each residential line. As these wells are not sufficient for the plantation population some of the households have dug their own Kachha well. Obviously these wells and the other poorly maintained Fucca wells are a source of water born diseases.

Health has two aspects, incidence of diseases and measures to mitigate such incidence. The first is reflected in the death rate and the second in medical facilities. The common diseases in the Chandmoni Tea Estate are cholera, malarial fever, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, hookworm, respiratory diseases, leprosy, gastroenteritis and diseases relating to meternity cases. Among these, tuberculosis, anaemia, gastroenteritis and diarrhoea cause death to a good number of individuals. Considerable number of deaths occurs due to 'other diseases' also.

Formerly in Chandmoni Tea Estate there was a hospital. Recently due to lack of facilities it has been reduced to a dispensary. The medical staff of the plantation consists of a doctor, a compounder, a dresser-cum-health assistant and a woman attendant. There is no qualified nurse or midwife. Due to the lack of proper management and finance the hospital cannot provide services to the plantation workers. Scarcity of medicines has become a common feature of the "health facilities" available to the workers.

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 provides that every worker is entitled to enjoy a medical leave for a period of 14 days in a year at the rate of two thirds of his or her daily minimum wages.

The rules regarding maternity provide that every woman employed in a plantation is entitled to enjoy a maternity leave with full-pay for a period of six weeks immediately

proceeding the expected day of her delivery and for a period of six weeks immediately following the day of her delivery. Ration at concessional rates is also available during this period. In case a women dies within six weeks of the delivery, the maternity wages are then given to the person who undertakes the care of the child.

Educational facilities

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 provides that every employer should, if the number of workers' children between the age of 6 and 12 in plantation exceed 25, provide and maintain a primary school for the primary education of children. In Chandmoni Tea Estate there is also a primary school but a considerable number of the students are outsiders. Out of a total of 300 students only 73 boys and 29 girls are the children of the workers and rest are the outsiders.

Holidays and recreational facilities

At present the tea plantation workers enjoy paid holidays on the Independence day, Republic day and May Day. In addition, there are four paid festival holidays of which two days are for Durga Puja, one day each for Diwali and Holi.

The rules provide that every employer should provide and maintain recreation centre or centres for workers with provision for a radio set and indoor games suitable for adult

and child workers, and where adequate flat open space is available within a reasonable distance, a playground for adult and child workers with necessary sports equipments for outdoor games. In Chandmoni Tea Estate the workers are provided with football, volleyball, and a playground by the plantation authority. However, recreational facilities for women are thought not necessary. There is no club either for men or women workers. The women have no roles in creativity and aesthetic. During leisure they only gossip and sometime they visit their relatives in the other residential lines of the tea estate.

ATTITUDES AND COMMITMENT

Attitude towards Plantation Work

An analysis of the plantation women workers' attitude towards their work and objective situation will remain incomplete unless the real reasons of taking up wage work in the tea plantation are understood properly. The women workers have come out of their home to work as wage earners. Their job motives are obviously different from those of the middle class educated working women. Middle class working women are induced both by economic necessity of the family as well as by the emerging emancipatory condition. In most cases these two motives co-exist side by side. The reasons for taking up employment by middle class working women are : (i) family oriented economic reasons, (ii) striving towards individual self-fulfilment and emancipation and (iii) desire to use one's leisure

time. It is seen that these motivations do not exclude one another but are interrelated. The work motives of the educated middle class women are not primarily oriented towards the need of the family but they are striving more towards individual self-fulfilment and self-realisation. Sometimes there is a genuine emancipatory tendency behind their work.

It is found that the earnings of the middle class educated working wives are often regarded as a subsidiary, as a help to buy "extras". They use the work for a secondary source of income. Basically such income is utilised for home decoration or to buy consumers goods and clothing, to enjoy holidays and to avoid unnecessary loneliness. In case of the backward class plantation women workers the earnings are considered as essential contributions to support their families. However, in both the cases money is undoubtedly the largest incentive for the married women to go out to work. Work in the plantation have increasingly been normal and essential component of a woman's daily life. It is a common fact that all the women workers have taken up employment out of economic consideration and not to fulfil their own individual needs. However, I am trying to explore here five broad aspects of the employment situation of plantation women; their attitude towards work, attitude towards the company as the employer, attitude towards pay and other facilities, attitude towards the management and lastly attitude towards their immediate supervisor.

Women workers' attitude towards work is directly related to their position in the life cycle. Womens' participation in the labour force is responsive to the major life cycle events as education, marriage, divorce, child bearing and geographical mobility. Thus variations in attitude are assumed to depend primarily on difference in age, marital status and presence or absence of dependent relatives. But among the plantation women workers there is little variation of opinion. In most cases the backward class uneducated plantation women workers have largely gone into plantation work as it requires little skill and carry small responsibility. To them plantation work is 'just' a job like any other for fulfilment of their economic needs. In case of plantation system women as compared to men, display no consistently attenuated level of occupational aspirations. Plantation women are not characterised by a qualitatively different orientation towards work from that exhibited by their male counterpart. There is no documentation of differing expectations and aspirations at the point of entry to the labour market though there is a motivational difference.

From the opinion of the plantation women workers it is found that due to some reasons they prefer plantation work and they do not like to move to any other job. One of the reasons is that the plantation provides them security of job. All members of the family are provided with jobs by the plantation authority. Moreover, as they have come from an

agricultural society they can easily adapt themselves to plantation work which is somewhat akin to agricultural work. Other reason is that as the plantation authority provides them residential accomodation women can work in plantation without seriously disturbing their family duties. Majority of the women workers here are of the opinion that women's job and their family duties harmoniously complement to each other. About 89.1 per cent of the women workers stated that plantation work and work at home are of equal importance to them. The rest of the women workers gave more weightage to household duties. The principle of utilising every ablebodied person of the workers' family as labourer in the plantation, residence within the plantation and nature of work have attracted women, to a large extent, to seek employment in this industry. In Chandmoni Tea Estate out of 221 women workers 14 (6.33 per cent) are unmarried who earn only to support themselves and their parents, 188 (85.06 per cent) women workers are married who are working as primary bread winners to support their families, only 12 (5.42 per cent) widow women workers earn to support their children and themselves, and 7 (3.16 per cent) women are working because their husbands are either invalid or suffering from diseases like leprosy and tuberculosis.

The women workers are significantly more satisfied with their wages than the men workers. However, promotion opportunities, though very limited, are only open to the men

workers of the plantation. While the women workers, inspite of being recognised as committed workers, as mentioned by the management, cannot move up in the job hierarchy. The men workers, although only few, can move up to occupy positions of Sardar, Dafadar, Boidar, Chaprasi and Munshi. These higher positions are provided with slightly higher wages than those of the ordinary labourers. These positions also enjoy some power and privileges. But the women workers never grumble for such discrimination. Their awareness is not upto that limit. Their job satisfaction is mainly due to certain facilities given to them. They quite often mention that they get free-quarter, fire-wood, ration at subsidy rate, cultivable land, bonus and other facilities from the plantation authority without any trouble. Many of these facilities are not provided by other industries to their workers. There is no vertical mobility in the occupational hierarchy but the women workers do not seem to have any frustration simply because their expectation out of the employment is limited. Their socialization process also helps them to accept the plantation occupation as their family occupation and has made them unconcerned about their low position in the industry. Their attitude seems not susceptible to change as they have less education and less outer influence.

The plantation women workers were also asked how the relatives, family, friends and other fellow workers evaluated their occupation. Most of them felt that their

families, relatives, friends and other co-workers evaluated their occupation positively. In their attitude towards the Chandmoni Tea Estate as the employer, all the women workers were remarkably alike. When they were asked to name the best things about working for the Chandmoni Tea Estate, the three most frequently mentioned items were the security of employment, the good physical working conditions, the fringe benefits such as maternity benefits, sick pay, bonus, provident fund, etc. Only 25 (11.31 per cent) women out of 221 women workers said that the plantation work was an interesting job. Out of 221 women workers 213 (96.38 per cent) said that they wished to stay in this tea estate until their retirement. They never thought of leaving. There was little variation in the reasons for wanting to stay. Two third of the women workers mentioned the attraction of fringe benefits and the employment security provided by the employer of the tea estate.

The low level of education is positively related to the low occupational aspirations of the plantation workers. The level of education in plantation, specially among the women is very low. Out of 47 literate women 38 (3.04 per cent) have primary education and 9 (0.72 per cent) have secondary education. It is interesting that the plantation women workers do not have any aspirations for better employment and better standard of living. Employment being family based to some extent automatically restricts the choice of

occupation. However, a direct comparison of aspiration of men and women workers is somewhat difficult as their jobs in the plantation are not always the same. Moreover men workers' jobs are more open than those of the women workers. In general both men and women have low aspiration which is also due to their ethno-cultural background. It is significant to note that in general all the women workers in the plantation expect their sons and daughters to follow their parents' occupation. However, a few men workers show fairly high aspiration for their sons' educational and occupational future. A few cases of aspiration regarding the future of their sons and daughters of both men and women workers will make the statement clear, Gondra Munda (29) is a Boidar (attendance keeper) of Chandmoni who has education upto class X standard. He belongs to the Saonsar religion. He possesses a high aspiration about the future of his sons. Gondra said "My father did not provide me opportunity for higher education, but I shall provide my sons. My three sons are studying in St.Mary's Convent School, Siliguri. I spend about Rs. 150.00 per month for their education. I shall give them enough opportunity for higher education so that they can get clerical or other jobs elsewhere". Although he does not have a daughter he advocates female education. His wife Gita Munda (26) is a worker in Chandmoni who has no formal education. Gita has expressed that she has no idea of the future of her sons education and employment. All these depend on her husband. But she likes that her sons

should accept occupation in the tea plantation. Ramjatan Naik (27) is a Ghasi who works in Chandmoni as a Boidar. He follows the Saonsar religion. Ramjatan has read upto class X standard. He has a training from the Workers' Education Centre, Siliguri. He spends about Rs. 60.00 per month for education of his two sons who are studying in the Prince Nursery School, Siliguri. Ramjatan says that without education it is very difficult to get any job outside. Although occupation in the plantation is not bad, now-a-days to get a good job education is essential. He also possesses a positive attitude regarding female education. Ramjatan's wife Butain Naik (24) is an illiterate who works in Chandmoni. Butain says that as she does not have education she does not have aspiration for better jobs. According to her it is essential to have education for getting better employment. Although she does not possess much aspiration about her sons' education and occupation she says that they should get education for better employment in tea plantation. Illias Soren (44) and his wife Carmela Soren (40) hail from Kheria community who are Christians. Illias is educated upto class VII and works as a health assistant. Carmela has read upto class V who also works in the same plantation. They have two daughters and a son. Both of them have a high aspiration regarding their son's and daughters' education and employment. The son has appeared I.C.S.C. examination from St. Mary's Boarding School, Nagrakata and a daughter is

studying in St. Mary's School, Siliguri. Their another daughter has read upto class VI in the St. Peter School, Gayaganga and is now working in Chandmoni. They spend about Rs. 150.00 per month for their education and put equal importance for male and female education. They emphasize the importance of female education. According to them education improves respect and economic condition of the family and it also provides better employment outside the tea plantation. Karlus Oraon (45), a Chaprasi is a Christian. Benidicta Oraon (36) is his wife who also works in Chandmoni. Both of them have no formal education. They have four daughters and one son. Both of them have a high aspiration about education and employment of their son. But they are indifferent in respect of their daughters' education and employment. Their daughters are not enrolled in any school. The eldest daughter is working in Chandmoni Tea Estate. Their son is studying in St. Peter School, Gayaganga who stays in the school hostel. They spend Rs. 100.00 per month for their son's education on the hope that he will get a better job in the tea plantation or outside. But they think that their daughters should take up plantation job. Emilleous Khalko (31) and his wife Kelmensia Khalko (27) belong to the Oraon community who are Christians. Emilleous and Kelmensia are educated upto class X and VIII respectively. Emilleous works in water supply department in the Military Engineering Services (MES) at Bagdogra and gets Rs. 300 per month. But

Kelmensia is a worker in Chandmoni. They live within Chandmoni Tea Estate. They have a son and a daughter. Their son is studying in St. Peter School, Gayaganga and stays in the hostel. They wish that their son and daughter should be given education equally which would enable them to take up jobs outside the plantation. Both of them do not prefer plantation work. Kelmensia says that she will leave the plantation if she gets an employment elsewhere.

There are differences at the aspiration level between the Adivasi workers and non-Adivasi workers belonging particularly to the Nepalis. It is noticed that the caste workers aspire more than those belonging to the Adivasis in respect of their own future as well as education and employment of their sons. But they are not keen about womens' education. Two cases of Nepali workers are given below : Ranbahadur Pradhan (55) is a Chowkidar who has no formal education. His wife Bishnumaya Pradhan (55) was a worker in Chandmoni, but she left the job in 1976 due to illness. They have three sons and a daughter. Both of them have high ambition for their sons. Their one son is a matriculate who works in the Indian Army. Other two sons are studying in the high school. Their only daughter has read upto class III. They do not like to employ their daughter in the plantation and want that the sons should do white collar jobs. Dilbahadur Chhetri (40) is also a Chowkidar in Chandmoni and his wife Umadevi Chhetri

(32) is also a worker there. Although they do not have any formal education they aspire high for their sons' education and employment. Four sons and two daughters are studying in School in Siliguri. Both of them do not like that their sons and daughters should work in the tea plantation. They aspire for better employment and white collar jobs for their sons. But they do not have any high hope for their daughters' future. They have a plan that after retirement they would go back to their native village in Bhojpur, Nepal.

In this tea estate most of the women workers are illiterate as I have mentioned earlier, and are unskilled labourers and their participation in the working class movement is very slowly emerging. Active participation against management is very poorly represented by the women workers. All the employees have direct access to the management which helps to mitigate their grievances to some extent. They never criticize management spontaneously. The plantation authority and the supervisors are also more satisfied with the work participation of women workers than that of the men workers. And when we turn to examine attitudes to supervisors we find no difference of opinion between women workers. In case of the plantation work Sardar, Dafadar, Chaprasi, Munsif and Bagan-babus are the first line supervisors although in some cases it is the Manager himself looks after the work. They were asked "Would you say you get on with your immediate supervisors very Well" ? All of them answered, "Generally our

supervisors do not behave badly. Only when we neglect our work or cannot perform any work properly the supervisors behave rudely". A woman worker judges her work relations in terms of the rewards that occur from the work and considers the employment as obviously stable and permanent. This naturally makes her to ignore the occasional rebukes and reprimands from the supervisors.

Women Workers' Commitment to Plantation Work

The concept of commitment not only involves the performance of the workers but also the acceptance of the relevant norms of the industrial ways of life by them and orientation of their behaviour accordingly. The commitment of the workers to the industry can be explained in the sense of accepting discipline, learning new skills, producing efficiently and fighting for their rights as workers through the trade union. The commitment also implies the acceptance of new residential patterns, system of hierarchy and social goals, in addition to the system of factory production which involves responding to the rhythm and speed of the machine and the authority structure of the industry. The committed worker is one who has internalized these values and actualised them in his behaviour. He is one who has completely snapped his links with the village and land and has become an urban industrial man. Commitment also implies that labour is willing to shift from agriculture

to industry. His wife also enters the labour market and he is conscious of his rights as a worker because industrial employment is his only source of security. ²³ Scholars have used widely different measures and criteria of commitment. Some of these are attitude to employer and organization, stability of work force, availability of workers when needed. Sharma finds that social differences also influence the degree of commitment. According to him traditional Indian culture does not present any serious obstacles to the process of commitment. ²⁴ Morris and Thorner have collected evidences leading to the conclusion that in most cases where workers are apparently uncommitted to their jobs, are due to the policies of recruitment and tenure adopted by the employers. ²⁵ Morris has rightly argued that if absenteeism is to be taken as a criterion of lack of commitment, it will have to be defined as wilful non-attendance at work. He finds that industrial labour force has not been particularly unstable. The quantity of labour and the degree of commitment to industry are more a result of managerial policies and market forces than of the psychology of workers or their involvement in the

23. Ramaswamy, E.A. and Uma., Industry and Labour, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 14,20,28.

24. Sharma, B.R., "Commitment to Industrial work : The case of the Indian Automobile Workers" in Indian Journal of Industrial Relations, 1968, 4(1), pp. 3-33.

25. Morris, D.M., "Some Comments in the supply of Labour to the Bombay Cotton Textile Industry 1854-1951" in Indian Economic Journal, 1953, 1(2), pp. 138-52 Thorner, D., "Casual Employment of a Factory Labour Force : The case of India 1850-1939" in Economic Weekly, 1957, Annual Number.

traditional social structure of caste, kinship and village.

A group of scholars has postulated the "logic of industrialism" and has argued that the essentially non-industrial characteristics of a society like India (e.g., relatively closed system of stratification, emphasis on primary group loyalty, religious values discouraging hard work and innovativeness, etc.) has obstructed workers' acceptance of the discipline and rigor of industrial activities. ²⁷ This thesis has drawn attention of several sociologists to study Indian industrial workers' commitment in the context of their social and cultural life. However, there are several dimensions of commitment such as psychological, social and economic. These dimensions should be studied in the context of industrial situations : recruitment and selection of workers, work place, work situation and conditions of employment, extra-industrial ways of life, etc. The workers come with different social backgrounds which also play a significant part in the process of commitment.

The plantation workers hail mostly from agricultural background and the industry itself is agro-based. The field operations of tea plantations are comparable to that

26. Morris, D.M., The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force : A study of Bombay Cotton Mills 1854-1947, Berkley, California, 1963.

27. Kerr, C., J.T.Dunlop, F.H.Harbrison and C.A. Mayers, Industrialism and Industrial Man, Heinemann, London, 1960

of modern agriculture. So the plantation workers do not feel strangers to the new working environment and hence they could easily adjust themselves in this agro-industry. This also positively affected the commitment of both the men and women workers.

We have seen earlier that the recruitment policy in tea plantation was different from those of other industries. Here labourers were recruited from distant places who were given accomodation within the plantation. The recruitment was family as well as kinship based and the workers live within the plantation close to each other. In many cases the management also provides small plots of agricultural land to most of the families. The management policies have motivated the workers to cut-off social relations to a large extent from their native villages and land. Although during the earlier phase of recruitment immigrant workers had a great inclination to continue social relations with their homeland, but the first and second generations of the immigrants had used themselves to live within the plantation environment. The present generations of the immigrant labourers have to a large extent discontinued social relations with their homeland. In most of the cases the present plantation workers are members of the second or third generation of the original migrants who had left their villages. They have adopted this occupation as their family occupation and both men, women and

children of their families have joined in it. Such a situation also provides the workers to develop a high degree of commitment to their work. They are very much conscious of their work because they know that employment is their only source of income. They form an isolated society in the plantation environment which is completely separated from the neighbouring society. In most cases their social roots are well established in the plantation. Thus the plantation workers have become more committed than the workers of other industries. Workers were also recruited by the employer through the old workers of the plantation. In these informal process of selection friendship, kinship, ethnic background and village ties play an important role. This have some impact over the commitment of workers. The plantation workers' commitment is a life-long commitment and their loyalty is valued more than their efficiency.

A planter prefers to employ women for the working force as he thinks that women are more committed workers than their male counterpart. The planters make their workforce committed by providing them with some apparently attractive social and economic benefits. In every plantation there is standardized working hours and a rest day in a week. The employer provides housing and other welfare facilities, such as, free quarter, free fuel and fire-wood, free health services, free grazing land, cultivable land, maternity benefits, bonus, etc. which have perhaps made the conditions of employment more favourable to the plantation workers. As the workers

live within the plantation obviously they have little difficulty in meeting the twin demands of society and plantation. Work in the plantation provides economic stability and security to the workers. Workers work in a world of kinsmen, neighbours and friends. It appears that their social life outside the work and their work within the plantation are an integral part of the same world rather than separate spheres of activity. All these facilities are not generally available in industries other than those of tea plantations. These have some positive effects upon the commitment of the labourers. Thus the plantation has become fully integrated into the life's of the various Adivasi and caste people. The plantation workers are well disciplined and they are always under some routine. This may also be judged in the light of labour commitment. Lambert has shown that some sections of the Indian working force are "over-committed" in the sense that they wanted to stick to their employer without caring much of their prospects. ²⁸ In that sense plantation workers are "over-committed" specially the women workers. Though in plantation, specially among the women workers, the upward mobility in the job is very much restricted but the job experience here determine the degree of commitment of women workers. Form is of the opinion that as the industrial workers move up in the occupational hierarchy, their commitment to industrial work

28. Lambert, R.D., Workers, Factories and Social Change in India, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1963, pp. 82-83.

29
increases. But this does not apply to plantation. The plantation workers specially the women workers are committed workers though they do not move up in the occupational hierarchy.

The nature of the plantation system and its working population show a sharp difference from those of other industries. However, the nature of commitment of workers of plantation cannot be compared with that of the other industrial workers. I shall look at the commitment from a comparative perspective of men and women workers of plantation. Commitment of a worker is studied here by turnover and absenteeism. As in plantation there is a scope for earning extra wages from leaf plucking it is considered as a measure of commitment.

High turnover and absenteeism indicate an uncommitted work force. Generally turnover figures include everyone who leaves factory irrespective of why he leaves or what he does after leaving. Mehotra says that it is not correct to infer lack of commitment from 'turnover' unless it can be shown that a significant number of workers leave factory employment of their own volition and do not take up employment. 30
The turnover figure was very high in the plantation industry

29. Form, W.H., Blue-Collar Stratification, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1976.

30. Mehotra, G.N., Studies in Industrial Sociology — The Indian Context, Atma Ram & Sons, New Delhi, 1975, pp. 12 - 13.

during the British period as labourers frequently ran away from plantations and the enticement of labourer was also very high. Since 1980's turnover had come down gradually. In general turnover was limited in the plantation industry due to three reasons : (a) until several decades ago labourers were restrained from leaving one garden for another until their period of indenture was over, (b) lack of opportunities in the rural matrix where the plantations were situated, and (c) there was positive efforts on the part of plantation owners to keep their labour force as little unpolluted as possible from outside influence. This caused the gradual development of 'island society' in the plantation. In recent years turnover in plantation is not a problem at all as it has come down to a lowest level. It is significant to note that turnover of women workers are comparatively lower than that of men workers. In Chandmoni Tea Estate the total turnover of men and women workers was 0.57 per cent, 0.97 per cent, 0.78 per cent, 0.96 per cent and 0.19 per cent in 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980 and 1981 respectively. The women workers' turnover figure was nil in 1977 and 1981; while it was 0.38 per cent, 0.39 per cent and 0.38 per cent in 1978, 1979 and 1980 respectively. These figures were comparatively lower than those of the men workers (Table : 24). It is revealed from the turnover figures of men and women workers that the latter are more committed to the plantation work than the former.

Table : 24

Turnover of men and women workers in
Chandmoni

Year	Total Number of worker	Workers' turnover		Total %
		Men %	Women %	
1977	520	3 (0.57)	-	3 (0.57)
1978	515	3 (0.58)	2 (0.38)	5 (0.97)
1979	511	2 (0.39)	2 (0.39)	4 (0.78)
1980	520	3 (0.57)	2 (0.38)	5 (0.96)
1981	520	1 (0.19)	-	1 (0.19)

In tea plantations daily wage workers get Rs.6.24 per day in 1980. Although the wages were enhanced to Rs. 8.12 in July, 1979, the workers of Chandmoni were not given the enhanced amount even in 1980. Along with the daily wages the plantation workers, who can pluck more than the amount fixed (Thika) by the management, can earn extra wages. This extra wage earning is only possible in the operation of leaf plucking. A certain amount of skill is necessary in the operation of tea leaf plucking. Obviously sincerity of the worker to

this operation is an important factor. It is observed that some workers pluck less than the amount fixed in the Thika, some others can just complete the Thika, while some others can pluck more than the Thika. This shows that some workers are less committed, while some other are more committed. In the study of commitment of plantation workers extra wage earning from leaf plucking is one of the important indicators of commitment. We are interested here to know the differences at the level of commitment between men and women workers in the operation of leaf plucking. Leaf plucking is the most important operation because it is done during the period from March to December. Our data show that women workers are more committed than the men workers in Chandmoni. In 1980, 232 women workers were engaged in the operation of leaf plucking who had earned an extra wages of Rs. 39.71 per head on an average for plucking of tea leaf more than the amount fixed in the Thika. In that year the Thika of leaf plucking was 22 kg. per worker and the leaf wage was fixed at 10 paise per extra Kg. Whereas in the same year 189 men workers were engaged in this operation and they had earned Rs. 25.33 per head on an average. In general it can be said that women workers are more committed to their work than the men workers of Chandmoni. From the data it is also seen that women workers of Goswami, Mahali, Bhokta, Lohar and Behari communities had earned less extra wages than their men workers from the extra leaf plucking. Reasons behind the

less commitment of these women were : their old age, more number of children and breast-feeding baby and inefficiency (Table : 25). Of the two largest Adivasi communities the Munda women appear to be more committed than the Oraon women in so far the leaf plucking is concerned.

Absenteeism is another indicator of commitment. It refers to the tendency on the part of a worker to abstain from his or her scheduled work. Absenteeism can be studied in many ways because the reason for such absence vary from industry to industry. However if absenteeism is to be taken as a criterion of lack of commitment it will have to be clearly defined as wilful non-attendance of work. A number of work-related factors are responsible for absenteeism. Sinha has grouped such factors under the following heads : (a) in-plant causes; (b) personal causes, and (c) community or social causes.³¹ A worker may be absent if he or she is sick or on a vacation or is simply in no mood to work. His or her absence may be authorised or unauthorised, wilful or due to some unavoidable circumstances beyond control. Absenteeism in the tea industry depends upon various factors which are uncommon to other industries. However, I shall compare here the rate of absenteeism of men and women workers of tea industry to see who are less committed and who are more committed.

31. Sinha, D., "Control of Industrial Absenteeism" in Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol IV, No.2, July, 1961, pp. 123-124.

Table : 25

Extra-wages earned by the daily wage-workers engaged in leaf plucking in 1980

Adivasi and caste	Men			Women		
	Number of workers	Total extra wages earned (in Rs.)	Average extra wages per man- workers (in Rs.)	Number of workers	Total extra wages earned (in Rs.)	Average extra wages per woman worker (in Rs.)
<u>Adivasi</u>						
Oraon	69	1843.56	26.71	84	2855.78	34.00
Munda	36	1035.15	28.75	50	3225.23	65.70
Kheria	4	72.34	18.08	5	242.11	48.42
Meher	2	11.44	5.72	-	-	-
Baraik	11	147.14	13.37	11	323.20	29.38
Goswami	2	14.43	7.21	4	15.37	3.84
Saosi	5	172.65	34.53	4	146.76	36.69
Bairagi	1	1.82	1.82	2	106.10	53.05
Goala	3	40.75	13.58	2	66.69	33.34
Malpahari	7	77.19	11.03	11	336.81	30.62
Mahali	6	247.28	41.21	7	38.46	5.49
Bhokta	1	118.82	118.82	3	71.85	23.95
Korowa	5	25.17	5.03	6	170.65	28.44
Lohar	5	250.11	50.02	6	162.35	27.06
Turi	2	72.22	36.11	2	127.42	63.71
Ore	1	.52	.52	1	68.12	68.12
Ghasi	14	336.31	24.02	15	325.74	25.72
Routia	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bhuiyan	-	-	-	-	-	-
<u>Caste</u>						
Bengali	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bharia	5	117.93	23.58	2	44.11	11.06
Nepali	10	201.79	20.17	15	717.67	47.78

In 1980 in Chandmoni Tea Estate the women workers of Oraon, Munda, Baraik, Saosis, Goala, Malpaharia, Mahali, Bhokta, Nepalis were more absentees than their men workers. Only among the women workers of the Kheria, Meher, Gond, Goswami, Bairagi, Turi and Bihari absenteeism was lesser than that of their men workers. The rate of absenteeism of a woman worker was 24.65 per cent where as for a man worker it was 20.22 per cent in 1980. Therefore, it appears from the study of absenteeism that men workers are more committed than the women workers (Table : 26, 27).

However, the above statement will remain incomplete unless we discuss in depth the reasons for absenteeism of both men and women workers. We must distinguish between the wilful non-attendance and non-wilful non-attendance of the men and women workers.

In general the plantation workers remain absent from their work mainly due to their addiction to liquor, social functions and festivals and illness. In case of women workers such absenteeism is mainly due to their household works and for looking after the children. The weekly rest day negatively affects on the commitment of men workers. The workers get their wages on the day followed by the weekly rest day. Therefore, the workers, mainly the men have the opportunity to spend a good part of their earnings on country-liquor. At least little less than half of the men workers remain absent from work for two or three days as they remain perpetually drunk for

Table : 26

Average attendance and absenteeism of daily-wage men workers in Chandmoni, 1980
(300 man days in 1980)

<u>Adivasi and caste</u>	<u>Number of workers</u>	<u>Total man days</u>	<u>Total man days worked</u>	<u>Average man days per workingman</u>	<u>Average absenteeism per manworker (in man days)</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>Adivasi</u>						
Orson	69	20700	16737	242.56	57.44	(19.14)
Munda	36	10800	8304	230.66	69.34	(23.11)
Kheria	4	1200	949	237.25	62.75	(20.91)
Meher	2	600	395	197.5	102.5	(34.17)
Baraik	11	3300	2416	219.64	80.36	(26.79)
Goswami	2	600	446	223	77	(25.67)
Saosi	5	1500	1138	227.6	72.4	(24.13)
Bairagi	1	300	260	260	40	(13.33)
Goala	3	900	821	273.66	26.34	(8.78)
Malpahari	7	2100	1699	242.71	57.29	(19.10)
Mahali	6	1800	1398	233	67	(22.33)
Bhokta	1	300	266	266	34	(11.33)
Korowa	5	1500	1175	235	65	(21.67)
Lohar	5	1500	1170	234	66	(22.00)
Turi	2	600	408	204.5	95.5	(31.83)
Ore	1	300	268	268	32	(10.67)
Ghasi	14	4200	3665	261.78	38.22	(12.74)
<u>Caste</u>						
Bihari	5	1500	1103	220.6	79.4	(26.47)
Nepali	10	3000	2698	269.8	30.2	(10.07)

Table : 27

Average attendance and absenteeism of daily-wage women workers
in Chandmoni, 1980 (300 man days in 1980)

Adivasi and caste	Number of worker	Total man days	Total man days worked	Average man-days per women worker	Average absenteeism per women worker (in mandays) %
<u>Adivasi</u>					
Oraon	84	25200	18331	218.23	81.77 (27.26)
Munda	50	15000	11137	222.74	77.26 (25.75)
Kheria	5	1500	1282	256.40	48.60 (14.53)
Meher	1	300	294	294.00	6. (2.00)
Gond	1	300	146	146	154 (51.33)
Baraik	11	3300	2120	192.72	107.28 (35.76)
Goswami	4	1200	1000	250.00	50.00 (16.66)
Saosi	4	1200	904	201.00	99.00 (33.00)
Bairagi	2	600	524	262.00	38.00 (12.67)
Goala	2	600	524	262.00	38.00 (12.67)
Malpahari	11	3300	2433	221.18	78.82 (26.27)
Mahali	7	2100	1580	225.71	74.29 (24.76)
Bhokta	3	900	657	219.00	81.00 (27.00)
Korowa	6	1800	1322	220.33	79.67 (26.56)
Lohar	6	1800	1211	201.83	98.17 (32.72)
Turi	2	600	445	222.50	77.50 (25.83)
Ore	1	300	240	240	60.00 (20.00)
Ghasi	15	4500	2702	180.13	119.87 (39.96)
<u>Caste</u>					
Bahari	2	600	458	229	71.00 (23.67)
Nepali	15	4500	3595	255.64	44.36 (14.79)

these days. Despite this fact the average rate of absenteeism among men workers is lower than that of the women workers (Table : 26 and 27). Three fourth of the total labourers are committed where as one fourth of them are less committed. Generally the women workers belonging to the Ghasi and Baraik communities are least committed among all the Adivasi and non-Adivasi communities (Table : 27). Though the Ghasis and Baraiks have come from Chotanagpur, traditionally they are not with an agrarian economic background. Perhaps their high rate of absenteeism is due to their maladjustment to the agro-based plantation occupational environment.

Among women the old workers are more committed than the middle-aged workers. The middle aged women are more burdened with household responsibilities. The young workers specially the unmarried men and women are more committed as they have less family burden.

There are some typical reasons for the women workers' absenteeism in plantation. In the rainy season (July-August) the rate of absenteeism is very high. There are two reasons for it. Those who possess cultivable land given by the plantation authority remain very busy with the Boro paddy cultivation during the rainy season. The other reason is that during this season quite often they suffer from various diseases like diarrhoea, fever, gastro-enteritis, cholera, malarial fever, etc. Most of my informants have expressed such experiences.

There is also another reason for absenteeism. The garden authority uses to give a plastic sheet and an umbrella to every worker once in two years. These are essential parts of the working life of the plantation workers as during heavy rain they cannot work without these. As the garden authority does not supply these two articles regularly some of the workers cannot attend the work during heavy rain. There are some other reasons also. Some of the old informants said that during the winter season their absenteeism is high because they suffer from cold. A few young women workers have expressed a different opinion. They usually remain absent in the winter season because it is a slack season in the tea plantation. As work load is not heavy in this period they can visit their relatives frequently who are also workers of other plantations in the Terai and Dooars regions. Besides, during the winter season they are very often busy with their household works such as paddy husking, cleaning and repairing their houses, constructing new houses, etc.

Besides, there are many other reasons due to which they remain absent from their work. When they themselves or their children suffer from illness, they cannot go to work. There are a few old women workers, who due to high addiction to drinking, remain absent for 2 to 3 days in a week. Once in a week many of them remain absent from their work for cleaning clothes of the family members and for drying paddy for husking. Also sometimes they remain absent without any reason. Above all the most common factor for absenteeism is due to their visit

to kinsmen living in other plantations of the region or due to their kinsmen who often come to visit them. In case of old women workers absenteeism is mainly due to their age and sickness, in case of middle-aged or young married women workers absenteeism is mainly due to some arduous household work or due to illness of their children. The committed workers regularly attend their work unless there is any strong reason for remaining absent from work.

It is seen from the above discussion that both men and women workers are more or less equally committed to plantation work. While turnover and extra leaf wages show that the women workers are more committed than the men workers, the latter appears to be more committed than the former in respect to absenteeism. However, factors behind women workers' absenteeism are various and are deeply rooted in the Adivasi culture. Such absenteeism does not depend entirely on the individuals' will but more on their cultural norms.

WOMEN WORKERS AND TRADE UNION

Participation of Women Workers in Trade Union

The workers of tea plantations in North Bengal initially participated in trade union activities only after the formation of Bengal Assam Rail Road Workers Union (BARRWU) in 1946. However it was a non-political union, but majority of the

members were supporters of the Communist Party of India (CPI). The Congress was new in the trade union activities in this region, and in most of the cases it was sponsored by the employers only. In 1946 the first central trade union for tea plantation workers was formed in Jalpaiguri. It was later affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Its secretary was a wholetime³² of the Communist Party of India and was an organiser of BARRWU at Dumohani. The communist trade unionists were allowed to enter in the Terai region only in 1952 because of the general elections in that year. The union organisers of tea plantations used the chance to hold mass meetings in the labour lines in the pretext of election propaganda. Ultimately the employers had to give recognition to the communist union to³³ contain their workers only in 1954.

At present there are two rival trade unions in the Chandmoni Tea Estate. These two trade unions are always in competition with each other, and they try to extend control over the workers. One of the trade unions is organised by the Congress party which is locally known as Rastriya Chiya Mazdoor Congress (RCMC) and the other one is organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU) locally known as the Darjeeling District Chiya Kaman Mazdoor (DDCKM). This latter trade union is influenced by the ideology of the Communist Party of India

32. Bhowmik, S., op.cit., pp. 142-143.

33. Griffiths, P., op.cit., p. 288.

(Marxist). The RCMC union was started in Chandmoni in 1950 and the CITU has been properly functioning since 1967-68.

✓ The unions function through the garden committee and its office bearers such as president, secretary and treasurer. All of them are men workers of the plantation and none are women. There is no scope for women to occupy such positions. The top leadership is not of working class origin, The leaders hail from the Bengali middle class families or they are of the 'Babu' class origin. This is mainly due to the fact that the plantation workers are not in a position to handle the matters of trade union nor there is any attempt to train them to do so. The secretary of the CITU is a Christian wage-worker of Chandmoni. He hails from the Munda community. It has been difficult for him to get the backing and co-operation of the sub-staff who consider themselves superior to him. The president is a compounder of the tea estate, a Bengali Babu. In case of the RCMC union, a Dafadar is the secretary who belongs to the Oraon community. He has to rely heavily on the advice of the sub-staff and old people while performing his duties. The president of this union is also a factory worker of Chandmoni and belongs to the same ethnic group.

The CITU has its roots among the women workers of the Chandmoni Tea Estate whereas the RCMC union is less popular among them. Though there are 88 (39.82 per cent) women workers as members of the RCMC union seldom they participate in

the meetings and in the decision-making processes. Whereas the CITU women members, whose number is 123 (55.65 per cent), are comparatively more active. A few of them take part in party meetings under the leadership of a woman named Manika Roy.

This woman is the wife of the president of the CITU. She hails from a Bengali Brahmin family and teaches in a primary school. She has organised a Mahila Samiti in the Chandmoni Tea Estate.

The trade union leaders of the local committee of Siliguri select the secretary of the garden unit. In most of the cases it is through the common consensus of the workers but not through elections. The secretary is the most powerful person among the workers of the tea estate. He is entrusted with many responsibilities of the union who leads its members and is the chief spokesman to demand for benefits of the workers. Sometimes a second rank leadership may also emerge to mobilize the workers for mass meetings and hold line meetings to discuss workers' demand, etc. Such a second rank leadership is uncommon to this garden.

The trade union collects its funds from its members. The lion share of the union fund comes from the union fees. The union fees for the HMC is Re. 1 per month for each member. In addition, each member contributes Rs. 5 to the union fund at the time of yearly bonus. In case of the CITU the membership fee for each member is .25 paise per month alongwith the additional annual contribution of Rs. 5. The members who are monthly wage

workers get higher annual bonus and therefore their membership subscription is also higher.

From the table : 28 it^{is} seen that most of the Christian workers of Chandmoni are members of the RCMC, i.e., 82.22 per cent are members of this trade union whereas 17.79 per cent of them belong to the CITU. The Saonsars show a tendency towards the CITU membership. There are 227 (67.76 per cent) workers to the CITU and 108 (32.24 per cent) to the RCMC. Among the caste groups there is also high trend of CITU membership. About 95.84 per cent are members of the CITU while 4.16 per cent are of the RCMC. The old men and women workers are generally supporters of the RCMC union, but the members of the young generation are more inclined to take membership of the CITU, because some of them seem to be politically conscious. It is seen that 92 Christian Oraon workers are members of the RCMC union and only 10 are members of the CITU. Among the Saonsar Oraon 31 are members of the RCMC and 41 are of the CITU. But there is only 1 Christian Munda as a member of the RCMC union while 8 are of the CITU. Among the Saonsar Mundas 33 are the members of the RCMC and 59 are of the CITU. In case of Christian Kheria 4 are members of the RCMC and 3 are of the CITU, whereas 4 Saonsar Kheria are members of the RCMC and 3 are of the CITU. However, it is revealed that majority of the Adivasis and caste groups have inclination towards CITU unionism. Out of the total of 515 workers only 207 (40.19 per cent)

Table : 28

Workers and trade union membership, 1978-79

Ethnic group	Number of the union members								Those who are not member of any trade union			
	<u>R.G.M.C</u>				<u>C.I.T.U.</u>				M	F	C	Total
	M	F	C	Total	M	F	C	Total				
<u>Adivasi</u>												
Orasn	60	54	9	123	24	24	3	51	.	2	.	2
Munda	18	11	5	34	35	31	1	67	.	5	.	5
Kheria	3	4	1	8	4	1	1	6	.	.	.	.
Meher	.	.	.	.	1	1	1	3	.	.	.	.
Gonda	.	.	.	.	1	1	.	2	.	.	.	.
Baraik	3	1	.	4	16	10	3	29	.	.	.	.
Goswami	.	.	.	.	4	4	.	8	.	.	1	1
Sacsi	1	1	.	2	3	2	.	5	.	1	.	1
Bairagi	.	.	.	.	3	2	.	5	.	.	.	.
Goala	.	.	.	.	3	2	.	5	.	.	.	.
Malpahari	2	3	1	6	6	6	.	12	.	.	.	.
Mahali	4	3	.	7	2	3	1	6	.	.	.	.
Bhokta	2	2	.	4	.	1	.	1	.	.	.	.
Chasi	3	4	.	7	14	9	2	25	.	1	1	2
Korowa	.	.	.	.	5	5	.	10	.	.	.	.
Routia	1	2	.	3	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Bhuiyan	.	.	.	.	1	.	.	1	.	.	.	.
Lohar	4	3	.	7	2	3	.	5	.	.	.	.
Turi	.	.	.	.	3	2	.	5	.	.	.	.
Ore	.	.	.	.	1	1	.	2	.	.	.	.
<u>Caste</u>												
Bengali	.	.	.	.	1	.	.	1	.	.	.	.
Bihari	2	.	.	2	10	2	1	13	.	.	.	.
Nepali	.	.	.	.	16	13	3	32	.	1	2	3
Total	108	88	16	207	155	123	16	294	4	10	4	14

are members of the RCMC union and 294 (57.08 per cent) are of the CITU. The rest 14 (2.72 per cent) workers have not accepted membership in any of the unions; among them 10 are women and 4 are children. Among these women workers two declined to continue their membership in the union because they did not get any help from the organisation when they had faced social problems due to their inter-ethnic marriage. A few cases are given below. Sudhni Naik (22) a Ghasi woman, a worker of Chandmoni, married a Munda. She was a member of the RCMC union. But due to inter-Adivasi marriage she had to pay a fine to the Adivasi Panchayat and in this matter her union did not support or help her. She resigned from the membership of the union and discontinued the subscription. There was another reason also. Her younger brother Bhulan Naik (20) did not get promotion from child worker to the adult worker category, and the RCMC union did not help him in this matter. His brother also discontinued the RCMC union membership due to this reason. At present they two are not members of any trade union. Khuse Rai (46), a Nepali woman worker said that her husband had died on duty in 1974. But the management refused to pay any compensation and even his provident fund was not paid. Khuse who was a member of the RCMC union requested the union leaders for fair judgement but did not help her. Since then Khuse left the RCMC and at present she does not belong to any union. Similarly Marsha Munda (57) left the CITU membership because the union did not help her to recover her retired

husband's provident fund. Rest of the women workers who were not members of any trade union left union membership due to some personal grievances.

The union involvement of the women workers is very low. The involvement of the members in the union is examined in terms of their evaluation of the organization and their participation in its activities. None of the women workers know the actual names of the trade unions to which they belong. They can only recognize the emblems of the trade unions. Whereas sixty per cent of the men workers are well aware of it. In general they are less aware of the details functions of the unions due to their illiteracy and limited world view. The political ideologies as well as political functions of the trade unions are unknown to them. They do not know even the names of the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Prime Minister of India, etc.

The plantation women workers are not in a position to take active part in trade union activities because of the social conditions. As soon as they finish their work they rush back to their home for doing their domestic work. The men do not like them to keep away from home after their work is over. As a result, women workers find it extremely difficult to attend union meetings or to visit union offices. In most occasions, therefore, their membership in the trade unions is little more than nominal. However, if any dispute regarding their own jobs crops up individually they are very quick to ventilate their grievances as loudly as possible. In general issues, however,

they depend on the men workers, join in the strikes and other activities with them as passive supporters.

Out of the total women workers of 221 only 10 (4.52 per cent) are regular participants of the unions, who regularly attend party meetings. The rest of them are very irregular in this respect. Among the 10 regular women participants of the union 3 belong to the Munda, 1 to the Baraik, 1 to the Gosla and 2 to the Nepali castes and the rest 3 to the Oraon. Out of the 221 women workers 211 (95.47 per cent) are the union members. The members approve the union, whatever its politics or performances, because they know that only the union is exclusively devoted to their interests, though a few (4.52 per cent) are of the view that union never serves their interest.

The informants were asked to name the most important of the four union activities, namely, economic bargaining, improving the working condition of the workers, building social solidarity and changing the political and social system of the country. Though most of them were unaware of the details functions of the trade unions they clearly knew certain specific functions. About 210 women workers told that economic bargaining was the most important function. Only about 5 per cent gave very vague opinion about the general functions. Similarly to a few women workers (6.78 per cent) union was meant to depend their service interests.

The plantation workers belong to the unskilled category except a few who can be accepted as semi-skilled

labourers. They are mostly concerned with the wages but not with their long term benefit. They often issue strike notice to demand for bonus, specially before the Durga Puja. In August, 1978, September, 1979 and 1980 there were general strikes for bonus. During this period there were a few token strikes demanding the arrear money of the enhanced wages. Such decision over strike was taken at the meeting of the co-ordination committee of the tea plantation workers of West Bengal in Jalpaiguri.

In Chandmoni a situation of unrest existed in 1977 when the rivalry between the RCMC and the CITU was at its peak. Influence of political parties from outside the plantation aggravated the situation when a RCMC leader was murdered. One Bihari boy named Bhagawan Jha was responsible for the incident. He was an active supporter of the CITU. For this incident 7 men were dismissed by the authority. In 1978 there was a general strike for indefinite period on the bonus issue. It lasted for one month and twentyone days. The two rival unions were united and demanding for 12 per cent bonus. Lastly, the bonus issue was settled at 8 per cent. During the period from September 1977 to July, 1979 the manager of Chandmoni was a very ill behaved person whose relation with the workers was very strained. In 1979, the workers gheraoed the manager several times and in July of this year they severely man-handled him and forced him to resign. In September, 1979, the workers called for a general strike for the bonus issue. This year they

demanding for 16 per cent bonus. Finally it was settled at 9 per cent.

In Chandmoni the situation gradually improved when a new manager joined in November, 1979. In February, 1980 there was a general strike for 15 days demanding the arrear money of the enhanced wages and also the enhanced wages of the women workers at par with the men workers. In this year before the Durga Puja both the unions called for a joint strike for getting 20 per cent bonus. However they succeeded in getting 12 per cent.

In the above strikes and gheraos the women workers also joined although most of them were passive supporters only. They never took any active role except a few. A few names may be mentioned here who became prominent figures during the agitations. Bina Goala (50), Tetri Baraik (46), Raimoni Korowa (44), Etowary Oraon (39), Fulmoni Munda (30), Varshi Munda (48), Keso Munda (44), Khuse Rai (46) etc. quite often used harsh words to the manager. Bina Goala and Tetri Baraik who were members of the CITU exhibited emotional reactions with extreme aggressiveness. When provoked they became violent, but this was not due to their union involvement. It was only due to their aggressive nature.

There are two main factors which seem to be the genuine motive for the workers to join the trade union movement : the desire to get benefit of bonus and to get an arrear of the enhanced wages. In the transitional Adivasi society

of plantation with a low level of technology the economic development is dominated by economic consideration and the workers' immediate objective is to attain higher wages and improved material conditions. Such a situation is quite different from advanced industrial society whose interests are many-sided and not merely economic. The plantation women workers have failed to join the trade union movement actively because they are not made aware of the trade unions' ideologies. They have no sense of lasting class consciousness as they are ignorant about their working condition, discrimination and exploitation. They are seen to be over-burdened with housework as well as plantation work. However, relation between the management and workers have changed considerably due to the trade unions' activities. Today the women workers have developed more contact with the management due to the changing relations.

The trade unions' functions are not only confined to the working life of the Adivasis but it influence their cultural life also. A few cases will reveal the role of union in the socio-cultural life of the plantation workers. Even in such cases women workers do not play any role in settling disputes. In 1978 Madan Bhokta (25), a Saonsar Bhokta, who read upto class X, lured away Flora Soren (19), a Christian Kheria, who read upto class VI. The boy lived in the neighbourhood of Chandmoni and did agricultural work. Flora's father was against this marriage; he is a Dawawalla and an influential member of the CITU. He called for a residential line Panchayat meeting

and demanded Rs. 500.00 from the boy. As the boy was not a resident of Chandmoni the fine could ^{not} be implemented. Then Flora's father demanded baptismation of the boy, but the latter refused. Flora is a worker of Chandmoni and a member of the CITU. On her request the CITU leaders settled the dispute through a mutual agreement. In another case of inter-Adivasi marriage between Chamra Munda (30), a Saonsar Munda and Bengo Oraon (20), a Christian Oraon the RCMC and the CITU leaders settled the dispute in 1974.

There are generally two kinds of management-labour relationship. One is characterized by confrontation where the workers fight in every possible way to obtain their rights and benefits. The other involves a policy of accommodation in which management considers peaceful agreement as more advantageous. The situation in this tea estate seems to be more, one of accommodation, although some tensions comes to the surface at times. Contact with the plantation owner is less possible as he lives outside, but the workers could present their grievances to the manager of the tea estate. The relationship of the workers with the present manager is overall good. He is quite popular among them specially among the women workers due to his pleasant behaviour. One factor of his popularity may be due to his long service first as a clerk, then as a assistant manager and presently as a manager and familiarity with the workers. The present manager personally knows most of the workers and calls them by their names. During the working hours he always moves

with the workers and makes constant supervision of their work. The workers are, at time afraid of him, but on the whole like him also.

The management's view is that the trade union leaders have ruined the innocence and submissiveness of the plantation workers. They have become lazy and arrogant due to the instigation of the trade union leaders. The manager said, "Now-a-days it has become difficult for the management to keep the male workers under the control and also to get committed work from them. Whereas the women are more disciplined and committed workers". ✓

The Adivasi Panchayat in the Plantation

I have already discussed that the social structure of the Chandmoni Tea Estate consists of multi-ethnic communities. This multi-ethnic social structure is controlled and maintained by the Adivasi-Panchayat. I shall discuss the role of the Adivasi-Panchayat in maintaining social control and cohesion among the various ethnic groups. However, the main concern here is to find out whether there is any role of the Adivasi women workers in the Panchayat. One can assume that alongwith the changing economic status of the Adivasi workers their status in the power structure of the society has also undergone considerable changes. The study of the Panchayat of the plantation society provides an insight into the relationship between the multi-ethnic social structure and the distribution of power

among men and women members of the society. It seems that there are : (1) general Panchayat — multi-Adivasi, (2) individual Adivasi Panchayat and (3) residential line Panchayat — Multi-Adivasi.

The Adivasi Panchayat is an informal institution for social control. It performs both jural and administrative functions as it can modify or prescribe customs for the plantation society. However this Panchayat is not the same as the statutory Panchayat. There are two types of Panchayat in the Chandmoni Tea Estate, but none of them are permanent. There are a number of smaller Adivasi-Panchayats each meant exclusively for one community. Its composition is therefore ethnically homogeneous. The other Panchayat is multi-Adivasi composed of members from various communities. The latter Panchayat may be held at two levels : at the residential line level and at the plantation level. The Panchayat does not have any formal body like that of statutory panchayat, and also there is no hard and fast rule for the formation of such Panchayat. The Panchayat is formed by a few Panches, i.e., persons. All the Panches are men. There is no place for women in the Panchayat.

The individual Adivasi panchayat is exclusively meant for settling disputes within a particular community. It decides intra-community disputes, custody of children of separated couples and also settles disputes arise out of inter-ethnic marriage. However, the smaller Adivasi communities of Chandmoni do not form such a Panchayat apparently due to their insufficient number. These smaller Adivasi communities settle their disputes

through the general multi-Adivasi Panchayat. The multi-Adivasi Panchayat holds its session more frequently than the individual Adivasi Panchayats. It decides cases relating to the general law and order situation in the Chandmoni Tea Estate. Cases such as theft, witchcraft, sorcery, inter-ethnic quarrels, inter-ethnic marriages, inter-religious marriages, etc. are also often settled. Sometimes the function of the trade union may merge with that of the multi-Adivasi Panchayat. ~~It~~ Petty cases within a residential line may be discussed and settled by the male members of the various households living in that particular line. The role and function of various types of Panchayats will become apparent from the discussion of the following cases. Bengo Oraon (25) fell in love with Chamra Munda (28) and they got married in 1974. Chamra had already left his first wife. However, Bengo's father could not accept them, and therefore he lodged a complaint against Chamra to the Oraon Panchayat. In this Panchayat Bengo's father demanded Rs. 500.00 as a fine from Chamra which the latter paid to the Panchayat. The Oraon Panchayat took Rs. 200.00 and the rest was given to Bengo's father.

In this Panchayat meeting Daniel Oraon (Secretary of the RCMC), Illias Oraon, Sammuell Oraon, Joseph Oraon, Manairam Oraon, Sanairam Oraon, Baidhan Oraon, etc. were present to settle the dispute but no women participated.

A case decided by the residential line Panchayat may be cited here. Koka Lohar (55) of Dibroo residential line of Chandmoni was notorious for rowdyism and addiction to

liquor. Since long the neighbourers did not like him. In 1976 Koka brought in his home a woman named Noni Lohar with her four sons, and kept her as a concubine. Koka had already married and had a daughter who was also married. His daughter and son-in-law was staying at that time in the same residential line. The residents of the Dibroo line did not like it and they held a Panchayat meeting. In this meeting Dibroo Munda, Somra Munda, Jallah Oraon, Gondra Munda, Sitaram Naik, Bhulan Naik, Bhudhua Munda, Thepai Munda, etc. took active part. After prolonged discussion Koka was socially ostracised and he was asked to leave the residential line. The Panchayat also requested the management to implement the decision. Since then Koka started to live separately in an isolated place away from other residential lines. All worker's of Chandmoni irrespective of any community discontinued social interactions with him. But he had developed close relationship with two other excommunicated families, that of Balkumari Majhe and Dharmadas Majhe. However, as Koka is a Sardar in Chandmoni he could exert his influence and command respect from his co-workers. This indicates the separation to some extent between social life and working life in the plantation. The Panches who decided this case were elderly men of various Adivasi communities. No woman participated in the Panchayat meeting as a member of the Panch.

A big general multi-ethnic Panchayat was held in Chandmoni in 1977. Balkumari Majhe, a retired ^{Tvri} woman worker of Chandmoni was suspected to be a witch who lived in the Matigara

residential line of Chandmoni. In 1977 due to an epidemic a large number of cattle died and many workers suffered from diseases in Chandmoni. Bisnath Bhokta a retired Sardar and some elderly person of the same residential line sought advice of an Ojha who held Balkumari Majhi as a witch and advised them to drive her from Chandmoni. Then all the Adivasi men workers of Chandmoni held a Panchayat and decided to beat her to death or to drive her out from Chandmoni. The management of Chandmoni took up the case and suggested the Panches to let her live separately in an isolated place within Chandmoni. Since then she had started to live in an isolated place not very far from Koka Lohars' house . No women worker participated in the Panchayat proceedings although this case involved a retired woman worker of the plantation.

There is no fixed or permanent body of members of the Panchayat. Both old and young men may join and take part in the decision making process. However, initiative is taken by a few powerful men or Panches who appear to be self appointed. They decide what action should be taken on certain matter and then they inform the common men of their respective societies about the venue and time of the meeting. Generally meetings are held in the playground of Chandmoni. The women are deliberately excluded from such meetings as if they are unable to discuss and decide any social matter. The Panch, i.e., important men members discuss the matters in the Panchayat meeting and the other members of the meeting irrespective of community and age

participate in the decision. Women of the society have no place even today in the functioning of the Panchayat.

Traditionally, the common will of the community was expressed by the village Panch where the entire village community participated in theory. But in practice the Panchayat was represented by the elderly men of the village. Practically there was no role of women in the decision making process in the Panchayat. In the present situation in the plantation the women workers have also no role in the decision making process, they can only sit and hear the decisions. However, normally they do not even take part in the meetings. They can only join as silent audience. As the women have no role in the decision making process their political status has yet to be improved. The economic status of the plantation women workers has improved but at the Panchayat level they are yet to be accepted as full members having a say in the decision making process. Economic independence does not necessarily bring improvement in the power and privileges in other spheres of life.