

CHAPTER - V

WOMEN AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
OF THE PLANTATION

This chapter mainly concentrates upon the social life of the women workers in the Chandmoni Tea Estate with a view to show the impact of plantation industry on the social and cultural life of the women workers and the extent to which the traditional life-style has changed in this environment. I have discussed the changes that have taken place in the institution of family and marriage, familial relationships and authority pattern, process of socialization of female children, process of social adjustment of the women workers in the industrial environment, nature of their economic contribution to the families, social status of the women workers and their general out look.

FAMILY AND MARRIAGE AMONG WOMEN WORKERS

The Family

There are 276 families in the Chandmoni Tea Estate which can be divided into three types namely, nuclear, joint and unclassified on the basis of their size and composition. The nuclear families generally consist of parents and their

unmarried children. The joint families consist of married sons and daughters living with their parents or sometime two married brothers living together with their sons and daughters. The unclassified type includes single member or more member consisting not of husband and wife but of some other relatives. Out of 276 families there are 208 (75.36 per cent) nuclear, 60 (21.74 per cent) joint and 8 (2.90 per cent) unclassified families. The nuclear families are of various types in their size and composition. The size varies from two to five and above members. The most common type of nuclear family has four members. There are 48 such families. Next in order comes the families with three members (44), five plus members (43), five members (39) and two members (34).

Table - 29

Size of the nuclear family

Family size	Number of families	Number of individuals
2	34	68
3	44	132
4	48	192
5	39	195
5 +	43	295
Total	208	882

The larger size are however not always due to greater number of children born to the couples in these

Families, but often some unmarried dependent relatives come to stay in these families as permanent members.

Table - 30

Size of the joint family

Family size	Number of families	Number of individuals
4	2	8
5	27	135
6	13	78
7	8	56
8	6	48
9	3	27
10	1	10
Total	60	362

The joint families consisting of five members are most numerous followed respectively by six, seven and eight members families. There are 27 families consisting of five members and 13 families consisting of six members and 8 families consisting of seven members and 6 families consisting of eight members. There are also 3 families consisting of nine members and 1 family consisting of ten members (Table : 30).

There are 882 members in 208 nuclear families. Therefore, the average size of a nuclear family is 4.24. There are also 362 members in 60 joint families. So the

average size of the joint family is 6.03. In case of the joint family there are a few typical large families. In such joint families sometimes married sons and daughters may live with their parents. There is the Ghardamad system where the daughters' husbands live with their parent-in-laws. This system is prevalent in the families particularly who have agricultural lands of their own. The Ghardamad works on this land. Such system is very common among the Ghasis and Baraiks. Sometimes brothers' sons or sisters' sons are also seen living with their relatives in large families. In some cases where the couples have no son or whose sons are minors they keep Ghardamad to work on their land. There is also another reason for which Ghardamad works in their father-in-law's land. In a plantation, a daughter may be recruited if her mother is ill or retired. A son also may have a job in lieu of his father or mother; a daughter-in-law may have a job after her in-laws have retired. But the son-in-law will never get a job in a plantation after retirement on his father-in-law or mother-in-law. Other relatives may live with a couple if they do not have accommodation. Sometimes father's brother or sister who is working in the same plantation may also live with their nephew or niece, and sometimes minor brother and sister live with their elder brother or sister. Although there are a few joint families in this plantation the nuclear families predominate. The plantation's recruitment policy has strengthened such nuclearisation.

In the plantations of this region the labourers were often recruited in pairs by the Sardars or sometime they came in pairs in quest of jobs. Gradually they settled down in the new environment in pairs. The plantations offer equal opportunity to the women alongwith their husbands in the job market and consider a nuclear family as a basic unit to receive work facilities and other benefits. Certain facilities such as free quarter, free firewood, free cultivable land, ration at subsidized rates are given to each family. This naturally encouraged the workers to form nuclear families. In many cases these are the factors responsible for splitting up of large joint families into their constituent nuclear units.

Additional employment and filling up of the new jobs are done primarily on the basis of family units and not from the unemployed persons available within the plantation as such. The facilities given by the management is same for all categories of family units including single member units.

There are also other factors which induce large households to split into smaller one. Since 1970 in terms of the Tea plantation Act, 1951, the management of the Chandmoni Tea Estate is providing some brick-built quarters to the workers. This accommodation is not sufficient for larger households. In such quarters there is only one room and a kitchen. If there is any family where two adult persons are workers, say for example, a father and a son who live together, they are entitled to get one quarter

only. For instance Michel Kheria (40) lives with his married son Zirmeous Kheria (22) who is also a permanent worker. As they live together they are entitled to get one quarter only. But if Zirmeous establishes a separate family he will be provided with a separate quarter.

The functional role of the family has changed as the traditional mode of production has changed to a new type of production relation in the plantation economy. Work in the plantation has changed their economic activity from self-supporting peasant cultivators to wage labourers. Thus the family has changed from a unit of production to a unit of consumption. Traditionally, joint living was essential for joint and organized efforts for agricultural work and to support the family economy. But under the present situation in plantation society, joint-living to some extent deprives the workers of some of their due benefits from the garden authorities. Thus joint family, except under special circumstances, is disfavoured.

Though there is a predominance of nuclear family in the plantation society, nonetheless a close relationship with other primary and secondary relatives are maintained. Here the kinsmen and relatives who live side by side in nuclear families often help one another in times of need. In this feature of close kinship inter-dependence the plantation society differs from the other industrial society.

Marriage

In the Adivasi as well as the Nepali societies in the plantation marriage appears to be more a social contract based on individual choices, rather than a sacrament. A boy and a girl can marry according to their own will without prior consent of their parents. Sometime it may take place by negotiation. After marriage if a girl does not want to live with the boy, she can leave him and may live with another boy of her choice. In case of Christian Adivasis, marriage takes place in the Catholic Church as all of them are Catholics. The Church never objects to separation but does not allow bigamy. Among the Saonsar Adivasis divorce and remarriage of both men and women are not uncommon.

The consensual union, when a couple live together without being married, is very common. In one sense we can call this as a prelude to marriage. The Adivasis also distinguishes between marriage (Sadi) and consensual union (Rajikhusi). During the field work I have found that most of the couples have established new families on the basis of such consensual unions. As Adivasi man often refers to, "I am keeping her but our marriage has not yet taken place". But an Adivasi woman never says, "I am keeping him". If we look at the traditional form of Adivasi marriage we find that such consensual unions were not very uncommon in the traditional society.

Marriage among the two religious groups, Christian and non-Christian (Saonsar) is very common. Endogamous marriage

is the general rule though there are numerous cases of inter-Adivasi marriages particularly among the Mundas, Oraons and Kherias. In such a case the boy has to pay a token fine to the girl's parents. In the Chandmoni Tea Estate there are six cases of marriage between Oraons and Mundas. This type of inter-Adivasi marriage is socially permitted as it is thought that Munda, Oraon and Kheria belong to the same status group. But the inter-Adivasi marriages which take place between the members of two different status groups are considered as serious offence. This is generally settled through the Panchayat and sometime a serious conflict between the two parties may arise. In such cases the boy has to pay a heavy fine. About twenty years ago such couples were excommunicated.

Although marriage is strictly monogamous, sometimes polygamy also takes place. When the first wife proves barren, the man can marry for the second time. There are three such cases of second marriage in this plantation. Two cases are from the Mundas, one Christian and other Saonsar and the third case is from the Ghasis. In case of the Christian Munda the two co-wives are living together and in the other two cases the co-wives live separately. There is one incidence of a Lohar man, who has wife and a married daughter, keeping another woman with her children born of previous union. There are also some men who have extramarital relations with women living outside the tea estate. But such extra-marital relations are not socially

accepted. The culturally approved formal marriage may be postponed, if the marriage formalities prove too burdensome at a given point of time. This happens among almost all the communities in the plantation. Therefore, they enter into consensual union (Raji-Khusi) first and then, in most cases years later, they get married (Sadi) when their finances permit. In this formal marriage religious ceremonies are performed by a grand feast. Bhowmik has found the same trend among the Adivasis of the plantations of Doears. He has reported that consensual union followed by marriage is not only found among the Adivasis but it is also noticed among other communities. ¹ But I have found this custom only among certain low caste Nepalis and Adivasis. Such a practice is not prevalent among Biharis and high caste Nepalis, who are, of course, very few in the plantation. It was reported that there are a good number of instances where the couples were ceremonially married just before the marriages of their sons and daughters. If the parents do not perform their own marriage rituals their children do not get legitimacy. Marriage among the Adivasis in Chandmoni may operationally be used to indicate the common residence of a man and a woman exercising sexual rights and recognising the children born out of them.

In a negotiated marriage the father of a girl searches for a groom when his daughter reaches the marriageable age.

1. Bhowmik, S., Class Formation in the Plantation System, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981, p. 121.

If a suitable boy is found and if the boy's parents approve the girl then there will be an elaborate discussion for the fixation of the bride-price. The boy's parents have to pay the agreed upon amount of bride-price to the girl's parents. Among the Adivasis there is no system of dowry. Once the fixation of bride-price is over the pre-marriage celebrations take place associated with large consumption of rice bear (Haria) in the company of kinsmen, friends and relatives. On a fixed date the girl leaves for the boy's home where kinsmen and friends are also entertained ^{with} large quantity of Haria. There is another ceremony known as Kutumb-Khilana (engagement). If the girl likes the boy's family, after a few months, the relatives of both sides are called for a feast with drink. After these preliminaries are over the actual marriage ceremony is performed. If the girl does not like the boy's place or his people she may return to her father's house and may marry again. In such a case the bride-price is returned to the boy's parents.

There is another type of marriage, known as a Ghardamad system which I have mentioned earlier. In case the boy is unable to pay the bride-price, he lives with the in-laws as a Ghardamad and pays the bride-price by serving them in domestic work. In this tea estate there are 6 Ghardamads of the Oraons, 1 of the Baraiks, 1 of the Lohar and 6 of the Ghasis.

Plantation communities as a whole try to confine affinal relations within their occupational group from the neighbouring gardens. It is difficult to give the exact number of such marriages that had taken place as no record is kept. But it seems ^{that} now-a-days most of the marriages take place within the same plantation. It is due to some economic interests that they try to confine the marriages within the same plantation. According to the Adivasi workers, at present the job opportunities of a worker is very limited, and if a girl is married to a boy of other garden she will have to leave her job. Since there is no guarantee for getting regular job in other tea plantations, girls as well as their parents are more inclined to settle their marriages in the same tea estate. The Adivasi workers no more prefer to establish marital alliance with their native place although earlier they used to bring wives from there frequently. This has resulted into a discontinuity of social relations with the home land. This breach has been further augmented by factors like considerable distance, lack of proper communication and mental attachment with the distant kinsmen, changes in the ideas and values etc.

The data on marriage show that there are 83 inter-plantation marriages within the same occupational group. The couples are middle aged and young. About 28 young couples have married within the Chandmoni Tea Estate. There are however 35 cases of marriage with persons of other occupational groups, namely, agricultural labourers, cultivators, wage-labourers in plywood factory, truck driver and cleaner, railway service

holder, rickshaw puller, military service holder, etc. There are 9 young couples who had married in their home land.

Inter-ethnic marriage.

Inter-ethnic marriages are not socially sanctioned, despite a shift from the traditional kin-based rural environment to the new plantation environment. About 20 years ago cases of inter-ethnic marriages rarely took place as they were strongly disapproved. If such a marriage had occurred, both the couples were excommunicated. At present the incidence of such inter-ethnic marriages seems to be on the increase. It seems that with the increase in communication and inter-action with society outside the plantation traditional ideas about marriage are rapidly changing and inter-Adivasi barriers are gradually breaking down.

The Adivasis of tea plantation are broadly divided into two status groups. One group which is considered superior consists of Oraons, Mundas and Kherias. Among them the Christians consider themselves superior to the Saonars. The Oraons, Mundas and Kherias consider themselves culturally similar and have close social interactions among them, while the rest of the Adivasis are considered as socially inferior to the former group. This latter group of Adivasis have also close social interactions among themselves. Marriage among the Adivasis belonging to the same status group are socially accepted. If marriages take place

between the Adivasi groups belonging to two different status groups, it is considered as a serious offence.

Although the population of tea plantations in North Bengal consists of multi-ethnic communities inter-Adivasi marriages seem to be quite rare in the plantations located in the interior regions. As for example, in Sonali tea plantation Bhowmik reports that there was only one case of inter-Adivasi marriage² between a Munda boy and a Oraon girl. As noted earlier in this plantation there are 20 Adivasi groups and 3 caste groups. I noted about 29 cases of inter-ethnic marriages among them during 1979 - 81. The Chandmoni plantation is situated very near to the Siliguri town. Urban influence on these heterogeneous communities appear to be quite strong. Besides, other factors play an important role in practising inter-ethnic marriage. The Adivasis who are few in number often have no other alternative but to take a wife from other communities. In recent years such marriages have become more frequent in this plantation and there is hardly any case of ex-communication. Even inter-ethnic marriages between Adivasi and caste group were found during my field work. Five such cases of Adivasi and caste marriages and 24 cases of inter-Adivasi marriages are given in Table - 31.

2. Ibid., p. 124.

Table - 31

Inter-ethnic marriage in Chandmoni Tea Estate.

Marriage between the ethnic groups.	Number of cases.
Oraon - Bihari Caste (Muchi)	1
Oraon - Munda	6
Oraon - Goala	1
Oraon - Lohar	1
Oraon - Kheria	1
Oraon - Gond	1
Oraon - Baraik	1
Oraon - Goala	1
Oraon - Rajbansi Caste	1
Munda - Ghasi	3
Munda - Bhokta	2
Kheria- Malpahari	1
Kheria- Bhokta	1
Baraik- Munda	1
Mahali- Ghasi	1
Ghasi - Lohar	1
Ghasi - Baraik	1
Bairagi-Bihari Caste (Khusbaha)	1
Turi -Bengali caste (Kayastha)	1
Bihari Caste (Muchi) - Meher	1
Saosi - Goswami	1
Total Number of cases.	29

Out of 5 cases of Adivasi and caste marriages there are marriages between Oraon and Rajbansi, Oraon and Muchi (Bihari caste), Meher and Muchi (Bihari Caste), Bairagi and Khusbaha (Bihari Caste) and Turi and Kayastha (Bengali Caste). Out of 24 cases of inter-Adivasi marriages there are 2 cases of inter-marriage between Oraon boys and Munda girls, 1 case of marriage between a Oraon boy and Goala girl, ^{and} 1 case of marriage between a Oraon boy and a Lohar girl. There are 4 cases of marriage between Munda boys and Oraon girls, 1 case of marriage between Munda boy and Bhokta girl, ^{and} 2 cases of marriage between Munda boys and Ghasi girls. There are also 2 cases of marriage between Bhokta boy and Munda girl, and Bhokta boy and Kheria girl and 2 cases of marriage between Kheria boy and Oraon girl and Kheria boy and Malpahari girl. Among other inter-ethnic marriages there are 3 cases of marriages between Baraik boy and Oraon girl, Baraik boy and Ghasi girl and Baraik boy and Munda girl. Besides, there are marriages between Ghasi boy and Munda girl, Ghasi boy and Lohar girl, Mahali boy and Ghasi girl, Mahali boy and Oraon girl, Gond boy and Oran girl, ^{and} Saosi boy and Goswami girl.

Inter-ethnic marriage, therefore, is widely practised in the Chandmoni Tea Estate so much so that often marriages between Adivasis belonging to two different status groups take place. However, such inter-ethnic marriages always involve a fine imposed on the couple. A part of the fine is given to the parents of the girl and the rest is taken by the Panchayat as

it becomes the mediator between the two involved social groups. Thus the multi-ethnic society of the tea plantation has adapted to the reality of situation and has found means to accept inter-ethnic marriages through the medium of a fine, which is often a token of social sanction. Only in very rare cases ostracization is resorted to when Adivasis belonging to two different social statuses inter-marry. In the Chandmoni plantation there were two cases of such inter-Adivasi marriages and offending couples were socially ostracized by the Panchayat. In one case a Lohar girl married an Oraon boy and in the other case a Munda girl married a Baraik boy. Both the couples were banished from the garden. Payment of the fine which was imposed by the Panchayat could have neutralised the ostracism but as the couples could not pay, they were banished. Sometime inter-union conflict may arise due to such inter-ethnic marriages, specially when the offending persons come from two rival unions. A few case studies of various types of inter-ethnic marriage that had taken place in the Chandmoni Tea Estate will reveal the reality of the changing situation.

Case I: Mariam Oraon aged 45 years is a Christian. She is working as a cow-herder in the Chandmoni plantation. She was born and brought up in the Ludim Tea Estate of Doears and when she was about 18 years old she married to an Oraon boy of the Ranichera Tea Estate of Doears. After a year she fell in love with a Gond man who was a worker of the same tea estate. This man was a widower with a minor son. The man seduced her and continued to live with her in the same

tea estate for a few days. Mariam's kinsmen became furious and haounded the couple out of the garden as the couple had breached the traditional norms of marriage. The couple reached Chandmoni tea plantation in search of job. Both of them were employed in the Chandmoni plantation. However, they have been accepted by the society of Chandmoni.

Case II : Bengo Oraon of 25 years was born in the Bagrakot Tea Estate, Dooars. When she was about 10 years old she came to the Chandmoni Tea Estate with her parents. After a few years she worked in the Chandmoni Tea Estate as a child-labourer and then as a permanent female worker. She has been working in this tea estate as permanent labour since 1971. At present her father is a permanent P.W.D. worker.

In 1974 she fell in love with a Munda boy of 28 years who was working as a garden Chowkidar. The boy was already married at that time. However, he left his first wife and started living with Bengo. The girl's father lodged a complaint against the boy to the Oraon Adivasi Panchayat of the plantation. In the Panchayat meeting the girl's father demanded Rs. 500 as a fine from the boy as he had belonged to a different community. The Munda boy had to sell his cow to pay the fine to the Panchayat. The panchayat took Rs. 200 and the girl's father was given Rs. 300. However, the couple was socially accepted by the parties.

Case III : Flora Kheria is aged about 18 years and has read upto class VI standard. She hails from a Christian family.

Her father is a health assistant of the Chandmoni Tea Plantation. In 1976 she was recruited as a permanent worker in Chandmoni through the CITU. However, she fell in love with a 20 years old Bhokta boy who had also read upto class V. Traditionally, the Bhoktas are considered as a community inferior to the Kherias. They started living as husband and wife, and there was no objection from the boy's family. The boy's father is a well-to-do owner-cultivator and none of his family member work in the plantation. However, the girl's father lodged a complaint against the boy in the Panchayat of the Kheria tribe and he demanded Rs. 500 as a fine for breaching the social customs. As the boy lives outside the plantation and is not a worker in the plantation the fine could not be imposed on him. But the girl's father demanded for Baptisation of the boy, but the boy's father did not agree with the proposal. As the boy was not a worker of the plantation he was beyond the control of the plantation Panchayat. However, the conflict continued between the two families. Lastly, the couple with the help of the CITU settled the matter. However, the girl's parents have not yet normalised their relationships with the boy's parents.

Case IV : Somari Munda of 25 years of age is an illiterate daughter of a Sardar of the Chandmoni plantation. She married a Ghasi boy of 27 years old who was already married. The boy read upto class IV. Their parents live in the same residential line in the Chandmoni plantation. Somari's father who was an

influential person of the residential line lodged a complaint against the boy. In the Panchayat the case was decided and the boy had to pay a fine of Rs. 300 of which Rs. 100 was taken by the Panchayat and rest of the money was given to Somari's father. In this way the couple was socially accepted in the Munda as well as Ghasi society.

Case V : Sudhani Naik, aged about 23 years, is an illiterate daughter of a divorced mother. She hails from the Ghasi community. However, she was in love with a Munda boy who was then a casual worker in the adjacent plywood factory. He came from Damaipur Tea Estate after death of his parents. They started living together since 1979. As the girl married a Munda boy the RCMC union members considered it a serious offense as the Ghasis were believed to be inferior to the Mundas in the Social hierarchy. Traditionally the Oraons, Mundas and Kherias did not take water from the Ghasis who by occupation were their drummers. The union members demanded Rs. 125 from Sudhani. But she could not pay the fine. The RCMC union debarred the girl from the membership and the couple was ostracized by stopping social interactions with them.

Divorce and remarriage

I have already mentioned in the earlier section of this chapter that to the Adivasis marriage is more a social contract rather than a sacrament. Consensual union is the general

norm followed by a formal marriage. The Adivasi boy and girl can marry according to their own will, and such consensual union can easily break down at their will. If a girl marries a boy and after sometimes she does not want to live with him, she can leave him and can marry another person. If the boy leaves her, she can marry again. If at the time of divorce they have got children, they mutually decide with whom the children shall live. This system is prevalent among all the Adivasis of the tea garden. The society allows a woman or a man to marry more than once. This custom is the same in respect of Christian as well as Saonsar Adivasis. Divorce among the Christian Adivasis is accepted by the church. But polygyny is strictly forbidden and the church may ex-communicate the couple. But among the Saonsar Adivasis polygyny is not an offence, it is only socially criticised. In the Chandmoni plantation there were six cases of polygyny in 1979. In two cases the co-wives are living together. Celes Barla aged 55 is a Christian Oraon and is a monthly rated worker of Chandmoni plantation. His first wife Magdalli Oraon was barren, that is why he took Varsi Munda as his second wife. Now the co-wives are living together without any conflict after the death of Celas in 1979. In the second case Koka Lohar aged 52, is a Saonsar and a monthly rated worker. He was married to Siben Lohar who bore her a daughter. After the serious illness of Siben by which time the daughter was also married, he married again an old Lohar widow who had also four children by her first husband. The two

wives live together. In other four cases the co-wives live separately to avoid conflict. Bhulan Naik is a monthly rated Ghasi worker of 27 years old. He is a Saonsar who had married Asha Naik who was born and brought up in the Ludim Tea Estate, for the first time. After four years of their marriage Bhulan fell in love with Somari Munda and married her. His two wives now live separately in the same residential line. In the other case Chamra Munda, a Saonsar, aged 28, who is a Chowkidar was married to Mangri Munda for the first time and then he fell in love with Bengo Oraon and started living with her abandoning his first wife. Now the two wives live separately in the same residential line and Chamra looks after both the wives.

Birsa Oraon, a Dafadar, a Saonsar and aged about 45 years was married to Jatri Oraon. They have five children. Birsa had some affairs with Etowari Oraon of the nearby Dukhuria basti, who was also a temporary worker of the Chandmoni Tea Estate. Finally, Etowari married Birsa as his second wife. Now Jatri and Etowari are living separately. Similar incidence of polygyny was found in the case of Birsa's brother Lal Oraon. Lal is 32 years old and also a monthly rated worker. He was married to Sonia Oraon for the first time and then married a Oraon girl, Sudhni, who is living in a nearby 'basti'. She is not a worker of the garden. His two wives live separately.

Marriage in the plantation society can be defined as elsewhere as a socially approved relation between a man and a woman. Pre-marital sex is a matter which hardly concerns the

society unless the girl becomes pregnant. After payment of the agreed bride-price a date is fixed when bride goes to the groom's ^{house} and starts living with him. If she does not like the place, the man or his relatives, she can return to her parents' house. If she likes, she can marry again. In such a case the bride-price is returned to the groom's parents. No stigma is attached to such girls.

In case of concensual union the couple can dissolve their marriage at their own will and they can marry again. Adivasi men and women have considerable freedom to select their partners as well as to leave them.

In the plantation society this form of divorce is very frequent occurrence. In every household at least one or two cases of divorce may be found. But the practice of divorce has been gradually declining over the years. Members of younger generation look at this practice with disfavour.

Women and the family planning

The Adivasi women workers do not have any idea of family planning. In the plantation the rate of literacy of the women workers is very low, which is one of the principal factors of non-awareness of the birth control methods, resulting into high birth rate in the society. Low literacy level, lack of knowledge of birth-control methods are the major factors responsible for the high birth rate of the plantation women.

About 93.6 per cent of the women workers in the plantation are married. The average number of children per family is 1.6. This low average is not an indication of awareness of family planning as infant mortality is very high. They prefer to be mothers of more children as children can provide more economic support to the family as a child labourer in the plantation. In this plantation even a few years ago children over 12 years were frequently employed in certain plantation jobs, namely, weeding, light hoeing, digging, etc. Grown up boys and girls are employed as permanent labourers under the rule of "permanent dependent vacancy filling".

Mothers are provided with the maternity benefits by the plantation authorities. This has become a positive inducement to the women workers to have more children and therefore, the birth rate is high. Only two Christian Orphan women workers expressed some awareness to birth-control methods. Perhaps it is because their husbands are employed in the Military Engineering Service and in the Railways, and they have been influenced by their husbands.

WOMEN AND THEIR DOMESTIC WORLD : CONFLICT AND ADJUSTMENT

Authority in the Family

There is a correlation between class position and the authority of the males. In the lower strata, husbands are

more likely to claim authority because they are male, but actually they have to allow more authority to their wives. Men of the upper strata generally assert less values of patriarchal authority, but in practice they manage to enjoy more power as they have more power resources. Women of the upper strata if they work, contribute a little to their family income. Their husbands are less dependent on the services of their wives and as a result husbands' position in role bargaining is much stronger.

"The hierarchical structure of authority in the patriarchal joint family, which is based on the principle of superiority of the male members over the younger and female ones, is the most important instrument of social control. The rights and duties of the individuals are laid down to a great extent by this hierarchical order of power and authority, and their relationships with one another are defined within the limits delineated by the family authority, the male head of the family, legitimized and sacralized by caste and religion". In the patriarchal society traditional male values are institutionalized in the family, economy, social and religious life. In reality power and authority of the Indian women as mothers is a consequence of the patriarchal family structure with its excessive emphasis on male descendants. "The status of a woman in the

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3. Goode, W.J., The Family, Prentice Hall of India (Private) Ltd, New Delhi, 1966, pp. 74 - 75.
 4. Mies, M., Indian Women and Patriarchy, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1980, p. 92.

family is determined by the ranking of her husband among brothers, the length of the period she has lived in the family and the birth of sons. Only the birth of a son emancipates the Hindu woman from the situation of absolute subordination and helplessness, in which she enters the family as a young daughter-in-law⁵. Such "son-complex" is totally absent in plantation society. One reason may be that in this society both sons and daughters work and earn, and both of them are economically independent. In Hindu society father acts as breadwinner and if he is the oldest male member of the family, he then maintains a much more formal relationship with his children than the mother. He is, in addition to being the bread-winner, also the discipliner. This hierarchical authoritarian relationship is particularly observable in the father-son relationship; in the father-daughter relationship it is less pronounced. In Hindu society daughter is, above all, an economic and social liability for the father. In the plantation the daughters are not the economic liability but an asset to their parents as they earn from their childhood. The other reason is that there is no system of dowry for girls in marriage. So daughters are not burden to the parents, rather the parents get bride-price at the time of marriage of their daughters.

In the plantation society the functional role of the family has changed and the authority of patriarch had

5. Ibid., p. 103.

gradually diminished with the breakdown of larger kin-based joint families. The nuclear family units have emerged as independent self governing entities with changes in authority structure within the family units. Firstly, there is a change in the headship of the family. Traditionally, the eldest male members of a family used to be the head of the households. In the plantation situation, the quarter is allotted to the individual name of the male worker who may not necessarily be the eldest male member of the family. Thus the eldest member of the family gradually loses not only the economic control over the family but as well the power and authority. The power and authority generally rest in the hands of the earning members of the family. A large number of working women (nearly 80 per cent) in the Chandmoni Tea Estate expressed the view that as a consequence of their employment there is less conflict of authority between husband and wife. In the plantation society men are not only the providers. Their wives work and contribute to the maintenance of the family. As a matter of fact in many cases their husbands contribute a part of their income to the family purse as they usually spend most of their income in drinking.

In the plantation society men usually exercise less authority over women. The Adivasi women generally are exposed to very few restrictions. They enjoy much more social freedom than the Hindu women. Inclusion of women in plantation as wage earners is a criterion of considerably higher social status for

plantation women, whereas the exclusion of women from all economic and intellectual activities was in India a criterion of status for the higher castes.⁶ In plantation society plantation work becomes normal and essential component of married women's daily existence. The men, and perhaps the women themselves, have always seen women's part as one that derives from their position in the family. It is also important that the social institutions may affect women's standing within the family and outside the home in different ways. For example, the status of some of the Adivasi women like Ghasis and Baraiks is extremely low in their society, while the employment in the plantation enables them to bring the majority of the family income, and this has raised their status within the family. Women's status in the society as well as their power is low when they have low status both in economic and social spheres, and high when they enjoy relative authority in both the spheres. In the case of the plantation society from the point of view of authority there is greater equality among women and men than that in the rest of Indian society. Women's status, personal power and authority in the family are considerably high among the Adivasi plantation women workers. This has been possible for their crucial economic contribution as well as for the pre-existing values of near equality of women in the domestic sphere.

6. Ibid., p. 30.

Thus a typical situation in the plantation society will read as follow. After marriage a son moves from his parental home and establishes a new family with his wife and children. The plantation authority provides him with a free quarter and he becomes the head of the household. The father, if alive, or the eldest male members of his old family loses control over the new family. When the extended family breaks down into single units, the father's authority tends to equalize with that of his wife; grown up children become more independent of parental control. Thus new ideas and values are absorbed more quickly in the families where young people hold the reins of the family. The wives got more opportunity to enjoy considerable authority in the family. The family and conjugal life have been significantly affected by the absence of the elderly members. The traditional kin bonds have also considerably weakened and the marriage has now become a more personal one than family affairs. Thus many new ideas and values penetrate in the traditional social system through these family unit run by young husbands and wives.

Adjustment Between Domestic Life and Working Life ✓

Every employed person is faced with the problem of defining the relationship between work and family in his or her life. If one is single or without children or dependent parents, this task seems to be relatively easy. Goode develops the

idea that individuals "shop around" for "role bargains" in order to reduce their role strains. He feels that an individual's total role obligations are impossible to fulfil and there must exist various means to mitigate the role strains. ⁷

Kinzer advocates that the general cultural norms may be mitigated by specific role relationships and specific cultural norms. These mitigating factors are : (i) specific cultural norms or legislation such as laws protecting the woman workers, access to the educational system, etc., (ii) husband's approval to his wife's working, (iii) means by which mother is relieved of continuous supervision of her children, and (iv) norms more often implicitly than explicitly relating to the role of a working woman. ⁸

✓ The role conflicts occurs when a person occupies two or more positions simultaneously and when the role expectations of one are incompatible with the role expectations of the other. The multiple statuses of a woman as a worker, as a wife and as a mother with her corespondingly multiple roles are each and in combination of potential sources of conflict. The role conflict may be of two types; (I) intra-role conflict and (II) inter-role conflict. The first one is associated with

7. Goode, W.J., op.cit., p. 109.

8. Kinzer, N.S., "Socio-cultural Factors Mitigating Role Conflict of Buenos Aires Professional Women" in R.Rohrlich-Leavitt (ed.), Women Cross Culturally, Mouton, Hague, Paris, 1975, p. 185.

different expectations that others hold for a person, i.e., role set. The second one i.e., inter-role conflict is associated with the different expectations that are associated with a person as the incumbent of two or more positions, i.e., multiple roles.

The women plantation workers occupies the statuses of woman, worker, wife and mother. They work for the economic necessity with the full knowledge of their husbands and children and associates with people who share their view. They seem to be happy with their job. They never feel inadequate and inept as a wife and a mother. Most of the women workers in the Chandmoni Tea Estate hail from an Adivasi background. In Adivasi society the restrictions on movement of women are few. At the same time they enjoy economic freedom which also helps them to reduce their role conflict in their family as wives, as mothers and workers. Their working conditions, rules and facilities are also congenial for their work outside home. These to some extent help to mitigate the role strains of the women workers in the family. The women integrate their work and the family in an accommodative way. The role of wife and mother in a traditional situation is somewhat different. Here

9. See Merton, R., Social theory and Social Structure, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1968, p. 269 for ROLE SET in which he defines it as that complement of role relationship which persons have by virtue of occupying a particular status.

though they work, it is guided more by family needs rather than by rigid job requirements. The women workers of the plantation have low career aspirations and promotion facilities as well as job opportunities elsewhere are very limited. These factors also tend to make them more adaptive to the work and home environment. Their low aspirations and almost nil education also help them to adjust better to the family life than the educated middle class working women who are to compete in a shrinking job market and enter into a conflict with a rigid patriarchal family system.

In Hindu society, husbands are, traditionally, minimally accomodative to the day to day family needs, their primary commitment is to their work. But in Adivasi society particularly in plantation the situation is quite different. Here husbands are more accomodative to their wives. Most of them help their wives in household work including cooking, or in looking after the children.

✓ Participation of women in economic activities is not a new phenomenon particularly in regard to the Adivasi women of the plantation. Family is the basic economic unit. The increasing nuclearization of the families in plantation has made the husband and wife relationships more crucial. Marriage here can be seen as a co-operative venture based on equal partnership. In such a situation mutual adjustment is vital for family stability, the women stretching their interest in work beyond the home while the men becoming more home

centred. The situation has also influenced the relationship between parents and children at home.

✓ In a typical industrial society there is a rigid separation between home and place of work. But in the plantation industry the situation is different. In a plantation both residential and working place are often close to each other. The working hours in the plantation are also routinised to accord with the day to day activities of the domestic life. The plantation women workers rise at about 5 A.M. to do household chores and prepare the breakfast. At 7 A.M. they have ^{to} go for their plantation work. After working in the field from 7 A.M. to 12 noon they come back home. They get a lunch break from 12 noon to 2 P.M. when they prepare and serve lunch to their husbands and children. They again attend the afternoon work in the plantation at about 2 P.M. and continue to work upto 5.30 P.M. Then they return home and on the way collect some firewood from the garden. In the evening they prepare dinner and do the remaining household chores including taking care of the livestock.

A case study of a young working mother will reveal her daily routine. Asari Saosi (24), wife of Raghu Saosi (25) has two sons — the elder one is of 4 years of age and the younger one is of 11 months only. Asari said that she woke up at 5 A.M. and swept the house. Then she prepared tea and Chapati. She and her husband took the breakfast when the sons

were also fed. Then she cooked the mid-day meal in which husband helped her. Then she fed their goat. Husband also looked after the sons at that time. She went out for work at 7.30 A.M. along with the sons and took some tiffin for them. The younger son was kept near the working place in the garden and he was watched by the elder one. When the child required breast milk she fed him. At 12 noon she came back home and took lunch together with husband and son. Then she washed utensils and brought drinking water from the well when sons were looked after by her husband. At 2-30 P.M. she again went out for work along with her two sons and returned home at 5-30 P.M. Her husband collected some fire wood and she cooked evening meal when husband also helped her. Then she fed her goats. In the evening they took meal together and went to bed.

The women workers those who have infants carry them on their back to the working place. The infants are laid down on a piece of cloth spread on the ground near their working place. While working they time to time look after them and breast-feed them if necessary. This facility given by the management avoids the problem of looking after the young children while they are away to work. Many families may not have elderly persons at home to look after the children. If the plantation authority had not permitted them to carry infants to their working place they would have faced the problem of raising the children. The women workers in plantation have

to perform two roles, one as housewives and the other as wage earners while the men enjoy their leisure after the plantation work is over.

I have mentioned earlier in chapter : 4 that there is a creche in the Chandmoni Tea Estate for keeping the infants and children under six of the workers during the working hours. This facility has further reduced the burden of the mother to look after the children during working hours. Grown up children move freely within the garden premises with their play-mates when their parents are away to work. The working condition in the garden offers necessary facilities and breaks to help the women to look after their children and attend to domestic duties. Though some husbands share the domestic burden with their wives it is the wives who are to toil harder. But this they do quite willingly and without any conflict. A conflict arises when the husband squanders away the money in drinks or runs after another woman.

Husband's Attitudes Towards Wife's Employment

It has been seen that in the working class families in the plantation although wives enjoy considerable freedom and authority in household matters the husbands symbolize the ultimate authority and power. This is but natural in a patriarchal society. In the joint family the father-in-law occupies the highest position of authority though he seldom wields his power without consulting his sons and daughter-in-laws.

However, a husband's attitudes towards his wife's employment is important in understanding the role conflict of the working women in the plantation family.

It is seen that a high percentage of the husbands shows a positive attitude towards their wives employment. In the Chandmoni Tea Estate 98.19 per cent women workers states that their husbands want them to work, and only 1.81 per cent says that their husbands are against their working. But even in the latter cases there is no familial problem arising out of their working against their husband's attitude.

In general the overwhelming majority of the plantation women workers live in a family atmosphere where positive attitudes are shown towards their jobs. In fact such a positive attitude of the husband helps not only to augment the income of the family but also to maintain cordial relations within the family. Even in joint families the parent-in-laws accept the outside employment of the daughter-in-laws as normal. It is not economic inducement alone that has helped to develop this positive outlook. This is also perhaps due to the traditional Adivasi ethos. Most of the Adivasis and other workers in plantation have come from an agricultural background where it is normal for women to participate in agricultural activities. The employment pattern in plantation also requires both men and women workers and if they are recruited from the same family it gives stability to the labour force. All these factors have contributed to evolve a norm in the plantation society where

the employment of women is taken as something expected and natural.

The women workers do not seem to make any conscious effort to adapt to both the roles, one as housewives and the other as workers. In the conducive working environment of the plantation both the roles come naturally to them. The adaptation process is easy and devoid of trauma. Husbands of a few women workers who work in organisations other than the tea plantation cannot help their wives in household work. Many of them get salary which is sufficient for maintenance of their families. But their wives do not like to discontinue their plantation jobs. This shows that they work not only for economic reasons but for other reasons also. These women are habituated to work in agriculture and the plantation industry provides them with a comparable agrarian occupational background. Because of the working class background their husbands often encourage them to continue with their employment in the plantation. The case of Parbait Oraon will probably illustrate this point.

Parbait Oraon (21) is the wife of Manairam Oraon (26). She was married to Manairam and came to the Chandmoni Tea Estate in 1978. Before marriage she was in Dardag, Ranchi. Her father was a small cultivator and she used to help her father in agricultural work. However, after a year of her marriage, she joined the Chandmoni Tea Estate as a temporary

labour in 1974. Next year she was recruited as a permanent labourer as a permanent dependent of her husband. With the full approval of her husband and father-in-law Charoa Oraon who was a Sardar that her wages would help to support the family that she took the job on a permanent basis.

Sharing of Household Responsibilities

There is no uniform pattern of allocation of household functions and responsibilities among the members of the family all over the world. The allocation of household functions and responsibilities vary from society to society. These also depend largely upon the degree of change that has affected the institution of family and marriage due to the process of industrialisation. However, pattern of allocation of household functions and responsibilities between sexes differs in traditional societies as compared to industrial societies. In traditional Hindu society allocation of household functions and responsibilities is distinct between husband and wife. This distinction has given rise to specialization of duties among them, such as, while wife looks after all the domestic work and rearing up of children, the husband earns for the maintenance of the family. The former's duties are confined to the domestic activities while the latter's duties are largely outside the home. However, industrialization has brought certain changes in this traditional pattern by bringing cooperation of both

husband and wife at the domestic level. Such a rigid distribution of duties between husband and wife is not distinctly found in Advasi society in plantation. In the plantation society, as said earlier, both husband and wife work together and most husbands equally participate in domestic activities. Thus they share each others' economic and domestic responsibilities.

The sharing of household responsibility is principally found in the spheres of three domestic activities : handling of family purse to meet regular expenses, performance of daily domestic chores and looking after the children. Besides, planning for the future and certain decisions on crucial matters which may appear from time to time need to be taken. The data on these aspects were collected from the women as well ~~as~~ as some men who are closely involved in the management of the family.

It is natural that when the wife is working as wage-earner she has a dual burden to carry. If the husband does not share the domestic responsibilities, tensions and ultimately rift may follow between a husband and wife. It is found that about 71 per cent of the husbands help their wives in domestic activities. In the plantation society doing the domestic chores and looking after the children do not affect the dignity of the husband. But probably this is a feature common to the working class where both men and women work as wage labourers.

Decision - making

One of the indicators of status of women is whether they play an effective role in the decision - making process in the family. To elicit information on this subject I put the question before the Adivasi and Nepali women — "Do you agree that the women should have a say in important matters regarding the family" ? About 89 per cent of the women workers replied in affirmative. Seven per cent of the respondents replied that they did not have any role in making decisions for their families while 4 per cent gave vague answers. The latter group of women mainly belongs to the age group of 45 - 55 years and they are illiterate. When the same question was asked to men, 87.62 per cent of them were of the opinion that their wives should have a say in important matters regarding the family affairs. The rest 12.38 per cent disagreed, most of whom belong to the Nepali castes. This shows that the majority of plantation women do want equal participation in the decision - making processes of their families. Though majority of the working women desire equal share in decision-making, in actual practice this is enjoyed by a very few of them. In certain vital issues in the family like marriage and education of sons and daughters, husbands usually unilaterally take the decision. Wives' opinion is not much valued. But wives take the major decisions regarding the day to day family expenditure, domestic activities, etc.

As the wives spend all their wages for the maintenance of the family they have a greater say in the day to day affairs of the family. Most of the husbands spend a part of their earnings on drinking rice-beer (Haria), and they generally do not interfere with their wives' earning. The wives generally do not object to their drinking as the drinking of rice-beer (Haria) is one of their traditional cultural habits. The quarrel may arise in case of excessive drinking. A few cases will illustrate the decision-making processes in the Adivasi family.

Gita Munda (26) and her husband Gondra Munda (29) are workers in Chandmoni. She has been working as a labourer since 1972 and her husband is a Boidar who earns about Rs. 300 per month. Their three sons are studying in the St. Mary's Convent School at Siliguri for which they spend Rs. 150 per month. Gondra hands over Rs. 250 per month to his wife and she controls the family budget. She is living in a joint family consisting of her parent-in-laws, sister-in-law and brother-in-law. The sister-in-law and brother-in-law are also permanent workers of Chandmoni who contribute to the family income. She likes to live in a joint family because joint family usually gives better protection to women and children. Gondra enjoys the highest authority in the family, in the decision making process in relation to the household affairs and the education of their sons. Gita always tries to obey him. In all the decisions of crucial matters she is always consulted. Gondra and his sister usually

do the weekly marketing at the Matigara Haat. Generally Gita does not like marketing. Sometimes conflict arises in the family front. Gondra is not addicted to drinking but occasionally when he drinks Gita picks up quarrel with him. Gondra tried to give up drinking as his wife does not like it at all. In this case it seems that both the husband and the wife are trying to adjust themselves conceding their self-interest every now and then in order to build a happy family life.

Economic Contribution

It has already been stated that the occupational status of husband and wife is same as most of them are daily wage workers. There are a few men who receive monthly wages, and, therefore, their occupational status is slightly higher than that of a daily wage worker. The number of such workers are 55 out of a total work force of 515. Income of both husband and wife is more or less same, barring wage-cuts due to absenteeism, illness etc., except that of monthly rated workers.

To get an answer to the question, why the women have taken up employment in plantation all the women workers of the Chandmoni Tea Estate were asked "Why did you take up this job?" Out of 221 women workers 216 (97.74 per cent) replied that they had accepted the employment due to the economic need of the family, and only 5 (2.26 per cent) women workers expressed that they had taken up the job to supplement their family income.

About 41.63 per cent of the women workers hand over their wages to their husbands. Out of 221 women workers 53 (23.98 per cent) women keep their earning with them and spend the entire amount to purchase food and other necessities for the family. These women workers manage their family budget themselves. They generally have husbands addicted to drinking. As such husbands contribute little of their income to the family purse, their wives have to take entire economic responsibility of the family. Those husbands who do not spend much money on drinking do not always give their earning to their wives. In many cases both keep their earnings separately to themselves. As many as 30.77 per cent of the plantation women workers jointly manage the family budget with their husbands (Table : 32). They belong to the age group of 25 - 55 years and hail from communities like Oraon, Munda, Bhokta, Kheria, Ore, Mahali and Melpahari. In case of 92 women workers out of 221 the husbands control the family budget. They belong to Nepali castes, Ghasi, Baraik and Turi, and Lohar Adivasi groups. A few widow workers control the family budget themselves. However, in most cases shopping of food materials and other goods necessary for the family is done jointly by husband and wife in the local Matigara Haat held every Tuesday. More than 64.00 per cent women workers joint their husbands in this weekly event. In rest of the families either the wife or the husband go to the market alone. However, on the pay - day the husband usually draw his wage as well as that of his wife's. More than 65 per cent

of the husbands were found to draw their wives' wages, and then after doing some minor shopping in Gudri Haat (local Haat) most of them handed over their wife's wages to them. It is generally seen that a part of the men's wages are spent in drinking rice-beer (Haria) or country liquor (Daru) and in smoking. Thus ^{is} it found that the women are the primary bread winners of the plantation family.

Table - 32

Management of the family budget

Person who manages the family budget	Number of women workers	Percentage
Woman herself	53	23.98
Husband	92	41.63
Both husband and wife	68	30.77
Some other relative	8	3.62
Total	221	100.00

Child-care and Socialization Process

Socialization is the process by which the young human being acquires the values and knowledge of his group and learns the social roles appropriate to his position in it. ¹⁰

10. Goode, W.J., op.cit., p. 10.

The family is the primary institution which provides an environment to the young members to get socialized. The society at large, provides them with a wider environment to interact with others and grow into full members of the society.

Parents play a vital role in the socialization process of their children. But the woman's biological 'destiny' as mother becomes a cultural vocation in her role as a socializer of children. In bringing up children, plantation woman achieves her main social definition. However, the cultural allocation of roles in bringing up children and limits of its variability are not the essential problem for consideration. What is much more important is to analyse the nature of the socialization process itself and its requirements. The nuclear family is centred around the two-generational hierarchy between parents and children.

Plantation society has a settled population that is born, grows up and continues to live in the plantation environment. Children, when they grow up, often follow the foot-steps of their parents in so far employment in the industry is concerned. The children, therefore, from their childhood share an awareness of the common problem of how their future life would shape up.

Among the workers of tea plantations child rearing is not much of a practical problem as it is among the urban middle class working mothers. The workers in a plantation

generally live within a community of kinsmen, though most of them live in separate households. Some old kinswoman may be asked to keep an eye to the children when their mothers go out for work. Sometimes old and retired parents look after the toddlers. Nursing infants are often carried on the back of their mothers to the place of work. A mother may also keep the infant in the garden creche, which most of the women do not do, as they said "babies are not properly cared for there".

As noted above the socialization of the children is greatly influenced by the plantation environment. From the very childhood the children watch their parents doing different kinds of plantation work and when they become adolescent—the time to be employed as 'child labourers', they are quite acquainted with various types of plantation work.

The mothers carry the infants on their back to the working place and the older children, specially the girls, accompany them. They look after their tiny brothers and sisters while their mothers remain busy with the work. Sometimes they also help their mothers in plucking and weeding; little girls collect dry twigs from the garden for daily cooking. The children also get some sort of training from hearing the frequent discussions on works among adult workers as well as from the instructions given by the Sardars to their mothers. The nuclear family with its limited number of members and a working mother necessitates the girls to do the household work. The girls from

their very childhood get used to do the day to day household work along with their mothers and help her in cooking, cleaning utensils, looking after young brothers and sisters and fetching water from the well. From childhood till they are married the girls move freely with boys and girls and thus learn the mystery of sex life. Cases of casual sex affairs, with boys are not infrequent among adolescent and young girls.

Both the parents share the responsibility of their children. Being the lower class working people the plantation workers do not prepare their children for an ordered and achievement oriented life. Their ambition is very limited which is to get a job for their children in the plantation. They do not wish to make the process of life more complicated by making futuristic plans for the children. This may be one of the reasons for not encouraging their children to go for schooling.

In the Adivasi society of the plantation girls are socialized in their role of male dependency which continue even after marriage and they have a family of their own. Thus the values, norms and patterns of behaviour are transmitted from one generation to the next.

The Adivasi women in the plantation do not suffer from a "son complex" as has been mentioned earlier. They treat their sons and daughters equally. Even in matters of vital importance like employment, choice of a partner in marriage, etc. they are not discriminated. However, in the case of education, the parents show discrimination between sons and daughters.

The standard of literacy among boys and girls is quite low as mentioned earlier. But whatever weightage is given to schooling it is primarily meant for boys. About 95 per cent of women workers interviewed by me did not intend to send their daughters school. In most cases the plantation women workers are illiterate and it is natural that they do not want to educate their daughters. They hold that female education is not necessary for employment in the garden as well as for raising a family. But, in choosing a career in tea plantation women workers, in general, are willing to give equal encouragement to their sons and daughters.

On the whole in the socialization process the plantation family reinforces the 'gender roles', that is, the cultural definitions of the traits and behaviour that are appropriate for men and women. The process of socialization of plantation women builds a poor self-image for themselves. The process also leads to relate them with the men-folk in the family in terms of dependency, a symbol of which is to identify the women in terms of their husbands, rather than by their own names. The women are socialized and values instilled in such a way that they accept, without a murmur, their exploitation by the men-folk. The patriarchal family system, the lack of education, dependency, role differentiation and inferior position in the political system and in trade union help to create a social environment in which inequality between sexes is perpetuated.

Economic freedom has done little to mitigate this position.

Status of Women in Plantation

In studying the status of women in a plantation society we must study the complexity of roles which the plantation women perform in socio-economic, cultural, religious and political fields. We have already seen the role performance of women in these spheres. The question that looms large is that whether economic emancipation of women workers has correspondingly elevated their status in the society or not.

The plantation society is a heterogeneity of Adivasis and castes. Traditionally speaking, in caste society the status of women is generally lower, whereas in Adivasi society it is relatively higher. One of the factors which contributes to a higher social status of women in Adivasi society is the economic role that they perform as wage earners.

It will be wrong if it is assumed that the plantation women enjoy equal rights and privileges with men. It is true that the Adivasi and Nepali women workers suffer few restrictions in their society. They can select their mates and can leave their mates as and when they like or they can marry again. Above all there is no system of dowry in their society. Only the system of bride-price is prevalent among them. If the groom is unable to pay the bride price he has to live in the girl's family for a certain period and has to perform the domestic duties in his

father-in-law's house. Such system of Ghardamad also refers to some kind of higher status of women in the Adivasi society. But still Adivasi society is male dominated and women are treated as a commodity. The wife is often referred to as the "kept" by the husband but a husband is never referred to as a "kept" by the wife. Marriage being easily dissoluble the children may remain in the custody of mother or father as may be agreed upon. In many cases the children stay with their mother and when she remarries the step-father accepts her children as his own. In cases of remarriage of a woman, there are 22.17 per cent of cases where a woman with children remarried and the new husband had accepted her children in the family fold. This has been possible because the woman also contributes her wages to support the family.

The over all occupational status of the women workers is lower than that of the men workers. Although wages of men and women workers are equal today, even a few years ago the latter used to receive lesser wages. Unequal opportunity in the occupational hierarchy, that is, women are never made a sub-staff, renders them a lower status vis-a-vis the men. Women always work as daily-rated workers. They are not promoted to the position of the monthly rated workers, sub-staff and supervisory staff.

Plantation women workers have no role in the decision-making processes in connection with theft, witchcraft, inter-ethnic marriage, inter-ethnic conflict, etc. which are

decided by the Adivasi Panchayat of the plantation time to time. The women do not have any voice in the Adivasi Panchayat.

Trade union leadership from the women workers of plantation has not yet emerged. Although women workers are members of the trade unions they hardly participate in the regular union meetings. But sometimes they take aggressive roles and join procession, demonstration, etc. Marginal participation in the union activities does not indicate that they have power in influencing the decisions of union leaders.

The educational attainment of plantation women workers is very low. Generally the level of literacy of the plantation workers as a whole is very poor. In case of women workers this is almost nil. This has further helped to perpetuate the lower status of women workers. The women workers are totally ignorant about the role of modern education in improving the status of women.

It is seen that though apparently plantation women workers enjoy considerable freedom of action their status when compared to men, appears to be low. Economic contribution has not helped to raise their status so as to make it equal with men. Their status is comparable to that of landless families in agricultural society because, in both cases, the products of their work are expropriated by their husbands.

Social Interaction of the Women Workers and Their Outlook

Tea plantations are usually situated in remote areas

and the workers live within the boundaries of the tea plantations. They have minimum connection with the outside world.

But the Chandmoni Tea Estate is situated near the Siliguri town. Workers interaction with the outside world is greater than that of the workers of the interior plantations. The society of Chandmoni has undergone some changes but by and large it has remained traditional. The young boys and girls have changed styles of their dresses. They occasionally visit Siliguritown. The old and the middle aged women mostly remain confined within the tea garden. Their interaction with the outside world is very limited. They only meet the outside people in the local weekly market, ^{(Haat).} The Haat is the place where the men and women workers meet with their relatives, friends and non-Adivasi people. It probably relieves the workers from the boredom of garden life and that is why they look forward to the market day. Everything of daily necessities and fineries are available in the Haat. This market day, held on every Tuesday, is also the weekly holiday of the neighbouring tea gardens, namely, Chandmoni, Matigara, Kamala, Sanyasi, Kiran-Chandra, Hind, Singhijhora, Sahabad, etc. of the region. Many workers from the neighbouring tea gardens come and assemble at a particular spot in the Haat where they drink, gossip and exchange information with one another. Many marriages are negotiated in the Haat. It is also a place for romance for the young boys and girls. Many of the workers come to the Haat for

drinking rice-beer (Haria) and country-liquor (Daru).

Now-a-days the young women workers seldom take rice-beer (Haria) or smoke. Many of them come only for enjoyment and relaxation. Haat is perhaps the only place of contact with the outside world particularly for the older generation of workers. But the young girls and boys are fond of cinemas who frequently visit town for this purpose. Besides the weekly Matigara Haat there is also a local Haat which is held on the pay-day of the garden labourers, i.e., on every Monday. Readymade garments, fresh vegetables, fish and various household goods are sold here.

The young girls are more fashion-conscious than the old ones and the Nepali women are more fashion-conscious than the Adivasi women. In Chandmoni the women are not so conservative like the women workers of other gardens situated in the remote areas of Terai and Dooms. As for instance the situation in the Sonali Tea Estate of Dooms is different. Here the Oraons, Mundas and Kherias may dine with each other but generally not with any other communities. The concept of pollution has also touched them similar to the Hindus. Food is regarded as polluted if touched by anyone not in their common status group. Womenfolk are more orthodox in these matters. They do not take food or water at the market, no matter how hungry or thirsty they are. Such a situation is rare in Chandmoni. The women here do not maintain such a pollution concept regarding food. They are not

so orthodox, they eat and drink food touched by persons belonging to other status groups. Even they eat food in the Haat and interdine with Bengalis and Biharis. In spite of this fact the Adivasi women workers appear to be conservative in regard to their dresses. Except a few girls, they use their traditional dress even today. The upper part of their body is covered with a blouse and a piece of cloth is wrapped round their waist reaching upto the ankle. Only a few Adivasi and Nepali girls wear Saris when they visit town and relatives of the neighbouring plantations.

The plantation women live within their own community, with their traditional beliefs and customs. They are ignorant of the changes that are taking place in the outside world. Plantation women seem to be more conservative than men. Some thirty years ago they were totally isolated from the rest of the world. In case of men such conservatism is breaking down rapidly as they come in contact with the outsiders more often. But in the case of women such isolation is also breaking down but at a slower pace. This is mainly due to their increasing participation in the trade union activities though they are very poorly represented at this point of time.

Among the Adivasis drinking and smoking are very common among both men and women workers. However, now-a-days young women workers are less addicted to drinking. Even some of them totally abstain from drinking and smoking. Perhaps they

have been influenced by the upper caste women whom they frequently see in the market and the town.

Though some plantation workers have connection with town, yet most of the women workers live in relative isolation from the rest of the world.

The plantation women are less conscious about their living condition as well as their working condition. In most of the houses there is an absence of furniture. Those who are a bit affluent can only afford to have a wooden or string cot, and one or two wooden chairs. They are used to sleep on the hard floor.

The outlook of the plantation women workers can be judged from their low level of literacy. They have no idea about the need or importance of women's education. So they do not encourage their daughters to go to schools. Their knowledge about outside world is also very poor. The women workers, specially those who are older, do not know the name of the country in which they belong. Most of them refer to the Darjeeling region as belonging to Bhutan. The reason behind it is that when they were brought to this region they were told by the recruiting agent that they were to go to Bhutan. Old women hardly know the name of the Prime Minister of India or the Chief Minister of West Bengal. Now-a-days due to the campaign of the trade unions the young women workers are familiar with these names. Their spatial movement, if at all, is restricted to

Siliguri, Jalpaiguri and a few tea gardens of Terai and Dooars. Occasionally they visit their relatives during their yearly vacation. Tea garden is the only universe for them. Thus they remain in an under-dog position and have become prisoners to a self-perpetuating system in which it is difficult to come out and improve their condition.