

A Note On Tea Plantation Labourers

It has been seen in the discussion of the earlier chapter that North Bengal is the main producer of tea of West Bengal, the second largest tea growing state of India. The North Bengal districts, mainly the hills and foot hill areas of Darjeeling and Doars of Jalpaiguri is the prime tea producing zone of the state. This region supplies both CTC and orthodox tea of which the tea of Darjeeling hills is world famous for its quality and flavour. On the other hand the tea of Terai and Doars have much thicker brue. The tea plantation of this region has been started under the British patronage in about 1850 onward and gradually took commercial shape. Now all the gardens are owned by the Indians. The economy of North Bengal districts is even at present highly under developed while the tea gardens are the pockets of prosperity. In this chapter a discussion will be made on the adibasi tea plantation labourers of Terai and Doars of North Bengal.

The prime part of the story of tea is the story of the people who built the industry. This part is more interesting with its own rhythm of joy and sorrow. This includes their migration, adoption of this new economic and living environment, their social life - cultural life so on and so forth. But there is a difficulty to get a systematic chronology of the history of these people due to the lack of documentary evidences. This is only available in part in the record of different tea enquiry committees. (Bhowmik 1981)

Origin and Migration

At the early stage of this industry the planters faced two vital problems. Firstly the ideally suited areas for tea were covered with thick unhealthy forest cover which were to be cleared. The second problem was the scarcity of labour. Tea being a very much labour intensive industry need continuous supply of cheap labour to carry on its operation at its different levels. The local people were reluctant to join the industry due to the hazardous condition of work as well as its low wage. The labourers had no fixed hour of work neither any fixed type of work. Their wages was as low as three rupees per month as the planters viewed their work as 'easy and light'. To solve the

problem of labour crisis the planters started the import of labourers from outside the state mainly from Chotonagpur area of Bihar and its adjoining area of Orissa and Madhyapradesh. These people were the aboriginal people of Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Barik, Tulsi, Asur, Lohar, Kheria and others, popularly known in India as 'adibasi'.

The tribal society of Bihar in the 19th century was 'in a state of turmoil'. Since the 17th century the decay of their traditional society started. By this time their tribal King and the royal family got Hinduised and interlinked to the neighbouring Hindu princely family by intermarriage, and started encouraging the Hindu Brahmin and other high caste people, with rudimentary education, to settle down at their place and offered them high administrative posts and land. These people, locally known as Dikus i.e. aliens, started exploiting these innocent tribal people and expropriate them from their land. This problem intensified with the introduction of British rule into this area. The traders and money lenders poured into this area and cornered land through various means. The simple minded innocent people finally burst into unrest and revolt. All the cultivating tribes. Munda, Kharias, Ho, Oraon, jointly fight against the aliens in 'Kol Insurrection' of 1831; 'Santhal Revolt' of 1858 and 'Ulgulan in Mundari' of 1899-1901 are the series of tribal aggression against the Dikus and the Britishers. In addition to the turmoil, the natural hazards like a series of flood and famine (of 1868-69, 1873-74, 1893-94, 1897 the severest, 1918) destroyed the society of the tribals of Chotonagpur. As a result the poor and ill-fated people had ^{but} nothing to leave their place to earn their bread and butter from any where through any type of work. Finally they migrated to the areas of tea plantation and came under the grip of the planters who exploited these uprooted people more easily. Being deprived from the means of their lively hood, turned into the pool of unemployment, these adibasi people became sturdy, hard-working and submissive who could live at an almost subhuman level of existence. Almost all the tea plantation of Terai and Doars are served by the slave or indentured labourers from the tribal people of Chotonagpur.

Since 1853 recruitment of indentured labourers from outside the state stated. Migration of these labourers to the plantation was mainly family based and organised instead of individual man and woman though this type of migration also occurred. The plantation absorb both male and female member of tribal family as labourers. The one of the major operation of plantation is plucking. This requires a huge number of female participation who had a

good reputation to score over the male more in efficiency and quality of leaf plucked. Moreover as the planters wanted cheap labour they encouraged the labourers to settle down permanently in the respective garden by providing them family quarter and a small plot of arable land as share cropper thus make them unable to go to any other sector of employment. The family based immigration cut off the labourers from their place of origin and ensure the planters that these people would never leave the garden. The present tea garden tribal labourers are the third or fourth generation of these early migrants and are totally cut off from their natal place.

In 1835 the time of take over the Darjeeling from the Raja of Sikkim by East India Company its population was 100 (Dash 1947). Its increased to 10000 by 1859. When Terai was annexed to this district its population was not known. The first regular census of 1872 of this district showed its population figure as 94712. In 1881 the population was 155179. The population increased very rapidly by the consecutive years. The population in 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941 was 249117, 265500, 282748, 319635 and 376369 respectively. This rapid growth of population was mainly due to the very rapid growth of tea industry in hills and foothills of this district and also due to waste land cultivation. Most of the increased population comprises the immigrant tribal labourers from outside the state. The census of 1961 showed the district was inhabited by 624640 persons of which 67,00 was the immigrants from outside the state, primarily from Bihar. The census of 1961 further revealed that 96,444 persons returned themselves as belonging to various scheduled tribes. The Siliguri subdivision had a predominance of scheduled tribes with the Oraon from Chotonagpur being the maximum in number followed by Mundas from Bihar and Santhal from Santhal Pargana. In 1872 the Oraons were 1648 in number which increased to 14433 in 1941. The Mundas was 255 in 1891 and increased to 5993 in 1941. The Santhals was 999 in 1891 and increased to 4045 in 1941(Bhadra : 1997).

The census of 1858-59 showed the population figure of the settled part of Jalpaiguri district was 189067 (9011961). The subsequent census showed considerable increase in the population. In 1871-72 the population was 327985. This increase of population was mainly due to the rapid growth of tea industry there in which attract the tribal immigrants from outside the state. In 1989 the number of immigrants of this district was 143922 (9011901). The census of 1901 put the number of immigrants as 188223. Bulk of the immigrants were

tribal people from Ranchi, Santhal Pargana of Chotonagpur. The migration statement show that 80436 immigrants were from Ranchi district and 10562 from Santhal Pargana. According to census report of 1911 the number of persons born in Ranchi district who were enumerated in Jalpaiguri district was 126214. The following table shows the immigration to Jalpaiguri since 1891 to 1941. This table includes all types of immigrants, not only those from Chotonagpur to Jalpaiguri.

Table 4.1.: The Immigrant Population of Jalpaiguri District (1891-1941)

Year	Actual Population	Immigrants
1891	433334	44329
1901	544906	95899
1911	661282	152174
1921	694054	163024
1931	739260	158757
1941	845702	156765

Source : A. K. Mitra 1953, Census of India 1951.

The immigration of tea garden labourers in North Bengal were very high since 1860-1881 because a number of tea garden sprung up during this time. Between 1896-1901 tea price fell greatly in Britain. Consequently the gardens reduced their labourforce. During 1901-1911 the plantation population showed a decline in its number. The immigration of tribal labourers from Chotonagpur was stopped by rule in 1950. Since then the planters could employed the labourers from among the surplus ones settle down in the neighbouring villages and plantations.

In 1952 the Plantation Labour Act was passed to protect men and women workers in plantation. Now the feudalistic relation between planters and the labourers changed to a relationship between employers and employees. The plantation labourers were given some legal protection and there was a scope to form their own association . Since the Plantation Labour Act was effective for permanent labourers the planters wanted to reduce the number of the permanent labourers as these would decrease the over head cost. Consequently there was a reduction in the labour force since the passing of the act.

Table 4.2.: Decline of Plantation Labour Force in India and West Bengal (1950-1980).

Year	West Bengal	India
1950	329034	1033090
1955	273163	989656
1959	236674	919405
1960	—	—
1965	191702	806152
1970	200280	759646
1975	200130	774897
1980	228705	912522

Source : Tea Statistics 1957, 1959, 1968-69, 1969-70, 1977-78, 1981-82

Traditional Occupation of the Adibasi Labourers.

The adibasi plantation labourers of North Bengal are generally the immigrant tribals of Chotonagpur and their descendents. These people altogether form a more or less homogeneous group commonly referred to as 'Modesia' by the local people. These poverty sicken, innocent, hard-working people are originally traditional agriculturists though some are of artisan background. Of these, Oraons are agriculturists, Baraiks are weavers of cloth, Mahalis and Turis are basket makers, the Lohers are iron smiths.

Tea plantation being an agro based industry has an agricultural environment in gardens. Besides, these gardens are generally situated in rural area. This condition helps the traditional rural agriculturist tribes to adopt the industry much easily. According to their traditional occupation there exists a kind of social hierarchy within their society, keeping the traditional agriculturist in the upper rank and the artisans in the inferior position. In factory there is a somewhat industrial environment. These people are considered as industrial workers though actually these semi isolated working group does not enjoy the actual status of the industrial workers. This industry does not need any education or previous working experience and here the unit of recruitment is family. Both male and female members of family here get job as labourer along with their children. A kind of strict bureaucratic structure exists in each tea plantation keeping management at the top and labourers at the bottom with a number of intermediaries. But the relationship

between the planters and the labourers are some what feudalistic in nature which has been changed to some extent in modern times with the exposure to the outer world. At present almost 85 percent of the labour force of Terai and Doars consists of the descendants of the immigrants of Chotonagpur. In plantation we get four categories of labourers male, female, adolescents (16-18yrs) and Children (12-16yrs). The last two categories i.e. the child and adolescent labourers are the special feature of plantation industry. The rest 15 percent includes the Nepali, Bihari and Bengali caste groups. Most of the plantation labourers are resident labour and live at scattered labour lines within plantation. The works in plantation start early in the morning and labours^{are} to report much earlier. Moreover the labourers are the immigrants and their descendants, so the authority had to give them the housing facility which was compulsory according to the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. Labour force in tea gardens are of two types (a) workers in the fields (b) workers in the factory. Factory workers are generally male. Female child and adolescents work^{ers} rarely work as factory workers. Factory workers form a fragment of the labour force.

Bureaucracy in Tea Plantation

Every tea plantation has a strict bureaucratic structure of administrative work organisation with a very little chance of promotion or upward occupational mobility. At the top level there is the executive category, includes Manager (Bara Sahib) and a group of assistant Managers (Chotta Shibs) who are the immediate authority of the plantation and look after its overall administration. The next category includes the supervisory staffs - both the garden (Bagan babu) and the factory (Factory Babu) and the clerks (Babu). The third category includes the sub-staffs who mainly carry out orders from the top and keep eyes on the collies. This group has a hierarchy within itself having at the top the Munshi (Field Staff) and Sardar (Factory Staff). Then comes Chaprasii. (peon); Boidar, who keeps the attendance in the field; Defadar, the gang leader of the collies; Chowkidar, the watchman; Paniwala, the man who carry water to the workers and he should be of a higher rank; Davawala the health assistant. The fourth and the last category of this hierarchical organisation is the 'Collie' include all the field and factory workers and daily wage workers directly engage in the process of production. The Collies form the large labourforce in the plantation. These people both male and female do all kinds of manual works in the garden and factory and carry on the flow production process.

Labour Recruitment

At the initial stage of tea industry in North Bengal the disperse and scanty population of this area failed to meet the enormous supply of required labour force for this very much labour intensive industry. Besides, the character of this local labour force was unsatisfactory. As a result labourers were imported from the tribal belt of Chotonagpur. Before 1874 Assam was a part of Bengal and here tea industry has started much earlier than Bengal. In 1859 Tea Planter's Association was formed in Assam to regulate the process of Labour Recruitment through the contractors (Arakathi) in an organised manner in Assam and also looked after the gardens of Terai and Dooars. However this process proved unsatisfactory by 1863. Besides this process, recruitment was also done by the planters themselves through the garden sardars and also through the recruiting agencies by contract basis. In 1874 Assam was separated from Bengal. The tea gardens of Darjeeling hills faced recruitment problems as these gardens were manned by the poverty sicken Nepali immigrants who were compelled to migrate from over populated Nepal due to its rising economic pressure. For the gardens of Terai and Doars imported labour force were to be needed. Here the planters recruited labourers following the popular policies namely Sardari system, Arakathi system and recruitment through some private agencies. Of these three systems Sardari system is the most successful one. In the first system garden sardar was sent to the recruiting ground with some money in the recruiting season, generally from early October to late February. It was easier for a sarder to collect this native people to induce them to show the advantage of work and the false prospects of ultimate settlement on independent holding. He then collect the willing people and brought them to the respective gardens. The sardars were usually accompanied by one management personnel who keep a vigil on him. In the second one i.e. in the Arakathi system the agents of the planters, generally the members of Gashi, Barik and other non-cultivatory tribes of Chotonagpur, went to the recruiting districts and collected labourers by giving them false promise of prosperity. Under the Amendment Act of 1870 these two system was in vogue till 1952. Since 1952 there has been no recruitment in plantation at least officially though this system. The third system of labour recruitment i.e. recruitment through local agents of some private agencies was done in the recruiting districts. These agencies supply labourers (Girmibas) to the garden concerned as per some agreements and get money for this job.

To look after the Labour Recruitment Policy in Terai and Doars the British planters of this area established an association named as Tea District Labour Association with its head quarter at Calcutta. This association had their agents in recruiting grounds. Besides, the Christian Mission had their own Labour Bureau to help the TDLA. 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. In 1889 a set of rules provided interalia that workers leaving one estate for another without permission must be turned out or sent back. Doars planters and then the planters of Terai region signed to this agreement. In 1959 recruitment from outside West Bengal has been reduced and gradually the TDLA dissolved. By this time a surplus condition among the plantation labourers has been created in North Bengal and the planters could recruit the required labours from the surplus one settled down in and around their plantation.

Types of Work, System of Works and Working Hours

In plantation daily wage labourers perform all types of manual works such of plucking of leaves, weeding, hoeing, manuring, forking, cleaning soil, pruning the tea bush in winter, taking care of nursery bed of young tea plants and cleaning the tea stalk in factory, spraying of pesticides and so on.

Plucking is considered to be the most important job in plantation and need patience. This job is generally done by the women folk who are believed to collect better quality of leaves with greater efficiency. The plucking season generally begins with early rain in March and ends either in November or in early December. The plucking gives the highest yield during July to August when rain fall is heavy. The plucking in early monsoons is supposed to produce the best quality tea.

After plucking the season of pruning the tea bush comes in winter on which depends the yield of the next season. On the basis of height of the bush pruning is made as light, medium and deep. The women folk perform the light and medium pruning while the deep pruning is done by the male labourers. Beside this male labourers perform the heavy manual works like deep hoeing, digging, spraying of pesticide and weedicides. The women workers also perform: weeding, manuring, light hoeing, collecting the seeds of the shade trees, forking and preparing of nursery beds. The adolescent labourers perform the same types of works as the women folk. The aged

labourers are generally engaged in picking out the stalks from the tea leaves. They also engage in making nursery seed beds. Children are generally given light agricultural works such as removing creepers and parasites from tea bushes, light digging, collecting the seeds of shade trees etc.

Plantation works is generally done in group or groups termed as 'Patti' consisted of fifty labourers either men and women under the supervision of Sardar and Dafader. The tasks are fixed either interms of Nal or Dangs or Bushes. A Nal or Dang is an area of 12 square feet and roughly 3000 Nals comprise an acre. The task assigned to the women and children are proportionately less than the men.

In 1951 the Plantation Labour Act lays down the maximum weekly working hour for the labours. Later in 1957 another Plantation Labour Act is enacted which is in vogue. According to this act the normal weekly hours of work were in between 37hr and 47hr in West Bengal. The act provides for a day rest long period of seven days and for the payment of work done on the day before rest. The act also provides for grant of leaves with wage at the rate of one day for every fifteen working days. Accumulation of leave is allowed upto a maximum of 30 days.

Table 4.3.: Sexwise classification of Plantation work

Operation in Garden Factory	Period in Month	Sex of labourers
Garden Operation		
1. Filling of vacancies of Tea Bushes	Jan-May	Men & Women
2. Transplanting	Jan-Mar	- do -
3. Manuring	Feb-May	- do -
4. Tipping	Mar-Dec	- do -
5. Plucking	Mar-Dec	- do -
6. Spraying Pesticides	April-Sept.	Men
7. Pruning	Oct-Jan	Men & Women
8. Weeding	Throughout the year	- do -
9. Hoeing	- do -	- do -
Factory Operation		
10. Machine operating	Mar -Dec	Men
11. Withering	- do -	- do -
12. Rolling	- do -	- do -
13. Fermenting	- do -	- do -
14. Drying	- do -	- do -
15. Sorting	- do -	- do -
16. Packing	- do -	- do -

Source : 'Class Formation In Plantation System' . Bhowmik 1981

Wage and Remuneration of the Labourers and other Job Facilities

The tea garden labourers are paid according to the task they perform. A work is known as 'Thika'. He is paid a wage for completing his 'Thika' which is known as 'Hazirā'. The wage were previously fixed arbitrarily by the planters through their organisation. The Hazirā remained static between 1920-1947. It was for one anna, three annas and six paises per thika respectively for men, women and children (P. Griffith 1971). The labourers could increase his income by completing more than one Thika once a day. Beside the wages they were given certain monetary benefits like bonus, sick allowance, maternity allowance, incentives, some ex-gratia payments during festivals. All these were paid either directly to the labourers or through the Sardars. The wage of the labourers was determined by the labourers capacity to bargain to higher wage but not by the productivity of the labourers. Their condition was miserable. The government do nothing to protect them. In the post independence period the situation was quite favourable for the but the wage in tea plantation lagged far behind those in other industries.

In the post independence era several committee viz. Modak Committee 1950, Banerjee Committee 1952 were appointed who recommended 6 merely and subsistence wage, food, education and medical and other facilities for the tea plantation labourers. A Central Wage Board was appointed by 1960. This board announced two interim wage increments of 8 paisa and 6 paisa. The then wage in Terai plantation was Rs. 1.95 for men, Rs. 1.81 for women and Rs. 1.07 for children in Doars Rs. 1.98, Rs. 1.84, Rs. 1.07 for men, women and children respectively. The central board recommended the wage of men women and children will be increased by 13, 10 and 7 paisa respectively from 1966. 1966 onward wages gradually increased either through recommendations of bipartite meetings or through the demand of the trade unions.

Table 4.4.: Wage Chart of the Labourers (1969-1978)

Year	Male	Female	Children
1969-70	Rs. 2.39	Rs. 2.22	Rs. 1.29
1970-71	Rs. 2.48	Rs. 2.48	Rs. 1.33
1971-72	Rs. 2.71	Rs. 2.54	Rs. 1.45
1972-73	Rs. 2.94	Rs. 2.77	Rs. 1.56
1973-77	Increased of wage for 4 times of 1973		
1978	Rs. 5.24	Rs. 3.04	Rs. 2.73

Source : Class Formation in Plantation System Bhowmik 1981

The wage differences between men and women labourers was abolished in December, 1976. but many of the employers in West Bengal refused to pay equal wage even after the Equal Wage For Equal Work Act was passed. The Indian Tea Planters Association is in favour of maintaining the wage differences between the men and women labourers because Thika assigned to women labourers is always lesser than that of men

Table 4.5.: The Rate of Daily Wage for Tea Plantation Labourers

Daily wage rate	1.6.90 Adult	30.5.91 Child- ren	1.6.91 Adult	31.5.92 Child- ren	1.6.92 Adult	31.3.94 Child- ren	1.4.94 Adult	31.3.95 Child- ren
1. Doars								
(a) Tea Est 500 hec & above	16.50	8.37	17.90	9.07	19.30	9.77	21.80	11.02
(b) Tea Est. bellow 500 hec	16.47	8.37	17.87	9.07	16.47	8.37	17.87	9.07
2. Terai	16.44	8.35	17.84	17.84	9.05	9.77	21.80	11.02
3. Darjeeling	16.12	8.19	17.52	8.89	19.30	9.77	21.80	11.20

Plucking incentive rate : Doars & Terai 25p each for per 1 kg (Valied upto 31.5.92)

Plucking incentive rate : Doars & Terai 32p each for per 1 kg. (Valied upto 1.7.94)

Source : Tea Board Statistics 1992-93

The Dearness Allowance form a part of the revised wage fixed under the Minimum Wage Act. Besides a labourers gets ration at concessional rates with firewood. Some protective uniforms like umbrella, apron to protect their cloth in tea bush, pullover, jute hessian which are essential for working in the plantation are supplied free to the labourers alongwith blanket once in every two years.

Beside the other job facilities in tea plantation the labourers according to the Plantation Labour Act 1951 the labourers are provided housing facilities, with the provision of adequate supply of drinking water, latrine and other health facilities and a medical leave of 14 days in a week with 2/3rd of his minimum daily wage, Women enjoy maternity leave with full payment. The act also provides that every employer should provide and maintain a primary school for labourers children and a creche (where 50 or more women are employed.) The act also provides recreational facility to the labourers and paid holiday on Independence Day, May Day and Republic Day and one day each for Durgapuja, Diyali and Holi.

Social Environment of the Plantation Labourers

Environment, means surrounding, that stimulate or influence the behaviour of a group. 'Social environment' includes that part of environment consisting of interacting individuals, their pattern of social organisations, their way of life and the other aspects of society. The social environment of the multi ethnic plantation society of North Bengal with colonial background is very complex.

Modesia

The immigrant plantation labourers of North Bengal from Chotonagpur belong to different ethnic groups. Externally they form a more or less homogeneous group commonly referred to as 'Modesia' by the local people. The word 'Modesia' is an indigenous term denotes 'our people' or 'my native people'. The immigrants labourers initially referred to their native people as 'Modesia' (Mo-desia) before the local folk who later on started calling the whole immigrants tribal labourers group as 'Modesia'. Another meaning of 'Modesia' is the migrants tribal of middle areas of the country i.e. Madhyadesh. 'Modesia' is not at all a single tribal group but a heterogeneous group comprising a number of immigrant tribal groups from Chotonagpur and adjoining area who are internally highly differentiated with their distinct socio-cultural traits, religion, customs and languages. Yet they have some common traits due to their same place of origin and same type of traditional occupation. Their customs, beliefs, rituals have some similar traits though each tribe name them separately. Due to their daily close and face to face interaction some cultural assimilation take place among them, each group has to evolve a compromise formula and an attitude of tolerance to others. The most common thing the tribal groups have the illiteracy, ignorance and dire poverty. They are socially, economically as well as culturally backward.

Settlement Pattern

Almost the entire labourforce of plantation is resident labourers. They live at labour 'Bastee' in labourlines scattered all around the garden. Previously the housing was done by the labourers themselves under the vigilance of the Sardar and these were the 'kaccha' huts. The materials were supplied by the management. But the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 lays down the provision of pukka structured quarter of the labourers with proper sanitation system and provision of drinking water. The labourers are not

able to get all these facilities but some pukka quarters are built. Usually the tribes of same category cluster together surrounded by their same status group. By this their community life maintained alongwith separate tribal identity. In the present days the rule of single tribal cluster is not maintained so rigidly as was in past. The habitants of a bastee bond each other in kinship terms.

Language

Originally the tribals from Chotonagpur has their respective languages like 'Kurkh', Mundari of Dravidian language group. But in plantation living together for a long time these groups has undergone a process of acculturation affecting their culture, society even language. The effect of linguistic intercourse is unique, though superficial because no single language could emerge as dominant language. Rather a link language which is a mixture of Hindi, Bengali and Assamese had been made current. This link language known as 'Sandri' is at present the means for verbal communication. The major vocabulary of this language is either Assameese or Bengali with a considerable amount of Hindi. The choice of major vocabulary depends on the regular contact and use of neighbouring Indo-Aryan language. The primary unit consists of Assameese, Bengali and Hindi words with secondary units comprising the language of Eastern Bihar. The original grammar of the language is seen to be lost totally. The interaction of various tribal groups and contact with highly developed speech community might be the main reason for the growth of Sandri language in the garden. It is already in the form of pidgin and functions as lingua franca among the labours of the garden. (Benerjee 1998).

Social Structure and Social Stratification

The social structure of the adibasi labourers group is very complex. Internally these Modesias are further subdivided into various sub-groups. Religion is one of the criteria of such subdivision. On this basis the tribals are divided into 'Saosar' (follower of tribal religion) and non tribals mainly Christian. Integration of this two groups are very easy. Among them there is no sense of inferiority or superiority complex. But subdivisions into various status group depending on same place of origin and same traditional occupation creates some complexities. The different ethnic groups arrange themselves in a hierarchical rank depending on this criteria keeping the traditional agriculturists at the top and artisans at the bottom. On this basis the traditional agriculturist tribes like Oraon, Munda Kheria form a common status group superior to

that of the artisan tribes like Turi, Baraik, Lohar etc.. Their commensal relation follows this hierarchy. The tribals of higher status group do not live with the lower one and not willingly come to form any affinal relation. The women are more conservative in this respect. This hierarchy and this commensal relation was followed very strictly in the earlier days but the rigidity slacken in the present days to some extent but in case of community participation these rules are followed strictly but no rule of pollution is followed in case of taking rice beer (harria).

Family-Authority and Kinship

Mainly pairing family, nuclear family is predominant in the plantation society along with very few joint families. The tea industry absorbs both male and female members as its labour. The basic unit of recruitment of the planters is the family. They encourage the family based immigration to get cheap and settled labourers. Several job facilities like small family quarter, ration, firewood are given according to the household except according to the heads of family members. Additional labourers are also taken from household basis. All these encourage the nuclearisation of family in plantation. The functional role of family changed in plantation economy as the self supporting tribal peasants turned to wage earner. Thus the family changed from the unit of production to the unit of consumption. Traditionally joint family was essential for joint and organised effort for agriculture and to support the family economy. In the present situation in plantation joint living deprives the labourers of some of the due benefits from the garden authority. Thus joint family except under some special circumstances is disfavoured.

With the break down of joint family in plantation society the patriarchal authority system has been diminished. Here both men and women are the wage earner. The authority came into the hands of the earning male member though: he exercises his dominance comparatively less on his working wife, who too earns the bread for the family.

Kinship ties are slackening in plantation society and kinship obligations are comparatively less than the order days. There is a striking decrease in the frequency of their visit to their natal places now a days. Local marriage which is highly preferable in this society, that develops a new kind of kin groups within plantation and ⁱⁿ the neighbouring villages. A close relationship with a new set of neighbouring kins men arises who help each other in

problems. This close kinship inter dependence of the plantation society differs from that of the other industrial society.

Marriage

Marriage among the tribals of plantation is more a social contact based on individual choice rather than a sacrament. Adibasi boy and girl can marry according to their own will without prior consent of their parents. Such union easily breaks down as their own will. Negotiation marriage (Sadi) is the general rule fixed up generally by the parents of the couple concerned. Here bride price is prevalent. After the fixation bride price a premarriage celebration takes place in the girl's house followed by feast, drink and dance. There is no fixed age at marriage. Endogamous marriage is a rule though inter tribal marriage also takes place. But marriage within the same status group is desirable. There is no problem in the marriage between Christian and Saosar. Marriage is strictly monogamous. Polygamy is also practiced though socially criticised. Divorce and remarriage of both men and women is also common. Another common feature of tribal plantation society is consensual union (Rajikhusi) in which couple live together without marriage and have children, 'Ghardamad' is another peculiar feature of plantation ^{society} when the boy stays in the girl's family for some period after marriage and work for this family if he fails to give the fixed bride price. 'Ghardamad' concept has changed today from that of the previous time. Now a man having plenty of land or property but has no son can keep his 'Damad' (son in law) at home out of agreement settled at the time of marriage. The plantation community try to confine their marriage within their same occupation group. At present marriage in the same garden is common as the job opportunity is diminishing. If the girl of other garden come to her husband's place she has to give up her job. Now in the surplus labour condition there is very little chance to get a job for her in the new garden. Marriage alliances in their natal village is now not preferred mainly due to the communication problem.

In plantation society plantation work become essential and normal component of married women's daily existence. Their husband as well as in laws have a positive attitude towards their work.

Social Control

Law and order in garden is maintained by the Panchayat, not the statutory one but the un official, garden panchayat which is generally a

temporary body form when problem arises. This Panchayat is of two kinds- one is the tribal panchayat deals the problems exclusive to the respective tribe like inter tribal dispute, custody of children of a separated couple etc. The garden panchayet is a multi ethnic panchayet body solve the problem of the garden like theft, rodism etc.

Employment

The adibasi people in plantation generally work as labourers in garden and factory. By upward mobility they come only upto the chaprasi level. In the slack seasons the temporary labourers work as share cropper in agricultural field in an out the plantation. The economic condition of the permanent labourers are stable. Beside this these people get engage in rickshwa pulling, petty business, and also get some return from live stock and poultry.

Social Interaction

The plantation society of North Bengal is a plural society where several ethnic groups with their diverse place of origin and linguistic and racial differences live side by side and communicate to each other during their daily and face to face interaction being in same economic activity. Each group has to evolve a compromise formula and degree of tolerance in their due course of interaction. Here several social processes are in operation. Some groups lose their identity through the process of amalgamation. Additional groups are created out of ethnic differentiation. Some groups lose their identity while some, specially the numerically dominated ones, able to retain their traditional identity, to some extent. But no group is so dominant to keep their identity intact. Here the tribals have to keep three levels of interaction. Besides the interaction within their own tribal group, with the different tribal labour groups, they have to interact with the other non tribal groups of lower caste Nepali, Bihari and Bengali as well as the Bengali, Bihari and Nepali Babu groups. The Bengalees are considered superior to the all the groups whom the tribals try to immitate almost in all respects. The Nepalis being ^{rat} greater are looked down upon.

Political consciousness

Tea plantations are generally located in the isolated part of rural areas of hills and foot hills of North Bengal. Besides, as a part of colonial economy the planters kept the labours out of the contract from outside. These people

are very little conscious of their actual position and the happening outside of their 'Universe'.

The surplus labourers of this region as share cropper (Adihar) got involved in the Tebhaga Movement of 1940's, Land Garb Movement of 1950's and Naxalbari Movement of 1960's. But these failed to keep any longlasting effect on them. At present Trade Unionism and Co-operative system entered among them. But they are much concerned to increase their bonus, wage and issues strike for these rather than long lasting improvement.

Religion

The adibasi plantation labourers are commonly the follower of traditional tribal religion, animism. They call themselves 'Saosar' They are mostly divided into different clans with their respective totem which is also taboo to them. At present in the plantation society converted Christian tribes men are also there. Some also claim themselves to be Hindu as they do not mean this term in its orthodox sense. Among the Christian and Saosar there exists easy integration and very little differences in their life style except the Christians attend church and follow a somewhat different rule of marriage. Actually the Saosars too are not the follower of their traditional religious life. They have come from their homeland long past and exposed to the tea garden culture. The religion they are practising to day is a mixed religion with some of its original traits blended to the new ones which they adopt in tea garden from their neighbouring ethnic groups..

Status of Women

These tribal women are generally enjoy much freedom than the Hindu caste women. They are exposed to very few restrictions. There is no prohibition of their smoking and drinking. In these society men usually exercise less authority over women. The inclusion of women as wage earner and their crucial economic contribution helps to raise their status, personal power and authority in the family. Besides, the role as bread earner they have to bear the burden of household and child rearing. Here they have to play the role as a woman worker, wife and mother at a time. They have to perform the role of wage earner at their working hours and as housewife in the time when the males enjoy leisure. In plantation society doing the domestic work and looking after the children do not affect the dignity of the husband. Here in this society husbands take the opinion of their wives but naturally it is not much

valued except regarding the matter of day to day expenditure domestic action etc. The wives usually do not object to their drinking which is their traditional habit but quarrel occur regarding excessive drinking and spending a large part of the income on it. It is found that women are the primary bread earner of the plantation family.

The life of the immigrant tribal labourers have changed to a great extent as they came to plantation system of North Bengal. The innocent hard working tribals with traditional peasant or artisan background turned to industrial wage earner and came to the fold of industrial bureaucratic organisation of plantation with agro based productive system. The village based tribals have to live into labour settlement allotted by the management. The new working and living environment affect their traditional life to a great extent. Nuclearization of family, reduction of kinship obligations increase in inter ethnic marriage, change in the religious rites and rituals are the result of this. These changes due to the immigration and adoption of new working and living condition and so on have a great sociological importance.

OBSERVATION

As the tea industry in North Bengal flourished since 1860's onward a huge labour force was needed to carry out the operation of this labour intensive industry at its different levels. The then scanty and disperse population of North Bengal failed to meet the demand of enormous supply of cheap labour. As a result and also as a part of colonial rule semi aboriginal people were imported from outside the state to serve the industry. These people were from different tribal groups viz. Oraon, Munda, Santal, Bhumij, Kheria, Lohar, Asur, Turi, Barik etc. of Chotonagpur plateau of Bihar and its adjoining region of Madhyapradesh and Orissa. Traditionally these people were of agricultural or artisan background. They came in the fold of the strict three tyre bureaucratic structure of tea industry.

Initially the immigrant labourers were recruited by 'Arakati' or 'Sardari' system though the agents who draw them from their natal place by advance paying. With the expansion of tea industry in North Bengal by 1959 the recruitment from outside the state were stopped by act. By this time the planters could recruited labourers directly from the previous ones who immigrated with family and settled down in and around the plantation creating

a surplus condition. In plantation the daily wage labourers perform all types of manual works in field and factory. Depending on sex generally light work is given to women ^{and} children. In West Bengal they have to work in between 37 to 47 hours in a week. The tea garden labourers are given wage (Hazira) according to the task (Thika) given to them for a time period. In 1994-95 the daily wage of the adult workers were Rs. 21.80 in the big gardens (500 hec) of Doars and Rs. 17.87 (500hec) Terai and hills of Darjeeling while the children gets Rs. 11.02. Besides wage they enjoy some other job facilities like free quarter, fire wood, ration, medical facility education facility for the children etc.

The immigrant tribal labourer groups externally form a more or less homogeneous group termed by the local folk as 'Modesia' (i.e. native people) by which the adibasi people initially referred to their tribes men before the local folk who started calling the whole group by this name. Internally the Modesias are highly differentiated with their distinct socio-cultural traits, language, religion and customs. They may have some similarities due to their same place of origin and same traditional occupation yet the great similarity they have is the illiteracy, ignorance and dire poverty which make them backward socially and culturally in every aspects of their life.

The structure of the multi-ethnic plantation society is very complex and unique where different ethnic groups have daily, friendly and face to face interaction being engaged in same economic activity. Here several social processes are in operation, several groups and subgroups are formed through the process of assimilation, amalgamation, as well, based on religion, traditional occupation, place of origin and so on. The different ethnic groups arrange themselves in caste like hierarchy on this basis and their communal relation follow this hierarchy, though not so rigidly in today except in community participation.

In plantation the adibasi labourers live in 'Bastee' i.e. the labour settlements allotted by the management, communicate in 'Sandri' i.e. broken Hindi mixed with Bengali and mostly are 'Saosar', animist, by religion. Their family get nuclearised with the authority resting upon the earning male member of the working couple. Their kinship obligation in homeland get staking and new relationship grew up within plantation with increasing local as well inter ethnic marriage. Marriage, commonly endogamous, appears more a social contact, based on individual choice than social sacrament.

Law and order of this society rests upon the unofficial garden panchayat. Large scale women participation in plantation as wage labourer raise their status in society. Besides plantation work these people also engage in agricultural activities as share cropper in and outside plantation and also in petty business. These people living in the remote gardens of North Bengal are very much unaware of the political scene of the country. At present trade unionism entered among them but these unions are much concern about the issues like increase of wage, bonus etc.

Immigration, adoption to new socio-cultural setting, occupation mobility from traditional agriculture to industrial bureaucratic organisation of plantation changes almost all the aspects of life of the Modesia labourers which is of a great sociological importance.