

**Chapter – 4**

**ETHNIC, SOCIAL, OCCUPATIONAL  
AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF  
THE WOMEN TEA PLANTATION  
WORKERS**

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### ETHNIC, SOCIAL , OCCUPATIONAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN TEA PLANTATION WORKERS.

#### 4.1 Migration History :

Migration is a special process, associated with the redistribution of population. Movement of an individual or groups which involves a permanent or Semi-permanent change of usual residence is migration (Wilson: 1985)

The more authentic history of Nepalis migration to Darjeeling hills begins in the middle of the nineteenth century only when the East India company's trade interest had been focused on this region. The first large scale cultivation of tea for commercial purpose took place in 1852 and we have already discussed in the previous chapters about the close interrelations between the growth of tea gardens and rapid increase of the population of Darjeeling mainly due to the migration of Nepalis from the hills of Nepal. The growth of tea gardens as a major factor in the migration of the Nepalis to this region has been duly emphasized by various scholars like L.S.S.O' Mally (1907) and later by Sunil Munsri (1980). Besides tea industry, the recruitment of Nepalis to British army is another important factor for the migration (Kansakar: 1980). As the old historical records shows the establishment of cantonments and barracks and a battalion of British infantry and Artillery stationed at Lebong (in 1847), Katapahar and Jalapahar in 1848.

The Anglo-Nepalis Peace Treaty 1816 better known as the Segauli Treaty empowered the British Govt. to raise three regiments of Nepalis hill people in the British army. But the Govt of Nepal, later on began to discourage the recruitment of its subjects to the British army. To overcome this problems the British began to settle the Nepalis in the northern hills of India (Darjeeling, Dehradun, Simla etc.). The Nepali Govt.'s policy on this issue was relaxed later by the Prime Minister, Bir Shamsheer. This was followed by the steady recruitment of soldiers from Nepal. The soldiers settled down in this region after retirement, though a few went back to Nepal. It is also evident that Nepal had invaded Sikkim many times after the establishment of the Gorkha kingdom in Nepal. It had even succeeded to occupy it

up to the Teesta River for thirty seven-years since 1780. Nepal ruled this area until the Treaty of Titaliya signed in 1817 after which the land occupied by the Gorkhas were restored by the British to Sikkim. Many Nepalis are known to have come and settled in this region during this period (Subba: 1989)

The many scholars have analysed the main reasons behind the coming of Nepalis to this region. One of the main reasons for the migration has been identified as economic. Forinstance, Haimendorf (1977) brings out the 'push' factors such as pressure on land and resultant impoverishment of the peasants in Nepal being responsible for the migration of the Nepalis. Similarly, Caplan (1970) considered the increase pressure on land and over population forced some families of Rais and Limbus to leave panther and Limbuan area of eastern Nepal. Kansakar (1980) considered the fact that the conquest of the Kathmandu Valley and the later unification of Nepal in 1769 by Prithivi Narayan Shah were responsible for the initial migration of the Nepalis. Yet another reason he presents is the recruitment of Nepalis into the British army since as early as 1815. He also considered the large-scale migration of Nepalis from eastern part of Nepal to work in newly established tea plantation of Darjeeling as the people in the eastern Nepal prepared to immigrate into the Indian hills like Darjeeling, Dehradun, Simla due to the similar ecological niche. On the other hand, many scholars (Pradhan: 1991, Hofer: 1978) stated that the two castes i.e., Rais and Limbus along with other middle castes emigrated from eastern Nepal due to religious reasons. They were beef eaters which was directly against the Brahmanical rites of Nepal and it was strongly prohibited by the laws of the land but I do not think this factor is important one because the numerically dominant communities in Darjeeling plantations are Rai, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, Mangers, Newars and other middle caste groups. Among the Rais and Limbus only the people belonging to Lhasa *gotra* or clan are beef-eaters and the *Kashi* gotra Rais and Limbus do not take beef. Among the Newari caste, only few lower caste Newars take beef. All the Mangers and Gurungs do not take beef as we know these two communities of Western Nepal were the first to adopt hindu way of life in Nepal. With the exception of Tamangs, other numerically dominant caste groups do not usually take beef. For many middle caste Nepali, to eat or not to eat

beef is determined by his or her *gotra* or clan affiliation. The scholars like Caplan (1970) and Hofer (1978) considered the fact that the introduction of new land tenure system known as *Raiker* as against the traditional type known as *kipat* system is one of the reasons for migration of Nepalis. *Kipat* system of land tenure was very famous, particularly among the Rais and Limbus of eastern Nepal. *Kipat* land was a sort of communal land holding jointly owned by a group of families (consanguineous kins), which they used to get following the law of primogeniture. This type of *Kipat* land used to pass from one generation to the next on the male line, usually the eldest senior male members were considered eligible for the inheritance of *kipat* land, which they could not sell out to others. The introduction of new land tenure known as *Raiker* replaced the old one known as *Kipat* and with the break up of traditional *kipat* holding the whole socio-economic life of the Rais and Limbus might have disturbed. They did not like the new *Raiker* system in place of their traditionally inherited system of land holding. For the Rais and Limbus, *Kipat* was not only a land management system but it was their way of life, core of their socio-cultural life. This might be one of the reasons behind the migration of Rais and Limbus of eastern Nepal bordering Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalaya. Overburden by the various taxes imposed by the Rana (Hindu) Rulers, the Rais and Limbus crossed the border of Nepal in search of jobs. In this context, I would like to cite an example of the imposition of tax known as *Megchan*. This tax was imposed by the Gorkha rulers for the collection of money to buy or raise the arms and ammunitions during the wars. The Gorkhas, after entering and conquering the Kirat Pradesh (eastern Nepal including the Khambuan and Limbuan of Rais and Limbus respectively) imposed this tax on the Rais and Limbus (Sharma: 1982). Hudgson also stated that this tax was imposed on every households in eastern Nepal. According to Sharma, this tax which was imposed during the war periods were continued in existence till 1949. Dutta (1981) considers the following developments as important for the coming of the Nepalis to the region in particular: increasing population, fragmented landholding, indebtedness, ecological crisis, and food deficiency in Nepal as indigenous and the Anglo-Nepalese Friendship Treaty of 1850, the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1851, and the revised Indo-Nepal Agreement of 1956 as exogenous

factors. According to Regmi (1971) a large-scale emigration of people from hill areas of Nepal to Bengal and elsewhere was due to the proletarianization of small peasants in Nepal. Pradhan (1991) has mentioned that the real cause of outmigration was economic hardship and social discrimination suffered by middle and lower castes as a result of political, social and economic domination of high caste *Tagadharies* (Bahun and Chetris) over the middle caste people of Mongoloid origin and untouchable low castes who constituted the overwhelming majority of the humble toiling fold.

It is quite plain from various writings of the British and Indian administrators that the Nepalis were the most sought after people by the British not only as soldiers but also as agriculturists. For instance, Hodgson (1874) considered them to be the best soldiers in Asia. The unwillingness of the Nepal govt. to allow the British to recruit its subjects for a considerable length of time had compelled the latter to adopt certain measures for getting them into their army. They sent agents for bringing them from Nepal and encouraged them to settle in the hill areas of Darjeeling, Shillong and Dehradun.

From the field study it is seen that in the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills, the middle and lower caste groups have migrated more than higher castes. The studies of Lionel Caplan (1970) and Patricia Caplan (1972) also shows that the lower castes of Nepalis have immigrated in larger numbers than the upper castes. Now the question may arise here as to why the *Bahun* and *Chhetris* (Upper castes) did not immigrate to the Plantation though there were a lot of small peasants among them in Nepal. One of the plausible reasons may be that they were successful agriculturists in Nepal Himalayas. The large-scale migration of lower and middle castes Nepalis is quite natural when the upper castes (Bahun and Chetris) have appropriated most of the local resources of Nepal including land, leaving the lower castes with the only option to leave. The upper castes themselves may not have felt it necessary to migrate as they had the most satisfactory socio-economic and political status there. Another reason behind the insignificant numbers of upper castes in tea plantation is that the very number of high castes is only three (Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetris) while the lower castes Nepalis including untouchables are

more than fifteen. Obviously, the upper castes make a small percentage compared to the lower castes in Nepal too. Thus, it is quite clear that the lower castes had immigrated in large numbers than the upper castes. My own census of seven tea gardens of Darjeeling hills supports this view. The caste distribution in tea gardens of Darjeeling – Kurseong areas, the middle castes are numerically dominant. The majority of them belonged to castes like *Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurungs, Newars* etc. the upper castes very few. In some tea gardens percentage of *Bahun* is nil. There are good number of lower castes (untouchables) Nepalis like *Kami, Damai* and *Sarki*. The high castes generally had a satisfactory position in Nepal. It is also true that they began to immigrate in significant number only in the beginning of the twentieth century. For the first time the census of India, 1931 has put the figure of the *Tagadharis* (*Bahun* and *Chhetris*) at 8,299.

The foregoing discussion shows that multiplicity of factors, following Lee's (1966) model of 'Push' and 'Pull' have worked hand in hand in building a viable Nepali (plantation) society in Darjeeling hills. But the 'pull' factors are perhaps more important in this regard. All over the world, bringing of labourers from outside, preferably from very far-off places, and employ them in plantations has been a concomitant feature of the colonial rule. (Cotton plantation in North America, Sugar plantations in British Guyana, Fiji and Cuba, Rubber plantation of Malaysia, Coffee plantation of Brazil, tea plantation of India and Sri Lanka, sugercane plantation of Java and Tobacco plantation in Sumatra's East Coast). The main rationale behind all this is that the employers can afford to pay such labourers a very low wage, and ensure a steady labour supply by keeping them tied to an invisible chain from which it is difficult for them to come out.

#### **4.2 Population Structure in Tea Plantations :**

As stated earlier the district of Darjeeling was taken over by the East India company from the Raja of Sikkim in 1835 and the first tea plantation was started in 1839. Soon after the introduction of tea plantation in Darjeeling, a large-scale migration took place from Nepal (particularly eastern Nepal). In 1931 there was 59,018 people who had come from Nepal. According to 1941 census, Nepal

provided 45 percent of migrants to India. Petterson (1963) suggests that there are 3 million people of Nepalis origin as the regular resident in North Bengal and North Assam alone.

The following table shows the caste/communitywise distribution of Nepalis population in Darjeeling hills.

**Table – 4.1**

**The Caste/Community wise Distribution of Nepalis population in Darjeeling in 1901.**

Name of caste or community	Total number of Population
Khambus or Rai	33000
Limbu or Subba	14300
Tamang or Murmi	25400
Mangars	11900
Chettri or Khas	11600
Gurungs	8700
Newars or Pradhan	5880
Bahun or Brahmin	5000
Yakha or Dewan	1143
Kamis	9800
Damai	4600
Sarki	1800
Gharti or Bhujel	3450

Source : *LSO' Malley, Darjeeling District Gazetteer (1907).*

The above table indicates that the most numerous groups are the *Rai* or *Khambus* and *Tamang* or *Murmis*. The other numerically dominant groups were *Limbus*, *Mangers*, *Gurungs* and *Chhetris*. From the lower caste, *Kamis* or blacksmiths were numerically dominant. But the figures given by O'Malley did not include other groups or castes like *Jogi*, *Sunuwars*, *Sunars*, *Thamis*, *Majhi* etc. These communities also constitute sizeable number of Darjeeling's population.

Till the late 30's migrants constituted the bulk of tea plantation workers, after which the process stopped to a great extent. When we correlate the nature of population structure in the plantation with the above premise, we find the majority of such workers belonged to the middle and lower caste group as it is also evident from the following table.

Table – 4.2

**Composition of Different Ethnic groups in Darjeeling Hill Areas (1901-1941)**

Caste/Ethnic groups	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941
Kiratis (Rai, Limbu and Yakha)	32.50	34.70	32.41	33.87	32.57
Tamang (Murmi)	18.68	17.07	17.80	20.34	21.61
Gurung/Mangers	5.84	6.05	5.67	5.85	6.67
Newars	3.86	4.34	5.11	5.40	5.28
Kami, Damai and Sarki (artisan Castes)	10.96	10.90	11.46	10.13	11.75
Brahmin other Nepali Group	10.93	10.23	10.89	10.67	9.58
Lepchas	6.67	6.08	5.65	6.34	5.38
Bhutias	6.23	6.75	6.23	2.79	3.28
%	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source : *Dasgupta and Samad, North Bengal Review, June, 1980.*

In the above table the population growth of different castes of Nepalis has been shown though the table does not include all the Nepali Castes, it can still throw some light on the caste or ethnic-wise population growth of the Nepalis in Darjeeling Himalayas.

It is clear from the above table that the middle caste groups (Rai, Limbu, Manger, Gurung, Tamang, Newars etc.) Constituted more than 62% whereas the lower castes (Kami, Damai, Sarki, Sunar) and the upper caste (Bahun and Chettris)

groups constituted very few percentage. Among the middle caste migrants the Kiratis (Rai and Limbu) were the majority. Next to Kiratis are the Tamangs. My field investigation also shows the same picture of caste distribution and numerical strength of caste groups.

#### **4.3 Ethnic and Caste Structure in the Tea Plantation :**

The Nepali caste system in the tea plantation is quite different from that of the traditional Nepal. Here, the immigrant Nepalis had to adjust in a completely new agro-industrial environment of the plantation society. We have already discussed in the previous chapters that unlike in Nepal, all the castes and tribes have to live in the plantation as a homogenous groups though they belong to diverse linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Moreover, we have already seen that in each tea gardens about 12 to 15 different castes and communities are living harmoniously and engaged in homogeneous economic activity. Under such circumstances they can not follow the strict rules regarding commensal relations, pollution and purity (concept of untouchability) etc. However, in certain situations, such as the customs in relation to marriage and death rituals, worship of ancestors (patrilineage) or *kul puja*, celebration of community festivals etc., one can see the distinct social status of a caste.

The following table shows the type of caste structure that have emerged in the region under study. It is evident from the Table that how the caste structure have changed considerably under the new agro-industrial setting.

Table – 4.3

**Caste Hierarchy of the Nepalis in Darjeeling Tea Gardens and their  
Traditional Occupations**

Caste status	Caste	Traditional Occupations
High (Upper) caste	<b>Bahun</b> (Brahmin)	
	Upadhya	Priests
	Jaisi	Astrologers
	<b>Chettris</b> (Kshatriya)	
	Thakuri	Aristocrats
	Chettri	Warriers
Middle Caste	Newars	Businessmen
	Rai	Agriculturist
	Limbu	Agriculturist
	Yakha	Agriculturist
	Mangar	Agriculturist
	Thami	Agriculturist
	Sunwar	Agriculturist
	Gurung	Shepherds
	Tamang	Horse traders/cavaliers
	Bhujel	Beaten Rice makers/palanquin bearers
	Jogi	Ascetics
	Yolmo	Paper – makers
	Sherpa	Porters
Low caste (untouchables) or artisans castes	Sunar	Goldsmiths
	Kami	Ironsmiths
	Sarki	Cobblers
	Damai/Darjee	Musician/Tailors

Source: *Field work.*

The above table makes it clear that so far as the caste hierarchy is concerned there are three broad groups high, middle and low – which may also be described as upper, lower and untouchable castes. In the high caste group, the *Bahun*s are at the top who are followed by the *Thakuris* and *Chhetris*. However, according to the

Varna order, *Thakuri* and *Chhetris* belong to the Kshatriya order. These three groups are collectively known as *tagadhari* jat who wear sacred threads or *janai*. The *tagadhari* is further divided into two types namely *Jharra Tagadhari* (pure) and *Thimala* (mixed) *Tagadhari*.

The *Rais*, *Limbus*, *Tamangs*, *Newars*, *Mangars*, *Gurungs*, *Sunuwars*, *Thami*, *Newars*, *Bhujels* are corporately known as *matwali jat* or drinking castes. They widely use wine (*Jnar* and *rakshi*) and sacrifice animals in practicing their rituals and majority of them still continue their animistic religion. They occupy the middle status in the Nepalis caste hierarchy. It is very interesting to note that the internal caste hierarchy of the Newars (started during the period of Jayasthiti malla, a Malla King) which managed to survive in Kathmandu valley even after the unification of Nepal by king Prithivinarayan Shah in 1769 could not longer sustain itself in the region under study. In the tea plantation society of Darjeeling himalaya all the Newars are considered as one of the middle castes like *Rai*, *Limbu* and others. It is found that the majority of the Newars in tea plantation use the title of 'Pradhan' or 'Srestha' and few among them still use the caste titles like *Jogi*, *Kusuley*, *Kasai* etc. (untouchable Newars).

The *Kamis*, *Sunars*, *Sarki* and *Damai* or *Darjee* are collectively known as the lower caste untouchables. All of them are artisan castes specialized in different trades. They are also known as *pani-na-chalne jat* (jat from whom water cannot be taken) or Achhut jat. Of the four groups, *kamis* are numerically dominant in the tea plantation.

#### **4.4 Nepali Caste Groups in Tea Plantation :**

##### ***Bahun*s or Brahmin**

The Brahmins locally known as *Bahun*s are of Indian origin. They had emigrated to Nepal via the western Himalaya during the twelfth century when the Muslims made their life uneasy in India. According to Bista (1976) the Brahmins and Rajputs who are said to have come from Kannauj and Chittore first met the *Khas*, a predominant race of Kumaon, Garhwal and the western districts of Nepal. Besides *Bahun*s had also emigrated to Nepal from places other than Kannauj and

Chittore. This is clear from the five major groups of Nepali Bahuns namely *Saraswat, Gaud, Kanyakubja, Maithili* and *Utkal Bahuns*. These names are adopted after the places of origin. *Saraswat Bahuns* were emigrated from the banks of the Saraswati River; *Kanyakubja* were emigrated from Kannauj, *Gaud Bahuns* from Bengal, *Maithil bahuns* were from Mithila and the *Utkal Bahuns* from Orissa. (Sharma: 1982) Bahuns were of two types, viz., *purbiya* and *paschimey*. The former were the residents of the eastern side of the Mahakali River and the latter were the residents of its western side.

Some of the clans of the *purbiya Bahuns* are: *Acharya, Adhikari, Aryal, Baral, Baskota, Bastola, Bhandari, Bhatta, Bhattarai, Chamlagain, Chapagain, Dahal, Debkota, Dhakal, Dhital, Dhungel, Ghimire, Gotame, Guragain, Kharel, Khanal, Lamichhane, Nepal, Neupane, Ojha, Parajuli, Paudel, Pokhrel, Purtel, Regmi, Rimal, Risal, Sigdel, Silwal, Subedi* and *Timisina* etc. The *Kumain* or *Paschimey Bahuns* are; *Bista, Bhatta, Dotel, Joshi, Khatiwada, Lohini, Pandey, Pant, Upreti* etc.

The Bahuns are further divided into two hierarchical groups – *Upadhyaya* and *Jaisi*. The *Upadhyaa Bahuns* are ritually superior than the *Jaisis* or *Joshi*. The former can perform priestly occupation whereas the latter can not. The *Joshi* or *Jaisi* are mainly astrologers.

Bahuns were first recorded by the census of India in 1881 but their exact number was not given. O'Malley (1907) has recorded their number around 5,000 in 1907. The population figure of *Bahuns* in Darjeeling was 8,299 in 1931 census.

### ***Thakuris***

The term '*thakuri*' is derived from '*Thakur*' which refers to the ruling chiefs under a common king. Nepal had many such chiefs until Prithivi Narayan Shah consolidated it in 1769. So anyone could become *Thakuri*. According to Bista (1979) '*Thakuri*' is "a generic term describing a group that developed into the highest social and political order out of the select people from *Khas* (Chettri), *Manger* and possibly a few Rajput immigrants from India. Most *Thakuris* have

Mongoloid features and it was likely that they represented a race indigenous to the Nepal hills (example, Manger).

There are mainly two hierarchical divisions among the Thakuris. The first and the superior group includes Shah, Sahi, Khan, Sen and Malla and the second or the inferior group comprises of *Man, Pokhrail, Kalyan, Newakotya, Hamal, Chand, Bansi, Bam, Reuka, Ruchali, Singh, Suryabansi* and *Uchai*. There was a group among the Mallas locally known as Thakuris. By the term '*Malla*' meant 'expertise in warfare'. This term gradually assumed the meaning of a 'title' which is only next to the Bahuns in Status.

The children of a union between a slave girl and a Thakuri boy are called '*Khawas*'. They adopt Thakuri kindred but can not marry with other Thakuris. The *Bhujels* who were once a slave caste in Nepal also have '*Khawas*' as one of its clan names. Besides, *Tharu* tribe living in terai Nepal also have '*Khawas*' as one of its clan names.

The Thakuris have an illustrious military background. They were considered the best recruits in the army. According to Morris (1985) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of 9<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles in 1929, the Thakuris were over 33 percent out of which 66 percent were Subedars, 75 percent Jemadars and 70 percent Havildars. In Darjeeling they were first recorded in 1901 but we do not have any information on their population figures. There are very few Thakuris in Darjeeling Tea gardens. As per my field record, there are only two Thakuri women workers one each in Pandam and Castleton tea gardens.

### ***Chhetris or Khas***

The word 'Chhetri' is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word 'Kshatriya' and in Nepal they are known as khasas (HMSO: 1965) This necessitated for the origin of the word 'Khas' which meant 'Khasnu' or 'to fall' or fallen caste from Bahuns. It is generally agreed that the Chhetris have one of the most varied origins. There are three probable sources of such origin: 1. progeny of the Brahmins with the local women; 2. Converts or descendents from the hill tribes in the process of Sanskritization of the local inhabitants; and 3. Ekharis or descendants of the

Rajputs and other Kharia of the Plains who had sought refuge in Nepal and served as 'military adventures'.

The Chettris or Khas are divided into several clans such as Bist, Basnet, Baniya, Bohra, Burathoki, Adhikari, Gharti, Karki, Khadka, Khatri, Khulal, Mahal, Raut, Rana, Roka, Thapa etc. They have Aryan features like the Bahuns and some Thakuris. They are Hindus and wear sacred threads. Ritually they are just below Thakuris. Along with Bahuns and Thakuris, Chettris are collectively known as *Tagadhari jat*.

In Darjeeling, their total population was 11,597 in 1901, 12,599 in 191 and 30,463 in 1941. My field record shows that out of total women workers of 2,097 (in seven tea gardens) only 105 were Chettri women. They are spread or found in all the tea gardens under study though their number is very few in each gardens.

### *Kiratas*

There is some controversy about who exactly represent the Kiratas. According to Chatterjee (1951) the term Kirata in Sanskrit indicates the wild non-Aryan tribes living in the mountains, particularly the Himalayas and in the North-eastern areas of India, who were Mongoloid in origin. On the other hand, scholars like Regmi (1969) considers only the Khamboos (Rais) and the Limboos (Subbas) of eastern Nepal (East no.2 district) and Darjeeling as the kirata tribe. Chemjong (1966) who is a Limboo himself includes many people like Mech, Lepcha, Yakha, Limboo, Mangar, Gurung, Rai Sunuwar etc. under the Kiratas category. The writers like Northey (1974) and Morris consider only the Rais (Kamboos) as Kiratas.

Now there is a general consensus among the scholars to regard only the Rais (Kamboos), Subbas (Limboos) and Yakhas (Dewan) as Kiratas. During my field work many respondents belonging to these three groups also expressed the similar views as these groups share similar socio-cultural and religious life. They have very close emotional ties between themselves and the marriage between them is not considered as an inter-caste marriage or '*ajat biha*'.

### ***Rais (Kamboos)***

The Rais or Kamboos is the single largest dominant caste group of Darjeeling hills. The term 'Rai' is known to be a title given to the Kamboos by Prithivi Narayan Shah after capturing their land in and around 1774 and the title 'Rai' amounts to the status of a chief or village head who was responsible for administering 'Kipat' land (communal land ownership). (Hermanns: 1954). The original home land of the Kamboos is Khambuan i.e., the areas between Sunkosi and Arun river of eastern Nepal. At present, Rais are mainly concentrated in the eastern portion of Nepal between Sunkosi river and the Singalila range and Mechi river, Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas.

The Rais are divided into more than a hundred *thars* or *pachha* (clans). Each thar or clan is residential clan associated with a locality. The following are some of the important thars or clans of Rais: *Chamling, Khaling, Kulung, Thulung, Namahang, Sangpang, Lohorong, Sotang, Runchenbong, Ruchnebong, Rupahang, Rodong, Bahing, Runghang, Yangdarang, Balung, Phaling, Phlemung, Nakchong, Natsereng, Namlung, Newahang, Tubihang, Dalhang, Tsetang, Tamchang, Khukkhang, Gaudong, Ochhonghang, Dumi, Dungmali, Nechali, Bangdel, Bagale, Bantawa, Rumdali, Athapre, Salten, Ombole, Ketra, Koya, Khamla, Ghume, Chowrasia, Dewaraja, Deusa, Naika, Batu, Balali, Bolna, Bhola, Mangharnu, Yamphu, Yangtongpa, Lengmuk, Saom, Subarja, Sokap, Sedengal, Sabhara, Dasingsamang* etc. Of these numerous thars, more than half belong to the Lhasa gotra (clan) and are supposed to have migrated from Lhasa, Tibet. The remaining other half thars belong to the Kashi gotra and believe to have come from Banares. In day-to day life, Kashi gotra Rais and Lhasa gotra Rais do not maintain any distinction between them and has nothing to do with marriage alliance. But the Lhasa gotra Rais are beef-eaters whereas the Kashi gotra Rais do not take beef. Each thar of Rai has a dialect of their own. But today they use Nepali as their mother tongue. Their respective dialects are used in designating Kins only or even today kinship terminology designating various kinds of affinal and consanguineous kins are based on respective dialects.

Traditionally, Rais were animists. But today their religious practices is influenced by both the Hinduism and Lamaistic form of Buddhism. Even today, the majority of the Rais use '*Bijuwa*' or '*Mangpa*' (priest) for the performance of various rites and rituals. One of the most important rituals performed by the Rais is the worship of patrilineage (male ancestors) known as *khamang* or *pitra* which is performed annually by the lineage members who are the descendents of the common male ancestor. All the Rais (except Christian Rais) still perform this rituals annually.

As we have already said that the Rais is the single largest population of the Darjeeling hills. In Darjeeling there were 33,133 of them in 1901, which increased to 64,745 in 1951. My study reveals that out of 2,097 women employees of the seven tea gardens, the number of Rai women is 504 which is the second largest population next to the Tamang women.

### ***Limbus or Subba***

The Limbus often use the title '*Subba*' which is supposed to be given to them by Prithivi Narayan Shah, a consolidator of modern Nepal. The Bhutias of Sikkim, Lepchas and Tibetans called them as *Tsong*. It is believed that out of thirteen *thars* or gotra of Limbus five have come from Tsang province of eastern Tibet to the hilly areas of eastern Nepal. This *panch thare* (five clans) Limbus belong to the Lhasa gotra or clan. The other Limbus are Kashi gotra Limbus who are, like Rais, believed to have come via Kashi. Limbus are also referred to as *Chong* by Lepchas of northern Sikkim and *Yakthumgbas* by themselves.

There is controversy regarding the history of their origin. Some scholars consider the eastern part of Nepal as their original homeland and some trace their origin from eastern part of Tibet. Many scholars consider them to have come from Kashi because of the existence of a large number of Limbus belonging to Kashi gotra or clans. Whatever be the exact history of their origin, there are some indications to show their ancient inhabitation in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. For instance, the following quotation of O'Malley makes it clear that the Limbus along with Lepchas are the ancient or earlier settlers of Darjeeling hills prior to the introduction of tea plantation. O'Malley (1907) writes: ..... beyond a few Lepchas

and Limbus with their little clearing in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the table-lands of Tibet, the Darjeeling Hills were practically uninhabited. According to Siiger (1967) the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim are Na-ang, Na-on, the chang, and the Mon. Here 'Chang' also spelt as chong or Tsong refers to the Limbus only. There is another reference by Namgyal and Drolma (1908) who writes that Phuntsog Namgyal and his group had come across the Lepchas, Limbus and Mangars in Sikkim during the Seventeenth Century. All this references makes it clear that the Limbus or Subbas are the earlier settlers of Darjeeling Sikkim Himalayas. Like Khambu or Rai, the Limbus also have a large number of *Thars* or clans such as *Chemjhong, Lingden, Loksom, Tumba, Tambakhole, Phudong, Angbang, Angthupuhang, Chongbang, Chobeguhang, Ektinhang, Fanghang, Fenduwa, Furumbo, Kanga, Mabuhang, Kambang, Swangsabu, Mangyung, Pahing, Pegahang, Pathegimbang, Punglang, Samahang, Heena, Hellock, Phembu, Rupihang, Tamaden, Tumbalamphe, Satihangma, Shelle, Shewan, Shigu, Tamsuhang, Thebe, Singthebe, Thuppoko, Tummyangpa, Ingbadokpa, Linkhim, Mayam, Onchhongbo, Phurumbo* and *Youngya* etc.

As in the case of the Rais, thars of Limbus are further divided into sub-thars which are associated with some locality (for instance, Tambakhole Limbu is associated with Tamakoshi regions of eastern Nepal) and the dialects spoken by the members of one thar is often unintelligible to the members of another thar. The Limbus are officially Hindus but they are still basically animists. As in the case of Rais, the Limbus too still invite their own traditional priest called *phedongma* to perform different rites and rituals. He performs multiple roles as a priest, an astrologer and a medicinemen. '*Mundhum*' is considered as one of the earliest sacred religious text of the Limbus and the phedangma should have a thorough knowledge of it.

The total number of the Limbus in Darjeeling was 14,305 in 1901 but even after fifty years their population are recorded to be 19,835 only. The reason for such a slow growth of population is not known. My field record shows a number of Limbu Women in different gardens like Badamtam, Vah-Takvar and Singell.

## *Yakhas*

The Yakhas are also called 'Dewan', 'Rai' and 'Jimdar'. They are also one of the kirata group who, like the Limbus call themselves '*Yakthumbas*'. According to Chemjong (1966) they are known to have been mentioned in the Mahabansa which is a Buddhist religious text by Mahanam Bhikshu written in pali language in the fifth century. It is believed that the present yakhas are the descendents of the same 'Yakha' described by Bhikshu in the Mahabansa.

Little is known about their history or origin and affiliation with other kirata groups. Some scholars categorize them with the Rais and other with the Limbus. For instance, Scholars like Northey and Morris (1974) believe that they are more inclined to the Rais than the Limbus. I also agree with them because the Yakhas or Dewan have many socio-cultural features which are more similar with the Rais than the Limbus. Though these three Kirata groups (Rais, Limbus, Yakhas) have many things in common e.g., all of them are animistic and bury their dead ones. The negotiated marriage can take place among these three communities or the marriage between Yakhas and Limbus, or Yakhas and Rais is not considered as inter caste or inter community marriage. Racially or physically also it is very difficult to distinguish Yakhas from Rais and Limbus. There is no general consensus among the scholars regarding their actual affiliation with other kirata group but the majority of the Yakhas want to categorize themselves with the Rais than with the Limbus. It is true that in the Limbus dominant areas, Yakhas are considered as Limbus and the Rais dominant areas they are known as Rais. During my field work I interviewed many Yakha women (respondents) and the majority of them use the title 'Rai' and not the Limbus. I also visited one village called Yakhadhura (named after Yakha community who were the earlier settlers of the village) in Badamtam tea garden and the majority of the Yakha respondents (male and female) expressed their views that they are sub-section of Rai and want to categorize themselves with the Rais and not with the Limbus. As we have already pointed out that these three Kirata groups share many things in common. One more interesting feature about Yakhas is that they do not have their own priest like that of Rais and Limbus. So they can invite Rai *Bijuwa* or Limbu *Phedongna* for funeral rites and other rituals. Though officially

they write Hinduism as their religion yet they are still very much animistic and majority of them still perform pitripuja or worship of patrilineage. The only thing which differentiates the Yakhas from Rais and Limbus is their women's dress called 'Mekhling' and their distinct language or dialect which they do not use now-a-days.

For the first time, Yakhas are mentioned in the census of 1901. Their total population in the Darjeeling hills was 1,143 in 1901. Now we do not have separate census figure on Yakhas. Now a days almost all the Yakhas use the Rai title and do not maintain a separate identity of their own. That is why I have not maintain a separate figure on Yakha women and included all of them (about 18) under Rai category.

### *Newars*

The term 'Newar' is supposed to be first used for the inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley during the seventeenth century (before the unification of Nepal by Shah dynasty). According to Regmi (1969) the term Newar does not connote any racial type and it is purely a geographical concept. According to Nepali (1965) the present Newars are drawn from the Abhiras, Kiratas, the Lichhavis, the vaisya Thakuri and the Karnatakes. It is very difficult to say who were the forerunners of the present Newar. Sharma (1982) also holds the similar views that the present Newari society or Newari caste is formed out of acculturation and assimilation of several groups (Lichhavi, Malla, Kirat etc.) who ruled over Nepal prior to the unification of Nepal by Prithivi Narayan Shah in 1769. At present, Newars are numerically dominant in the fertile areas of Kathmandu Valley, Patan and Bhaktapur of Nepal.

Religion wise, they are broadly divided into two groups: *Shivamargis* or Hindu Newars like Rajyopadhyaya, Upadhyaya (Deubhaju), six clans or *Cha thare Shrestha*, *Dhobi*, *Kasai*, *Kusuley*, *Podhe*, *Chyame* etc. *Buddhamargis* or Budhist Newar like *Bajracharya*, *Shakya*, *Tuladhar*, *Tamrakar*, *Kangsakar*, *Amatya*, *Pradhan*, *Rajbhandari*, *Jyapu*, *Kumale*, *Chitrakar*, *Napit* etc. The Newars are internally divided into a number of castes. According to Nepali (1965) King Jayasthiti Malla was solely responsible for the introduction of the Newari caste

system on the basis of Hindu Varna model during the fourteenth century. The Newari caste system existed in and around the Kathmandu valley till 1769 when it received a death blow as the Gorkha conquerors superimposed their own castes on that of the Newars [see Table-4.5].

The Newars have a very important social institution known as '*Guthi*' which is common among all types of Newars. There is hardly any Newars who is not a member of some Guthi. There are three important Guthis among the Newars. They are – *Sanaguthi*, *Siguthi* and *Dewaliguthi*. The *Sanaguthi*, and *Siguthi* are related with death and funeral rites whereas the *Dewaliguthi* is solely responsible for the ancestor worship or the worship of partilineage and its members are the descendants of a common male ancestor. The Newars called their eldest male head of the joint family as *Thakali* and his wife as '*Thakali Naki*'. Bajracharya and Dewbhaju (Deva Brahmin) are the priests of Buddhist and Hindu Newars respectively.

In Darjeeling, the total population of the Newars in 1901 was 5,770 which rose to 14,827 in 1951. The Newars are fairly numerous in Darjeeling hills. Their population is slightly lower than the Rais and Tamangs. My field report reveals that out of 2,097 women workers of seven tea gardens, 180 belong to Newari caste.

### *Tamangs or Murmis*

The *Tamangs* or *Murmis* are a Mongolian group who claim to be among the earliest settlers of Nepal. They are also called *Mulmi*, *Dhamang*, *Ishang* and *Sain*. The word '*Murmi*' or '*Mulmi*' means inhabitants of border areas between Nepal and Tibet. One of their living legends says that they were cavaliers of Srong Tsen Gampo, a Tibetan King. At present, they are mainly concentrated in the hills of Kathmandu valleys viz., Sindhupalchok, Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Dhading, Makwanpur, Kabhrepalchok etc.

The Tamangs have a hierarchical division of their clan or *thar* into groups: *Bara Jat* or 'twelve clans' and *Athara Jat* or 'eighteen clans', the former enjoying a higher status. But this division is hardly seen in actual relationship. Tamangs are divided into numbers of clans such as *Goley*, *Gomden*, *Glan*, *Ghisingh*, *Chyaba*, *Zimba*, *Pakhrin*, *Baja*, *Bamjan*, *Manden*, *Tupa*, *Syangbo*, *Singden*, *Samden*, *Sai*,

*Syangden, Waiba, Lho, Lopchan, Londen, Rumba, Yonzon, Moktan, Memsingh, Pain, Dong, Thing, Titung, Darpa, Darden* etc. Tamangs are Buddhists. They are the followers of Nyingmapa Sect or Mahayana form of Buddhism who worship Guru Rimborche (Guru Padmasambava).

In Darjeeling hills, they are the second numerically dominant group next to Rai. The Tamangs were first time recorded in 1906, their population at that time was 25,400. According to 1931 census, their total population in Darjeeling himalaya was 43,114 or 16.9 percent of the total Nepali population in the district then. My field record shows that the Tamangs along with Rais form the single largest community in tea gardens.

### ***Jogis***

The Jogis are also called '*Sanyasis*' which means ascetics. Many people consider them to be the offsprings of the Bahuns and Chettris. Traditionally, they used to roam about the villages and asked for alms after having blown the conch shells or the shin bone of human body around the houses at night and driving away the evil spirits. Now-a-days Jogis of Darjeeling have totally stopped this profesion. But in Nepal they still practice this profesion. Every year the Jogis from Nepal terai come to Darjeeling and Sikkim for asking alms. They are the followers of a Hindu sect called '*Gorakhnath*'. This sect has a strong tradition of worshipping the gurus (Nath Jogi) or teachers from whom they learn the mantras. In 1931 census their total population in Darjeeling was 1,789. My field record shows that a small percentage of Jogi women are found in different tea gardens like Singell.

### ***Bhujels or Ghartis***

The *Bhujels* are also called '*Gharti*' and '*Khawas*'. But a good number of Tharus (important indigenous tribe of Nepal terai) are also called '*Khawas*'. It is believed that the *Bhujels* or *Ghartis* were the descendants of manumitted slaves. In Nepal, prior to the abolision of slavery in 1824 A.D., the rich people mostly the aristocratic family used to keep number of slaves. The *Bhujels* were treated as one of the untouchable castes and their social status was so low but after the abolision of

slavery they are treated as middle caste group. Even in Nepal, their position is much better now. They are also Hindus. They do not have language of their own.

In Darjeeling hills, they were first time recorded in 1906 and at that time their population was 3,450. According to 1931 census, the total population of Bhujels in Darjeeling was 6,312. My field record reveals a good number of Bhujel women in Castleton and Singell tea gardens of Kurseong areas.

### ***Mangars***

Like many other Nepali community they also belong to Tibeto-Burmese ethnic group. Regarding the origin of Manger tribe, Chemjong (1966) writes: The origin of Mangar tribe as mentioned in kirat chronology is a place in the north called Shin. When they came to Sikkim they settled there permanently. They built *Jongs* or Forts, wherever they settled and called them *Mangar Jong*, or the fort of Mangers, Perhaps the name of Mangar Jong Tea Garden in Darjeeling is named after the *Mangar Jong* or the fort of Mangars as we know the fact of Darjeeling which was a part of Sikkim before 1835. Namgyal and Drolma (1908) also accepted the fact of Mangars living in Sikkim since the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. All these facts shows that along with the Limbus and Rais, Mangers were the early settlers of Darjeeling himalayas.

Some writers believed that they are the degenerates of Thakuris (Kshatriyas). According to Dahal (1991) Mangars were given the status of Kshatriyas during the reign of Gorkha dynasty (Shah dynasty) in Nepal. It is believed that they are one of the first tribe to be Hinduised by the Brahmins. Their socio-cultural features are similar to that of Brahmans and Kshatriyas.

Mangars are divided into three important *thars* or clans namely *Thapa*, *Rana* and *Aley*. The total number of sub-clans of these three clans is about 400 which is supposed to be the highest in the Nepali society. It is believed that they are among the earlier settlers in the Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal Himalayas.

In Darjeeling, their population was 11,900 in 1906 which rose to 19,413 in 1951. According to my field survey, out of 2,097 women workers in seven tea gardens only 115 women belong to Mangar caste.

## **Gurungs**

Like Mangars, Gurungs also belong to Mongoloid physical stock and speak their own dialect based on Tibeto-Burman group. It is believed that the Gurungs along with Mangars are the first indigenous tribes of Nepal to receive the Hindu Brahmanic influence as the Brahmans of Indian origin had first contact with the Mangar and Gurung tribe of Western Nepal.

Regarding the origin of Gurung Chemjong (1966) writes: they were one of the seven tribes of Northern Tibet who had migrated from there to Kham province of Eastern Tibet and from there to Unan province of Southern China where they mixed up with Tai shan tribes and spread towards South and Western direction under their leaders Sai-ik-Shan and Segop Shan. At present Gurungs are mainly concentrated in Western Nepal particularly in the areas of Buragandaki, Kaligandaki and Gandaki. A good number of Gurungs are also found in eastern Nepal particularly in the areas of Rumjatar where they speak in Nepal language but the Gurungs of Western Nepal speak in their own language. Gurungs are traditionally known to be 'animists' but they were later Hinduised. But we also find a good number of Buddhist Gurungs who use Buddhist Lamas for ceremonial purposes.

Gurungs are divided into two hierarchical strata or divisions called the 'four clans' or *Char Jat* and the 'sixteen clans' or the *solah Jat*. The former holding superior status than the latter. The history witnessed the bitter or inimical relationship between these two groupings. But the difference between '*Char Jat*' and '*Solha Jat*' is no longer maintained today. The conflicting or bitter relationship between these two broad clans was put to an end in 1867 (during the reign of Jangabhadur Rana) by colonel Lachaman Gurung by signing a bond of friendship. (Sharma: 1982) Now-a-days even the Gurungs of Darjeeling – Sikkim hills do not make any distinction between *Char Jat* and *Solha Jat*. The '*Char Jat*' or four clans of Gurungs are Ghaley, Ghodane, Lama and Lamichane and Sixteen Jat or *Solaha thare* (clans) Gurungs are Dhyabre, Kyawche, Dorjee, Kurumchejigre, Dorjalo, Rimali, Fouj, Chormikom, Yi, Migi, Paygi, Khatra, Yoj, Kholali, Sogun, Thormaji etc. The Gurung dormitory or *rodi ghar* is an interesting institution like many tribals

of north-east India, Gurung had their youth hostel or *rodi ghar* for both boys and girls who had crossed the age of Sixteen. Rodi ghar used to perform so many functions. The selection of future marital partner was one of the important function of the dormitory. Now this is dead institution even in Nepal.

According to O' Malley (1907) their population in the Darjeeling district was about 8,700 in 1901 Darjeeling which was slightly less than the population of Mangars. In 1951, their population in the district rose to 17,864. My survey record shows a good number of Gurung women workers in different gardens like Pandam, Badamtam and Vah-Tukvar. As per my field data they are the fifth numerically dominant community in the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills.

### ***Sunuwars or Mukhias***

Sunuwars are also called 'Mukhias' which is a title equivalent to 'Rai' or 'Subba'. Regarding their early history, origin and migration, Chemjong (1966) writes that they are supposed to have migrated to different places in three groups. The first group, the *Jirel* and *Sirel Sunuwars* traveled from Tibet to Kashmir, Punjab and Bihar and finally reached Simangarh from where they went further and ultimately settled in Jirikhola and Siri Khola areas of central Nepal. Hence, they are named after two Kholas or rivers as *Jirel* and *Sirel*. The second group, called Sunuwars proper, also came from Tibet, following the routes of changpo and Brahmaputra rivers, and finally reached the side of Sunkoshi River in eastern Nepal. The third group migrated from Simanggarh to eastern Nepal, settled with the Rais and became one of the Rais. At present Sunuwars are densely inhabited in the hilly areas of eastern Nepal (Particularly in the areas between Likhu Khola and Khunti Khola), Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas.

Sunuwars are traditionally divided into two hierarchical groups of clans called *Bara Thar* or 'twelve clans' and *Das Thar* or 'ten clans'. The former group of clans practise Hinduism and the latter, mainly the Jirels, practise lamaistic Buddhism. But in day to day life they do not maintain any socio-cultural difference and the intermarriage between these two groups is also permitted. The Sunuwars

have their own language '*Koincho*' which belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group and their script is called '*Koinch brehs*'.

The total population of the Sunuwars in Darjeeling was 4,822 in 1931. My field record shows about 52 women workers belonging to Sunuwar castes mainly in Badamtam and Vah-Tukvar tea gardens of Darjeeling hills.

### ***Thami***

The history of origin and migration of Thami is obscure. There are different contradictory views on their linguistic and racial affinity with the neighbouring groups. Scholars like Sharma (1982) holds the view that the Thamis shows close linguistic affinity with the Khambus or Rais and claims that they can be considered as one of the Rai group. He says the linguistic variation may be attributable to the ecological variation. On the other hand, Bista (1979) writes that they are predominantly found in Tamang areas and practise Socio-economic and religious customs similar to that of Tamangs. It is true that the physical features of the Thamis show a closer affinity with the Tamangs than with the Rais. The majority of the scholars believed that they are more akin to the Tamangs. At present, they are densely inhabiting or populated in the Dolakha district of eastern Nepal. They are traditionally Buddhists like that of Tamangs. But now-a-days Thamis profess both the Hindu and Buddhist religion.

The Thamis are also divided into a number of *thars* or clans like Dolakhe, Dumpali, Ishirishmi, Dangurishmi, Rishmi, Angkami, Shirishmi etc. The population of Thami is very few in Darjeeling district. As my field records shows a very few (10 only) women workers belonging to Thami caste who are working mainly in Pandam and Springside tea gardens.

### ***Yolmus***

The Yolmus or Kagatey who used to be treated as one of the Tamang groups but today they are given the status of a scheduled tribe and treated as one of the Bhutia groups. Like Tamangs they are also Buddhist but they have closer socio-cultural ties with the Nepalis. The population of this tribe is very few in Darjeeling hills.

### *Sherpas*

The word '*Sherpa*' is supposed to be a corrupt form of the word '*Sharpa*' which means people 'living in the east'. Like Tamangs they are also believed to have come from the eastern part of Tibet. At present, Sherpas are mainly concentrated in the northern areas of eastern Nepal particularly in the Helumbu and Solukhumbu areas. A good number of Sherpas are also living in Darjeeling, Sikkim and Bhutan Himalayas. The Sherpas are well known all over the world as porters and guides in mountain expedition.

Like other tribals, they are also divided into number of exogamous clans, viz., Dawa, Goley, Thaktu, Goparma, Garja, Chiyawa, Mopa, Mendey, Shagup, Sherba, Salaka, Lama, Pangdorjee, Paldorjee, Pangkarma etc. Like many Tibetans, they practise adelphic or fraternal polyandry. The practice of partilateral cross-cousin marriage (marriage between mother's brother's son and father's sister's daughter) is also widely prevalent. They are all Buddhists and recognized as scheduled tribe in West Bengal and Sikkim.

The population of Sherpa was first time recorded in Darjeeling and it was around 3,450 in 1906. Again in 1931 census they were recorded as 6,929.

### *Majhi*

The Majhis (boatmen or fishermen) who are declared as Scheduled Castes in West Bengal and Sikkim. Their population is very few in Darjeeling Hills. But in Sikkim, a good number of Majhis are living in the Majhi gaon near Jorethang in South Sikkim and Majhitar near Rangpo in the east. In Darjeeling hills, some of the oldest living families now live near Pedong and Algarah (Kalimpong sub-division of Darjeeling District) near the ruins and remnants of old forts. Traditionally they lived in caves, river beds, or in huts of bamboo and wood. Though they have their own dialect Majhi, they speak Nepali.

There are legends associated with the Majhis. It is believed that Majhis emerged when boatmen had to ply men to earth through a vast mass of water. Even today if a boat capsizes, it is usually the Majhis who take out their diving equipment and rescue the victims (Lama: 2001)

The Majhis worship the river god, the moon god and lord shiva. They have their own *thankari*, the exorcist. Families are mainly patrilineal and property is always inherited by the eldest male.

### ***Kamis, Damais, Sunar and Sarkis***

The Kamis (ironsmith), Damais or Darjees (Musician or tailors), Sunars (goldsmith) and Sarkis (Cobbler) are 'untouchables' or *pani-na-chal-ne Jat* (achhut Jat) and they occupy the lowest rank in the Nepali caste hierarchy.

Like many other Indian (Hindu) occupational castes they must have derived their caste name or titles from their occupation or profession. For instance, the word 'Kami' derived its meaning from the word *Kamaunu*. It connotes to manufacture. The Kamis are artisans who manufacture varieties of utensils and domestic implements. The word '*Damai*' is similarly derived from the word *Damaha* which is the chief musical instrument used in the marriage ceremony. Among the Damais those who practice tailoring are called *Darjees*. The word *Sunar* is also derives its meaning from 'Sun or gold'. The Sunars are goldsmith.

The exact history of origin of these castes is obscure but many scholars still hold the view that they are the progeny of Brahmans and Chhetris of Nepal. It is true that these artisan castes have Aryan features and culturally they are more closer to Brahmans and Chhetris rather than to other middle castes groups who are Mongoloids. Besides common physical and cultural properties one can find the untouchables and twice-born castes bearing the common family names or caste titles. For instance, there are number of titles like *Khati, Ghimire, Singh* which are equally present in both the untouchables and twice-born e.g., in Nepali society, one can get Biswakarma Khati (untouchables), Neogi Khati and Tuwar Khati (Kshatriya Khati). Like wise, we get Ghimire (untouchables) and Buripola Ghimire and Chipokhala Ghimire who are Brahmans.

The untouchables themselves too have strong arguments that they are the descendents of Bahun and Chettris. For instance, writers like Pradhan (1978) also holds the same view that the Nepali untouchables seem to be the progeny of Brahmans and Chhetris of Nepal but seem to have been relegated by them for some

unsocial behaviour. This system was known as *Pani Bara Katnu* means to boycott them stating *Achhut Jats* or untouchables castes. The fact that the population of the untouchable is not more than ten percent of the total Nepali population in Darjeeling as well as in Nepal shows the possibility that they could have been the offsprings of the 'fallen' people. Of the three main untouchables castes, the Kamis seem to be the most numerically dominant. The Kamis are for the first time recorded in the census of 1901. Their total population in that year was around 9,800 which rose to 16,272 in 1931 and again in 1961, their population increase to 19,851 forming 26.5 percent of the total scheduled castes population of the Darjeeling hills. My field records also reveals the same fact that they are the most numerous group among the untouchables. (see table 4.6) As per the census of 1901, the population of Damais is 4,600 in Darjeeling which rose to 8,162 in 1931. The population of Sarki (shoemakers) was 1,800 in 1901 which rose to 2,778 in 1931.

#### **4.5 Nepali Caste System in Tea Plantation: Caste hierarchy and Caste Structure :**

The Nepali society did not have any caste system until the beginning of the fourteenth century. According to Hamilton (1819) there were only 'tribes in the Nepali society, who were gradually brought under the caste system by immigrant Hindus from India namely Rajputs and Brahmans. He further writes that before the arrival of the Rajputs, the whole nation i.e., Nepal consisted of twelve *thums* or clans and each thum was governed by a chief who was considered as the head of a common family.

It is a historical fact that the tribes like *Gurungs* and *Mangars* of western Nepal were the first to be converted into Hindus as they lived along the path of the Indian emigrants. It is true that these two groups are more sanskritised than the other kirata tribes like Rais, Limbu and Yakhas and some Gurungs and Mangars gotras or thars are similar like that of the Brahmans (e.g., char thare or four clans Gurungs have Bhardwaj gotra). Prior to the unification of Nepal by the king Prithivinarayan Shah in 1769, there was a separate caste system among the *Newars*. It was king Jayasthiti Malla who was responsible for the introduction of caste system on the

basis of Indian varna model during the fourteenth century. This king organized the Nepali society in the framework of *varna* and castes with the help of some Indian Brahmans. The criteria taken for social ranking were hereditary occupation, marriage circles and ceremonial purity. (Nepali: 1965)

The following table shows that the Newari caste hierarchy was broadly composed of six layers and the distinction between Hindus and Buddhists did not exist below the unclean castes. Nepali (1965) however, says that such caste hierarchy is only tentative and may be disputed from a particular castes point of view. For instance, it is believed that the *Udas* held the highest rank in the Kathmandu valley while *vanra* were ascetics. It is clear from the following table that the newars had their own priests, artisans and untouchable castes.

**Table – 4.4**  
**Newari Caste Hierarchy until 1769.**

Caste Status	Hindu Newars	Buddhist Newars
Priestly castes	Deva Brahmin	Gubhaju or Bajracharya
High Castes	Chhatharia Shrestha Panchatharia Shrestha	Vanra or Bare Udas
Upper lower Caste	Pahari, Jyapoo	Hale or Guala
Lower Castes	Gathu-Chitrakar or Nankhoosa pu(n) or Mali	Cheepa Manandhar kow or Ranjitkar Salmi
Unclean Castes	du(n), Yeeya (n) Bha, Kasai Kusle or Jogi	Balami Sanga or Sangal
Untouchable Castes	Pore-Kullu, Chyame, Hare Haru	

\* Castes put horizontally have equal ritual status

Source : *Nepali: 1965:150.*

This Newari caste hierarchy existed in the valley for about four centuries. It was only around 1769 that it received a death blow as the Gorkha conquerors (Kshatriyas) superimposed their own castes on that of the Newars. After 1769, a new

caste society emerged in Nepal on the sub-structure of the Mongoloid and other tribes who were relegated to the status of sudras. Hence, prior to 1769, except in case of Hindus and Buddhist Newars, the basis of caste hierarchy was totally absent among the Mongoloid tribes such as *Rai*, *Limbu*, *Tamang*, *Sunuwars*, *Gurung* and *Mangars*. The new caste system or caste hierarchy which was established after the arrival of Brahmans and Kshatriyas had one very important features i.e., the creation of vertical as well as horizontal groups and the inclusion of many tribes (particularly Kiratas and Mongoloids) in the vaisya and sudra category. It is also important to mention here that the Mongoloid tribes like *Gurungs* and *Mangars* of western Nepal received a special status in between the Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. It was already pointed out in the previous section that the Gurungs and Mangars were the first to be converted into Hindus and it was king Prithivinarayan Shah who with the help of the Mangars and Gurungs unified and created modern Nepal. The new caste hierarchy that emerged in Nepal after 1769 is shown below :

**Table – 4.5**  
**Caste Hierarchy after 1769**

Varna	Caste
Brahmin	- Upadhyaya, Kumai, Jaisi and Deva Bhaju (Newar)
Kshatriya	- Thakuri, Chhetri, Khatri
Double Order	- Mangar and Gurung
Vaisya	- Newar high Caste
Shudra	- Limbu, Rai, Low caste Newars, Sunuwars, Murmis, Thamis, etc.
Untouchables	- Nepali (Kami, Sarki, Damai) - Newar (Chyame, Pore etc.)

Source: *Nepali 1965: 148.*

Thus, the new caste structure introduced or established by king Prithivinarayan Shah was strictly guarded in Nepal as it received government patronage. But the existence of Buddhists among the Newars is never an obstacle to

the smooth functioning of caste system in Nepal. (Rosser: 1966) The internal caste hierarchy ;of the Newars, at least in the Kathmandu valley, persists even today.

According to the new caste hierarchy Brahmans (Upadhyay, Jaisi, Dev Bhanju or Newari Brahmans) and Kshatriyas (thakuris, Khatri, Rajputs, Chettris) are collectively known as '*Tagadhari*' *Jats* means those who wear sacred threads or *janai*. The Rai, Limbu, Tamangs, Sunuwars, Thamis, mangers and Gurungs are known as *Matwali jats* which means drinking castes. But here the expression *Matwali jat* is a misnomer in the sense that there are many drinking castes members who do not drink while many who are not do it. Those who are known as *Matwali jats* are the Tibeto-Burman speaking groups and they are indigenous tribes of Nepal. Many of these tribes do not strictly follow the caste principles. For examples, Murmis or Tamangs and Thamis have given the status of Shudra and they are also known as *Matwali jats* but they do not follow caste principles and still profess their indigeneous religion i.e., Buddhism. Another example is Rais and Limbus. They are officially Hindus but their Socio-cultural features (rites and rituals) reveals their tribal animistic religion. The writers like Northey and Morris (1974) also hold the same view that most of the Rais and Limbus accepted Hinduism and its caste principles as a fashion only to get the ruling class favour (Hindu Shah rulers).

This is perhaps one of the main reason why the middle caste groups (Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Mangar, Gurung, Newars, Sunuwars) who were the indigenous tribes of Nepal migrated in larger number from there (see chapters 3 & 4). In the following section we shall focus our attention on the caste structure or hierarchy and the traditional caste occupations of the women workers in tea plantation. We shall also try to find out the reasons behind the overwhelming majority of women from indigenous tribes of Nepal in the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills.

#### **4.6 Ethnic/Caste Background of the Women Workers :**

It goes without saying that the bulk of the workers in Darjeeling hills are descendants of the immigrant Nepali from rural Nepal. In the plantation society they form a homogenous group or an organic whole despite their different place of origin and heterogenous socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills the majority of the working population are of Mongolion origin belonging chiefly to various Nepalese Castes. In the following section we have shown the caste/ethnic background of the women workers in different tea gardens under study.

**Table – 4.6**

**Caste or Ethnjic Background of Women workers in Seven Tea Gardens.**

Caste/Ethnic Groups		Name of Tea Gardens							Total
		Badamtam	Pandam	Vah-Tukvar	Happy Valley	Springside	Singell	Castleton	
Brahmin (Bahun)	Upper Caste	13	12	--	01	--	04	03	33
Thakuri		--	01	--	--	--	--	01	02
Chettri		19	13	27	02	06	31	07	105
Rai	Middle Caste	250	13	134	32	02	63	06	504
Limbu		17	01	4	04	--	21	01	88
Manger		20	32	04	04	04	45	06	115
Tamang		117	09	124	37	107	137	72	603
Newar		85	15	04	04	23	46	03	180
Sunwar		25	02	16	03	01	05	--	52
Gurung		49	22	11	48	07	06	01	144
Thami		--	07	--	--	03	--	--	10
Bhujel		03	--	08	--	02	13	27	53
Kami (Biswakarma)	Lower Caste	52	06	12	07	07	28	20	132
Damai (Darjee)		17	01	06	04	04	06	01	39
Sarki		--	--	--	03	--	04	01	08
Sunar		--	--	--	--	02	--	--	02
Jogi		--	02	--	--	02	--	--	04
Kusuley		02	--	--	--	--	--	--	02
Majhi		--	--	--	02	--	--	--	02
Lepcha		Tribe and other community	02	--	02	--	--	--	--
Bhutia	03		--	01	--	--	01	--	05
Sherpa Plainsmen	03		--	03	--	--	--	--	06
Total Women Workers		680 (32%)	134 (6%)	396 (19%)	159 (7%)	170 (8%)	414 (20%)	149 (8%)	2097

*Source : Field Studies on Various Tea Garden Offices.*

**4.7 Occupational Background of Women Tea Plantation Workers :**

The plantation workers of Darjeeling hills differ from the Assam, Terai and Dooar's plantation workers where 80 per cent labourers are recruited from Tribal people of Chotangapur. (Jharkhand), Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh whereas in Darjeeling hills about 95% of workers are from Nepali caste groups. They are the descendants of the immigrant Nepali from rural Nepal particularly from Eastern and western hills. They form a homogenous group and engaged in

homogenous activity in plantation despite their diverse occupational background and the place of origin.

In the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills, the middle caste groups are numerically dominant. Among the middle caste groups Rais and Tamang are in majority. Rais and Tamangs together with the Mangars, Gurungs, Limbus, Sunuwar etc. form about 70 percent of the total workforce. There are very few workers from upper and lower caste groups. A brief discussion of their traditional caste or community occupation is necessary for understanding the numerical dominance of the middle caste groups and their better adaptation and adjustment in the agro-industrial setting of the tea plantation.

Table – 4.6 shows that in the Nepal society the Brahmin (Bahun) occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy and along with the Thakuri and Chettri they form an upper caste group. The traditional occupation of the Bahun (Upadhyaya) is priesthood while that of Jaisi or Joshi Bahun is astrologers and farming. They are not entitled to practise priesthood as they are ritually inferior than the pure Upadhaya Bahun. The traditional occupation of Thakuri and chettri are aristocrats and warriors respectively. The Thakuris were the ruling caste of Nepal. The Thakuris and chhetris are mainly found in the 9<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Regiment of the Indian army. Like all other agriculturists, the Chettris also live in rural areas of Nepal and majority of them are also engaged in farming. Gurungs were mainly found in the western and central Nepal. Traditionally they were chiefly the pastoral community (shepherd) of the high Himalayas. (Bista: 1976) This Gurungs along with the Mangars of Western Nepal were sought in the British and Indian army for their martial superiority. The Indian government still maintain 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Regiment comprising mainly of Gurungs and Mangars of Western Nepal and Darjeeling hills. These different battalions are collectively known as '*paschimey palton*'. The traditional occupation of Mangars was agriculture and some skilled works such as craftsmen in masonry, carpentry, stonecutting, quarrying etc. The works on mines and state quarries are still found to have been done by the Mangars in the villages of eastern Nepal today. Like Gurungs, they also had pastoral economy. Rais were mainly agriculturists. In eastern Nepal, they had traditional

ownership of land known as Kipat system. It was a sort of communal land ownership jointly owned by an extended family consisting of the members of fifth and sixth generation. The eldest male head of a particular lineage (large joint family) was responsible for the administration and management of this communal land. Rais also use to practice shifting cultivation or *Bhasme Kheti*. Both male and female could equally participate in the field to cultivate crops for domestic needs as well as for the markets. The Rais were mainly concentrated in eastern Nepal (Majh-Kirat) right upto the Arun and Tamar rivers near Dharan. Morris and Northey (1974) puts that bordering the Indian subcontinent which helped themselves to be enrolled in the services of British and Indian Gorkha regiments. Even today, Rais along with Limbus comprise the 11<sup>th</sup> Gorkha Regiment of the Indian army. This regiment is also known as '*Purbiya Palton*'.

Like Rais, the Limbus are also agriculturists. They were mainly concentrated in eastern most areas (pallo-kirot) of Nepal known as 'Limbuan' which shares the common boundary with western Sikkim and Darjeeling hills. Like the Rais or Khambus of Khambuan, the Limbus of Limbuan also had an interesting history of their communal land ownership known as Kipat system. The private ownership or individual right of landownership was totally absent in the Limbuan. Like Rai women, women in Limbu community also use to take part actively in the agricultural field. Besides farming as their primary occupation, a good number of Limbus are working in both the British and the Indian army.

Another numerically dominant caste in tea gardens is Newars. The traditional occupation of the Newars is said to be 'business' but actually they had a wide distribution of occupations. So it would be better to discuss their internal caste structure and associated caste-based traditional occupations as a numbers of women workers still use their respective Newari caste titles like Kusuley, Jogi, Kasai etc. and do not enjoy middle caste status as other Newars.

It is already shown in table 4.4 that the Newars had internal caste structure associated with a particular occupation or profession till 1769 (during the Mall regime) but after 1769 Hindu Shah rulers imposed their own caste system and all the

Newars were relegated to the position of vaisya and given them middle caste status. (see Table-4.5). But even today one can find the continuation of the internal caste structure at least in and around Kathmandu valley.

**Table – 4.7**

**Newari Caste and Occupational Hierarchy upto 1769**

Caste	Traditional Occupation
Deo Brahmin	Family Priests
Bhatta Brahmin	Temple Priests
Jha Brahmin	Temple Priests
Gubhaju Brahmin	Family Priests
Bare	Gold and Silver Smiths
Shrestha/Sheshya	Merchants
Urya/Udas	Merchants/Craftsmen
Jayapu	Farmers
Kuma	Potters
Sayami	Oil Pressers
Khusa	Palanquin Bearers
Nau/Napith	Barbers
Kau	Blacksmiths
Bha	Funeral Duties
Gathu	Gardeners
Tepe	Cultivators
Pum/Pu	Painters
Duhim	Carriers
Balami	Field workers
Pulu	Funeral Torch Bearers
Cipa	Duyers
Jogi	Musician/Tailors
Nay	Butchers
Kulu	Fisherman, Drum makers and Sweepers
Pore	Sweepers
Chyame	Fishermen and Sweepers
Halahul	Sweepers

Source: Rosser, 1966: 85-86

The above Table makes it clear that the Newars had their own temple and family priest, gold, silver and black-smiths, merchants, craftsmen, farmers, potters, oil pressers, palanquin bearers, barbers, dyers, musician, tailors, butchers, fishermen, sweepers and many mores.

Now coming back to the tea plantation, it is clear from the field data as well as personal interviews with the Newari women that all Newars irrespective of their different caste titles designate themselves as 'Pradhan'. With the exception of few people who still write their respective Newari titles like Kasai, Jogi, Kusuley, almost all the Newar women use the title of 'Pradhan'. Today except a few business families of Darjeeling and Kalimpong towns, all are engaged in the various works of the tea plantation.

The *Tamangs* or *Murmis* is the single largest dominant group in the tea plantation. In Nepal group they were found around the hills of Kathmandu valley and east of it. They were traditionally horse-traders and cavaliers. Many Tamangs are also engaged in hewings of woods, coolies in different towns of Darjeeling and Sikkim but the majority of them are now engaged in tea plantation. The *Bhujels* (Gharti) were traditionally slaves in Nepal. After the abolision of slavery in Nepal in 1926 they have migrated to the regions of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Now a number of Bhujels are working in tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. At present, they have totally abandoned their traditional occupation of beaten rice making, palanquin bearing and working as slaves of big land holders and bureaucrats of Nepal.

Like *Bhujels*, *Thamis* are also found in different tea gardens but numerically they are insignificant in number. In Nepal, they are mainly concentrated in Dolakha district in western Nepal. They are mainly agriculturists. The *Sunuwars* are also found equally participating in an agricultural operation. According to Bista (1976) a good number of Sunuwars have been recruited into the Gorkha regiments of the British and Indian armies and later on into the Royal Nepal Army.

The *Jogis* were ascetics but today they rarely engage themselves in this occupation. The *Sherpas* are one of the most dominant tribes of North-East Nepal and they have spread upto Sikkim Himalayas and enjoying the status of schedule

tribe both in West Bengal and Sikkim. Their population in the tea gardens is almost nil. They were traditionally trans-Himalayan traders and cattle bearers. They *Yolmos* were paper makers, *Lepchas* were shifting cultivators who are no more cling to their traditional occupation. At the bottom of the Nepali caste hierarchy we have a number of occupational castes or artisans like *Kami* or *Biswakarma* (Blacksmiths), *Sunars* (goldsmiths), *Sarki* (Shoe-makers or cobblers) and *Damai* or *Darjee* (Musicians or tailors) etc. Today a very few among them continue their traditional occupation. Of these four groups, *Kamis* or blacksmiths are numerically dominant in the tea plantation (see Table....). One of the possible reasons behind this may be their nature of occupation who use to manufacture utensils, iron tools and agricultural implements needed for the agro-industrial nature of plantation.

From the above table it can be concluded that the majority of tea garden women workers hail from agricultural background of rural Nepal and the numerical dominance of the middle caste groups like *Rais*, *Limbus Tamangs*, *mangers*, *Gurungs*, *Newars*, *Sunuwars*, *Thamis*, *Bhujels* etc. is certainly due to their poor peasant economy at the place of origin and the domination and exploitation of the immigrant Hindu rulers from India.

#### 4.8 State of Education of Women Tea Plantation Workers :

Literacy rate is a key factor that determines the social and economic status of women. Literacy is an indication of exposure to modern ideas and is therefore crucial for an overall analysis of women's status. The movement for improving women's status all over the world has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society. It adds to women's earning capacity and organizes them for claiming their rights.

The following table indicates the level of literacy among the women workers of tea plantations. It was found that out of total number of 300 respondents, 174 i.e. 58% women were literate. It was very interesting to note that out of these literate women, 4 were Madhyamik or class ten passed but the majority of them (about 45%) have studied only upto primary level i.e., upto class IV level. A very few women have studied upto class VIII (10%). There were only 8 women who of IX to X

standard of which 4 were Madhyamik passed. The illiterate women mostly belonged to older generation and most them have already crossed forty years of age. Most of the younger generation women workers were educated at least upto primary level and this shows the successful implementation of the provision of the plantation Labour Act, 1951 which made it mandatory for all tea plantations to provide for primary education to the children of workers.

**Table – 4.8**

**Level of Literacy of Women Workers**

Standard	Number	% (Percentage)
Illiterate	126	42.00
Class I-IV	135	45.00
Class V – VIII	31	10.00
Class IX – X	8	3.00
Above X	Nil	-
Total	300	100%

Source : *Field studies on various Tea Gardens.*

As we have already said that education is one of the important indicator of development. This indicator amongst the women workers is gradually improving. Even though education is free upto primary level, all the working parents can not send their children to schools due to household responsibilities, specially looking after the younger siblings and assisting the mother in domestic chores. In many cases the girls do not go to schools or have to drop out because they had to take care of the younger children. This again was due to violation of the Plantation Labour Act. The Act provides for crèches in all plantation employing 30 or more women but this was hardly enforced. Though some well-run tea gardens have established crèches but the stable crèches do not serve the purpose because the workers complained that they have to walk long distances to feed their babies and it is not possible for lactating mother to visit the crèches at short intervals. To overcome this problems many gardens are having mobile crèches (shifting according to the place

of work) but the problems is not altogether solved. With the result, daughters are sometimes drop out from the schools mainly to look after their younger ones. There are a number of reasons for the low level of literacy among the plantation women. In the majority of the tea gardens, the only source of education for most of the workers' children was the primary school in the plantation. These schools were badly maintained in many tea gardens. They do not have adequate infrastructure or teachers. The general apathy of the employers and government towards the educational needs of the workers and their families was mainly responsible for this situation.

#### **4.9 Marriage and Family Life of the Women Tea Workers.**

##### **4.9.1 Women and Rules of Marriage**

As we have already pointed out in the previous sections that the Nepali society is caste based society but with the exception of high caste *Tagadhari jats* and untouchables, most of the middle caste groups like Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Tamangs, Sunuwars etc. do not follow strict Hindu marriage rituals and rules. This middle caste groups who were the indigenous tribes of Nepal have their own marital rules and regulations which still reflects their tribal characteristics.

Let us first discuss the marital rules among the high caste *Tagadhari jats* including the Bahun and Kshatriyas. Generally, this groups strictly adhere to the principle of endogamy or intra-caste marriage or *Jat Bibaha*. This is perhaps why many scholars regarded castes as basically an endogamous groups (Karve: 1965) It is seen that as far as possible they prefer to marry within the same caste group but they should avoid 'Pinda' (Seventh generation from the father side) and Sapinda (Fifth generation from the mother's side). Among the high caste groups the practice of hypergamy (Anuloma) and hypogamy. (Pratiloma) were equally present since the ancient times. It is very interesting to note the emergence or origin of different caste titles among the Brahmins out of hypergamous and hypogamous unions. This may be illustrated in the following table.

Table – 4.9

**Hypergamy (Anuloma) and Hypogamy (Pratiloma) among the Bahuns.****Hypergamy (Anuloma) :**

1. Upadhyaya Bahun (Male)       $\triangle = \circ$  Jaisi or Joshi Bahun (Female)  
     $\triangle$  Jaisi Bahun (Child)
2. Upadhyay Bahun (Male)       $\triangle = \circ$  Thakuri (Female)  
     $\triangle$  Hamal Chhetri (Child)
3. Upadhyaya Bahun (Male)       $\triangle = \circ$  Chhetri  
     $\triangle$  Khatri Chhetri
4. Upadhyaya Bahun (Male)       $\triangle = \circ$  Matwali jats (Middle Castes)  
     $\triangle$  Chhetri (Degraded)

**Hypogamy (Pratiloma)**

1. Upadhyaa Brahmin  
 or Bahun (Female)       $\triangle = \circ$  Kshatriya (Male) (Thakuri or Chhetri)  
     $\triangle$  Bhat (Sut) Chhetri
2. Upadhyaya Bahun (Female)       $\triangle = \circ$  Kshatriya (Male) (Thakuri or Chhetri)  
     $\triangle$  Khati (Rathkar) Chhetri

Source : 1. *Field studies conducted on various tea gardens.*

2. *Sharma: 1982, p.68.*

The above table shows that traditionally if an Upadhyaya Bahun marries a Jaisi, Chhetri, or a Matwali girl, the children could not retain their father's descent and thereby the caste status of their father. Such children would in most cases be given the different (midway) titles which is ritually superior than his mother's title

and inferior than his father's title. Such a principle (anuloma or hypergamy) is however, no longer in vogue in tea plantation. The children of a Bahun remain a Bahun, no matter which caste their mothers belong to. But even today, the caste status of the mother largely determines the social status in the family. Traditionally, the Bahuns also had the practice of hypogamous marriage or pratiloma i.e., a high caste females marrying with low caste males. In Nepal, we still get titles like Bhat Chetri (low category Kshatriyas) and Khati Chhetri (low category Kshatriyas). The title like Bhat Chhetri was used by the offsprings of Upadhyaya Bahun female and Thakuri male out of socially approved relationship (title like Bhat Chhetri). The title like Khati Chhetri or Rathkar was used by the offspring of Bahun female and Thakuri male who was born outside of socially approved relationship or in case of couple who did not follow the Hindu marriage rites like kanyadan or giving alm of girl etc. Coming back to the tea plantation it is seen that the population of Bahun is almost nil. But few tea garden have Bahun population though their percentage is very negligible. Though endogamy is still a major principle of the caste system but it has totally broken down in plantation as most of the Brahmin women say that getting partners from ones own caste is very difficult on the one hand, and getting partners from far off places like Nepal and Sikkim is too costly for them, on the other. Under such circumstances, inter-caste marriage or '*Ajat Bihah*' (both hypergamous as well as hypogamous) is also on the increase. The concept of caste endogamy and sapinda and pinda exogamy has little relevance in the tea gardens. With the exception of few *Jharra* or pure Bahun families most of the other *Timaha Tagadharis* groups like Thakuris and Chhetris do not strictly adhere to the principle of endogamy. On the other hand, the question of avoiding the seventh generation from the father's side (pinda) and fifth generation from the mother's side (Sapinda) does not arise in the tea plantation as the plantation society is consisting of immigrant families having not more than third and fourth generation members. The Field data revealed that the number of Tagadharis women were very few. Out of the total working women of 2,097 in seven gardens under study, the number of Bahun, Thakuri and Chhetris women were 33 (1.5%) 2 (0.09%), and 105 (5.0%) respectively. It is known from the personal interviews with the Kshatriyas that the

inter-caste marriage is increasing at the faster rate but unlike the Bahuns, they do not have to loose their caste status (even traditionally) in case of hypergamous marriage i.e., marrying with lower caste (*pani-chalne jat*) women. But in case of hypogamous marriage i.e., Chhetris women marrying with other *pani-chalne jats* like Rai, Limbu, Tamang, manger, Gurungs etc., the offspring of Chhetri women would get the caste status of his or her father. But rising and falling from the previous caste rank is purely an individual phenomenon.

Before discussing the marital rules among the Matwali jats it would be necessary to have a clear meaning of the various terms (marriage rules) like *jat biha*, *ajat biha*, *Kujat biha*, and *Chori biha* or *gandharva biha* etc. *Jat biha* means an intracaste marriage or endogamous marriage. An *ajat biha* means inter-caste marriage and the marriage between a touchable and an untouchable is never formalized and is locally called *Kujat biha*. Hierarchically put, the *jat biha* stands on the top, followed by *ajat biha* in the middle, and the *Kujat biha* at the bottom of the hierarchy. Lastly, the *chori biha* means marriage by elopement, which is one of the important features of the Kirata tribes like Rais, Limbus, Yakhas etc.

Let us discuss the marriage rules among the Rais, Limbus, and Yakhas (Dewan). These kirata tribes also follow the rule of endogamy and as far as possible they try to take partner from their own group or caste. But at the same time, a marriage between Rai, Limbu and Yakha is not considered as *ajat biha* or an intercaste marriage. These castes can have negotiated marriage among themselves and this is perhaps due to a long history of ethnic affinity that they belong to the same kirata stock living side by side in the eastern hills of Nepal (Limbuan and Khambuan) since the ancient times. These castes are called '*rit-vatey jat*' meaning a formal ceremony can take place in a marriage between these castes. If they take partners from outside of these three castes (but only with the touchable castes) than such marriage is called as *Ajat biha* or intercaste marriage. The ritual ceremony of the Limbus in case of an *ajat biha* is very interesting. They have a ceremony called *dalbhat* (boiled lentil and rice) which is offered to the relatives and neighbours. The girl after that day becomes a Limbu or a member of the family's *kul* or patrilineage. It is very interesting to note the practice of *jat danda* among the middle caste group

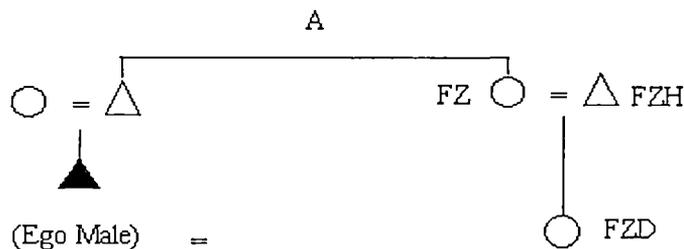
or *setho Matwalis*. Generally, the caste endogamy is strengthened with the help of *jat danda* or penalty for breach of caste endogamy. If a male member of the high caste marries a female, of the middle castes, the former has to pay *jat danda* to the latter. But if the otherwise happens then no *jat danda* is taken. But this system is totally absent among the *Tagadhari jats*. Among the middle castes, the *jat danda* is taken by all but only in case of *ajat biha* or intercaste marriage and never in a *kujat biha* or marriage with the untouchables. An inter caste marriage between two touchable castes (*Tagadharis* and *Setho Matwalis*) is not a big offence but it is certainly so if it is between a touchable and an untouchable. Even today, a marriage between touchable and untouchable is not approved by the society.

It is also observed that the middle caste groups or *Setho Matwali jats* are numerically dominant in the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills who are horizontally organized occupying the middle status in the ritual caste hierarchy. These middle castes groups like Tamangs, Gurungs and Mangers traditionally used to practice Matrilateral and patrilineal cross-cousin marriage (see table 4.10). This institution is almost dead or vanished in the agro-industrial setting of plantation society. Like other caste groups, they have also adopted the rules of *sapinda* (*matrikins*) and *pinda* (*patrikins*) exogamy i.e., avoiding the consanguineous and uterine kins for marriage alliances.

**Table – 4.10**

**Patrilineal and Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage among Tamangs, Gurungs and Mangers.**

a) Patrilineal cross-cousin Marriage or Marriage between mother's brother's son and father's sister's daughter (*Mama chela* and *Phupu Cheli ko bibah*)





According to Chemjong (1966) until 1769, the children of a Tamang women and a Khasaman (Tagadhari jats) used to be called *Gothar* or *Godar* Tamang, the offsprings of Newar men and Tamang women were called *Ngarba* Tamang and the children of Tamang women and Rai, Limbu, Sunuwar, Gurung and Manger were called *Sangri* Tamang. At present, they do not follow such rules instead the offsprings of Tamang women would automatically get the caste status of fathers.

The majority of the middle castes Nepalis (Seto Matwali jats) practice *aja bibah* or intercaste marriage but it is of isogamous type as the different castes occupy the horizontal caste status in the ritual hierarchy. On the other hand, in case of *Tagadhari* and *Kalo Matwali* jats (untouchables), intercaste or *ajat bibah* is either hypergamous or hypogamous type as they are vertically arranged in the ritual hierarchy. One of the most important features of Matwali marriage is *chori bibah* or marriage by elopement. For instance, it is very interesting to note among the Rais that even in the case of jat bibah or intracaste marriage (negotiated) as a custom the couple have to elope before the formal ceremony takes place. Now, in the tea plantation even the *Tagadharis* (with the exception of few Jharra or pure Bahun) are adopting this practice of elopement in case of *ajat bibah*. One of the important factor behind this trend may be due to their numerical insignificance in the plantation as they are the latter immigrants and they have often no scope of finding a spouse of their own caste from within the tea plantation and adjacent areas. Unlike in Nepal, their living with the lower caste members over a long time in tea plantation has also minimized the actual distance between castes and marrying with a lower castes (Setho Matwali jats) people has almost become social.

Like the upper caste Tagadharis, the Kami, Sarki, Sunar, Damai or Darjee also follow Hindu marriage rituals. The principle of caste endogamy is strictly followed by them. They also have the system of *jat danda* or penalty for the breach of caste endogamy. Among these untouchables, the *jat danda* is taken only if a Kami marries a Sarki girl or vice-versa. If a Damai marries a Kami or Sarki girl no *jat danda* is taken from the former as Damais belong to the ritually inferior group and no *jat danda* is taken from such inferior groups. As we have already pointed out above that the *jat danda* is taken only in case of *ajat bibah* or inter-caste marriage

and never in case of *Kujat bibah* or marriage of touchable with untouchables. So, if the untouchables men marry with touchable women, no *jat danda* is taken from the former. The field data indicates that the Kamis or blacksmiths are numerically dominant among the untouchables in the tea plantation. This numerical dominance is perhaps one of the important factor for the predominance of *jat bibah* among the kamis.

There are very few women workers from tribal communities like Sherpa, Bhutia and Lepcha. Traditionally they use to practice fraternal polyandry or adelphic polyandry in which a single woman was regarded as a common wife of several brothers. Besides polyandry, Sherpas also had an institution of patrilateral cross-cousin marriage in case of negotiated one. Now these institutions have almost vanished among the sherpas of tea plantation. Like other castes, they have also become monogamous.

It is observed that the most preferred marriage in the plantation is monogamy but the several cases of polygeny also came to notice. Few cases of polygeny have emerged out of sorrorate marriage (marriage between Sali and bhena) which is widely prevalent among all castes and tribes. Levirate marriage (marriage between dewar and bhauju) is also equally practise by all people.

#### **4.9.2 Marital Status and Age at Marriage.**

Regarding the marital status 90% women was found to enter love marriage or *chori bibah* (marriage by elopement). Only few Tagadharis women of Badamtam and Pandam were married from outside (mostly Terai areas of Nepal) through the negotiated marriage arranged by their elders. Tea garden women get freedom to select their partner. The marriage among Nepalis is not a sacramental affairs but contractual which does not bind the couple through religious constraints. They are equally free to divorce their husbands on the ground of maltreatment, drunkenness, adultery etc. Women are free to contract second marriage as their menfolk would do. No social stigma is attached in the divorced women, they easily get another husbands. So far as the custody of children is concerned, women are also allowed to

take the custody if they desire and the legal procedure of custody is totally ignored by them as they are absolutely unaware about them.

Widowhood does not attach any special social stigma to a women. A widow is permitted to marry anytime. If she is willing to stay in the same family, without remarriage, she is accorded due respect by the members. They freely participate in all the social functions of the family and society.

The following table reveals the age at marriage of women workers taken from different gardens under study.

**Table – 4.12**

**Age at marriage of women in tea gardens**

Age group	No. of women	% (Percentage)
12 below 14	Nil	-
14 below 16	30	10.00
16 below 18	49	16.33
18 below 20	72	24.00
20 below 22	66	22.00
22 below 24	46	15.33
24 below 26	29	9.66
26 below 28	06	2.00
28 and above.	02	0.66
Total	300	100

Source : *Field Survey.*

Table – 4.12 reveals that the number of women entered marriage before 18 is 79 (26.3%). There is not a single women married before puberty. The number of women married at the age of 16 to 24 years is very high (233 or 77.6%). All this shows that the marital status of plantation women is no doubt high but at the same time, the fact like a good number of women entered marriage before legally stipulated figure of 18 years shows the unawareness of the legality involved in early marriages. This trend should be checked.

### 4.9.3 Widowhood and Remarriage

Widowhood among the Nepalis is not an acute problem as widow remarriage is socially permitted. Among many Hinduised Nepali tribes like Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Gurung, Mangeri etc. there had been a social custom of marrying widowed sister-in-law by the brother-in-law. According to this system in case the elder brother died the younger brother used to keep his sister-in-law as his wife. This type of levirate marriage is still practice by many Nepali caste and tribal groups. On the other hand, the problem of widowhood hardly arose among the non Hindu communities like Sherpa, Lepcha, Bhutias as they had the system of polyandry.

Social pathologies i.e., dowry, bride burning, rape, prostitution and other crimes against women are hardly heard in the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. Divorce is yet another important factor in the context of studying status. The marriage among Nepalis is not a sacramental affairs but contractual which does not bind the couple through religious constraints. Women are free to contract second marriage as their menfolk would do. No social stigma is attached to the divorced women and widow women. A widow is permitted to marry anytime as she likes. On the other hand, through the system of *jarikal* (fine or compensation) a married woman is permitted to secure release from one husband to marry another, by making payment of compensation by later husband.

### 4.9.4 Household Composition and Family Types Among Plantation Women

There is considerable overlapping between the concepts of family and household. The Indian census defines a household as a group of persons normally living together and taking food from a common kitchen. The household members might or might not be related to one another. On the other hand, the family may be broadly perceived as a unit of two or more persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, adoption or consensual unions. It is considered as the basic unit of society and is a link between continuity and change.

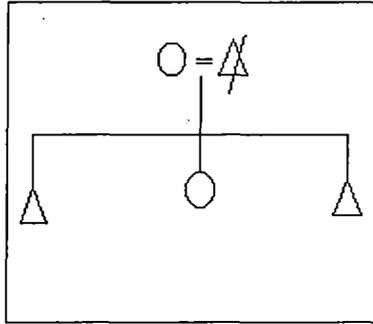
Based on the field data, we have divided the households into two types, 'A' and 'B'. Out of the 300 total households of women respondents, around 47% belong to Type 'A' consisting of simple households comprising whole or a part of a

parental family. The data revealed five major compositions of simple households. They are as follows :-

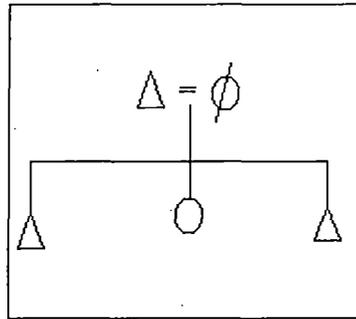
(i) A household composed of single man or women.



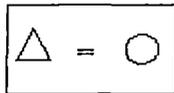
(ii) Household of widow mother and unmarried children.



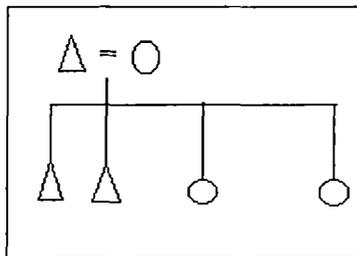
(iii) Household of widower father and unmarried children



(iv) household of husband and wife



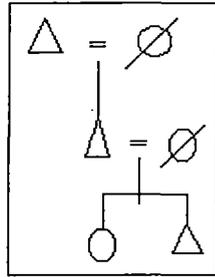
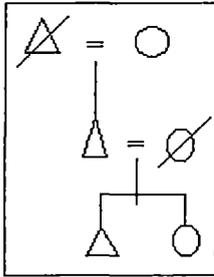
(v) Household of husband, wife and unmarried children



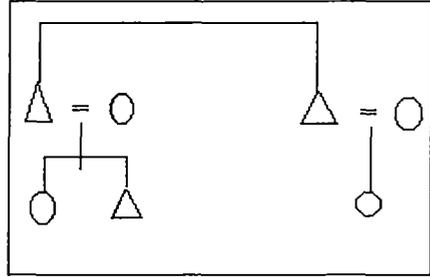
On the other hand, Type 'B' household is complex household which is composed of more than one parental family, or parts of more than one parental family or of one or more than parental family. We have come across following different types of complex households among the plantation women. They are –

(i) household of a typical composition

a)

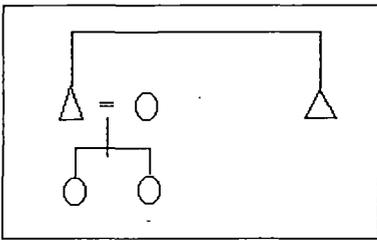


b)

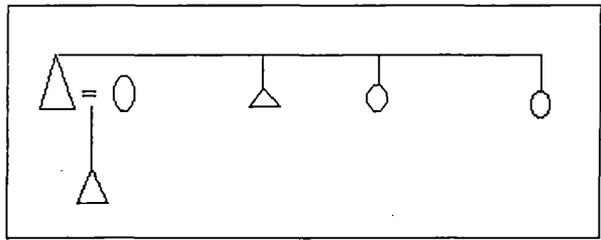


(ii) Household of one married man and one or more unmarried sibling

a)

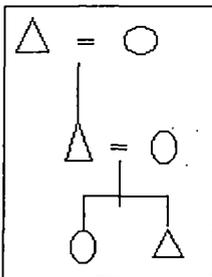


b)

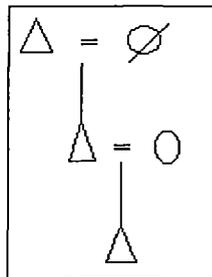


(iii) Household of parental unit and one married son.

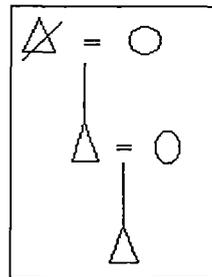
a)



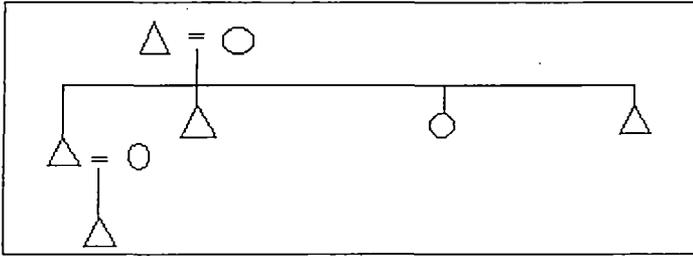
b)



c)

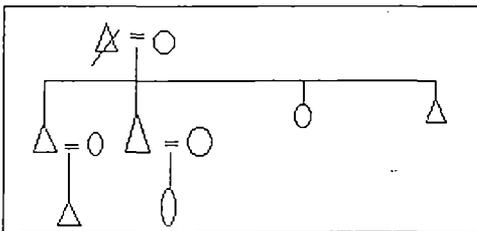


(iv) Household of parental unit, one married son and other unmarried children.

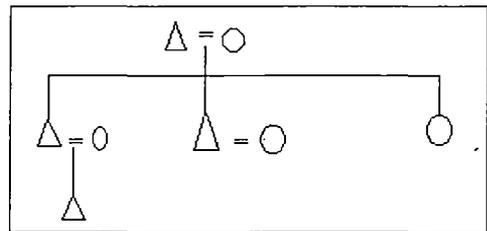


(v) Household of parental unit and two or more married son.

a)



b)



Index :-

-  = Male
-  = Female
-  = Dead Male
-  = Dead Female
-  = Marriage
-  = Descent
-  = Siblings

The following table gives an idea about the size (number of members) of the two types of households among the plantation women.

Table – 4.13

## Size of Households of Women Workers

Size (number of members)	Type 'A' (Simple)	%	Type 'B' (Complex)	%
1-3	31	21.98	8	5.03
4-5	39	27.65	44	27.67
6-7	51	36.17	58	36.47
8-10	11	7.80	38	23.89
11-14	9	6.38	11	6.91
Total	141	100	159	100

The above table reveals an interesting feature of household composition among the plantation women. Out of the total number of 141 simple households, the majority of them i.e., around 63 percent households are having 4-7 members and only around 14 percent households have 8-14 members. On the other hand, number of complex households are slightly higher than the simple household i.e., around 53 percent. Out of the total number of 159 complex households, around 60 per cent households have 1-5 members and only around 7 per cent households have 11-14 members in the households.

#### 4.9.5 Structure and Organisation of Family

After analyzing the household which is one of the dimensions of family, we can have some idea about changing pattern of family system in plantation society. Family is slightly different than household. The relation of blood among its members is very important in case of family. For our purpose, we have understood family as a social and economic unit consisting minimally of one or more parents and their children. Members of a family always have certain reciprocal rights and obligations, particularly economic ones. Family members usually live in one household, but common residence is not a defining feature of families. The same factors which are responsible for the increasing number of simple households having single member worker are responsible for the nuclearisation process of the family

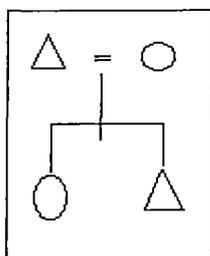
system. Traditionally, many Nepali Castes or hinduised tribes like Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Mangers including Newars and high castes Brahmin and Kshatriyas used to live in joint family system. As we have already discussed the existence of communal land ownership (*Kipat* land) held by Joint families among the Rais and Limbus of eastern Nepal bordering Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas. But after entering into the agro-industrial setting of tea plantations, their family system have undergone changes. Like in the household composition the size of the family have tended to be micro in tea plantations as each individual has begun to live with his spouse and children separately for the sake of convenience.

As our field record reveals the following different types of families which are found in the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. For instance, we have come across following types of families classified on the basis of size, composition and relations. They are :

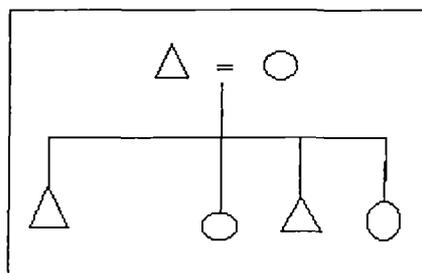
**a) Nuclear Family**

i) Nuclear family consisting of parents and their unmarried children-

a)

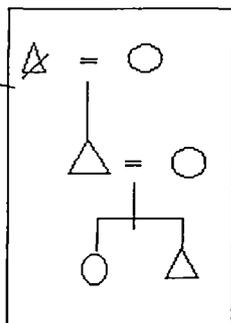


b)

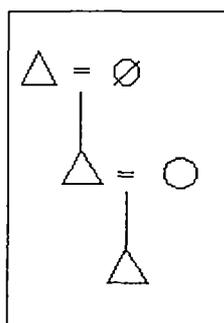


ii) Supplemented nuclear family consisting of widower or widow with his or her married son and their children.

a)

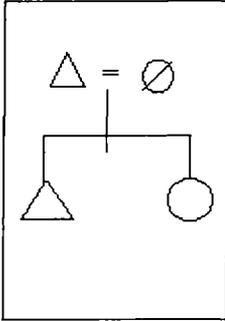


b)

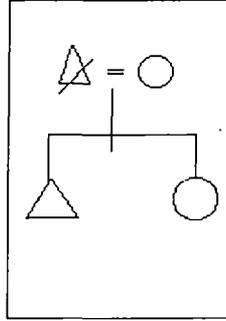


iii) Minimal nuclear family consisting of widower or widow with his or her unmarried children.

a)

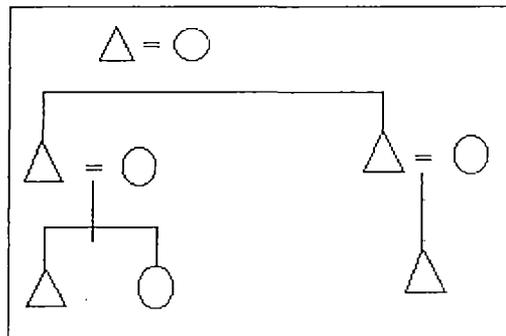


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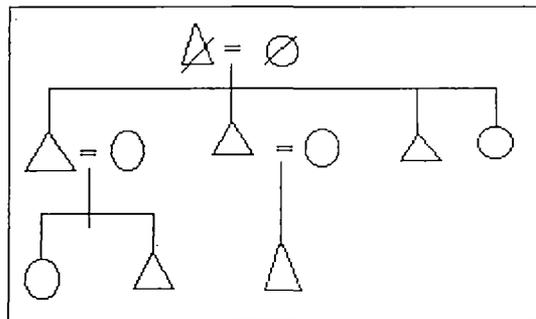


### b) Joint or extended family

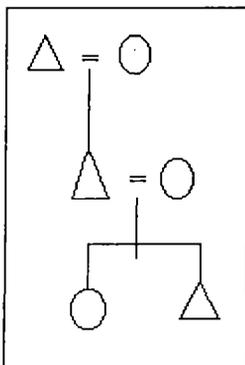
i) A typical joint or extended family consisting of two or more nuclear families affiliated to or extension of parent-child relationship rather than husband-wife relationship i.e., by joining the nuclear family of a married adult to that of his parents.



ii) Collateral or horizontal joint family consisting of two or more married brothers and their wives, children and unmarried brothers and sisters.



iii) Lineal or vertical joint family consisting of parents and their married son and grand sons and daughters.



There are three types of nuclear families and among these three, nuclear family consisting of 5-7 members is more numerous. More than 50 per cent families are of nuclear type but their size is not small as in the case of industrial urban centers where most of the nuclear family have not more than two children. Here, though the nuclear families are found in majority yet their size is not small. About sixty per cent of the nuclear families are having four to six children. This is mainly due to the lack of knowledge or reluctance on the part of couple to adopt family planning programme. There are a number of joint or extended families though their number is less than nuclear family. The lineal or vertical joint family consisting of parents and their married son and their children is more numerous than collateral or horizontal joint family consisting of two or more married brothers, their wives and children. This type of family exists soon after the death of their parents and after few years, they again split into nuclear families. We have also come across a few cases of polygynous families consisting of married man and his two wives and children. In four cases of polygynous families, married man had taken two sisters from the same family. This type of sororal polygyny is common practice by many communities in tea plantations of Darjeeling hills. On the other hand, polyandrous family is totally absent among the plantation women. Traditionally the system of polyandrous family was in vogue among the Sherpas who were the people of Tibetan origin. But now-a-days, Sherpas have also become monogamous in tea plantations.

The policy of Management has also strengthened the nuclearisation of family system in tea plantations. The plantation offer equal opportunity to the women along with their husbands in the job market and consider a nuclear family (Simple household) as a basic unit to receive work facilities and other benefits. Certain facilities such as free quarter, free firewood, cultivation land, ration at subsidized rates are given to each family. This naturally encouraged the workers to form nuclear families. The joint-living to some extent deprives the workers of some of their due benefits from the garden authorities. Thus, joint living, except under special circumstances is disfavoured. Though there is a predominance of nuclear family a close kinship interdependence is seen among them. They maintain close kin ties with their relatives. Here, the kinsmen or relative who live side by side often help one another in times of need.

#### **4.10 Religious practices of the Women Tea Plantation Workers :**

The plantation women belong to various religious background such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity etc. Traditionally, excepting high caste Bahun and Kshatriyas (who were Hindu Indian emigrants), all other Nepali Castes and tribes were animists and Shamanists having full of tribal rituals and festivals. Later on, these indigeneous tribes of Nepal have converted to Hinduism after the establishment of an independent Shah Kingdom by king Drabya Shah at Gorkha in 1459. We have already discussed about the Mangars and Gurungs of western Nepal who were the first two tribes to be converted into Hindus but it is interesting to note about some castes or ethnic groups like Tamangs, Yolmos, Thamis and Sherpas who could retain their indigeneous religion namely Buddhism. Among the other tribes like Rai, Limbu, Sunuwars, Newar, Bhujels the influence of both the Hinduism and Buddhism is visible. Table – 4.14 gives the idea about the traditional religious background of the Nepalis castes and tribes and practice of using their own caste priests in performing different rituals and festivals.

Table – 4.14

**Traditional Religions of the Nepalis castes and Tribes and their respective  
Traditional Priests.**

Nepali castes	Traditional Religion	Traditional Caste priests
Bahun (Upadhyaya and Jaisi)	Hinduism	Upadhyaa Bahun
Kshatriyas (Thakuris and Chhetri)	Hinduism	Upadhyaa Bahun / Ojha
Newars (Buddhist)	Buddhism	Gubhaju or Bajracharya
Newars (Hindu)	Hinduism	Devabhaju or Devabramin
Rai	Animism	Bijuwa /Manpa
Limbu	Animism	Phedangma
Gurung (Buddhist)	Buddhism	Lama
Gurung (Hindu)	Hinduism	Dyabre/Jhankri/Pajuy
Sunuwar (Hindu)	Hinduism	Poinbo
Sunuwar (Buddhist)	Buddhism	Natso/Nagami
Manger	Hinduism	Bhusal
Tamang	Buddhism	Lama
Thami	Buddhism	Lama
Sherpa	Buddhism	Lama
Lepcha	Buddhism/Animism	Lama/Bongthing
Kami, Sarki, Damai	Hinduism	Dhami/Jhankri
Majhi	Hinduism	Thankari

Source : *Field Studies conducted in various Tea Gardens.*

The above table indicates the different religious faiths professed by various Nepali caste and tribes in their traditional society. But after migrating to an agro-industrial environment of tea plantation and forming a homogeneous society despite their heterogeous socio-cultural background, now they have not been able to retain some of their traditional rituals and festivals. It is known from the interviews with the old women respondents that in the beginning, plantation had unicast village or caste Dhuras (such as Yakha dhura, Newar dhura, chamling dhura etc.) which had its own dialects and used to practice their own traditional rituals and festivals. But with the emigration of the Tagadharis and lower caste untouchables, the practice of (celebration of) Hindu festivals became famous among all the population where all

the workers irrespective of caste or tribal background participate actively. However, the basic procedure of performing the rituals and festivals remained predominantly tribal in character involving animal sacrifices and use of liquor. It is already observed that after migrating to the plantation the majority of people designated themselves as Hindus in various census records. This was perhaps due to the process of Sanskritization under the influence of later immigrants Hindu Tagadharis. However, the Hinduism professed in the plantation was not like typical Hinduism followed elsewhere by Tagadharis. Writing in 1906, O'Malley says "the Hinduism professed in the district is nothing more than a thin veneer over animistic beliefs. Beneath this veneer the real popular religion can be seen in the worship paid to a host of spiritual beings .... The religion prevalent is in fact demonolatry, of which exorcism and bloody sacrifices are the most prominent feature." (O'Malley: 1907) This demonolatry or the fear and worship of evil spirits among the Nepalis has been aptly described by Graham as he says, "the little offering in the middle of the path to bar the progress of an evil spirit or the living sacrifice being offered to propitiate another, or the burning of a rag before the door, over which the friends step when they return from burying a relative, to prevent any accompanying spirits from entering with them." (Graham:1906) It is clear from the above quotations that to the Nepalis, the religious rites were chiefly valuable in averting the anger of an evil spirit, as it was thought that all sickness was caused by such possession and different castes or tribes use to employ their own sacrificial priests like Bijuwa, Phedangma, Bongthing, Jhankri, Dhami etc. who use to indicate the offended demon, and prescribe the proper sacrifice of pig or goat or fowl to appease the spirit.

With this traditional religious background of different Nepali castes, let us see the religious background of plantation women and their role in various rituals and festivals.

The following table indicates the religious background of the women workers in seven tea gardens under study. From the data it is revealed that the majority of women profess Hinduism which is a predominant form of religion. This is perhaps due to the fact that the numerically dominant castes like Rais, Newars, Limbu, manger, Gurungs (with the exception of Tamangs) have designated

themselves as Hindus. For instance, Animists like Rais and Limbus officially designate themselves as Hindus but their ritual practices still reflect animistic belief. Unlike in Nepal, all the Newars of plantation have designated themselves as Hindus. We do not get a single Newari Buddhist in the plantation. Like Newars, the majority of Gurungs and Sunuwars women also designated themselves as Hindus. Interviews with the respondents revealed the fact that the population of Buddhist Gurungs (Gurungs bearing the title of Lama) and the Buddhist Sunuwars (Dasthare-Jirel Sunuwars) are very few in the tea gardens. Buddhism is the second dominant religion in the plantation. Tamangs, one of the numerically dominant Nepali caste in the tea plantation (in the whole district as well) profess Mahayana (Nygmapa Sect) form of Buddhism and worship Guru Padma Sambhawa and use Lamas as priest at their weddings, birth, funerals etc. Beside Tamangs the other castes and tribes like Yolmo, Sherpa, Thami, Lepchas also profess Buddhism though their percentage is very few in the tea plantation. Like Tamangs, they are also the followers of Mahayana Buddhism. A good number of women belonging to Rai, Limbu and untouchables (Kami, Damai) have converted to Christians. The conversion into Christianity emerged as a new phenomenon among the workers which was not there in the traditional Society. It is very interesting to note that a good number of Kami or Biswakarma women have been converted to Christians and perhaps one of the main reasons behind this proselytizing process is the absence of concepts like pollution and purity (Chuwa-Chhut) in Christianity where even the Kami women belonging to *pani-na-chalne jat* or untouchables caste can have equal religious status with other women and they do not have to face degraded positions unlike in Hinduism.

**Table – 4.15**  
**Women and their Religious backgrounds**

Caste/Ethnic Groups	No. of women from different castes in seven Tea Gardens under study	Hindu	Buddhist	Christian
1. Bahun (Brahmins)	33	33	--	--
2. Thakuri	02	02	--	--
3. Chhetris	105	105	--	--
4. Rai	504	495	--	09
5. Limbu	88	86	--	02
6. Mangar	115	115	--	--
7. Tamang	603	--	603	--
8. Newar	180	180	--	--
9. Sunuwar	50	52	--	--
10. Gurung	144	140	04	--
11. Thami	10	02	08	--
12. Bhujel	53	51	--	02
13. Kami (Biswakarma)	132	120	--	12
14. Damai or Darjee	39	31	--	08
15. Sarki	08	08	--	--
16. Sunar	02	02	--	--
17. Jogi	04	04	--	--
18. Kusuley	04	04	--	--
19. Majhi	02	02	--	--
20. Lepcha	02	--	02	--
21. Bhutia	04	--	04	--
22. Sherpa	05	--	05	--
23. Plainsmen (Bihari Sharma, Rajak etc.)	06	06	--	--
Total (%)	2097	1438 (68.57%)	626 (29.85%)	33 (1.57%)

Source : *Field Studies conducted in various Tea Gardens.*

All the women irrespective of their castes and religious background equally participate with males in performing or celebrating Hindu rituals or festivals like Maha Sivaratri, Ram Nawami, Saraswati Puja (Basant Panchami), Durga Puja, Krishna Janmashami, Biswakarma Puja, Rakhi Purnima, Nag Panchami, etc. In these rituals or festivals only the Nepali Bahun Priests are invited to perform the Puja. Besides Hindu festivals, Buddhist festivals like Buddha purnima or Buddha Jayanti is celebrated in different monasteries or gumpas where one can see both the Hindus and Buddhist women participating equally in the ritual as the Hindus also consider Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, but in such ritual only the Buddhist Lamas are invited if it is performed in the gumpas. Dasain (Dussera) and Tihar (Tyohar) are the very important festivals of Hindu Nepalis which are celebrated at community level by all the castes and tribes including Buddhist Tamangs, Thami, Yolmos and Sherpas but since the last two decades, Tamangs are more inclined towards their own traditional festival namely Lhoshar or Losar.

It is very interesting to note the continuation or persistence of traditional family rituals among the Matwali jats. For instance, the Kirata tribes like Rai (Khambu), Limbu and Yakhas still practice ancestor worship (Kulpuja or Worship of patrilineage) annually. Such rituals are performed at family level, usually at the house of eldest male member of a particular *thar* or lineage. Whether it is a *Khamang* of Rais, *Mangena* of Limbus or *Bhimsen puja* of Newars, in all such ancestor worships, animal sacrifices (mostly hens) and use of liquor or *jnar* are used in performing these rituals. It is true that women do participate in all such ancestor worships but they are often excluded from direct participation as only the male members are directly involved in such *Kulpuja*. The Nepali society, being a partilineal one, the role of women have been minimized as far as their direct participation in ancestor worship (worship of patrilineage) is concerned.

It is observed that a number of community festivals are celebrated in tea plantation irrespective of their caste and tribal backgrounds. One such example is *Sansari puja* which is performed by all villagers for a good rain. On such occasion, all the villagers go to the top of hill and throw down grains, pigeon, stones of all sizes. So that the rumbling of their fall may resemble the rumbling of thunder, as

they believe that rains would thus follow. Another example is the celebration of fecundity festivals which is performed on the day of Basant Panchami (Saraswati Puja) by consecrating the seed on the day of panchami would lead to good harvest in future. Beside these, almost in every one or two month's, they celebrate SAGRANTIS like Chaite SAGRANTI, Maghe SAGRANTI, Asar SAGRANTI, Saune SAGRANTI etc.

It is also observed that some typical Hindu rituals or festivals are performed or observed by only the tagadhari females. For instance, the rituals like Tij Brata, tulsi Brata, Yakadashi (Aakadashi), Swasthani Brata etc. These Bratas or fasts are rarely observed by middle caste Matwali women.

## FINDINGS

It goes without saying that the bulk of the tea plantation workers in Darjeeling Himalayas are descendants of the immigrant Nepalis from rural Nepal. In the plantation society they form a homogenous group or an organic whole despite their different place of origin and heterogenous socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is also seen that the middle and lower castes women have migrated more than the higher castes women. Among the middle castes, Kiratas (Rai, Limbu and Yakha) women are numerically dominant followed by Tamangs, Gurungs, Manger, Newars etc. The discussion on migration process shows that multiplicity of factors, following Lee's model of 'Push' and 'Pull' have worked hand in hand in building a viable Nepali (Plantation) Society in Darjeeling Himalayas. But the 'pull' factors are perhaps more important in this regard. All over the world, bringing of labourers from outside, preferably from very far-off places, and employ them in plantations has been a concomitant feature of the colonial rule. The main rationale behind all this is that the employers can afford to pay such labourers a very low wage, and ensure a steady supply by keeping them tied to an invisible chain from which it is difficult for them to come out.

The plantation workers of Darjeeling Himalayas differ from the Asam, Terai and Dooars plantation workers where 80 per cent labourers are recruited from Tribal belts of Chotonagpur (Jharkhand), Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh whereas in Darjeeling Himalayas about 95% of workers are from Nepali castes and tribal groups who have entered into agro-industrial setting of tea plantations with their diverse traditions and castes occupations.

The Nepali caste system in the tea plantation is quite different from that of the traditional Nepal. Here, the immigrant Nepalis had to adjust in a completely new agro-industrial environment of the plantation society. Unlike in Nepal, all the castes and tribes have to live in the plantation as a homogeneous groups though they belong to diverse linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Moreover, we have

already seen that in each tea gardens about 12 to 15 different castes and communities are living harmoniously and engaged in homogeneous economic activity under such circumstances they cannot follow the strict rules regarding commensal relations, pollution and purity etc. however, in certain situations, such as the customs in relation to marriage and death rituals, worship of ancestors or Kul puja, celebration of community festivals etc., one can see the distinct social status of a caste. One of the important feature of caste sytem is the traditional hereditary occupation or caste callings. An analysis of the occupational backgrounds of the women workers helped a lot in understanding the numerical dominance of the middle caste Nepalis and their better adaptation and adjustment in the agro-industrial environment of the tea plantation. It is observed that the majority of women tea workers hail from agricultural background of rural Nepal and the numerical dominance of the middle caste groups like Rai, Limbus, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Newar, Sunuwars, Thamis, Bhujels etc. is certain due to their poor peasant economy at the place of origin and the domination and exploitation of the immigrant Hindu rulers from India. The traditional agrarian background of these middle castes women have helped them to accept plantation works as the plantation industry is agro-based and is not heavily mechanised. Moreover, the field operations (like weeding, pruning, manuring, hoeing, nursery work etc.) in the tea plantation are very much similar to those of the agriculture. Therefore, the Nepalis women are not strangers to the new environment. Unlike typical industrial society, in tea industry we do not get a strict separation between home and place of work. Here, both the residential and working sectors are within the same area which have helped the women to adjust better in the plantation work than in any other industry.

Literacy rate is a key factor that determines the social and economic status of women. Literacy is an indication of exposure to modern ideas and is therefore crucial for an overall analysis of women's status. This indicator amongst the women workers is gradually improving. Which shows the successful implementation of the provision of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 which made it mandatory for all tea plantations to provide for primary education to the children of workers.

Regarding the marital status 90 percent Nepalis women were found to enter love marriage and marriage by elopement (*Chori bibah*). Only few Tagadharis women (Bahun and Chhetris) were married from outside through the negotiated marriage arranged by their elders. It is also observed that the Nepali society is caste based society but with the exception of high caste *Tagadhari jats* (Bahun and Chhetris) and some untouchables, most of the middle caste groups like Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Tamang, Sunuwar, Gurung, Manger etc. do not follow strict Hindu marriage rituals and rules. This middle caste Nepalis who were the indigenous tribes of Nepal have their own marital rules and rituals which still reflects their tribal characteristics. It is observed that the most preferred marriage in the plantation is monogamy but the several cases of polygamy also came to notice. Few cases of polygamy have emerged out of sorrorate marriage is also equally practise by all people. It has been observed that the structure of the family has undergone remarkable changes. The joint family system has broken down resulting into nuclear families. Traditionally, the agrarian economy required joint living, whereas in the tea plantations this system deprives the workers of some of their due benefits from the plantation authority. Certain facilities such as free quarter, free firewood, cultivation land, ration at subsidized rates are given to each family unit.

It is observed that the Nepali women belong to various religious backgrounds such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Animism etc. Traditionally, excepting high caste Bahun and Chhetris, all other Nepali Castes and tribes were animists and Shamanists having full of tribal rituals and festivals. Later on, these indigenous tribes of Nepal have converted to Hinduism after the establishment of Hindu kingdom (Shah dynasty) in Nepal. After immigrating to the tea plantation and forming as a homogeneous Nepali speaking community they accepted Hinduism as the predominant religious. However, the basic procedure of performing the rituals and festivals remained predominantly tribal in character involving animal sacrifices and use of liquor.