

**Chapter – 5**

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC ROLE AND  
STATUS OF WOMEN TEA  
PLANTATION WORKERS**

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### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN TEA PLANTATION WORKERS**

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to study the status and role of Nepali women in tea plantation of Darjeeling hills in terms of various roles they perform in society. As we know the women's role and status all over the world are generally determined by social institutions and norms, religious ideologies, economic system and so on. The role and status of women are the outcome of the age-long tradition of the cultural groups where they are born and brought up. Thus to understand the nature and extent of women folk in relation to any society the concerned cultural patterns are needed to be focussed accurately.

Lowie (1912) has pointed out four determinants for the status of women. They are: actual treatment, legal status, opportunity for social participation and character and extent of work. A study by the U.N. (1975) on the "Status of Women and Family Planning" views that the best measure of status is the extent of control that a person has over his or her own life, derived from the access to knowledge, economic resources and political power and the degree of autonomy enjoyed in the process of decision making. Thus high status of women refers to their economic independence, access to education and power and low status implies the lack of them.

For the purpose of our study we have defined social status as the position a woman has in society by virtue of having to perform certain roles. Her social position includes position in the family, occupational hierarchy, trade unions, religion, socio-cultural organisations etc. In this chapter an attempt has been made to study to what extent the employment of women had changed their standing in the family or how domestic responsibilities affected working women, how she spends her day and other related factors. Further, we have tried to focus our discussion on women's role in decision-making processes, their participation in the socio-cultural organisations, leisure time activities etc. as these aspects are very vital for the assessment of women's status in society.

### 5.1 Women and Economic Activities :

It is seen that the Nepali women are employed in various occupations of the tea plantation including daily-rated worker or *coolie*, sub-staff like *daffadars* and *chaprasis* and staff including clerical, medical and teaching. However, the appointment or recruitment of Nepali women in the last two categories (staff and sub-staff) is recent phenomenon. It was only after 1980 that the management started recruiting women in staff and sub-staff categories but their percentage is negligible. It is interesting to note that women are numerically dominant as workers or *coolie*. It was revealed from the field record that in all the seven tea gardens under study women have outnumbered men as daily rated workers and one can get the same picture in rest of the tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalayas. Women workers are basically involve in plucking of tea leaves which starts from early February and continues up to the month of October – November. We have already seen in chapter three that besides plucking women also do light and medium pruning, skiffing, hoeing, manuring, and weeding and rough weeding (sickling) nursery work etc.

Women's participation in economic activities is very high. Their work-schedule is very hectic. Along with their normal plantation work, women are involved in agricultural operations from sowing to harvesting. Along with men folk they equally participate in various agricultural activities in their *khetland* and individual owned land. Unlike in the past whatever they produce in their land is sold out to the local market or weekly hat of payment. During the winter season when there is no plucking in the tea plantation, women have to do winter cultivation work like skiffing (light and medium), pruning, manuring, filling of tubes in nursery etc. for which they were given task or *thika* (see table no. ). Many women are seen busy in their agricultural land after completing their *thika* within four to five hours. They produce many crops and vegetables like maize, rice, millet, ginger, tomatoes, bean, chilli etc. whatever surplus they have after consuming at family level, they sale in the nearest market or local *hat* within the garden itself. It is therefore observed that tradition of peasant economy having rural agricultural background has helped the Nepali women to accumulate money rather than spending as in the past for family consumption only.

It is interesting to note that with the exception of few *Darjee* (Tailor) and *Kami* or *Biswakarma* (Ironsmith) families no other caste groups are following their traditional occupations. In the new agro-industrial setting of plantation society there is no correlation between caste and traditional occupation among the Nepalis. Nepali women from various caste and tribal backgrounds have engaged in plantation work irrespective of their traditional occupational backgrounds.

It is seen that the women workers although live on the income from agro-industrial plantation works still they cling to their traditional practices of cultivation of land. So one can see the combination of industrial and agricultural occupations in an unique form.

Along with their normal duties of plantation work, plantation women also domesticate cattle stock as part and parcel of their economy. The common livestock among the middle caste Nepalis having tribal background is pig. Particularly among the *Kirata* tribes like *Rai*, *Limbu*, *Yakha*, *Sunuwar*, domestication of pigs are very famous while the *tagadhari jats* like Brahmin (Bahun) and Kshatriya (Chhetris) along with some *Newars* and *Gurungs* usually do not domesticate pigs. It shows that pork eating as taboo has still found among the *Tagadharis* and some higher caste *Newars*. Among the *Tagadharis*, cows are common livestock while all the Nepalis caste except some *Kashi gottre* (Clan) *Kirata* tribes like *Rais* and *Yakha* domesticate goat. So the collection of fodder for the animals is also one of the important activities of the plantation women.

As in all societies the economic roles of men and women in plantation society are distinguished. The daily routine of a plantation women is extremely hectic. It has been their responsibility, traditionally to collect fuelwood and fodder for the family, and fetch water from *dharas* (springs) in vessels which they carry in a *doko* (bamboo basket) on their backs. The Nepali women are responsible for all domestic tasks like preparing meals for the family, caring of children, cleaning the house, washing clothes including the caring for domestic animals.

Given the geographical conditions of nagged steep terrain, heavy rainfall etc, the plantation women have to directly bear the brunt of all climatic hazards. The

heavy load of work in the daily lives of plantation women has serious implications for their health. This is more so because the families are large in tea plantation society with more than six members on an average. Heavy workload coupled with early marriages between 16-20 years, take their toll on women's health.

As women labour contributes more in terms of time, output and income, they need a fair deal both in socio-economic planning and in decision-making. The social security measures for women and legal protection should also be substantially expanded keeping in view with their role in the economy.

### **5.2 Women's Economic Contribution and Position in the Family :**

In the view of many writers economic status is crucial to the overall status of women in the society (Boserup: 1970; Martin and Vorties: 1970; Stoller: 1975). The most important variable that is closely related to the status of women is the work-role, particularly their employment outside the home. It is maintained, that gainful employment holds the key to improvement in Women's status. Sociologists hold that the women's status outside the home completely changes her status role in the family and in the larger society. But our analysis of field data revealed that the work status of a woman does not lead to a change in the work patterns at home. The culturally defined role of a female as a home-maker has not undergone any change in spite of the new or additional role of the women as a wage-earner in the family.

Nepali women play a crucial role in the hill plantation society. However, their low socio-economic status is largely based on the myth that women are inferior as agents of production. This was based on the prevailing concept of relative inferiority of women as labour input which led to the wage discrimination in tea industry for more than one century. Since the inception of tea industry, women were paid lower wage than males for the same work done. Ultimately wage-discrimination was abolished after the passing of the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976. Contrary to this general belief of low labour input of women, empirical evidence show that the participation of female labour in tea plantation is much higher than the males. Their contribution towards work output and family income is very significant.

As we have already seen in the previous chapters that women are numerically dominant as a worker in the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills. As the field record revealed that about 90 percent working women in Darjeeling tea industry belong to middle caste Nepalis and many of whom like *Limbu* (Subba) and *Tamang* (Murmis) have become scheduled tribes in the recent years. This status of women earning their living and also helping the family economically have given some freedom to them. These working women were paid lower wages than men for more than a century. It was only after the passing of the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976 that the women started getting equal remuneration. Though the Act was passed in 1976, in several tea gardens women used to receive lesser wages till 1980-81 due to the reluctance of owners or managers to implement the provision of the Act. This unequal wage rate in the tea plantations had also helped in maintaining the unequal status. Unequal wage-rate along with unequal opportunity in the occupational hierarchy of plantation rendered women a lower status vis-à-vis men. For more than hundred years, women were kept or recruited only in the daily-rated workers or *coolie* category. They were never promoted or recruited in the staff and sub-staff category. In Darjeeling hills, tea plantations was started in 1843 and commercialised since 1856, but it is sad to notice that only in recent years i.e., particularly since 1980s that some tea gardens have been recruiting women to staff and sub-staff category though their percentage is very few.

As we have seen that women's contribution to the family's income is significant. But it is sad to note that besides their regular or routine contribution as wage earner, much of the labour contributed by them specially in the domestic chore and also outside are not usually considered as productive. Even though women contribute substantially to the labour force and thereby to family income norms governing the traditional patrilineal framework still continue. Women do not enjoy independent property rights. However, a widow may enjoy her husband's property if she does not have an issue or her children are minors. In the absence of a son, property may be enjoyed by the daughter.

During the field work it was observed that in many tea gardens like Badamtam, Pandam, Vah-Tukvar and Singell, a good number of families are headed

by female workers as their husbands are working outside in Indian army, police and other government and private organisations. As we have already discussed in Chapter two that the tea industry in Darjeeling Himalayas have been stagnating particularly since 1980s. Many tea gardens have already been closed down and around twenty have been declared as sick unit which forced many male members to migrate outside in search of jobs leaving their families behind.

It cannot be disputed that absence of the emigrant (male head) from the household can have serious implications for the women left behind, both socially and economically. Some studies have shown that women in emigrant households seem to be emerging as independent persons with more authority and power in family decision-making than ever before (Gogate: 1986; Gulati: 1987). At the same time, some also suggest that there has not been any major role revisions in the emigrant families and that the women's position within the family structure continue to be, more or less, the same as it was prior to the impact of emigration (Shaheed: 1981; Gilani: 1986). Then again, few others have also indicated that, although improving the women's position still remain below that of men (Findley and William: 1991). So far as the position of plantation women in the emigrant families is concerned we can say that they are economically better off than the women whose husbands are working in the same garden. As compared to other women, women from emigrant households are more exposed to outside world as they occasionally get chance to visit and see different places where their husbands are working. One very noticeable trend in the emigrant families is the importance given to children's education including the girl child. It was revealed from the field record that a good number of female headed households particularly from Badamtam, Pandam and Singell tea gardens have children studying in good English medium I.C.S.E. and C.B.S.E. Schools as their husbands are regularly sending money for the education of their children.

### **5.3 Women and Domestic Responsibilities.**

To get an idea of the extent to which women's participation in plantation work had affected their domestic responsibilities, the respondents were asked to

specify the domestic chores that they had to do regularly. They could specify up to four chores. An overwhelming majority of the respondents did domestic chores regularly. In the absence of labor saving devices, sharing of work by the different family members is the only available method of lessening the burden.

The major tasks performed by the women workers were cooking, washing clothes for the family, fetching water, collecting fuel and fodder, cleaning the house, taking care of the children, cultivation work in kitchen garden etc. Majority of the women workers expressed no difficulty in performing their domestic tasks. It would seem to be because of the help extended to them by their families that most respondents expressed no difficulty in fulfilling their domestic obligations. In fact, only about 10% women workers said that nobody in the family help them to perform the domestic tasks.

Those being helped were asked to name persons in the family who helped them. About 80% women workers said that they were helped by their female relations like daughter, mother, daughter-in-law etc. About 10% women were helped by husbands or sons in their household. Another 10 per cent said that their husband rendered no help in domestic chores. The main reason given for non-sharing of household work by their husbands was custom and tradition. So, the work status of a woman does not led to a change in the work patterns at home. The culturally defined role of a female as a home-maker has not undergone any change inspite of the new or additional role of the woman as an earner in the family. This shows the division of household labor is clearly inequitable to women. Regardless of their employment status, female perform, on average more than twice as much housework as their males. But only a few male or even female perceive this situation to be unfair to female. Household work is a gendered activity particularly for those in marital relationship. Not only is the bulk of household performed by women, but these tasks are also allocated disproportionately according to gender. As we have pointed out above, in tea plantation, beside attending plantation work, women are chiefly responsible for routine tasks which is time-consuming whereas men tend to be responsible for tasks such as home repair, yard work, grocery shopping, cultivation etc. Following Scholar (1984) we refer to "female typed" tasks as routine and all

other as “Sporadic” to highlight the differences in time commitment that characterize these tasks. As female typed tasks are routine work everyday they have to follow this routine without questioning the sense of justice as prevailing ideology or social norms has defined most household tasks as feminine activities and women have accepted this sexual division of labor without question.

#### **5.4 Women in Decision Making Process :**

Women’s role in decision making process is considered as one of the important indicators of her status in the society. Traditionally, the Nepali society was patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal where the father or eldest male head enjoyed a dominant position and exercised the exclusive right of decision making. Tradition and custom imposed a formalized environment in which the women had to operate. The eldest male member was to be the head of the joint family who was responsible for making final decisions which were binding on the part of other members of the family. Normally, the nature of decision was related to the matters like allocating land, crops, sharing of ancestral property, performing ancestor worships or arranging marriages.

In the plantations too, the society is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. Theoretically men as the head of the family enjoy a prime position in decision-making. However, unlike in Nepal, the male authority in tea plantation is somewhat different from their traditional society. The nature of decision making process is different in case of the tea plantations where a good number of earning members are females as we have already mentioned that females are numerically dominant as a workers and a number of families have female heads as their males (father or husband) are staying away in connection with their jobs or employment. It was revealed from the field data that a good number of female headed households particularly in Badamtam, Vah-Tukvar and Singell Tea gardens have their males working outside and many of them are serving in Indian Gorkha Regiment, Border Security Force, Territorial Army etc. Out field record revealed that with the exception of few female headed households in all other households women equally participate in the decision making process in matters like children’s education or

admission in schools, expenditure on children's marriages, running the households or buying household articles, the observance of ritual and social ceremonies etc. and whatever, the decision is to be taken it is discussed by husband and wife first but the males would be final decision makers. But in case of households headed by widow mothers and female-headed households woman take independent decisions on many matters related with day-today affairs. But even in such households, males are ultimate decision-makers. For instance, even in households headed by widow mother, it is always the eldest son who exercise authority and takes the final decisions. In female-headed households too, the important decisions are taken by males during their annual or biannual visit to the home.

It is also observed that the women from nuclear family enjoy greater participation in decision-making in family matters than those women who are from joint family. In joint family female have to accept the decision already reached by husband and in-laws. About sixty percent of women interviewed emphasised their role in decision-making.

In the past, one of the important agencies of social control in the tea gardens was *jati samaj* or caste panchayat. This panchayat was not a statutory one but was a non-official body consisting of male village elders. In the early years of plantation history, villagers were mostly unicast or unitribe type. Women were excluded from such panchayats. These *jati Samaj* or Panchayats dealt with matters concerning inter caste marriage or *a jat bibah*, payment of *jat danda* or penalty for the breach of caste endogamy, thefts, quarrels etc. Since such panchayats consisted of elderly male members of the society and women were excluded from such body, they had minimum role to perform. They were allowed to attend the meeting but their voice was not counted in the decision-making process. In most of the meeting, they used to remain as silent spectators and they had to accept the decision taken at the panchayats.

Now, the social importance of the *jati panchayat* have relegated to the background with the formation of trade unions after 1950s. The trade union leaders started to solve village dispute as well. The influence of the trade unions was felt on

the panchayat in the garden. In recent years, the local or garden level committee also includes women as their executive members and these garden level leaders were often asked to mediate in the affairs of the panchayat. Women in trade union body have some voice in decision-making process. The fact that the social life of the workers is closely associated with their workplace have given them encouragement to this process. The growth of trade union movement has minimised the role played by the elder members in the village panchayat and at the same time it has given women the power to raise their voice and participate in the decision-making process. Recently, particularly since 2000, all the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills have brought under the Panchayat Raj System and the provision for the reservation of seats for women has further encouraged them to take active part in the political processes.

On the whole, it can be concluded that the decision-making practices of the plantation families are not very traditional. Now, women do participate in all domestic, and non-domestic decisions.

### **5.5 Women's Participation in Social Organisations :**

Participation in Social Organisation broadens one's outlook and contributes to the development of one's personality. Participation outside the home rather than confining oneself to the narrow boundaries of the home and family provides an opportunity to influence others and to be influenced by others. This promotes self-confidence and awakening particularly among women. Thus participation in organization particularly social organisations will have a bearing in shaping one's attitudes and behaviour.

In order to know the membership and participation of women in various social organisations, women respondents were asked to name the different kinds of socio-cultural organisations existing in their locality. About 32 per cent women respondent replied that they were the members of various socio-cultural and religious organisations like Sai Samiti, Satsangh, Mahila Samiti, Samaj Bikash Samiti, Bhajan Mandali, etc. It is very interesting to note that women in many tea gardens have become the member of caste associations or *jati samaj* such as Akhil Bharatiya Tamang Buddha Sangh, Akhil Kirati Khambu (Rai) Association, etc.

When asked how the men in the family reacted to the women's participation in such organisations, more than half said that they are encouraged by their male members, but only a few women reported a negative attitude of men towards their participation in community life.

Though the social system is still dominated by men, women do participate in all socio-cultural organisations which is undoubtedly to a high degree when compared to the case in plains. But their high degree of membership and participation does not reflect their high position in the social organisations as the high posts like President and Secretary are occupied by males. More than mere membership, holding a position in an organisations confers greater opportunities for the individual to put forth their best and to develop self-confidence and personality. Such individuals are likely to assert their position in the home front and will have broader horizon even in matters of family relationships but such opportunities for holding higher positions in various organisations have been denied to women.

#### **5.6 Leisure and Recreational Activities of the Women :**

Despite the progress towards a greater sharing of parental responsibilities in the home, and of domestic tasks by other family members, the heaviest burden continues to remain with women almost everywhere and the plantation women of Darjeeling himalaya is no exception.

The women respondents were asked if in their view working women required a special leisure hour. Almost all the respondents said that working women did need leisure time. In order to know how the women workers of different tea gardens utilise their leisure time, each respondents was asked to specify upto four activities and which she spent her free time. A considerable number said that they spent time listening to radio or tape-recorder (32%), watching television (24.66%), sewing and knitting (16.33%), visiting friends and relatives (26.33%), and a very few (0.66%) spent time on reading.

Table – 5.1

**How Respondents utilised their free time on their hobbies**

| Hobbies                             | No. of Respondents |       |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Sewing/Knitting                     | 49                 | 16.33 |
| Reading                             | 02                 | 0.66  |
| Listening to Radio or Tape-Recorder | 96                 | 32.00 |
| Watching Television                 | 74                 | 24.66 |
| Visiting Friends/Relatives          | 79                 | 26.33 |
| Total                               | 300                | 100%  |

Source: *Field Work.*

**5.7 Patriarchy and Women's Self Perceive Status :**

Though the Nepali women in tea plantation enjoy not much subordinate status to men so far their roles and positions are concerned yet they are not free from the forces of patriarchal control i.e., domination of men in the society. In Nepali society also patrilineal social structure governs or determines the actual role and status of women in the society. Patriarchy is one of the main features of the Indian family and family organisation among the Nepalis is no exception. Patriarchy generally leads to patrilocality which separates the women from her natal family home after marriage. Among the Nepalis also post-marital residence is patrilocal or virilocal where a girl is expected to stay at the natal home of her husband soon after marriage. A woman often does not have the title to the matrimonial home in which she concentrates all her time and energy. In the case of death of her husband or desertion or divorce, she is often rendered destitute as she neither has a home in her family of marriage, nor in her natal family which has given her away. The patrilineal setup of social structure provides male an upper hand in most of the life ways including residence, succession, inheritance factor that determines the legal status of women. But the Nepali women do not enjoy more legal rights to properties. Only the males are considered eligible for family or ancestral properties, but by access Nepali women enjoy certain better privileges.

It is true that there exists a tremendous cultural diversity among the various Nepali castes and tribes and there are variations in degree of patriarchy among them.

We have already discussed in the earlier chapters that among certain communities like Tamang, Yolmos and Sherpas (Nepali, Buddhist tribes) there is an immense influence of Tibetan culture. Traditionally, they were near matriarchal communities but they are also not free from the influence of the forces of patriarchy of dominant Hindu Nepalis (particularly Brahmin and Kshatriyas) who ruled over the indigenous tribes. Traditionally, with the exception of higher castes *Bahun* (Brahmin) and *Chhetris* (Kshatriyas) almost all the middle castes Nepalis were hinduised tribes (indigenous tribes being hinduised by Hindu Gorkha rulers). Among these hinduised tribes particularly those who follow animist and Buddhist traditions, women do not acutely suffer from low self esteem and low self image. But the prevalence of predominating values of upper caste Hindu Nepalis have a profound impact in their lives and activities.

#### **5.8 Adaptation and Adjustment of Women Plantation Workers :**

Let us now discuss the nature of adaptation and adjustment of Nepali women workers to the semi-industrial way of plantation system after migration from a poor agricultural background of rural Nepal.

According to Parson, adaptation does not mean an adjustment to a new environment alone but also an improvement on the previous condition by exploitation of the new resources. He called it an adaptative upgrading. In this sense adaptation means not just a passive process of social adjustment but an active and innovative process as well. (Parson: 1977)

In tea plantation both agricultural and industrial environment exist. As tea industry is agro-based and located in rural areas Nepali Women workers with rural and agricultural background are expected to adapt better with the working environment of the industry with a consequent effect upon lessening the conflicts between home life and working life. Being akin to agriculture, plantation work and its environment seem to be more congenial to women than in a factory or a mine. The field operations or cultivation work in tea plantations like hand weeding, sickling (rough weeding), manuring, hoeing, pruning, nursery work etc. are comparable to that of modern agricultural. So, the women working outside the home

in the field is not new among the Nepalis castes and tribes like Rai (Khambus), Limbu (Subba), Tamang (Murmis), Thamis, Gurung, Manger, Sunuwar, Newar etc. Along with men folk, women of these communities used to participate equally in agricultural operations. These Nepali women do not find any contradiction between female as a worker and female as a housewife. They think that in order to supplement family income they should work. Their wage are required to run the families.

Unlike other industry, tea industry is located in rural areas and management provide workers with a plot of land (khetland or kothebari) which is rent-free. The women workers spend their time in cultivating maize, bean, potatoes, millet, ginger etc. after finishing their plantation work and sometimes during holidays. As mentioned earlier, the majority of Nepali women workers have come from peasant background of rural Nepal and among the rural people there is a tradition of women working in the agricultural field alongwith their menfolk. We have also cited earlier that the women from Kirata tribes like Rai, Limbu, Yakha use to participate actively in the agricultural operations on their *Kipat* holding (communal land holding). In tea plantation, work spot and residential area exist side by size. Women workers can easily reach the work spot after finishing their household chore. The ecological settings also helped them to adjust with the plantation environment because those who have come from Nepal, are mostly from eastern and western hills of Nepal and few communities like Tamangs (Murmis) and Thamis are from hilly areas around Kathmandu valley i.e., Central Nepal. In Darjeeling Himalayas. they found the same geophysical setting as in their place of origin. It is also an accepted fact that many Nepali Communities like Rai including Yakha, Limbu, and Sherpas whose original homeland is hilly regions of eastern Nepal (Khambuan, Limbuan, Solokhombu respectively) have been spread to Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas since ancient times. These Kirata tribes (except Sherpas) are numerically dominant in the tea plantation of Darjeeling Himalayas.

Plantation society differs to a great extent from typical industrial society. As the tea industry is agro-based and is not heavily mechanised, the Nepali women do not face much difficulties to work within the work routine and discipline of the

plantation. Moreover, the high technology can not be applied to labour-intensive industry such as tea. In tea plantation, plucking is the main activity which is more efficiently done by women workers as it is similar to those of agriculture and women workers mostly hailing from rural areas do not feel any difficulty in this work. Nepali women workers with low level of literacy are well adapted to tea plantation work which is mostly unskilled in nature.

It is very interesting to notice that in tea plantation of Darjeeling Himalayas Nepali women from middle castes and tribal background have better adapted and adjusted to plantation environment than the women from higher castes *tagadhari jat* (Brahmin and Chhetris) and lower castes.

Adaptation is a more or less universal phenomena. In every society there are some people who have adapted better than the others. The better adapted people form the higher classes, and the less-adapted people the lower rungs of the society. In tea plantation of Darjeeling Himalayas, Nepali women from middle caste and tribal background have adapted relatively better than the lower and higher castes women which is evident from the occupational mobility in the plantation work hierarchy, numerical dominance of middle castes women in the working force, dominance of middle castes women in the trade union activities etc. In chapter three we have seen that Nepali women from middle castes and tribal backgrounds have been able to rise in the occupational hierarchy better than others. It was revealed from the field record that in all the seven tea gardens under study the women from middle castes backgrounds (mostly indigenous tribes of Nepal Himalayas) have been able to rise in the work hierarchy of tea plantation enjoying the positions as staff (clerical) and sub-staff or supervisory staff like *daffadars* and *chaprasis*. The discussion on trade union movement and women workers also revealed the fact that women from middle castes groups have already assumed leadership position at garden level unit of various trade unions. This fact goes to prove that the women from the upper and lower caste groups have not been able to rise in the occupational hierarchy, they are less active in trade union movement and hence they are relatively less adapted to plantation environment than the women from middle castes groups.

## FINDINGS

In the tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalaya about 90 per cent of women workers belong to middle caste Nepalis like Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Newar, Sunuwar, Thami, Bhujels etc. whose socio-cultural life reflects tribal characteristics and number of women belonging to Upper castes *Bahun* (Brahmin) and *Chhettri* (Kshatriya) and lower caste untouchables are very few. In some of the tea gardens under study their percentage is nil. Nepali women of these middle caste groups enjoy very flexible social code of conduct and therefore, have more freedom in society as compared to the women of upper caste groups. These middle caste women are comparatively more free than in traditional Hindu Society. The majority of Nepali women hailing from agricultural background of rural Nepal had the tradition of working in agricultural field along with men. We have already cited the example of women belonging to Kirata tribes like Rai (Khambu), Limbu (Subba), Yakha (Dewan) who use to participate actively on their *Kipat*, holding i.e., land owned by community as a whole.

It is true that the Nepali women workers suffer very few restrictions especially so far as the *institution of marriage* is concerned. Both men and women have a free choice of living with or leaving their respective partners or in other words, they can select their mates and can leave their mates as and when they like. This sort of choice is hardly there in most types of traditional Hindu societies, where the girl generally has no say in the selection of a spouse. Bride price i.e., the practice of giving gift of money or goods from the groom or his kin to the bride's kin is also given to the girl's parents. As a custom, this system is still continuing among the hinduised Nepali tribes like Rai (Khambu), Subba (Limbu) and Yakha (Dewan). The system of bride price or *rit* usually grants the groom the right to marry the bride and the right to her children. Hence women are not viewed as a liability in their society. The son complex or preference for boys which is so predominant in Hindu society is less or almost absent amongst the Nepais mainly because raising of girls and their marriage do not entail much expenditure. There is no system of dowry though there is system of giving *daijo* from the girl's family, which is also not

compulsory. Even when a marriage breaks the custody of the children is taken by either of the parents through mutual agreement. In many cases the children stay with their mother and when she remarries the stepfather accepts her children as his own.

Nepali women in the plantation society enjoy greater freedom and liberty. There is no segregation. Although the conditions of life are hard she enjoys a full and happy life. She can move freely out of the home without male escort. She visits the weekly market and fairs. She is free to choose her marriage mate and get a divorce whenever she likes. She participates in song and dance and takes active part in religious festivals and social ceremonies. It is true that in some religious rituals (ancestor worship or *pitripuja*) she is not directly associated but her indirect participation is always there.

The analysis of the effect of women's employment on the status of women revealed that the employment of women does not necessarily lead to a change in the work pattern at home. The traditional role of a woman as a home-maker and socialiser of the young remains unaltered despite addition by women in her role as a new dimension of an economic earner. Also, the mere fact of women making a financial contribution to the family income does not lead to a change in the existing role structure and ensuring power position within the family as manifested in her role in decision making. As it is customary to perform household work and childcare by women, men did little to reduce increased workload of the women in the family; they helped in areas, which are less demeaning for them. Even during sickness of the child, women rather than man had to absent from the work. Husbands or male members still continue to remain as main decision-maker.

The case of Nepali women reveals that status of women is not a function of her economic role. It is determined by the principle of social structure on which a particular society is based. Even though women contribute substantially to the labour force, norms governing the traditional patrilineal framework still continue. Women do not enjoy independent property rights. However, a widow may enjoy her husband's property if she does not have an issue or her children are minors. In the absence of a son, property may be enjoyed by the daughters.