

Preface

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness and recognition of the fact that women who formed one half of the society can not be ignored at all. An increasing role of women in building the nation is extremely vital. Women issues are the key factors in the process of social change and development. The improvement of the status of women has now been recognized all over the world as an important aspect of national progress and development. It is also felt that the problem of poverty can not be tackled without providing opportunities of productive employment to women of a country.

The conference on International Women's Year held at Mexico City in 1975 and the World Conferences of the United Nation's Decade for Women Organised at Copenhagan in 1980 and subsequent conferences on Women's issues has attracted a number of Sociologists and Social anthropologists to study the various problems of women. There has been a remarkable increase in the study and researches on the issues of women. But an important area of women's work which escapes the attention of the scholars is working female in the agro-industrial setting of tea plantations in India. In tea plantations, women constitute overwhelming majority of the working force. There are a very few writers who have turned the focus of their enquiry on women tea plantation labourers. Hence, there is no serious study available on women workers of the tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalayas.

The basic objective of the present study is to examine the changing role and status of Nepali women in tea plantations of Darjeeling Himalayas in the context of their community, culture and society. Unlike the women plantation workers of Terai and Dooars regions of Northern part of West Bengal, the Nepali Women workers of tea gardens in Darjeeling Himalayas have come from diverse social, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds. About 90 per cent of women tea workers belong to middle caste Nepalis who were originally the indigenous communities of Nepal Himalayas and later Hinduised by Hindu rulers of Nepal.

The middle castes or communities like Khambus (Rai), Limbus (Subba), Yakhas (Dewan), Tamangs (Murmi), Gurungs, Mangers, Newars, Sunuwars (Mukhia), Bhujels (Gharti), Thamis, Jogis are found in tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalayas. Among them Rai and Tamang women workers are numerically dominant in the tea gardens. The number of Nepali Women workers belonging to higher castes (Bahun, Chhetri, Thakuri) and lower castes (Kami, Damai, Sarki, Sunar, Majhi etc.) are very few.

The predominance of women workers over the male workers is a distinctive feature of tea gardens in Darjeeling Himalayas. The family based recruitment policy of colonial planters and the nature of tea plantation works are mainly responsible for the numerical majority of women in working force in tea plantations.

The present study was conducted on seven tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalayas. The name of these gardens are Badamtam, Pandam, Happy Valley, Vah-Tukvar located in Sadar Sub-division and Singell, Springside and Castleton located in Kurseong sub-division of the District of Darjeeling in West Bengal.

The present study would not have been completed without the assistance received from many persons and institutions. First of all, I owe my gratitude to University Grant Commission for providing me Junior Research Fellowship through the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal during the period from April 1994 to May 1996. But I discontinued the J.R.F. for joining the service in May 1996. I did my Ph.D. registration under Prof. B.P. Misra of the Centre for Himalayan Studies. But unfortunately I could not complete my work under him as he retired from the University in April 2003. Later, on the basis of his advise and suggestion I re-registered my Ph.D. research under Prof. Sekh Rahim Mondal of the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal to continue the work. Prof. S.R. Mondal was kind enough to consider my problem and kindly agreed to guide and supervise me to complete the work and to prepare the thesis.

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It is my duty to convey my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Sekh Rahim Mondal, Prof. of Sociology and Anthropology, Centre for Himalayan Studies and Head, Department of Anthropology, University of North Bengal who has inspired me and offered me valuable guidance, supervision and suggestion to complete this work and to prepare this thesis. Without his generous help and active directions the work would not have completed.

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