

Chapter – 3
WOMEN, WORK AND WORK
ORGANIZATION

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WOMEN, WORK, AND WORK ORGANIZATION

3.1 Work organization in Tea Plantation

In this chapter we shall attempt to describe and analyse the organization of work in the tea gardens. We shall also discuss about the position and place of women in it. In order to understand the role of women in the plantation economy it is necessary to study the work organization which gives an idea of the salient features of the social structure and system underlying a society. We have discussed in details the position of women in plantation work hierarchy and tried to explore the reasons behind the overwhelming majority of women as workers or *coolies*.

First of all, it is very important to know about the meaning of organization. According to Dimock and Koenig, organization is a systematic bringing together of inter dependent parts to form a unified whole through which authority, coordination, and control may be exercised to achieve a given purpose. Because the interdependent parts are made up also of people who must be directed and motivated and whose work must be coordinated in order to achieve the objectives of the enterprise, organization is both structure and human beings. (Dimock and Koenig: 1961). They have concluded that organization affects the people who work for it in five different ways :

1. An organization divides work among its members by giving each employee a particular task.
2. The organization established standard practices by working out detailed procedures.
3. The organization transmits authoritative decisions by dispatching such decisions downward, upward, it provides employees with the signals they need in the course of their work.
4. The organization provides a communications system by providing a network of formal and informal communications.

5. The organization trains its members by providing for the internalization of influence relative to knowledge, skills and loyalties. (Dimock and Koenig: 1961)

There are five elements of organization, namely objectives, specialization, hierarchy, coordination and authority. All these elements are visible in the formal organization of tea gardens. For instance, tea garden or tea industry as an organization consists of group of persons who cooperate in the accomplishment of objective. The main objective for them is to run the garden smoothly. There is a distribution of work among the management, staff, sub-staff and workers who may specialize in particular work. The assignment of specialized tasks to each member of an enterprise is an important element. However, specialization alone is not sufficient for an organization unless there is co-ordination of various segments of work. In the tea garden all employees specializing in various tasks are interrelated. In the tea gardens, four-tier system of work hierarchy exist, starting from workers, sub-staff and staff to management at the top. We see the vertical lines of responsibility within an organization. Workers and supervisors or sub-staff clearly understand from whom they should take orders and to whom they report. Finally, an organization fixed authority. Here, authority refers to someone who gives direction to others, solve differences among individuals working on related tasks. In the tea gardens, head manager (*barra sahib*) has the authority to give direction to each individuals working in different sections. There are two distinct approaches used in the organizational studies. The first approach followed by students of administration deals primarily with the structure of organization, allocation of functions and authority, specialization, coordination, overhead direction and control. They focus their attention on the formal structure of organization. The second approach is that of sociologists and social psychologist, they focus their attention on the individual and human behaviour in organization and also inquire into role of informal organization. Both these approaches are essential for the understanding of an organization and the motivation of individual within an organization because an organization does not refer to structure (routine, chart, manual, instruction etc.) alone, but also human beings which constitutes an important component of an

organization. Its success and failure is determined by the proper handling of these two elements.

In the following section, we have tried to analyse the organization of work in the tea gardens and try to find out in the process the position of women in the work hierarchy. The different tiers in the hierarchy of tea garden begin with the managers or skilled supervisors at the top and end with the daily rated worker or unskilled workers at the bottom.

The work organization of the tea garden can be understood properly from the following table.

Table – 3.1

The work organization in the Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills.

<u>Management</u>		
<u>Garden work</u>	<u>Factory</u>	<u>Office</u>
1. Field Assistant/Senior garden supervisor	1. Factory-in-Charge	1. Head Clerk
2. Head Munshi/Bara Munshi	2. Senior Factory Clerk	2. Second Clerk
3. Second Munshi/Chota Munshi	3. Junior Factory Clerk	3. P.F. Clerk(Sr.)
4. Head Chaprasi	4. Tea House Sardar	4. P.F. Clerk (Jr.)
5. Second Chaprasi	5. Supervisors/Sub-staff	5. Store Clerk (Sr.)
6. Head Bahidar	6. Factory workers	6. Store Clerk (Jr.)
7. Senior Bahidar		7. Excise, Transport Clerk
8. Senior Daffadar/foreman		8. Wage Bill Clerk
9. Junior Daffadar		9. Typist/Clerks
10. Chowkidars		
11. Workers/Coolie		

Source : *Tea Garden Offices.*

Above table shows the organization of work into field, factory and office. There are different kinds of field work. For instance, plucking, pruning, manuring, weeding, hoeing, skiffing, nursery work etc. are the important task in the plantation. The highest position in the field is occupied by senior field Assistant or garden supervisor. He has to supervise the work performed by persons below him like Munsis, Chaprasis, Bahidars, Daffadars etc.

In factory or manufacturing process, factory-in-charge occupies the highest rank and he is responsible for the entire work in the factory. There are different kinds of work in the factory. For instance, withering, rolling, fermentation, sorting, packing etc. The tea house Sardars supervises the work done by workers in all these processes. Factory-in-charge gives the direction to the Sardars while he is supervising the different stages of manufacturing.

In office, head clerk or *bara babu* occupies the highest rank. There are different kinds of office work. For instance, keeping the records of provident fund, gratuity, ration, wage bill, excise, transport etc.

There are broadly four categories of employees in the tea garden hierarchy. They are 1. Management, 2. Staff, 3. Sub-staff and 4. Workers or *coolie*.

3.2 Management: Women in Management

Tea gardens have a complex and highly stratified managerial structure. This structure evolved during the colonial period by the British planters has continued without significant changes to the present. The manager of tea garden (Head Manager/*Bara Sahib*) occupies the highest rank in the garden hierarchy. Some companies (FERA, Public Ltd. Co. and Govt. Ltd. Co. like WBTDC) have superintending managers over and above the managers, to supervise a group of gardens. Legally, the manager is the representative of the company, or the employers, in the garden. He is responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the tea garden, supervision of the factory and the production of tea. He is assisted by a few assistant managers who fall in the second rank of the management category.

This second rank consists of the assistant managers known as *Chhota Sahib*. The number of assistant managers varies with the size of the garden. Each assistant managers is in charge of the division in the garden. Divisions are further divided into blocks. The *Chhota Sahib* has to supervise the work of the labourers. He must keep a check on the quality of work.

It is interesting to note that the managerial hierarchy also involves ethnic divisions. Prior to independence almost all the gardens were managed by British managers. But during the post Independence period, ownership and management

have shifted to Indian communities hailing from plains like Marwaris, Bengalis and Punjabis. So far as the appointment to the management position is concerned only a few local people have been so far recruited. Recruitment through promotion from staff category is also rare. Out of seven tea gardens under study, six gardens have full manager or *bara sahib* hailing from the plains and belonging to Punjabi and Marwari Communities. Pandam, owned by W.B.T.D.C. is the only tea garden where all the positions in the managerial hierarchy are occupied by local Nepalis. In the rest six tea gardens, the local Nepalis have been appointed as *chhota sahibs* or assistant managers. So far as the women in management is concerned, we did not get a single women manager in these seven tea gardens under study. But during the field work, it was known through the official record of DPA that Ms. Luxmi Limbu, daughter of Mr. P.R. Limbu of Kalimpong is the first women manager in the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. Ms. Luxmi Limbu, is a science graduate who did her Post Graduate Diploma in Tea Management from National Institute of Tea Management and started her career as an assistant manager in Seok Tea Garden (Mirik region) in the year 1997. Presently she is working as an assistant manager under Gooderick Group Ltd.

3.3 Staff : Women in Staff Category

There are a number of intermediaries between the *Chhota Sahib* and the daily rated worker. Just below the Chhota Sahib comes the garden assistant and factory-in-charge. They are commonly known as the *bagan babu* and *factory-babu* respectively. They fall in the second category i.e., staff. The *bagan babu*'s primary job is to assist the *chhota sahib* in the field work. The *factory babu* assists the factory's head (tea maker sahib), supervises the workers' work and maintains an account of tea production. In the office section, there are number of clerks, whose duty is to keep the records or accounts of provident fund, gratuity, wage bill, transport, excise etc. The head clerk or *bara babu* is the senior most staff. He supervises the work in the office.

After Independence, when laws were passed regulating employment conditions of workers, office organization had to change. The increased work load

called for more staff and for division of work. The clerk is no longer a jack-of-all trades as he was formerly. He is given charge of specific section. In the factory too such changes have taken place. The various provisions of the factory Acts have to be observed. For instance, women workers are forbidden to work in factory after 7 pm.

In this staff category, majority of staff belong to the Nepali community and other local people. Besides they are directly recruited from among the garden residents through written examination and interview conducted by the Management.

In the following section we shall try to present the picture of women's participation in this category in the seven tea gardens under study.

It is very interesting to note that a good number of tea gardens have appointed women as a clerical staff in the office section. The office management in a tea estate is kept under control of the managers. Head clerk in the office has to keep full supervision of the office matters and must always be ready to explain to the manager, the matter which requires clarification to him. The appointment of additional clerks depends upon the load of the work which generally depends upon the size of the tea garden. More clerks are appointed in the non-Indian tea companies than the Indian tea companies. In some of the gardens owned by Indians (small proprietary gardens), accountants acts as a manager who is actually in charge of the whole estate.

It is clear from the following table that out of seven tea gardens under study five tea gardens have appointed women in staff category (clerical grade). Out of five tea gardens, four gardens are having women staff belonging to middle caste Nepalis. In one tea garden (Happy Valley owned by Banerjee family) there is one woman staff who is a Bengali hailing from Kolkata.

Table – 3.2

Women as staff (clerical) in various Tea gardens under study (1998-99)

Name of the Tea Gardens	Name of the Women	Ethnic/Caste background	Clerical Grade
1. Badamtam	Poonam	Gurung	III (Wage Bill)
2. Pandam	Manju	Newar (Pradhan)	II (Factory Clerk)
3. Singell	Alka	Rai	I (Second Clerk)
4. Vah-Tukvar	--	--	--
5. Happy Valley	Amita	Chowdhury (Bengali)	II (P.F. Clerk)
6. castleton (Gaurisanker)	--	--	--
7. Springside	Vidhya	Rai	I (Head Clerk)

Source : *Tea Gardens Office.*

3.4 Sub-Staff : Women in Sub-Staff Category

Subordinate to the staff is a category of personnel known as 'Sub-Staff' and they consist mainly of the supervisory staff. They go by a number of designations related largely to the tasks they perform. These people have been promoted from the lower ranks. The basic distinction between them and the ordinary workers is that, besides the nature of work, these people earn slightly higher wages and are paid on a monthly basis.

The highest rank in this category is the *Munshi* in the field section. Below him comes the *Chaprasi* who carry the orders from the top and keep an eye on the sub-staff below them.

The *Bahidars* is next to the *Chaprasi*. He takes the attendance of the workers and sub-staff in the field from the various melos or place of work.

Below *Bahidar* is the *Daffadars*. The daffadar is a sort of supervisor or a group leader. He is given charge of a group of workers and he has to supervise the activities of the workers. He has a very important role in the tea garden. He has to guide the workers at every step. All those above him, i.e., *chaprasi*, *bahidar*, *munsi*, *chhota sahib* are there to direct the daffadar as to what work the workers should perform. In this sub-staff category, a number of women have been appointed in different gardens since 1980s which shall be discussed later.

The hierarchy in the factory is not as elaborate as in the field. There are generally three posts above the worker viz., factory sardar, factory babu and factory sahib. There are very few sub-staff personnel in factory section.

The *Chowkidar* and the *Paniwala* are also sub-staff. The chowkidar is the watchman or guard. Each garden has a number of chowkidars in different positions such as factory chowkidars, garden chowkidars, hospital chowkidars etc.

The *Paniwala* or chowkidar of water has to look after the proper or adequate supply of water in each lines or villages. The sub-staff are generally promotees from the Class IV category i.e., worker/*coolie*.

Recruitment, Qualification

Recruitment of women in the sub-staff or supervisory category has been rare. They are mostly appointed in the *coolie* or workers category. It was for the first time in the history of tea plantation of Darjeeling hills that women were appointed as *daffadar* or foreman (supervisory category) in 1981. For more than hundred year women have been recruited only in the coolie category.

There is no direct recruitment of women to this sub-staff category. They are promoted from the worker or coolie category after passing written test to be conducted in the respective gardens. Other requirements are that she should be a permanent worker of the garden with a minimum educational qualification of class V passed. At present, there are 76 tea gardens in Darjeeling hill, out of which only about twenty gardens have appointed women to this category.

Function of a Daffadar (Supervisory Staff)

The daffadar is a kind of supervisor or rather a group-leader. She is the link between workers and the Management. She is given charge of a group of workers (around 30 to 50) and she has to supervise their activities. The daffadar has a very important role in the tea garden. She has to guide the workers at every step. She explains to them the type of work to be performed, at what place it should be done and how much work each worker must do. She generally works under the supervision and direction of her superiors. The daffadar transmits these directions to

her group of workers and sees that they are followed. During the plucking season she has to direct and teach the workers the right way of plucking leaves so that the bush is not damaged.

In cultivation work, the daffadar is there to check the quality of the work. Cultivation work in winter is regarded very important for the future of the garden. The daffadar's responsibility in guiding the workers along the correct lines is therefore an important one.

Table – 3.3

**Women as a Sub-staff (Supervisory staff) in various Tea Gardens under study
(1998-99)**

Name of the Tea Gardens	Name of the Sub-Staff	Ethnic or caste background
Badamtam	Manrupa Vishma Shyam Kumari Damber Kumari Shailamani Chandramati Pawitra	Gurung Sharma Rai Sunuwar Rai Manger Sharma
Pandam	Maya Chandra Fulmati	Rai Manger Kusuley (Newari low caste)
Singell	Renuka Jethi Maya Munna	Tamang Gurung Manger
Springside	Thulo Kanchi Madhu	Rai Pradhan (newar)
Happy Valley	--	--
Vah-Tukvar	--	--
Castleton (Gourisankar)	Bimala	Bhujel

Source : *Various Tea Garden Offices.*

It is clear from the above table that out of seven tea gardens under study five gardens have appointed women as sub-staff or supervisory staff though their percentage is very few as compared to male sub-staff. The two tea gardens namely Vah-Tukvar and Happy Valley have not appointed any women in this category. The majority of sub-staff women belong to middle caste groups. Out of 16 sub-staff women, only two women belong to upper caste and there is not a single sub-staff women from lower castes.

3.5 Coolie or Worker : Women Workers

The last category in the hierarchy is the *coolie* or worker category. By worker we mean those people who are directly involved in the production process. The factory worker and the daily rated worker are known as coolies.

The daily-rated workers are of four types- there are adult workers of either sex i.e., adult male (*marad*) and adult female (*aurat*). These are workers above the age of eighteen. Then there are the adolescents and the children (*chokra*). Each type can be either male or female. The former are those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen and the later are those between the ages of 14 and 16.

Majority of women are employed in worker or coolie category. It is important to note here that they are the ones who are directly involved in the process of production. They have to do all the physical labour in the garden.

As stated earlier, tea is the only industry where the participation of women workers is in the maximum. In the plantation of Darjeeling hills, they have outnumber men workers. The nature of plantation or nature of job-allocation may be cited as one of the reasons for the predominance of female labourers in the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills.

Table – 3.4

Nature of Job-Allocation Among Labourers (in percentage)

Nature of Job	Percentage
1. Plucking of tea leaf	59.25
2. Cultivation work including extension	23.36
3. Factory and Manufacturing	5.87
4. Establishment	1.43
5. Miscellaneous work including vegetative propagation	12.00
Total	100.00

Source : *Govt. of India, Report of the Central wage Board for Tea plantation India, 1982, p.37.*

The above mentioned activities of tea gardens may be grouped under two main heads (i) plucking and cultivation, (ii) processing which includes works in the factory and the office as well. From the percentage of labourers engaged in different categories we can understand that plucking and cultivation occupy an important position engaging 80% of its work force.

Although the activities connected with growing or cultivation work of tea leaves are undertaken by both male and female labourers, more than 80% women labourers are employed in this section. Processing is done in the factory. In the processing stage, women are engaged only in sorting section.

In the following section we shall discuss about the participation of women as a coolie or workers in various tea gardens under study. We shall also focus our attention on the nature and type of work performed by women labourers. Plucking (collection), pruning (cultivation work) and processing (manufacturing) are three main activities in tea plantation where the women have been employed.

Table – 3.5

Women as a worker or coolie in various Tea Gardens under study (1998-99)

Name of Gardens	Male	Female	Children	Total
Badamtam	459	646	22	1127
Pandam	75	149	--	224
Vah-Tukvar	265	390	14	669
Happy Valley	64	159	--	223
Castleton	87	148	--	235
Springside	70	170	--	240
Singell	165	388	--	553
Total	1185	2050	36	3271
%	36.22%	62.67%	0.03%	100%

Source : *Tea Garden Offices.*

3.5.1 WOMEN AS FACTORY WORKERS

There are six processes of manufacturing tea. The are withering, rolling, fermentation, drying, sorting and packing, out of these six process women are engaged only in sorting process. In sorting process 90% workers involved are women workers. In other processes of manufacturing only male are employed because of the physical intensive character of the work.

A very interesting feature came to light during the field study so far as factory workers are concerned. Generally there are not many permanent workers appointed solely for the factory work but whenever there is a necessity of employing more workers they are taken away from the field operation and employed in factory. Once in the factory they get better wages and other facilities. Women are employed in factory only during the peak plucking season i.e., from April to October-November. The number of women factory workers employed in each garden depends on the production of tea. In some tea gardens women are employed during the peak plucking season on temporary or casual basis. The management preference

for employing women workers on casual basis may be due to the fact that they need not incur extra-expenses in providing other facilities to these workers like housing, medical facilities etc.

Table – 3.6

Women Factory Workers of Badamtam and Springside (Castleton) Tea Gardens (1998-99)

Name of tea Garden	Name of the Women	Caste or Ethnic background of Nepali Workers
Badamtam	Sabita	Rai
	Bishnumaya	Rai
	Krishna Kumari	Rai
	Lilamaya	Rai
	Kaloomaya	Rai
	Anju	Rai
	Panchamala	Rai
	Lilu	Rai
	Jaimaya	Limbu (Subba)
	Dhanmaya	Newar (Pradhan)
	Latchi Maya	Newar (Pradhan)
Bishnumaya	Newar (Pradhan)	
Springside (Castleton)	Minu	Rai
	Thulo Kanchi	Rai
	Sumitra	Lama (Tamang)
	Pushpa	Sundas (Darjee)
	Sabita	Chhetri

Source : *Tea Garden Offices (Badamtam and Springside)*

Table 3.6 shows the total number of factory women workers employed in Badamtam and Springside Tea Garden during 1998-99. Out of these seventeen, only two women (one women for each garden) are employed as permanent worker of the factory. The remaining fifteen women are employed as temporary factory workers

during manufacturing season and in off season (November to March) they work as permanent field workers and these same women are employed every year in the factory. Twelve women out of fifteen have been working in factory (during peak season) since 1978-79. All of them are living in nearby villages or in close proximity to the factory. As long as they remain in the factory, they are covered by the Factory Act of 1948 and they get the same facilities and benefits as the permanent workers of the factory. While they are in field operation. Factory Act does not cover them. Community wise, *Rai* women are numerically dominant followed by *Newars*. Out of seventeen factory women workers of these two tea gardens, one each belong to *Limbu*, *Tamang*, *Darjee* and *Chettri*.

3.6 Recruitment Policy and Women Tea Garden Workers

The tea industry is agro-based and labour-intensive industry. This is the only organized industry where women have outnumbered men as a working force. The predominance of female labour over the male workers is a distinctive feature in tea gardens of Darjeeling hill areas. As estimated by CMPO (Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization) in its Techno-Economic Survey of Darjeeling hill, out of total work force of 40,172 on roll in the tea gardens of the hill areas in 1971, the adult females constituted 58 percent. If the figures of adolescent females are considered this would be more than 62%. In 1987, there was a total of 46,390 workers in the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills, out of which 27,005 (58.2%) were women (Tea Statistics: 1988).

The following two tables show the number of women workers in seven gardens under study.

Table – 3.7

Working strength of the seven Tea Gardens in 1995 (permanent workers or coolies excluding staff and Sub-staff)

Name of Tea Gardens	No. of working strength		
	Male	Female	Children
Badamtam	459	646	22
Pandam	75	149	-
Vah-Tukvar	265	390	14
Happy Valley	64	159	-
Castleton	87	148	-
Springside	70	170	-
Singell	165	388	-
Total	185	2050	36

Source : *Tea Garden Office.*

Table – 3.8

Working Strength of Seven Tea Gardens in 1995 (Total permanent work force) excluding Medical and Teaching Staff.

Name of Tea Gardens	Workers or Coolie			Staff (Clerical)		Sub-Staff	
	Male	Female	Children	Male	Female	Male	Female
Badamtam	459	646	22	18	1	52	7
Pandam	75	149	-	5	1	12	3
Vah-Tukvar	265	390	14	10	-	24	-
Happy Valley	64	159	-	6	1	12	-
Castleton	87	148	-	8	-	16	1
Springside	70	170	-	4	1	18	2
Singell	165	388	-	12	1	46	3
Total	1185	2050	36	63	5	190	16

Source : *Tea Garden Office.*

3.7 Recruitment of Workers in the Tea Garden of Darjeeling Hills :

The tea industry in Darjeeling hills was started later than in Assam (1839). The recruitment system in the tea plantation of the former was different from that of the latter as the labourers were never placed under any contract and in that sense they were free. The workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 (No. VII) which was applicable in case of Assam and Annamalai Hills was never applied to the tea plantation of Darjeeling hills.

In Darjeeling hill, tea industry has been commercialized since 1856. The recruitment of workers, during the initial period were made mainly from the rural areas of Nepal through the recruitment agents known as *Sardars*. Unlike the recruitment policy which had adopted in the tea regions of India (Assam, Nilgiri and Annamalai Hills) by following the various acts of the British Govt. the tea gardens of Darjeeling Himalaya had quite a different system of labour recruitment policy. The Inland Emigration Act III of 1863 which provided that all the labour recruiters should be licensed and that every intending emigrants should be closely supervised by this Act was not applicable in Darjeeling hills. Unlike the *Arkatis* of Assam and *Kanganies* or *maistries* of Annamalai Hills, *Sardars* of Darjeeling were not a licensed recruiters. As per the recommendations of Labour Enquiry Commission of 1868, which advocated for the recruitment of labourers by the plantation themselves through the agency of the plantation *Sardars*, the Nepali *Sardars* were appointed to recruit the *coolies* into the plantation. (O'Malley: 1907)

Labour was one of the most essential elements in the factors of production of the planter. This was an industry which was highly labour intensive and which did not have scope for technical innovation beyond a point in the production process. Whether it was coffee or tea, it had to be picked or plucked from the plants manually and the planters could never hope to replace this manual process by a mechanical one. One of the chronic problems that the planters faced was the shortage of labour supplied to the tea estates. The nature of the tea industry demanded that the planter to be able to maintain a stable and regular workforce. The planters, in their search for a permanent labour force recruited or imported coolies on the basis of family and

not individuals, so this type of recruitment of whole family speaks of the Britishers well-planned design. This would mean less of labour mobility from one place to another and the scope to employ even the children at less than half of the wage of an adult.

The planters in Darjeeling hills preferred *Sardari* system for labour recruitment. Sardars were not local recruiters like the *arkatis* and *Kanganies*. More often than not, the Sardars were themselves a part of the factory or plantation labour occupying supervisory positions. Unlike tea plantations of Assam and Dooars or Terai regions of West Bengal where the labourers were indentured from the various tribal belts of Chotanagpur, Santhal Pargana of Bihar and Orrisa, the question of labour recruitment in Darjeeling gardens was little difficult as the workers were to be enticed from across the Indian border i.e., Nepal. The Sardars had to face lot of troubles in enticing the people in Nepal. During the dull season, generally after the rains in October or November to February, these people (Sardars and their assistants known as Gallawalas) used to go mainly to Nepal to recruit labour. Here, the caste or community backgrounds of the recruits played an important role as it was easier for these people to induce new recruits of their own caste or community fellows by enticing or showing all the advantages of work and the prospects of ultimate settlement on independent holdings. The Sardars used to entice workers to come with their whole families as in the case they were likely to stay permanently in the plantation. The Sardars used to get commission from the management for recruiting workers. At the initial stage, labour was a far more scarce commodity than land. The workers who came from elsewhere had to be bound to the workplace by coercive means. To start with, this was done by advance at the time of recruitment. But the receipt of an advance did not necessarily ensure that the workers would remain permanently on the estates. The intolerable working and living conditions often led to what was called desertions. The rigid regimentation of the workforce was one of the most striking features of plantation life. The plantation system was arranged along military lines, and the confinement of the coolies to their own premises befitted such a disciplinary system. In the early periods coolies were housed in

barracks and split up into groups headed by *foreman* or Sardars who after working hour, acted as Wardens entrusted with maintaining discipline.

As a result of the initial recruitment policy mostly through the Nepali Sardars, entire labour force (90%) is composed of Nepali people. Only about 10% labourers come from tribal groups (Lepchas, Bhutias and Sherpa), people from Terai Nepal and Plainsmen. The Sardars were also Nepalis who were responsible for the supervision of labour while at work. He was not merely responsible for the new recruits, the service, facilities, job prospect as well as transfer to a better position dependent on the pleasure of these Sardars.

Now the entire labour force of tea gardens composed of Nepali caste and communities of whom Rai, Limbu, Tamangs, Manger, Gurungs and Newars, form more than half of the garden population.

The working population who have settled in the plantation and in the neighbouring villages in the tea gardens has grown considerably with the result that at present plantation have surplus labour. Hence, at present instead of the problem of labour shortage, the problem of surplus plantation labour is most insistent in these tea gardens. The problems of surplus population was felt as early as 1915. To meet the situation, the planters started implementing 'Contract Clause' of Bengal Act III of 1915 which provided not only for the recruitment of labourers but also incorporated provisions for labour retrenchment. Thus, from onwards, many workers were retrenched. This system was locally known as *Hatta bahira* System.

To find a permanent work in the tea plantation is very difficult now-a-days. Every tea garden in the hills are facing the problem of surplus labour population. DPA report shows that in 1990-91 there were 52,000 workers and 2,08,000 dependents in the tea gardens of hill area. In most of the tea gardens of Darjeeling hill, working force has remained constant since 1970 onwards. The recruitment of new workers is absent in almost all the tea gardens of hill areas.

3.8 Recruitment System in Seven Tea Gardens under study :

In all the tea gardens which have been taken for case study the recruitment of workers during the pre-Independence period was done through the *Sardari* system. The Sardars used to entice the men of their own caste and communities to leave their natal villages in Nepal and to come and settle in plantation. As a result, in the early periods of tea industry we had a number of unicast or unicommunity villages in the gardens. The labourers belonging to the same caste or community preferred to cluster in their own *caste dhuras*. The researcher found a good number of uni caste gaons or dhuras in different tea gardens like *Yakha dhura* (Yakha or Dewan, a Sub-section of Kirati race), *Khaling dhura* (Khaling is sub-section of Rai) *Newar dhura*, *Gurung gaon*, *Manger gaon* etc. Migration to these gardens were primarily family-based. Till 1920, when there was labour scarcity in these gardens both husband and wife were together as workers beside some individual labourer who would come in the quest of plantation job. While recruiting the workers the policy of the management was to give preference to the dependents of its workers whether they are wife, children or relatives.

The recruitment system through *Sardars* continued till 1950, after which the perceptible changes could be observed. With the passing of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and the emergence of wage Board, the workers had been started to be recruited from among the local garden population. After Independence we have seen the emergence of various workers union affiliated with different political parties. Particularly after 1960, we find, workers union playing significant role. The management could recruit the workers only in consultation with the existing labour unions. The recruitment was made either to fill the vacant post or to absorb the bonafide dependents of the workers in place of the deceased or retired relatives.

The present recruitment system in all the tea gardens under study is the same which is as follows :

1. *Badli* or Substitute Workers

- i) When a worker is retire after a completion of 55 years of age or, she/he has reached the retirement age, the son or daughter (Bonafide dependent) gets the job of his/her parents.
- ii) If a worker who is no longer fit for work, he may take voluntary retirement and in his place his family members get the job.
- iii) In case of death of a permanent worker one of his family members get the job of the deceased. In the absence of any issue or bonafide dependent of the deceased or person who is going to retire, or disablement of worker, his or her close relatives will get the job.

2. Hardship System:

Another unique system of recruitment prevalent in these gardens is locally known as 'hardship system'. The criterion for such appointment is the economic hardship faced by a workers family due to the existence of a large number of dependents. This practice of filling up vacancies on the basis of hardship is contrary to family planning programme because only the large size household with the largest number of dependents will have the chance to get the job. This practice was very much in use till 1960. Now-a-days only few gardens recruit labourers through this method.

During the peak plucking season (from May to October), garden management recruit temporary or casual labourers. They prefer female workers for this purpose because they are considered as better plucker than male workers. This casual or temporary workers are provided by the unemployed dependent of the garden resident. The need for employing outside workers (workers residing in another tea garden or nearby forest villages) is necessary in case of big or large size tea gardens which produce more quantity of tea. In small size tea garden temporary workers is provided by surplus population of the garden.

3.9 Women and Types of Work:

The daily-wage women perform the following manual work.

3.9.1. Plucking of tea leaves (*Patti tipai*)

The harvesting of tea leaves from the bushes in the plantation is called plucking. It is an important operation because the quality of manufactured tea depends upon the care and attention with which plucking is done. The accepted formula for normal plucking is “two leaves and a bud”. Anything lesser than this is considered as fine plucking and the inclusion of more leaves as “Coarse plucking”. Plucking is done by hand. Women are mostly employed in this operation due to their smooth plucking without injuring the plant. Plucking is the most preferred job of women. They are believed to be better pluckers and their efficiency in this task is rated higher than that of males. According to the Managers of some of the tea gardens under study men also pluck leaves, but it is generally found that the quality and quantity of leaves plucked by them are not as high as those of women.

Plucking season in the Darjeeling hills begins with the early rains in March and ends in late November or early December. It reaches its peak, i.e., highest yield, during the months of July and August when the rainfall is heavy. The bushes are usually plucked once in every 7 or 8 days during the peak plucking season. The first crop of leaves (known as the first flush) in the early monsoon showers is supposed to produce the best quality of tea. The leaves must be plucked in such a way that the bush is not damaged. The leaves plucked should be roughly of the same length. Randomly plucked leaves, which come in various sizes would not only lower the quality of the tea produced but would also damage the plucking points of the bush and consequently reduce its yield.

For nine months of the year most of the women (90%) are engaged in plucking tea leaves while the male workers (30%) are employed for plucking only for four to five months during the peak season.

3.9.2. Pruning (*Kalam Katai*)

Pruning is an important operation. It is essential in order to induce a vigorous vegetative growth and to ensure continuous supply of green flushed for the manufacture of tea. The main objects of pruning are to maintain the plant permanently in the vegetative phase and to keep the height of the bush within the bounds of easy and efficient plucking.

After the plucking seasons is over the bushes are pruned. Such pruning is made from six inches to eighteen inches. This work goes on till late January. The pruning is divided into light, medium or slope and deep or heavy on the basis of the height of the pruning. Women perform only light and medium pruning. The yield of the oncoming season depends on how the bushes are pruned. When allowed to grow naturally without pruning, the China plant grows to a height of about 15 feet. The Assam variety is more like a tree in form and grows to a height of 25 and even 30 feet. It must be kept in the form of a low bush, not higher than 3 feet, although 2 feet is considered the most appropriate height.

In case of new plant, pruning begins one year after its planting. A young plant is cut to a height of 6 or 8 inches, and sometimes even lower as a bushy growth from the root is desirable. A year later, pruning is carried to a height of about 12 or 14 inches, and thereafter a little higher year by year. About once in fifteen or twenty years, the bushes require heavy pruning in order to remove the snags and knots formed by successive light pruning. Great care has to be taken in pruning. If this is done in a haphazard manner the branches may be damaged which will in turn damage the oncoming crop. It is generally believed that pruning determines the yield of the following year.

3.9.3. Weeding

It is an important task performed by women. If there is low plant population, there are greater chances of weed growth in the vacant spaces leading to high cost of weed control. Weeding is done either manually or by herbicides. The disposal of weeds is necessary to improve soil conditions as soil from lower layers is mixed with that of the upper layers. Clean hand-weeding is largely resorted to during the

rains, while the faces of the terraces and the space between the lines are kept free of weeds by sickling (rough weeding). Women perform clean weeding manually by hand or with the help of small forks if the soil is very dry. In order to get the *hazri* or *hazira* or daily wage, women have to complete given task or piece-rate of sixty to eighty tangas (1 tangas = 12 feet) in weeding.

Weeds are unwanted plants in the land used for cultivation. Weed control is an expensive input in tea cultivation. Weed control in tea plantation areas has become much more effective by introducing herbicide in the 1980s requiring less workforce but ensuring complete control of weeds for more length of time than manual weeding. Now the tea gardens are using herbicides like Oxyfloufen, Glycel, Paraquate etc. and at the same time they have planted semi-permanent shade trees like Arhar, Croton, Boga Medeloa, Indigofera etc. to suppress weed growth.

3.9.4. Manuring and Fertilizing:

It is an important task in tea plantation. The object of manuring is to maintain in the soil a sufficiency of materials necessary to maintain the growth required to produce a certain level of crop, without detriment to the plant itself. High yield or production of tea also depend on manuring. The application of more nitrogenous fertilizers is necessary to increase yield or productivity. There is positive correlation between low yields and consumption of nitrogenous fertilizers. 90 to 94 kgs. of nitrogenous fertilizer is necessary for one hectare.

In Darjeeling hill, more than 60% of tea bushes have become old which can give neither good quality nor higher quantity. It is also equally true, as mentioned in earlier chapters owners of the tea garden (small proprietary gardens) are also not interested in replanting by replacing the old tea bushes which have crossed their economic life. Hence, in order to increase the productivity, manuring is considered an important activity. Women are basically involve in manual manuring or application of chemical fertilizers. In order to complete the *thika* or task women workers are required to apply 75 kgs. of manure per day. The different types of manures given to tea bushes are urea, sulphate of ammonia, super phosphate, rock phosphate, Dolomite, Heptachlore etc.

3.9.5. Nursery Work

Women are equally involved along with men in the different stages of nursery work. Nurseries are made at different points, taking into consideration the easy availability of water and proximity to the garden proper. A good rich virgin soil is generally preferred as a nursery site, and plants normally do much better on such soils. The soil in these nurseries had to be thoroughly pulverized, and all jungle, roots and stones removed. The germinating beds are formed for seed.

Sometimes the seeds are sown directly into the nursery beds. Good seed is usually sown about one inch deep and at a distance of 4 inches apart. As soon as the plants have sprung up, and their individual character indicated, the unsatisfactory ones are uprooted, including all those of an inferior class and all blighted seedling. Only the fittest being allowed to occupy the ground. The seedlings are transplanted in the field after one to two years. One finds majority of women workers involved in every step of nursery work like preparation of nursery beds, sowing of seeds, watering the seedlings, filling up of tube etc. In order to complete *hazira* or task women have to fill up about 200 polythene tubes per day.

3.9.6. Chilling and Colon Thully

These are the two important activities done by women workers.

Besides these, women are also involved in various miscellaneous activities. The number of women employed in such activities are very few (10% approx.). The activities like collection of seeds of the shade trees, removing parasite growth from the bushes, watering to newly planted tea seedling in vacant place etc.

From the above discussions it is clear that the women workers are involved in all types of plantation work. They are considered more efficient in plucking of tea leaves. They are equally efficient in medium and light pruning, hoeing, skiffing etc. All these agricultural operations are still highly labour-intensive and these could not be mechanized so far in India.

3.10 Thika System and Women

It is important to mention here the practice of Task or *Thika* system. Under this system a worker is allotted a certain piece of work to be completed within a given period of time. The *Thika* or task system is applicable only in those activities which can be measured (in terms of kgs, feet etc.) work-load is the determining factor in wage calculation of a worker.

Table – 3.9

Task or Thika system of work in Darjeeling Tea Gardens during 1998-99

Types of work (field operation)	Two varieties of tea bushes	
	China	Assam
Plucking (patti tipai) (Men and Women)	a. 4 kgs. (in down or off season) b. 9 kgs (in peak season)	5 kgs. (in down or off season) 11 kgs (in peak season)
Pruning (Kalam Katai)		
b) Rejuvenation or heavy pruning (Men only)	2 ½ tanga	3 ½ tanga
c) Medium/Slope pruning (Women)	4 tanga	5 tanga
d) Light pruning (Women)	7 tanga	8 tanga
Chilling (Tachai) (Women)	17 tanga	17 tanga
Skiffing		
a) Deep (Men)	9 tanga	14 tanga
b) Medium (Men)	10 tanga	15 tanga
c) Light (Women)	50 tanga	60 tanga
Weeding (Women)	60 tanga	80 tanga
Colon Thully (Women)	25 tanga	30 tanga
Manuring (Women & Men)	75 tanga	75 kgs.
Filling tubes in the nursery (Women)	Fill up 250 tubes a day	

Source : Files consulted at different Tea garden Offices.

1 tanga = 12 feet.

The above table 3.9 shows the *thika* or task system of work in different tea gardens under study during 1998-99. there are different types of work which are performed on the basis of *thika*. *Thika* system is more prevalent during plucking season. In different tea gardens under study two varieties of tea bushes have been sown. The amount of tea leaves to be plucked vary in these two types of tea bushes. During the dull or slack season of plucking (March to May and October-November), women have to pluck 4 kgs. of tea leaves in case of China bushes and 5 kgs. in case of Assam variety. During the peak plucking season (June to September) they have to pluck 9 kgs. in China variety and 11 kgs. in case of Assam variety. They will get additional incentive of money (doubly or *bakshis* or extra tea leaf price) for every kilogram of leaves plucked in addition to the quantity agreed upon as per the *thika* system (extra tea leaf price or doubly see Table 3.12). In case of pruning tea bushes, women do only medium and light pruning. In case of medium they have to prune 4 tanga (China variety) of tea bushes and in Assam variety, it is 5 tanga, whereas in case of light pruning it is 7 tanga and 8 tanga in case of China and Assam variety respectively. In Chilling, the quantity agreed upon is 17 tanga in both cases of China and Assam variety. In rough weeding they have to complete 60 (China) and 80 (Assam) tangas. Women also perform light skiff in which they have to complete 50 tangas (China) and 60 tangas (Assam). Filling up of tubes in the plant nursery is another work performed by women in which they have to complete or fill up 250 tubes a day. Manuring is another work which is done by women. They have to manure (application of urea etc.) 75 kgs. per day. During the slack season (mostly in winter) some of the women workers are engaged in miscellaneous works which can not easily be measured on the piece-rate basis. Such work are (i) collection of shade tree's seeds (ii) Watering to newly planted tea sapling or bushes (sown in vacant place) for which they are paid on time basis.

3.11 Amenities for Tea Garden Workers

During the pre-Independence period, the amenities (social, economic and health) made available to the workers were kept at the bare minimum level such as housing, medical facilities, food grain subsidy etc. After independence, various Acts were passed regulating the conditions of workers. The owners or the management of

the garden were forced to provide amenities to the workers. Now the owners are bound by Statutory obligations.

The following are the different amenities or fringe benefits available to the women employees under different statutes.

1. Statutory items under plantation Labour Act 1951 (amended in 1960 and again in 1981).
 - a) Housing
 - b) Children's Education
 - c) Medical attention
 - d) Sickness benefit
 - e) Welfare
 - f) Earned leave
2. Common statutory items:
 - a) Provident Fund (According to Employees Provident Fund Act, 1952)
 - b) Bonus (According to the Payments of Bonus Act, 1965).
 - c) Gratuity (According to the payment of Gratuity Act, 1972).
3. Non-Statutory items:
 - a) Food-grains subsidy or ration.
 - b) Dry tea
 - c) Fuel
 - d) Electricity.

Almost all the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills implement these rules. In some tea gardens (small gardens under individual ownership) facilities or amenities are not provided properly due to the low level of literacy among the working population, or lack of awareness or consciousness, failure on the part of Government to look after its proper implementation and give penalties in case of non-implementation.

Non-Statutory Items

- i) **Foodgrain Subsidy or ration** : Like the male workers women (worker, sub-staff and staff) too, get subsidized ration of 1 kg. Rice and 2.300 kgs. wheat every week. The concessional rate for both rice and wheat is 0.60 paise per kg. The bonafide dependents of the permanent workers are also entitled to

get ration. Adult dependents (upto the age of 16, in case of school or college going children upto the age of 18) get 1 kg. Rice and 1.500 kgs. wheat every week. Minor dependents get ½ kg. Rice and 700 gms. Wheat per week. Absence from work on account of certified sickness, authorized maternity leave and authorized holidays will not be penalized. There will be reduction in quantity if a worker remains absent from work.

- ii) **Dry tea:** Women workers get 350 gms. of dry tea per month. Sub-staff and staff get 500 gms. and 800 gms. respectively.
- iii) **Fuel or firewood:** The women workers get 8 mds. of firewood per year (2.99 quintals). Female children (minor workers or *chokra* get 4 mds. of firewood or 1.49 quintals per year. Sub-staff women (the women daffadars/Sub-staff belonging to Other Monthly Rated Employees (OMRE) are further categorized into three grades like grade I, II and III. Most of the women sub-staff belong to grade III and get 12 mds. or 4.48 quintals of firewood. Staff women grade III get 60 mds of firewood (22.39 quintal) per year. In the recent years (since 1998) with a view to conserving the forest and protecting environment, the garden management have started giving coal briquette in lieu of firewood. Some gardens are providing cash compensation in lieu of coal briquette or firewood.
- iv) **Electricity:** The free electricity is provided only to the staff women.

Statutory items under Plantation Labour Act, 1952

- a) **Free Quarters or housing:** Free quarters or housing are provided to the workers, sub-staff and staff women as per the Plantation Labour Housing Schemes Rules 1958. In this case, Central Government used to subsidized Housing Scheme for workers which has been closed since 1986.
- b) **Medical facilities:** Free use of Medical facilities are provided to them by the management in accordance with the West Bengal Plantation Labour Rules for herself and her family residing on the garden.

- c) **Annual leave:** They get 1 day for every 20 days worked. Leave will be exclusive of all holidays, occurring during at either end of the period of leave.
- d) **Casual leave:** 12 days with or without pay at the management's discretion, as laid down in the standing orders of these 12 days, 9 days with pay may be claimed by them under the following conditions:- (i) Death within the family or (ii) Marriage within the family.
- e) **Sickness Allowances:** In the case of sick or illness, they get sickness allowance for the total period of 14 days in a year at the rate of her daily wage.
- f) **Welfare or miscellaneous:** Women workers get canvas aprons, cotton or woolen blankets, umbrellas etc. Staff and Sub-staff women also get umbrellas and blankets annually. Management also provide free educational facilities upto the primary level to the workers children.
- g) **Maternity benefits:** As per the Maternity Benefits Act, 1961, all the women employees get maternity benefits i.e., women employees get maximum period of 12 weeks of which not more than 6 weeks shall precede the date of delivery. Entitlement to Maternity benefit will be given to women who have actually worked in the establishment for not less than 80 days in the 12 months immediately preceding the date of her expected delivery.
- h) **Holidays:**
- (i) **Festival Holidays:** They get following festival holidays-
 Durga Puja (Dasain) – days (2 days festival holidays plus 2 days annual leave)
 Diwali or Laxmipuja – 4 days (2 days festivals plus 2 days annual leave)
- Those who have worked for less than 120 days during the period of 1st April to 30th September will not be granted these paid festival holidays pro-rate. Those who have not qualified but wish to take advantage of the festival leave may at their own request, have the days in question counted against their earned leave, otherwise such leave will be treated as without pay.

(ii) National and Regional Holidays

They get the following holidays-

- a) New year (1st January)
- b) Republic Day (26th January)
- c) Independence Day (15th August)
- d) Maghe Sankranti
- e) Sawan or Shrawan Sankranti

Leave Traveling Allowance: Only the staff women get an annual leave travel allowance. The reimbursement of travel expense is done subject to a maximum of Rs.800/- in case of married employees and Rs.400/- in case of single person.

Bonus: As per the Payment of Bonus Act, 1965, women employees get bonus annually, In Darjeeling hill, tea gardens which are under DPA (members of Darjeeling Planters Association) are categorized into three grades (i.e., I, II, III) on the basis of their profitability and bonus is given or allotted at different rates to each grade ranging from 8.5 percent, 14.5 percent to 20 percent.

Gratuity: As per the payment of Gratuity Act, 1972, women employees get their gratuity under this Act, gratuity shall be payable to an employee on the termination of her employment after rendering continuous service for not less than five years, on retirement or resignation or death or disablement provided that (i) the completion of five years continuous service shall not be necessary in case of death or disablement, and (ii) in case of death of the employee gratuity payable shall be paid to the nominee or to the heirs.

Provident Fund: Women employees also get provident fund as per the Employees Provident Fund Act, 1952 which was extended to tea plantation from 30th April, 1957.

3.12 Women Workers and their Wages

In the pre-Independence period the workers were paid very low wages as they were, then unorganized and had a very little scope for interest articulation. The Government too did nothing to protect them. In the post-1947 period the situation

was more favourable towards the workers. Though the wages in tea plantation continued to remain low as compared to other industries e.g. jute, cotton textiles etc.

Tea gardens operate on a system of daily wages. The daily wage workers are paid on the basis of time-rate as well as piece-rate. Under the former, a workers is paid according to the time for which he or she works, usually on an hourly basis, under the latter category or *thika* system, payment is made on the basis of the output of work. For this to be possible the work must be easily measurable, consisting of standard prices which can be counted or output can be measured by length or by weight etc.

The tea industry has in the main been very closely knit and employers give "Standardised wage". The standarised wages are wage agreements among the employers in order to secure uniformity in the matter or wages and to prevent any employer from paying substantially higher wages than his neighbours. There is thus none of the attraction of higher wages to tempt the workers to transfer his services from one garden to another.

In 1952, for the first time statutory minimum wages were fixed for tea plantation workers in West Bengal. The daily wage rate at that time was 1.19 paise for male, 1.06 paise for female and 0.62 paise for children. Low wages have always been the distinctive feature of the plantation industry. The Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for Tea plantation was set up by the West Bengal Govt. in March 1950, known as the Modak Committee, after its chairman. The Modak Committee recommended that the minimum wage must not be merely a subsistence wage. Besides providing for his food, it should also help the workers preserve his efficiency by providing for education, medical and other amenities. Finally, they fixed the minimum wages as mentioned above i.e., a daily wage of Rs.1.19 paise for men and 1.06 for women (Modak Committee Report: 1951)

Tea gardens labour wages have generally been lower than the average wages for agricultural labour in north-east India. The management have attempted to justify the difference on the grounds that the tea gardens employees enjoy additional benefits like subsidized foodgrains and supply of firewood, tea etc. This has been a

contentious issue between management and labour union for decades. Wage differentials between men and women existed in the tea plantation from their inception. Before India's independence in 1947 women generally earned a wage which was three-fourth of the wage paid to men. This difference was gradually reduced during the post-Independence period because wage discrimination on the basis of sex was thought illegal and unjust.

The following table shows the wage discrimination in tea plantation of Darjeeling hills 1952-1980.

Table – 3.10

Daily wages of labourers in Tea Gardens of Darjeeling Hills since 1952-1980

Field Workers		Rupees per day	
Year	Male	Female	Children
1952	1.19	1.06	0.62
1962	1.54	1.47	0.84
1964	1.60	1.52	0.87
1965	1.73	1.62	0.94
1966	2.11	1.94	0.98
1971	2.73	2.23	1.26
1973	3.00	2.83	1.35
1978	6.50	6.30	1.30
1980	7.50	7.43	3.85

Source: *Calculated from the Tea statistics published by Tea Board of India.*

The progress to equality in wages has an interesting history. Labour unions had long demanded equal wages. But tea plantation managements was in favour of maintaining the wage differences between men and women workers on the grounds that the women are given a lower volume of work than men or the work-load for women workers is always lesser than that of men. The *thika* (task work) assigned to women workers is always less than that of men. In 1976 the Government of India passed the Equal Remuneration Act abolishing wage differences among sexes in all industries. Even after the enactment was in force, many managements, refused to

implement its mandates. In fact the Indian Tea Planters Association stated that giving women the same wages as men while maintaining unequal work loads would result in discrimination against men (Bhowmik: 1981)

In December 1976 the Ministry of Labour of the Government of India clarified that the Equal Remuneration Act applied to 'equal nature of work' and not to the volume of work (Bhowmik: 1981)

The equal remuneration was not enforced everywhere in the tea industry as late as 1980 despite clear statutory provisions. But after 1980, almost all the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills implemented this Act. The gardens under study also implemented the Act from 1980 onwards. The following table shows the rate of wages for men and women from 1980-1996.

Table – 3.11
Daily wages of women workers since 1980-1996

Wages (Rupees per day)

Year	Rupees Paise
1980	7.72
1981	8.62
1982	8.62
1983	9.37
1984	9.37
1985	10.87
1986	11.72
1987	12.57
1988	13.42
1989	16.22
1990	16.22
1991	17.77
1992	19.37
1993	19.37
1994	21.80
1995	24.30
1996	26.30

Source : *Tea Garden Offices*

There is no discrimination regarding the payment between male and female workers; but during plucking season it was found from official records that women earn more money than men on the merit of their efficiency. Women are considered more efficient in plucking of tea leave. For plucking more tea leaves during the peak plucking season workers are given *doubly* or *bakshis* (extra tea leaf price) which acts as an incentive for plucking more tea leaves. In the following table the rate of extra tea leaf price is given-

Table – 3.12

Extra tea leaf price given in the tea gardens of Darjeeling Hills (1990-1996)

Year	Types of tea leaf plucked			
	Assam		China	
	Rs.	Ps.	Rs.	Ps.
1990	1.15		1.40	
1991	1.20		1.50	
1992	1.20		1.50	
1993	1.30		1.60	
1994	1.55		1.85	
1995	1.90		2.20	
1996	1.90		2.20	

Source: *Tea Garden Offices*.

The concept of a need-based minimum wage was put forth by the 50th Indian Labour Conference in 1957. According to the guidelines set up by the conference, a need-based minimum wage must take into account the minimum needs of food, clothing, fuel and housing of three units of consumption subsequently in 1958 the central wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry was formed to decide on the need-based minimum wage for tea plantation workers.

The employers' representatives on the wage board strongly objected to the formula accepted by the Indian Labour Conference. They argued that since employment in the plantations was family-based, three units of consumption was too

high as every family had at least two workers. Hence they suggested that only 1.5 units of consumption should be taken for determining the need-based minimum wage. The wage board found this argument baseless and commented: The family system of employment cannot be considered as unique to the tea plantation industry and even if it had been so it is a matter of consideration whether it is justified for employers to claim benefit of it by low wages for male wage earners. Earlier, in 1930, the Royal Commission on Labour in India had also put forth a similar argument against the low wages paid by the planters (Bhowmik: 1981)

The employers however obstinately stuck to their concept of wage determination. Finally the wage board had to concede their view as a result of which tea plantation workers are the lowest paid in the organized sector. The fact remains that the planters have used the existence of the high employment of women workers to keep wages low.

FINDINGS

Like any other full-fledged industry Tea Plantation has an organization of work and a hierarchy of staff. This hierarchy includes the Manager, Deputy Manager, Assistant Managers, Labour Welfare Officer and Doctor who form the top management category. They are locally known as *Sahibs*. Below the managerial category is the staff category which includes the Supervisory and Clerical Staff. They are locally called as *babus*. Below the Staff category is sub-Staff category which includes the sub-staff like Chaprasi, Boidar, Daffadar, Chowkidars etc. At the bottom of the work hierarchy there is worker or *coolie* category. They are divided into two categories. One is factory worker and another is garden or field worker. The daily-rated garden worker is further divided into three types: Firstly, there are adult workers of either sex i.e., adult male or *marad* and adult female or *aurat* who are above the age of eighteen. Secondly, there are adolescent of either sex who are between the age group of sixteen and eighteen and lastly, there are children or *chokra* between the ages of fourteen and sixteen.

The field data of seven tea gardens under study reveals the fact that excepting a few *sahibs* and a Doctor, all the management cadres, supervisory and office *Babus* are Nepalis by ethnic background. Regarding women's participation in management category. We did not get a single women employed as manager in these seven tea gardens under study. It is known from the official record of DPA that so far only one woman has been appointed as assistant manager in hill tea gardens. It is also known that a few women have been working as labour welfare officer in various tea gardens of Darjeeling hills. It is equally interesting to note that out of seven tea gardens under study, five tea gardens have already appointed women in staff and sub-staff category. Except one tea garden (Happy Valley) all the tea gardens have women staff belonging to middle caste Nepalis. Some women have already been working as head clerk or *bari amma* and second clerk (next to head clerk) in grade I category. Out of seven tea gardens, five tea gardens have appointed women in sub-staff category. In some tea gardens like Badamtam and Singell,

women have been working as sub-staff (mostly in *daffadar* category) since 1981 and some women have been promoted to *chaprasi* who holds superior position than the *daffadars*. It was found that the sub-staff women are generally promoted from the workers or coolie category provided they are eligible for the post and this is perhaps the only promotional opportunity provided to the women coolie or workers. The sub-staff women draw better pay and facilities than the ordinary workers. At the bottom of the work hierarchy, we have daily-rated workers or *coolie*. Among the daily rated workers, factory workers are considered superior in comparison to the garden or field workers as the former category is regulated by the Factory Act of 1948 and the later by the PLA of 1951. In the workers or *coolie* category, women are in overwhelming majority. About 80% women workers belong to middle caste Nepalis like *Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Newar, Sunuwar, Bhujel, Thamis* etc. The percentage of high castes (Brahmin and Chhetris) and lower caste Nepalis (Kami, Damai or Darjee, Sunar, Sarki, Majhi etc.) are very few. Among the middle caste groups *Tamang* and *Rais* are numerically dominant followed by *Newars, Gurungs, Limbus, Mangers* etc. It shows that *Matwalis* or middle caste groups form the dominant majority in the working force of the industry in Darjeeling Himalaya.

It has already been mentioned earlier that plantation industry employs more women in proportion to men than in any other organized industry. In the seven tea gardens under study the women workers constitute 62.67 per cent of the total work force. There are number of factors which are responsible for the overwhelming majority of women in the tea industry. They are: (i) the labour recruitment policy followed by the colonial planters during the early phase of plantation industry; (ii) agro-industrial nature of plantation industry; (iii) residential labour force in tea industry where women can also seek employment in the tea plantation without causing serious disruption in their domestic life.

In Darjeeling hills, tea industry has been commercialized since 1856. the recruitment of workers, during the initial period were made mainly from the rural areas of Nepal (mostly eastern and central hills of Nepal) and Sikkim through the recruitment agents locally known as *Sardars*. The Workmen's Breach of Contract

Act of 1859 (No.VII) and The Inland Emigration Act III of 1863, which were applicable in case of other tea regions like Assam, Nilgiri and Annamalai Hills, were never applied to the tea plantation of Darjeeling Himalayas. Unlike the *arkatis* of Assam and *Kanganies* or *maistries* of Nilgiri and Annamalai Hills, Sardars of Darjeeling were not a licensed recruiters. Sardars were themselves a part of the factory or plantation labour occupying supervisory positions. In all the tea gardens, which have been taken for case study, the recruitment of workers during the pre-Independence period was done through the Sardari System. The Sardars used to entice the men and women of their own caste and communities to leave their natal villages in Nepal and to come and settle in tea plantation. The planters, in their search for a permanent labour force recruited or imported coolies on the basis of family and not individuals, so this type of recruitment of whole family speaks of the Britishers well-planned design. This would mean less of labour mobility and scope to employ even the women and children by paying them less wages than the men. The Sardari system of recruitment continued till 1950. With the passing of the PLA, 1951 and the emergence of Wage Board, the workers had been started to be recruited from among the dependent members of the retiring workers, this is locally known as *badli* or substitute recruitment.

The tea plantation being agro-based industry the women labourers have to perform different types of work which are similar to agricultural operations. They perform different types of work like plucking of tea leaves or *patti tipai*, pruning or *kalam katai*, weeding, manuring, nursery work, chilling etc. Plucking is the most preferred job of women. It is an important operation because the quality of manufactured tea depends upon the care and attention with which plucking is done. Women are mostly employed in this operation due to their smooth plucking without injuring the plant. Plucking requires patience and dexterity of fingers which the women can provide better than men. During the peak plucking season, men are also employed in plucking tea leaves but they are mainly engaged in heavy pruning, deep and medium skiffing, spraying pesticides, rough weeding, etc. Besides plucking women do perform other activities like light and medium pruning, light skiffing, hand weeding, colon thully, manuring, filling of tubes in the nursery etc. In some tea

gardens women have also been employed in tea factory as factory workers. It was very interesting to note that the tea gardens like Badamtam and Singell (Castleton Tea Factory) have employed a number of women as factory workers and once in the factory they get better wages and other facilities but they work in the factory only during the peak plucking season. During the slack or winter season, these factory women join the winter cultivation work along with other workers.

During the pre-Independence period, the amenities made available to the workers were kept at the bare minimum level such as housing, medical facilities, food grain subsidy etc. After independence, various Acts were passed regulating the condition of workers. Now the owners are bound by statutory obligations. The plantation owners offer several facilities for them but all these seem to be inadequate. Under the statutory items of plantation labour Act, 1951, management provide housing, sickness benefits, maternity benefits, education, crèche, welfare or recreation etc. Under non-statutory items, workers get foodgrain subsidy, dry tea, fuel, electricity etc. In every week each worker is provided with 1 kg. Rice and 2.300 kgs. wheat every week. The bonafide dependents of the permanent workers are also entitled to get ration. Women workers get 350 gms. of dry tea per month. Sub-staff and staff get 500 gms. and 800 gms. respectively. Women workers used to get 8 mds. (2.99 quintals) of firewood per year whereas sub-staff and staff women used to get 12 mds. (4.48 quintals) and 60 mds. (22.39 quintal) of firewood per year. In the recent years particularly after 1998 the garden management have started giving coal briquette in lieu of firewood. In case of sick or illness, women workers get sickness allowance for the total period of 14 days in a year at the rate of her daily wage. They also get woolen blankets, umbrellas, canvas aprons, etc. Every year 12 days casual leave, six week pre-natal and six week post-natal maternity leave are also granted to the women workers.

Tea gardens operate on a system of daily wages. The daily wage workers are paid on the basis of time-rate as well as piece-rate. Under the former a worker is paid according to the time for which he or she works, usually on an hourly basis, under the latter category or *thika* system, payment is made on the basis of the output of work.

Tea gardens labour wages have generally been lower than the average wages for agricultural labour in north-east India. The management have attempted to justify the difference on the grounds that the tea gardens employees enjoy additional benefits like subsidized foodgrains and supply of firewood, tea etc. This has been a contentious issue between management and labour union for decades. Wage differentials between men and women existed in the tea plantation from their inception and it was continued upto 1980. In 1976 the Govt. of India passed the Equal Remuneration Act abolishing wage differences among sexes in all industries. The equal remuneration was not enforced everywhere in the tea industry as late as 1980 despite clear statutory provisions. But after 1980, almost all the tea gardens Darjeeling hills implemented this Act. Now, there is no discrimination regarding the payment between male and female workers; but during plucking season it was found from official records that women earn more money than men on the merit of their efficiency. Women are considered more efficient in plucking of tea leave. For plucking more tea leaves during the peak plucking season workers are given *doubly* or *bakshis* (extra payment for plucking more tea leaves), which acts as an incentive for plucking more tea leaves.