

Chapter IV

Female Labour Absorption in Construction Work

4.1 : Female Construction Workers of India

In terms of employment, the building history is one of the largest in India, employing millions of workers. Although, the construction work is an important source of absorbing unemployed people, the industry relies heavily on unskilled labour. At the same time, the use of mass-production technology is practically absent.¹ As a matter of fact, such industry is primarily suitable to Indian context as it is mostly labour-intensive. And being labour intensive, construction works in India, by and large have given employment to a sizeable section of women workers too. Unlike other industries where women are employed in semi-skilled or sometimes even in skilled jobs, in construction industry they are employed as only as unskilled labourers. In building construction, the tasks assigned to them are carrying earth, mortar cement, stones, water, bricks etc. on their heads or backs from the place of storage to the site. In road construction and repair, they are absorbed for crushing the stone, carrying the headloads and also for working on hand pumps etc. It is disappointing to note that the women workers in construction works are assigned all sorts of the physically exhaustive tasks whereas the finishing jobs like that of mason etc. are completely done by the men-folk.

There have been many studies on the construction workers in our country. Estimates of the number of construction workers are also done from time to time. According to 1971 census, there were 2,04,000 women construction workers in India (down from 2,90,000 in 1951). At an average women comprised 10% of the rural and 9% of the urban workers in construction. As per A. Mitra and S. Mukhopadhyay, in all class I cities of India, the construction sector had absorbed 3.55% of the total female work-force in 1971

which had gone upto 4.04% in 1981. The corresponding percentage of male workers in their total work-force were 3.50 and 4.43 in 1971 and 1981 respectively. They also calculated the compound annual growth rate of female construction workers during the period 1971 to 1981 to be 6.33% as opposed to 5.34% for males.² The female intensity of the construction work has, in fact, increased from 9.098% in 1971 to 9.908% in 1981. This implies that there were more women relative to men in construction sector in 1981 as compared to 1971.³

Summarising the whole picture that emerges from the census data on construction workers, Mitra and Mukherjee had shown that on an average the construction industry has staked a larger claim on the work-force in 1981 as compared to 1971, both in absolute and relative terms. Not only has the number of construction workers gone up in the cities of India, on average the sex composition of the work-force has changed, in that the female intensity⁴ of the construction work-force has shown an appreciable increase. While the share of female construction workers to the total female work-force (female construction workers/female workers) has also gone up marginally, the increase is lower than that observed for males (male construction workers/male workers). This apparent anomaly has been explained by a substantial increase in the work-participation rate of women as well as an increase in the sex-ratio of the population.⁵

Mitra and Mukherjee further pointed out that there does not appear to be any appreciable structural change in the overall employment structure of female work-force in the cities, whatever change one can detect, appears to be less pronounced than that for male workers. However, one important feature of female employment in the construction sector has been its primitive alignment in manufacturing other than household industries (MOTH). This is found from the factor analytic exercise on the

data. This is so for the structure of female employment in both the census years i.e. 1971 and 1981 separately, as well as for changes over the inter-census decade. This alignment can be observed from individual city data especially for cities undergoing rapid increases in the female employment in the construction sector. This is a feature peculiar to female labour market. For male workers, employment is negatively aligned to employment in non-household manufacturing.⁶

Another significant feature of the construction labour market is the high variability of the female intensity of the construction work-force overtime. Mitra and Mukherjee held the view that the significant percentage of the change in the employment of female workers in this sector can be accounted for by changes in the male-female ratio within the construction work-force rather than changes in the overall importance of construction sector as such. This phenomenon lends credence to the hypothesis that while construction workers, as a whole, are known to be an exploited category of workers, women within this category are subject to a more intense form of job insecurity. It is quite likely that in a macro sense women as a whole operate in the capacity of a reserve army within the construction work-force, being drawn upon in situations of excess demand and retrenched as demand slackens. This last-in-first-out kind of a situation would indeed generate a high degree of variability in the female intensity of the construction work-force.⁷

4.2 : Importance of Construction Work and the Absorption of Women in it in Darjeeling Hill Areas

Contrary to the average Indian picture, in the hilly subdivisions of Darjeeling district, construction and repair of road works are crowded with women workers. The roads that lead to various corners of the hilly region are very often closed or destroyed by land-slides and land-slips and side by side of the

male workers, women are employed in large number in repair and reconstruction. Another new phenomenon that has come up recently especially in Darjeeling town is the continuous migration of people from the adjoining rural and tea garden areas. The influx in the urban centres has become quite noticeable during and after the Gorkhaland agitation in the hills. It can be visualised from the upcoming of hundreds of residential buildings in and around the municipal areas. It may be mentioned, in this connection, that migration was encouraged by Britishers right from the period of early settlement in Darjeeling.⁸ And the process of rural-urban migration (the inter-country or inter-state migration have been virtually nil these days) is still on. Together with this, the peace restored after the amicable solution of the ethnic identity problem through the creation of DGHC in 1988, the tourism industry after a temporary halt, has found a good prospect. This has encouraged private entrepreneurs to build up new hotels, restaurants, shopping complexes in Darjeeling, Mirik, Kalimpong and in Kurseong. Moreover, the conversion of the Tenzing Norgay Road from Siliguri to Darjeeling into National Highway no.55 A has required its proper maintenance and possible expansion. Opening of all these opportunities has led most of the contractors employ many people in road and building construction. And it is the fact that women are favoured by the contractors as they can be exploited easily and they can be made to work at a relatively lower wage rate. Also, as per a few contractors whom this researcher has visited, the women folk are regarded more attractive to their works as compared to their male counterparts. They acknowledged that women drink much less. Male labourers drink very hard and often it becomes difficult to make them work.

A few words, in this context of construction workers, must be written to make it understand why continuous road repair and construction are necessary in the hills of Darjeeling. The

main reason is that very often there are landslides and landslips in the area and the roads get blocked frequently. Very often, particularly during the monsoon the roads go down due to various physical reasons operating in the area. For example, Paglajhora (both upper and lower) in between Ghayabari and Kurseong is a place where the road itself is sinking over the years thereby causing enormous trouble to the people living or visiting there. Similarly, Likhevir on the national highway in between Lohapool and Teesta Bazar, Peshok on the way to Kalimpong from Darjeeling etc. are the famous spots where the stones continuously slip down from above the top of the hill and blocks the road.

The main reasons of the frequent landslides/slips in the hill areas are related to intensive and extensive cultivation, felling of trees on large scale, defective drainage system, badly constructed houses on the slopes, undercutting steep slopes for terrace cultivation, taking out of coals by digging abruptly in the lower altitude range of Tindharia areas and many other similar factors. The unprecedented rise in rural population without corresponding increase in employment opportunity also has compelled the people to encroach the forest land and cultivate on slope which has led to the landslips.⁹

The problems of frequent landslides and landslips in the hill areas have been the theme of discussion and study of the various official organisations and researchers. In this connection, it can be mentioned that various reports have pointed out that Darjeeling hill area is "unsafe" due to landslides. It has been estimated that about 50% of the farmers are unsafe in Rangli-Rangliot, Mirik and Pulbazar blocks. Another survey report states that out of a total rural population of 3,97,507 in the hills of the district (1981 census), 2,17,507 persons i.e. nearly 56% live in the face of landslides. The report further stated

that the major road arteries connecting agricultural zones with district headquarter via Tenzing Norgay Road, Maneybhanjan-Rammam Road, Ghoom-Darjeeling Road, Darjeeling-Kalimpong Road, Kalimpong-Gangtok Road, Punkhabari Road etc. have become vulnerable to landslides on a reasonable scale.¹⁰

Such problems of landslides and landslips have been further accentuated by the perennial problem of soil erosion in Darjeeling hills. All these factors together have made the repairing and construction/reconstruction of roads a routine affair in the hill areas which continue uninterrupted all through out the year. And it has already been mentioned that most of the contractors prefer women to work in there sites. Normally in the hill areas the construction works for women are mainly of three different types. First, a group of women crush a big boulder of stone & bricks with hammer and other primitive instruments. Secondly, a group of women help the male labourers in laying stones and bricks and digging. And the third group of women workers do bring the stones, mortars and other materials on their heads or in *doko*¹¹. Digging with shovel is mainly done by the males and in the hills it appears to a very arduous job. But crushing stone and carrying the loads are equally difficult and these tasks are solely assigned to women workers. Most of the women labourers are paid according to piece-rate but some of them are paid daily wages too. There are large number of teenagers among the construction labourers.

In the hills, the group for repair and construction of road is termed as "gang". The "gang" consists of about 20 to 25 labourers under the supervision of an elderly supervisor. The gang generally moves enblock from one place to another for the same type of work once the construction work at a certain locality gets over. Such a movement generally takes place after the "gang" works in a place for 5 to 7 days continuously in

average. The "gang" as such lead a community style of living having food together. Also, the "gang" very often stays in the makeshift shanties and only a few of the gang-members go to the nearby villages for night stay wherever they have come from. Very often, one has to travel a long distance if one does not want to stay in the makeshift shanties. But in winter this is not always possible. Winter, as we all know, in the hills is very severe and it seems one has no option but to stay with the "gang" on the roadside till the work at the site is completed.

The "gang" enjoys and suffers collectively. The women workers generally take up the responsibility of cooking and washing for the gang in spite of the fact that they work on the site arduously side by side of their male counterparts. One aspect that gets credence is that there is no sense of caste differentiation in the life of labourers, especially living in the "gang". This researcher had gladly noticed that in the gang there were labourers both males and female from the so called lower castes like "kamis" and "damais" and other "adivasis" working with high-caste people like "rais" and "gurungs". The female labourers and generally not afraid of their male counterparts except when the male workers get drunk and sometimes misbehave with them. There was, however, no incidence of sexual harassment of the female construction workers by their male co-workers.

4.3 : Labour Laws and the Wage-Payment in the Construction Work

India has progressive labour laws on the books. They are not enforced, most laws do not even cover to the vast majority of Indian workers, particularly, the informal sector labourers. The Abolition of Contract Labour Act, 1971 sought to eliminate the practice of contract labour and provide some benefits such as maternity leaves and some medical facilities to women labourers. It, however, is often violated. In the hill areas of Darjeeling

district, it is the practice and even the women workers in construction industry have taken it granted that they never fall into the category of beneficiaries of such benefits. On enquiry, it has been found that even when the workers both men and women are deprived of the accidental benefit by the employers in case they underwent any accident during work-period. In fact, the labourers are completely unaware of these rights. In some states of our country, construction workers are covered by Minimum Wages Act; but in our study area, the minimum wages Act have never been enforced. The government is itself a culprit in this regard. Many construction projects - building roads, bridges, railway lines and government buildings are in the public sector. The government is the largest employer in construction sector in other parts of India; yet public works are constructed on contract. The construction contractors solicit the services of labour contractors for supplying labour in order to complete the work in time. These labour contractors, popularly known as "sardars" play a key-role in bringing the construction workers at various sites in hill areas too. These labour contractors receive commissions from the construction contractors for the number of workers they supply and understandably the commission which the construction contractors pay to the sardars are deducted from the wages to be paid to the labourers. Also, the construction contracts being short-term, based on tenders and scattered at different places, the construction contractors can not employ labourers on a permanent basis. This temporary character of the work, make the construction labourers dependent on the sardars. And thus they are subject to wage exploitation.

Govt. regulations provide for amenities such as creches, sanitary services and holidays as well as specified maximum hours and minimum wages for workers in the construction projects of CPWD.¹² According to the model rules of the Central Public Works

Department (CPWD) of Govt. of India, there should be at least two huts with two ayahs for children where there are more than 50 women workers on a construction site. There are some sites in our study area where construction works are under P.W.D. and more than 50 women are generally found to work (e.g. Paglajhora constructions site on the National High Way no.55 A). But unfortunately the women Labourers of the "gang" can not think of having the huts built by the contractors and ayahs deputed for their children. The working mothers, therefore, are compelled to leave their children uncared at home with siblings.

As a matter of fact, the creche facility is conspicuously absent in the hill areas of Darjeeling. Only 3 creches have been found in the course of this study - 2 in Darjeeling and 1 in Kalimpong. In Darjeeling town, the Hayden Hall Institute is running a creche and a bawaldy for the 35 children of the 200+ women workers attached with it. The 2nd one run by the Darjeeling town Women's Congress is at a very poor state due to the lack of proper supervision and the existing inter-rift among its managing committee members. In spite of this, at an average daily nearly 20 children of the poor mothers working in nearby site as the construction workers and coolies are looked after here.

Women constructions Workers are special target of wage discrimination too. The Indian constitution, in the Directive Principles of State Policy, has recommended equal pay for equal work. The article, 39D of the constitution - equal pay for equal work - is only a policy statement at present. The women workers in the informal sector activities do not get equal remuneration for equal work. According to a Delhi Administrative Notification in 1974, the minimum wage rate for unskilled construction worker was fixed at Rs.5:15 per day. However, during the survey made by Sinha and Ranade in Delhi in 1975, they found that the women workers were being paid only at the rate of Rs.4.50 per day.¹³

Such wage discrimination even during the 90's still exists everywhere. In Darjeeling hill areas, although female construction workers undertake the same order and hard work done by men workers like crushing the stones or carrying the chips and mortars through the steep road or through the ready made stair cases leading to a multistoried building, they are paid much less than the payment made to the male workers. The following table shows the existing wage structure of the male and female workers in building construction in 1992 in our study area.

Table 4.1 : Wage Pattern and Mode of Wage Payment of the Building and Road Construction Labour

| Nature of works | Mode of Wage Payment | Daily Wage (in Rs.) |
|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Thikadar + Mason | Weekly | 45 - 50 |
| A Grade Mason | Weekly | 38 - 45 |
| B Grade Mason | Weekly | 28 - 37 |
| Unskilled male labour | Weekly | 20 - 25 |
| Unskilled female labour | Weekly | 15 - 22 |

Source : Field Survey

The general mode of payment to both the male and female construction workers is found to be weekly. In most of the sites, they are found to work six days a week. For the rest day, they are not paid anything. It has been observed that the male workers enter the construction labour market as unskilled labour first and they gradually upgrade themselves in accordance with their ability and can go to the top. During the field survey, a number of male labourers were met who were simple unskilled labourers in the beginning but in course of time they developed their ability and efficiency. A few years later they had gradually been promoted to be masons and thus reached the top position in the construction labour market. The wage accordingly varies from Rs.20 per day to the unskilled labourer to Rs.50 per day to the

A-grade mason. The B-grade masons, on the other hand, are the close associates and the helpers of A-grade masons.

But this is not the case for women, the women workers in construction do not have the scope of promoting themselves to a highest position in the market. They start their construction career as simple labourers and remain at the same position till they retire. Surprisingly the sardars in the construction works are invariably the men. It thus shows that the opportunity of lighter works are exploited by the male workers only. Even though they have the experience, it is not utilised by the contractors. It has been observed that the elderly women give proper suggestions to the B-grade masons regarding the proportion of mixture of the cement and sand but are not allowed to do the job. Given the opportunity, they can prove themselves equally efficient with the experienced masons. The female workers are found to get a wage of Rs.15 to Rs.25 a day. This variation in daily wage depends on the age - structure of theirs. The teenagers and old ladies generally get below Rs.20 while the young ladies do get little more. The difference in wage payments between the male and female construction workers thus reflects the 'male chauvinism' and their domination in construction sector.

4.4 : Findings of the Field Survey

Age composition of the female construction workers - Of the total 332 respondent female construction workers picked up randomly from various urban construction sites in the Darjeeling hills, 59.34% were between 20 to 40 years in age. The presence of aged workers were quite low. Only 5.12% of the female workers were in the age group of above 50. At the same time 1.2% of the women workers were virtually the child labourers in the sense that they were in the age group of below 10. The participation of the child and old female workers in the arduous construction

works in the urban areas is the indicator of the plight, economic backwardness and miserable status of the women workers in the hill areas. The following table shows the overall pattern of age-composition of the women workers in the construction sector.

Table 4.2 : Age Composition of the Female Construction Workers

| Age - range | No. of workers | % of total female construction workers |
|-------------|----------------|--|
| Below 10 | 4 | 01.20 |
| 11 - 20 | 84 | 25.30 |
| 21 - 30 | 104 | 31.33 |
| 31 - 40 | 93 | 28.02 |
| 41 - 50 | 30 | 09.04 |
| above 50 | 17 | 05.12 |
| Total | 332 | 100.00 |

The respondents were asked to indicate the age at which they took their first job. The data show that 3/4th of the women got employed when they were 20 years or below in age. Nearly 36% of the women were already employed by the time when they had reached the age of 15 years. Also over 40% of the women had worked for more than 7 years and at least 20% of them had held more than three jobs.

Caste composition - Another feature that had been noticed in the construction sector was that 83% of the female workers belonged to SC/ST category, with only 17% belonging to other castes. The general picture, therefore, was that the female construction workers in the hill areas of Darjeeling district mainly come from the SC and ST Sections of the society.

General educational level - The general educational standard of the female workers in the construction industry was quite low. The following table represents the general educational standards of the female construction workers.

Table 4.3 : Educational Status of the Female Construction Workers

| Education Level | No. of workers | Percentage |
|------------------|----------------|------------|
| Nil | 149 | 44.89 |
| upto class IV | 120 | 36.14 |
| V to VIII | 43 | 12.95 |
| above class VIII | 20 | 06.02 |

As seen in the table, 44.89% of the female construction were illiterate. In fact, the educational status of them was so poor that only around 19% of the women workers had schooling experience in the real sense. Such a low educational status of the female construction workers had made them vulnerable to various exploitations. Also, the lack of education was the main cause behind the impossibility of changing their profession.

Marital status - 52.10% of the women construction workers were found to be married. Presumably they were in the exhaustive construction work only to supplement the family - income. The maidens were not very far behind the married in their presence. They accounted for 35.54% of the total female constructions workers. This obviously included the teenaged. Instead of being in schools and colleges, a large number of them had to be engaged in income - supplementation of their families. Similarly, 8.14% of the workers were widowed. Comparatively large percentage of

Table 4.4 : Marital Status of the Female Construction Workers

| Marital Status | Number of Workers | Percentage |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------|
| Maiden | 118 | 35.54 |
| Married | 173 | 52.10 |
| Widowed | 27 | 8.14 |
| Divorced/Separated | 14 | 4.22 |

widowed women in manual job is the indicator of the fact that the male "Karta" of the lower - income group families mostly failed in protecting the future of their family-members thus

compelling their wives and children to take even the most inhuman jobs.

Commuting distance - In road and building construction, as already stated, although many of the workers stay and move along with the "gang", quite a number of the women workers were also found to commute daily to the work-site. Normally, they were seen to come from nearby villages and tea-industries. The daily commuting distance of the women construction workers has been shown in the following table.

Table 4.5 : Daily Commuting Distance of the Construction Workers

| Commuting distance | No. of female workers | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| 0 km | 83 | 25.00 |
| 1 - 5 km | 223 | 67.17 |
| 5 - 10 km | 21 | 06.33 |
| above 10 km | 05 | 01.50 |

It appears from the table - 4.5 that only 25% of the female construction workers hailed from the area around the construction sites and therefore they do not have to commute to reach the work place. The rest were the daily commuters to the sites. Most of the female workers being married, the family responsibilities would not allow them to stay with the gang but to commute daily. 1.50% of the female construction workers had to travel around 20 km. daily. To travel 20 km. daily in the hills is not a matter of joke. Above all, the transport cost they incurred constitute a large proportion of their income from the work. The 26 respondents who commuted daily a distance of 5 km or more had to spend the transport cost from Rs.50 to Rs.150 a month.

Family size of the female construction workers - Most of the workers came from the families having more than four members. In fact, there was a large concentration of female workers when the family size increased. As the family size increased and the

income of the husbands became insufficient the females moved out in search of a job.

Table 4.6 : Family Size of the Female Construction Workers

| Family size | No. of workers | Percentage |
|-------------|----------------|------------|
| 1 - 4 | 136 | 40.97 |
| 5 - 8 | 178 | 53.61 |
| above 8 | 18 | 05.42 |

Family income - It is not only the family size that affected the female workers' participation in construction works but the family income was also equally responsible. The approximate family incomes (monthly) of the construction workers are shown in table 4.7.

Table 4.7 : Monthly Family-Income of the Construction Workers

| Family Income | No. of construction workers | Percentage |
|---------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| up to Rs.1000 | 237 | 71.38 |
| above Rs.1000 | 95 | 28.62 |

The family income as stated by the respondents were approximations only and they are expressed in terms of current prices. It has been observed that the construction works were crowded mostly by the women from the families having income of Rs.1000 or less per month. In this context, it should be mentioned that 18 respondents declared that agriculture was their additional source of income.

Monthly contribution - The table below shows the contribution of women construction workers to their families.

Table 4.8 : Average Monthly Contribution of the women
Construction Workers

| Contribution made | No.of workers | Percentage |
|-------------------|---------------|------------|
| Nil | 4 | 1.20 |
| upto Rs.150 | 24 | 7.23 |
| Rs.150 - Rs.250 | 56 | 16.87 |
| Rs.250 - Rs.350 | 107 | 32.23 |
| Rs.350 - Rs.450 | 64 | 19.28 |
| Rs.450 - Rs.550 | 55 | 15.96 |
| above Rs.550 | 24 | 7.23 |

Only a few workers (7.23%) could contribute more than Rs.550 per month to their families. Of the married workers over 80% had contributed the same as their husbands. Sixteen respondents earned more than their husbands. Thus, it can be said that in the economic sphere, the status of most of the women construction workers was the same as that of their husbands. This fact, however, is not recognised in the society and also the economic freedom of the women workers is virtually nil in the sense that their participation or non-participation in the construction work is dependent upon the willingness of the male members of the families. Another interesting feature was that, in all cases, the women worked as labourers and so did their husbands. Only 4 teenaged respondents were found not contributing anything to their families. Their income was not regular and whatever they earned was being spent on their private consumption of clothes, cosmetics and such other items.

Age of entry - The responses about the age of entry of the women workers in the construction can be summarised as follows. That nearly 2/3rd (65.66%) of them had entered the construction labour market at the child-bearing age of 15-30 years. The participation of the child & adolescent workers in the hills was relatively low at 18.67% compared to their high entry

rate of 30.42% as shown by the ICSSR study.¹⁴ The percentage of female workers who had entered the construction labour market at the age of 30 years or more was only 15.66. This sizeable fraction of women construction labourers were found to have entered due to certain domestic compulsions such as sudden death of husbands, separation etc.

Hours of work - The working hours in the construction sector in our survey area differed from place to place and site to site. For example, in Mungpo areas, in the road repair, the workers were to work for 7 hours a day in average whereas in all other parts the working hours varied from 8 hours to more than that. The break-up of the women construction workers according to the hours to work is as follows:

Table 4.9 : Working Hours of the Female Construction Workers

| Working hours | No.of workers | Percentage |
|------------------|---------------|------------|
| 7 to 8 hrs. | 295 | 88.86 |
| More than 8 hrs. | 37 | 11.14 |

It has been already stated that the construction workers are mostly employed by the private contractors. And for this reason, in some cases, they had to work for more than 8 hours a day. However, all workers were found to have a short break for lunch.

Encouragement - Almost all respondents stated that poverty was the main reason to take up employment in the construction sector. The largest single category of respondents (40%) took up the employment of their own accord. 22% of the respondents were persuaded by their husbands, 24% by their in-laws and the known persons already in construction work, and 13% were found to be persuaded by their parents. It is thus obvious that in the strata of the hill society employment of women is not tabooed at all as it is seen in many upper and middle class

societies in other parts of the country. Women in Darjeeling in general, are encouraged to take up employment.

In spite of a large number of women being absorbed in construction sector, the construction works are not available to them for all throughout the year. Most of them get jobs in this sector for about 100 days a year in average. For the rest of the days they either remain idle or in many cases it is found that they take up other casual jobs such as agricultural works in the rural areas. As a matter of fact woman who works as construction worker in one season might be found to work as agricultural labourer or casual labourer in tea gardens in another season.

4.5 : Summary

The construction industry in India absorbs an increasing number of female workers. This can be understood from the increasing female intensity of the construction work during the period 1971 to 1981. The female intensity rate in the construction industry has increased from 9.098% in 1971 to 9.908% in 1981. The compound annual rate of growth of the male and female workers in the construction sector during the same period was 5.34% and 6.33% respectively. Although, their proportion in the construction industry in India is increasing, it has been observed that women in this industry are subject to an intense form of job insecurity. They operate in the capacity of a reserve army in the construction work being drawn upon in situation of excess demand and thrown out as demand slackens. Thus, there exists a high degree of variability in the female-intensity of the construction work-force.

In the hill areas of Darjeeling district, construction works, road repair and construction in particular, are undertaken almost round the year. The main reason for round the year repair works is that very often there occur landslides and slips and the roads connecting the various interior parts with the urban

centres get blocked frequently. Such slides and slips in monsoon are due to the soil erosion, felling of trees on large scale, defective drainage system, badly constructed houses at terraces, and taking out of coal in the lower Himalayas. The recent rural to urban migration and the bright prospect of tourism in Darjeeling hills also have contributed to the round the year construction of hotels, roads, and residential houses. Added to these are the new developmental projects undertaken by DGHC. Such a growing construction industry in the hills has absorbed a large number of women. In both the road construction and building construction, women's role is equal, if not more than the male workers, in Darjeeling hills.

The construction workers in Darjeeling hills are generally recruited through the sardars and it is a fact that the contractors prefer women to men. Women are ready to work even at a lower wage and they are more sincere to their duties. The male labourers give troubles to their employees at times when they get drunk. The women are free from such addictions. The preference of the female workers in construction is attributed also to the fact that the women of hill areas can perform the arduous manual works equally with their male counterparts.

The hill construction workers have certain peculiar features. A group of workers engaged in the repair and construction of roads at a site is known as "gang" which consists of 20 to 25 labourers inclusive of both male and female. They move enblock from one place to another after working at a site. The members of the "gang" barring the mother workers often stay together in makeshift shanties where they take common food. The gang lives a community style of living in the sense that they enjoy and suffer collectively. There is no caste-barrier among the labourers. Also, the female labourers in the gang are not afraid of the male labourers while staying in the gang. The male

labourers are rarely seen to misbehave with or harass the female workers in the gang.

Although there are certain labour laws in connection with the construction works, they are hardly found to be followed in the hills. The construction workers are not covered by the Minimum Wages Act neither do they receive any accidental or any other medical benefits from their employers. Female workers can not think of availing themselves of the maternity benefits. Women construction workers are subject to wage-discrimination too. A male worker who starts the construction career as an unskilled labour can upgrade himself to the top position in the construction labour market but the women workers has no such promotional prospect. She starts the construction career as an unskilled labour doing the manual works and ends up at the old age with the same type of arduous works being assigned to her.

The field survey in the Darjeeling hills has shown that most of the female construction workers are at the child bearing age. Most of them are illiterate and are from the families having the family members between 5 and 8. They are found in the construction works mainly owing to the economic hardship of their families. The employment of female members of the family is generally not tabooed in the hill society rather they are inspired, in some cases, compelled by the male members. The women construction workers although play a very crucial role in the society and also in supplementing the family income, they have little liberty in deciding the pattern of family expenses. This aspect is determined and as a whole decided by the husbands or other male members, as the case be, of the families.

Notes and References:

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2. A. Mitra and S. Mukhopadhyay, "Female Labour Absorption in Construction Sector", Economic and Political Weekly, March 11, 1989, p.523
3. ibid, p.524
4. Female intensity has been defined as the ratio of the female construction workers (FCW) to the total construction workers (TCW)
5. A. Mitra and S. Mukhopadhyay, op. cit., p.528
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7. ibid, p.528
8. A. J. Dash, Gazetteer of the Darjeeling District, Vol. 10, Govt. Printing, Calcutta, p.50
9. M. Dasgupta, Project Report on Women Labourers in the Informal Sector : A case Study of the Plains and Hills of the Darjeeling District, ICSSR, 1992, p.32
10. A. Chatterjee, "A Survey on the Occurrence of Landslides and their Impact on the Economy of Darjeeling District" (Working Paper), 1985
11. "Doko" is a typical hand-made carrier instrument, made of bamboo sticks by the Nepalese in the hills. It is used to carry loads on the back by fixing a typical rope called "Namlo" round the doko and placing the rope on the head so that the weight is generally pulled by the head supported by the back.
12. Chitra Ghosh, op. cit.
13. Sinha, G. P. and Ranade, S. N. Report of Two Surveys on Women Workers in Construction in a Developing Economy, Allied Publishers, 1976, p.86
14. M. Dasgupta, op. cit., p.34