

CHAPTER VII : Women Workers in Tea Industry

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Tea industry in the South and North employs a substantial share of women workers who account for nearly 47 per cent of the total employment of 10 lakhs workers in tea plantations in the country. It is true, when women have been thrown out from Jute, Textile, Tobacco etc. on a large scale due to various reasons, in plantation industry women are still on a large scale. The reason for large employment in tea plantation is that the two leaves and a bud have to be plucked from the tree and this job is better done by the women. Women are able to perform better due to their nimble fingers as is viewed by the owners. These are hardly convincing reasons, because men are also engaged in plucking alongside they also carry out tasks related to maintenance of the bushes and plantations.

In reality, the division of labour between the sexes is more a matter of convention or perhaps belief, rather than a scientific reality. Employing women in tea was more profitable for the employer for many years since the equal Remuneration Act, maternity Benefit Act, provision of creche etc. were not applied. Wherever they are applied now, the tendency to

escape these rules and Acts is very prominent. The whole family including the children work in the gardens with different wages.

7.1 Early Condition of Women

The early history of women in the labouring communities of tea gardens in Assam and North Bengal is marked by the customary absence of inscriptions other than signs of violence and oppression. Women remain below the level of perception which orders visible history. Plantation labour itself was not always an important object of knowledge in historical discourse, public gaze turned towards them only when something out of the ordinary happened, like general strike or mass violence or exodus or revolt. Within this community woman occupies an ever smaller space, for she was assiduously pushed into the spare of domesticity and supportive labours, always expected to be docile and inarticulate. It is not as though women did not speak out or act against consignment to the margins of visible existence, what happened was that the logic of patriarchy, often internalised by women themselves, worked both in the hierarchical ordering of labouring communities and in the apparatus of violence and terror on which plantation economics thrived for a long time. No wonder, then the women received only marginal attention in the minor chronologies

offered by record and representation for the history of plantations. Neither historiography nor journalism considered women in this sector to be of more than passing interest. The history of women in the tea gardens therefore, is prolonged order of silence broken by eruptions of oppressive terror, when women were taken away, humiliated, beaten up and sexually assaulted did they become unwilling objects of social gaze.

Early information available from official reports, newspaper accounts, court cases and so on make it clear that for and false promises of money and security were responsible for large migrations of labour to the tea gardens. Women and children very often accompanied their men, of it was a more or less radical uprooting which lay at the basis of migration. Labour contractors acted as planters' agents because it would be men of same community or at least those speaking the same language, who would be trusted by emigrants. For women this was a transition from the tribal or feudal community to the coolie lives of the dank malaria-infested valleys of Assam and North Bengal. This was also a transition from the system of community protection to the helplessness of servile bondage.

The plantation machinery of exploitation demanded a purposive spread of personalised terror in order to keep the labouring population quiet. Colonial commercialism exploited in an intensified form the customary feudal exaction of services. Not only labour which produced the commercial crop but also

personal services and personal homage were demanded and forcibly exacted. This intensification of feudal terror, the sign of absolute authority over a community isolated from its social moorings, set up an entire order to coercive subordination. A language is constructed by the oppressive apparatus, system of address, channel of authority, spatial distance separating the slave from his master, arbitrary exaction of personal labour services, deliberate irrationality of subjective brutality enforced regimentation of labour and leisure. The sexual abuse of women is part of this machinery of terror.

This was in 1921, when several legislations had come into being seeking to protect plantation labour. But the planter was acquitted. Till the end of the colonial era cases of rape, forcible seduction buying and selling of women and decoying young women by various artifices are rampant. Sometimes cases were brought to the notice of government authorities and reported in newspapers, but the criminals almost never received any punishment worth the name. Accompanying the systemic reduction of labouring community to a state of object surrender of subjectivity there was a process of degradation and humiliation which sought to rob these men and women of their social identity. Their values, rituals and traditional ties were subjected to tremendous pressure. Young tribal women would be invited to the planter's bungalow to stage a dance performance; they would be piled with liquor in the course of the evening

and taken advantage of by the white man, the baboo and the sardar. When families and communities are subjected to such habitual degradation, their values will very often be corrupted and the community ethos will disintegrate. The oppression of women was a crucial ingredient of the colonial system of easy exaction of profitable labour.

7.2 Employment of Women Workers

The extent of employment of women workers is given in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1

Distribution of male and female workers in tea industry-1990.

District/State/Region	Male	Female
Dooars	77543 (50.79)	63706 (41.73)
Darjeeling	17885 (37.17)	29043 (60.36)
Terai	18575 (49.04)	17140 (45.25)
West Bengal	114003 (45.84)	119889 (48.21)
Assam	251511 (46.43)	233486 (43.11)
Tamil Nadu	44303 (43.10)	56436 (54.91)

contd...

Table 7.1 contd ...

Karnataka	2252 (53.40)	1868 (44.30)
Kerala	33539 (45.19)	39719 (53.39)
South India	80094 (44.16)	98023 (54.04)
All India*	453001 (45.91)	458519 (46.47)

Note : Figures in parenthesis are the percentages to total.

*Including all tea growing areas in the country.

Source : Tea Statistics 1990-91, Published by Tea Board, Calcutta, pp.144 and 147.

Table 7.1 shows that the total number of female workers is slightly higher than the males all India level. The two tea growing states of South India, viz. Tamil Nadu and Kerala employed higher proportion of male workers. The male workers in the tea gardens of Assam were 3.32 per cent more over the female workers. In West Bengal tea gardens of Darjeeling hills employed substantially higher proportion of female workers while in the other two tea growing regions of the state viz. Dooars and Terai the female workers were out numbered.

In Table 7.2 we have presented the number of female workers in per 1000 males in the tea gardens of Terai and West Bengal.

Table 7.2

Females per 1000 males

	1961	1971	1981	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
West Bengal	975	1101	1034	973	990	1024	991	1026	1052
Terai	1068	1085	1024	963	937	1034	932	933	933

Source : Appendix II.

The male/female ratios as depicted in Table 7.2 clearly shows a decreasing proportion of females during the decades eighties. This is perhaps due to the implementation of Equal Remuneration Act, and Maternity Benefit Act etc. Though these Acts were passed before the eighties, but in tea gardens the employers did not give the immediate effect of the Acts. After the trade unions had intervened by way of struggles the employers gave effect of the Acts from the eighties.

7.3 Women's Wages

Wages differentials between men and women existed in the tea plantations from their inception. Before India's independence in 1947 women generally earned a wage which was three-fourths of the wage paid to men. The differences narrowed after the post independence legislation regulating payment of

Minimum wages was passed. The wages in this period in Terai Tea gardens showed the following trend :

Table 7.3

Wages differences between male and female

Year	Rupees per day		Differences
	Male	Female	
1952	1.16	1.03	0.13
1953	1.50	1.36	0.14
1966	2.08	1.91	0.17
1976	4.24	4.07	0.17
1978	6.24	6.07	0.17
1980	8.04	7.87	0.17
1983	9.69	9.52	0.17
1984	10.44	10.44	-

Source : Data compiled from different years' Tea Statistics, published by Tea Board, Calcutta and Memorandum of Settlements, 1966 to 1991, published by Tea Association of India (North Bengal Branch, Siliguri).

Table 7.3 shows that in 1952, the women got daily wage 13 paise less than that of males. In 1953 the difference increased to 14 paise. The wage difference remained same till 1966. After the final recommendation of Central Wage Board the wage difference rose to 17 paise and it remained same throughout the period so long the difference existed in the tea industry.

In 1975, the Govt. of India passed Equal Remuneration Act abolishing wage differences among sexes in all industries. Even after the enactment was in force the employers refused to pay equal wages to male and female workers.

After the trade unions intervened by way of struggles the employers agreed to pay equal wages. As the data on daily wage rate of the workers presented by Tea Statistics (Official Publication of Tea Board) revealed the equal wages for male and female in Terai tea gardens was not implemented till 1983.

7.4 Women in Plantation Hierarchy

We presented the organisation structure in tea gardens in Chapter III (Table 3.6). This shows that there are four levels in the organization structure of a tea garden, viz. management, staff sub-staff and workers (Coolies). A male tribal worker can hardly be promoted from the level of cooly to the sub-staff. But this promotion scope is not available for the women. A women works at the level of cooly throughout of her life. Thus the organization hierarchy also involves sexual division along side with ethnic division, which is very undesirable for the women. The principal work of them is tea plucking and weeding. The working day is from morning till 5 P.M., with a midday break of about an hour. The women cannot take any leisure in break period because of her household work. The fatigue took

its tool of the women's health. Absenteeism is high, particularly in the hot season, and very few women could continue working beyond 55 years.

7.5 Creches

Section 12 of the Plantation Labour Act, 1952 provides "The predominant share of women workers in the total workers in the total work force makes it obligatory on the part of the employers to provide certain facilities to women one of which is a creche for the children of workers".¹

Moreover, "There should be enough space for children in the creche, children should be looked after by trained women ... The employers are also required to provide fresh or prepares milk for the children refreshment ... clothes for everyone, oil and soap."²

In spite of the statutory obligation of the employers to provide creches and its proper maintenance, the actual conditions prevailing in tea gardens with regard to creche is miserable. In most of the tea gardens in the Terai creche as such do not exist. Whenever they exist they exist in paper, or in a tent or in a room. One may not even find children there. Milk supply is rare, clothes cradles do not exist, the trained aya has not employed. It therefore quite a common

sight to find women working with children strapped to their backs.

The Indian Labour Journal October, 1984 states, "For instance most of the creches in the Northern and North-Eastern Plantations were found to be not only below the prescribed standard of construction but also were found wanting in sanitation and cleanliness. In almost 88 per cent of the cases, creches were being looked after by untrained staff. In some cases creches existed only in the "form of tents" with the result only about 23% of the eligible children actually attending creches ...".³

So it is fact, that in tea gardens the creches are very few and where they are existed they are badly maintained. Thus, it will be good if the social welfare department of State Govts consider running a scheme to train the attendants to improve the running of creches. At present the demand for creches is voiced by working women in tea gardens and government should seriously consider it.

It was the women, in waves and waves of migration, who had to bear the brunt of adjustment to strange and inhospitable surroundings. In pre-independence period she was humiliated, beaten up and sexually assaulted by the Colonial British Planters. After independence though the humiliation and sexual assaultation has been stopped the exploitation of women continued to many other directions. Women received a lower

wage at least up to 1980 though the work was back-breaking as that of men. Leaf-Picking, weeding, ditch-digging, cleaning etc. were the province of women. They worked long hours just as the men did but the added burden of cooking, cleaning, fetching and gathering, child minding and so on made life an unending round of torment for the women.

From the very beginning, women workers have been actively involved in trade union activity. They have, however been mostly used as 'Cannon fodder' in agitational activity like strikes organized by trade unions. In several cases, trade unions have deliberately kept women in the frontline while, confining the managerial staff in tactic known as 'gherao' and while confronting the police. The agitational activity did yield results.

But in spite of participation of the women's in the early struggle of trade unionism still she is out of trade union leadership. Moreover the present trade unions are not making effort for the social conditions of women. In course of promotion from the level of cooly, to sub-staff women have been the victimed of sexual division. Due to absence of creches she has to strapp her baby to her back along with 25 kg./30 kg. plucked tea.

The unhygienic condition of living, the bad and inadequate food, bouts of infections diseases, lack of proper clothing and

lodging against the weather and absence of medical and child care are bad enough, particularly for the women who has to cope with these conditions most of all for the sake of the family. But what must have been particularly oppressive is the social isolation in which they have to face unending rounds of oppression. The fact that even under such conditions strong social identity is preserved can be attributed principally to the tenacity and the discipline of women.

7.6 Type of Work of Women

The women in tea plantations mainly engaged in plucking of tea leaf. Men are engaged in agricultural work like hoeing, cleaning the base of the tea bushes, spraying pesticides etc. They seldom pluck tea leaf. In slack season women are also employed in light hoeing and light and medium pruning. Only young, efficient and able bodied women are employed in such pruning as it needs some skill. In plantation women are also employed in forking and hoeing and they also do hand weeding. Women are not generally employed in tea factories, only aged and sick women are employed in factory for sweeping and picking out the tea stalks from finished tea. Apart from plucking it is seen that in many other jobs in the plantation women are as efficient as men. Plucking required patience and dexterity of fingers which the women can provide better than men.

Though there is no right compartmentalisation of work for male and female workers some sort of division of labour exists. Women are given more manual and relatively unskilled jobs on the ground that they are not "qualified for higher and skilled job" as the management often says.

7.7 Various Reasons for Employing Women in Tea Plantation

The women workers consider their work as a part of their life. The inclusion of Adivasi women in the work system of the plantation is an important criteria to determine their status where as the exclusion from all economic and intellectual activities are the criteria of status among the higher caste women. The majority of women who had already worked in a plantation before marriage continue to work after marriage. In many cases the women workers are the primary bread winners.

Thus, the women workers of plantation work are basically propelled by their economic motivation. Such economic motivation is a result of obligations towards their family and other dependents. The major part of the income goes towards the purchase of daily foods, just as a part of the man's income goes towards the purchase of liquor and tobacco.

The participation of women in plantation work does not adversely affect interpersonal relationships between husband

and wife. It does not create a situation of conflict in the family. However, their husbands and in-laws show positive attitudes towards their employment. Their positive attitude is often equated with their active support. The male support their wives' work simply because it brings in money for them and the family.

7.8 Summary

The women workers along with their men counterpart, directly involve themselves in the productive system of the plantation. In this sense, with men workers, are the actual producers in the mode of production of the plantation system, who sell their labour to earn a livelihood. But in tea gardens the women are the subject of exploitation for a long period of time. Till the end of colonia era cases of rape, forcible seduction, buying and selling of women and decoying young women by various artifices were rampant. After independence though her sexual assaultation has been stopped, but she was exploited in many other ways. Women got less wages than males for a long period of time. Even after the enactment of Equal remuneration Act, 1975, the employers paid less wages in the tea gardens of North East India at least upto 1983. Creches are very few in the tea gardens of north east India and where they are existed they are badly maintained. So she has to strapped baby to her back along with 25 kg./30 kg. plucked tea.

Women workers do not join the trade unions but hardly take active part in them. It is not because they are incapable of doing so but because of male dominance in this field. Inequality between men and women has been fully carried over into the trade union organization. Hardly there is any trade union leader in tea gardens from among the women workers. Even in the local committees of the trade unions there are a very few women members. But if a procession or a demonstration is staged they are placed at the front.

In organization hierarchy she does not get promotion to the sub-staff position along with male tribal workers. Thus, she is victim of sexual division. But neither the trade unions nor the Government raise voice against such exploitation of women in the tea gardens.

Notes & References

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