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EXPLOITATIVE LABOUR REGIME: WOMEN LABOUR IN TEA ESTATES OF SONITPUR, ASSAM



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ABSTRACT

Tea Garden Women Labour of Sonitpur in Assam has had a long history of oppression, repression and suppression by 'private' and 'public' patriarchies underlying the political and socio-economic system, despite their major contributive roles, both in reproduction as well as production, to plantation economy. About half of the labour force constitutes women in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur. It is revealed by their recruitment in large numbers in Tea Estates which signifies that their work is considered as 'productive labour'. The most important occupation of Tea Garden women labour is production of tea through intensive labour which shows their gendered

attributes to the different tasks performed in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur.

KEYWORDS : *Sonitpur, Tea Estates, Exploitative labour regime and women labour.*

INTRODUCTION :

The most important feature of the economy of Sonitpur is the existence of large number of Tea Estates. There are altogether sixty one big Tea Estates in Sonitpur District which covers an area of approximately 29,197.11 hectares. The tea garden population in Sonitpur is mainly composed of different ethnic groups and tribes and each of them having their own language and culture. 'Capitalists have an interest in exploiting women as a workforce as cheaply as possible'. Little has been written on the plantation labours in India, much less on the role of female tea labours although they work in large numbers in tea plantations. A study on tea plantation workers of Sonitpur District of Assam has not yet been considered as a serious area of research, let alone the study of the women workers, though it entails historical, sociological and anthropological significance.

The Planters showed more interest in women immigrants since women migrants as reproducer of labour, constituted a crucial factor in their calculations. This is due to the fact that the immigration of women led to the long term advantage of a self-reproducing and stable work force. In spite of this, women have always remained in a disadvantaged position for centuries and the Planters try to devalue women's labour in tea plantation

Since the major thrust of this study is on understanding in a historically specific way, the lives,

labour, paid and unpaid role, and contribution of tea garden women labour to socio-economic production in a specific regional context namely Sonitpur, the study is influenced by feminist approach. Oral methodology is of great importance to retrieve women's role since most of the available data are gender absent. There are different factors that have necessitated the use of oral sources like dearth of recorded files and other documents, and much of its history is yet to be explored. The work is conducted on the basis of intensive study using Multi-Stage Sampling. District forms the first stage, Tea Estates form the second stage and the respondents, the third or ultimate stage of Sampling.

For the selection of respondents, number of permanent working labour women in all six selected Tea Estates is obtained through field work and 15 percent of the total permanent working labour women in each Tea Estates are considered to be a representative sample. Accordingly, a Sample of 350 labour women are taken with probability proportional to the total number of women labour in each selected Tea Estates by the method of Simple Random Sampling. The following Table 1.1 shows the number of total respondents that have been taken from each Tea Estates for study:

TABLE 1.1: ESTATEWISE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENT WOMEN TAKEN FOR STUDY

Sample Tea Estates	Permanent Working Labour Women	Respondent Labour Women
Nahorani	467	70
Sessa	460	69
Shakomato	440	66
Dhullie	393	59
Nirmala	100	15
Nya Gogra	473	71
Total	2333	350

Source: Field Survey, 11/07/2012

Two Tea Estates, Nahorani and Sessa, from Tezpur Sub-Division are taken for the study. Nahorani under Tezpur Sub-Division is one of the largest Tea Estates. It is owned by Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited and was established in 1910. The Tea Estate occupies a total area of 1115.26 hectares and out of which 671.00 hectares are dedicated to tea plantation.

Sessa of Tezpur Sub-Division is under Apeejay Tea Group which has 17 Estates, spread over 50,000 acres in Assam, produce 25 million kilograms (approximately) of tea. Apeejay Tea Limited, Empire & Singlo Tea Limited, part of Apeejay Tea Group are the oldest tea companies in India. Apeejay Tea, formerly known as Assam Frontier Tea Limited was established in 1889. Empire & Singlo is the merged entity following the amalgamation of Empire Plantations (India) Limited established in 1863 and Singlo (India) Tea Company Limited established in 1864.

Two Tea Estates, Shakomato and Dhullie, from Biswanath Sub-Division are taken for the study. Shakomato Tea Estates, situated on the North Bank of Brahmaputra in Biswanath Sub-Division is owned by M/s. Darshanlal Jagdish Parshad Private Limited, who is in the business of tea production and marketing for more than 70 years. The founder Lala Darshanlalji of Dehradun was one of the pioneers of the tea industry in India. Under the name of M/s Sheo Parshad Darshanlal, the group flourished and spread over Assam, Darjeeling and South India. Shakomato Tea Estate was acquired from M/s James Warren & Co. Limited in 1963 and was developed under an able guidance of Jagdish Parshad by the name of M/s Darshanlal Jagdish Parshad Private Limited. At that time of the inception of Tea Estates, the production was approximately 0.4 million kilograms and today it has gone up to 1.3 million

kilograms. The production yield is approximately 2500 kilograms/ hectare.

Dhullie Tea Estate is owned by Assam Brook Limited, earlier known as Brook Bond Estates India Limited. The Company is engaged in cultivation, manufacture, processing and marketing of tea. The Company owns two Tea Estates namely Tinkharia and Dhullie. Dhullie Tea Estate covers a total area of 1088.96 hectares and 500.00 hectares areas are under tea plantation.

Two Tea Estates, Nirmala and Nya Gogra, from Gohpur Sub-Division are taken for study. Nirmala Tea Estate, located in Gohpur Sub-Division occupies a total area of 298.19 hectares. It is owned by New Manas Tea Estates Private Limited. It is a Private Company incorporated in 1968. Nya Gogra was established in 1926 and subsequently amalgamated with McLeod Russel India Limited in 1977. The out division, Gohpur, a separate entity under McNeill & Magor Limited, merged with Nya Gogra in 1988. Two more divisions, Satrang and Gogra, constitute the 1121.04 hectares represent the Estate today.

DISCUSSION:

Labour is one of the factors of production and it is a human effort directed towards producing commodities. Through the expenditure of labour power, production takes place. Karl Marx was the first who investigated thoroughly the quality of value creation of labour. For instance he said that labour is the worker's own life activity which the workers sell to another person to secure the necessary means of subsistence. Women labourers played an important role in pre-capitalist society where they had to perform both the productive and unproductive activities. The male members also performed labour along with female members in the society. Thus there existed a certain kind of collective labour.

In the Tea Estates of Sonitpur, women labour played an important occupational role in workplace. Both permanent and temporary workers are engaged in the workplace of Tea Estates of Sonitpur. Their high work participation contributed immensely to the economic development of Assam since the market profit of tea mainly depend on the quality of plucking tea leaves where female dominance prevailed. Lambert has pointed out that: 'some sections of the Indian working force are "over committed" in the sense that they wanted to attach to their employers without earning much of their prospects'. In that sense, workers of Tea Estates are 'over-committed' especially the women labourers.

In the Sample Tea Estates, they engaged not only in the task of plucking leaves but also in different activities like digging fields, watering the plants etc. which require a lot of physical labour. In spite of productive and reproductive role, rights of women workers were discriminated. Their upward mobility in the job was very much restricted. They were not satisfied with the Estate Authority. They even could not raise their problems before the Management because women in supervisory staffs were less in number, as such and hence, they are being exploited.

Interview has been conducted to know the different tasks performed by women in the Sample Tea Estates which is shown in Table 1.2 below:

TABLE 1.2: NUMBER OF RESPONDENT WOMEN WORKERS AND PERFORMANCE OF DIFFERENT TASKS IN TEA ESTATES

Tea Estates	Number of women workers and their different tasks			
	Plucking	Pruning	Agricultural operations (manuring, tipping, cultivation etc.)	Other miscellaneous jobs
Nahorani	70(100.00)	70(100.00)	60(85.71)	16(22.86)
Sessa	69(100.00)	69(100.00)	50(72.47)	15(21.73)
Shakomato	66(100.00)	66(100.00)	45(68.19)	14(21.21)
Dhullie	59(100.00)	59(100.00)	45(76.28)	13(22.03)
Nirmala	15(100.00)	15(100.00)	13(86.67)	8(53.33)
Nya Gogra	71(100.00)	71(100.00)	60(84.50)	20(28.17)
Total	350(100.00)	350(100.00)	273(78.00)	86(24.58)

Source: Field survey, 16/09/2012 N.B. Figures within Brackets Indicate Percentage.

Thus, it is evident from Table 1.2 that women's labour is visible through their active participation in different tasks in Tea Estates which proves that Tea Estates became largely a female dominated space as most of the plucking, pruning and maintenance tasks were performed by women. Asha Munda, a female worker of Shakomato Tea Estate, who worked since 1983, expressed that she got engaged in Tea Estates as a main plucker as it ensures a livelihood for her children and future generation inspite of her job being dull and frustrating. She knew that her work was tedious in nature due with little or no scope left for women on upward mobility in job. As such and hence, they are being exploited by the Management. Thus, individual liberty of women labourers in Tea Estates were neglected though economically they are independent.

While talking with Dulal Pasi, a male Sardar of Dhullie Tea Estate, stated: 'Men can do the plucking job, it's not like they can't. Usually they are not so patient and pull out the leaves and thus spoiling the bushes. But women do that since they are more patient'. In Dulal's perception this idea of patience is the defining point for women's suitability for the job. Thus, the idea of women being naturally suited for plucking was widely held among the workers and even the Management.

On the other hand, when asking questions like why women did the job of plucking to Luli Sawara of same Tea Estates, she pointed out thus : 'Look at our fingers they are softer so they do not damage the bushes. We have seen our mothers do this from birth and learnt. Training and Practices are important'. Regarding plucking, Luli referred to a process of training and practice as well. Women's skill in plucking tasks in course of time gets essentialized as women's work. Thus, by highlighting the characteristics of patience, the process of training was made invisible.

The European Planters were succeeded in establishing, 'one of the strictest industrial and social hierarchies imaginable,' in tea plantations of North East India, the legacy of which continues. In the Sample Tea Estates, there are hierarchies of overseers and supervisors who were all men and still at present a multi-tier control has been seen over the activities of women workers. Over the past 20 years or so, women all over the world have increased their participation in the labour market, but they continue to work in less prestigious jobs, are paid less and have fewer opportunities for advancement. In the Tea Estates the hierarchies like Planter-Manager-Babu stands tall. Women's subordination was a

feature of every mode of production. Their subordination was found in almost all sectors of work and the plantation system of Tea Estates has also its belief on the subordination of women workers. There was a patron system which was patriarchal in nature as the Planter-Manager-Babu symbolizes the father figure. Such patron system is still prevalent in the Sample Tea Estates. Women have to perform their work through Manager's hukum or order. Tea plucking is a labour-intensive activity in which different strategies were employed to control the female pluckers. For one thing, 'giving of orders was mainly a male prerogative.' So, social and economic structures reflect the invisible power of public patriarchy.

The ideologies underlying their different experiences of gender and kinship relations are manifest in folk tales, and stories, part of the popular culture of the plantation:

Sardar bole "Kam Kam"

Babu bole "dhari aan"

Sahib bole "Libo pither sam"

Hai! Nisthur Shyam, Phankhi diye aanili Assam

English translation: Work! Work! Says the Sardar (labour gang leader)

Get them here! Says the Babu (Overseer)

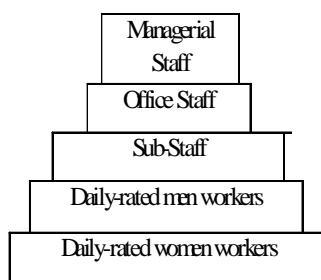
'I will take the skin off your backs', says the sahib (Planter)

Hai! Cruel Shyam (Lord), you lied and brought us to Assam.

The Jhumurgeet cited above performed to this day on the Sample Tea Estates recalls physical violence which occurred during the Colonial period and it shows female labourers on the Tea Estates appear to have faced the full force of power unleashed by the hierarchical structure of authority. The Jhumurgeet evokes hierarchy which was determined by the position occupied in the plantation structure and as well as by class, caste, race, ethnicity and gender.

The Manager is the supreme authority within Tea Estates and practically assumes all power of a dictator. He might be exploitative but ultimately unchallenged. Below the Manager, there are Assistant Managers who look after the smooth functioning of gardens and factories. The Bagaan Babu (Garden-Babu) who works under Manager or Assistant Manager of a Tea Estate is the head of the pluckers' supervisory structure. He is responsible for the specific garden functions like which section needs to be plucked, what work needs to be done and how many workers are required for it. Munshis (Overseer) or Boidars worked under the Bagaan Babus. His work is much the same as Bagaan Babu. Below Munshis there are Kamdaris or Chaprasis (Assistant to Overseer) who supervise the work of Sardars. Sardars are the direct in-charge of their group of pluckers or pruning squads etc. Women who work under the supervision of these Sardars therefore, occupy the lowest status in Estate hierarchy, which is generally ignored.

Again in the factory of Sample Tea Estates, under Assistant Manager, there is the Factory Babu who is responsible for the smooth functioning of the factory management. Under him was the factory Sardars who look after each factory room and works in different shifts. There are the office personnel that look after the ration, payment and other clerical work of the Tea Estates. Thus, at the bottom there are the workers and among the workers women labour occupies a very low status in Estate hierarchy. This clearly shows the power relations amongst the tea garden labourers of the Sample Tea Estates which still exists in the Tea Estates. This hierarchy can be visualized as illustrated below where the daily-rated workers including women are at the base:



In the Sample Tea Estates, the following Table 1.3 shows the gender division of plantation work:

TABLE 1.3: GENDER DIVISION OF PLANTATION WORK

Operations in field	Periods in month	Sex of the workers
1. Filling of vacancies of tea bushes	January-May	Men, Women
2. Transplanting	January-March	Men, Women
3. Manuring	February-May	Men, Women
4. Tipping	March-April	Men, Women
5. Plucking	March-December	Men, Women
6. Spraying Pesticides	April-September	Men
7. Pruning	October-January	Men, Women
8. Weeding	Throughout the year	Men, Women
9. Hoeing	Throughout the year	Men, Women
Operations in factory	Periods in month	Sex of the workers
1. Machine operating	March-December	Men
2. Withering	March-December	Men
3. Rolling	March-December	Men
4. Fermenting	March-December	Men
5. Drying	March-December	Men
6. Sorting	March-December	Men, Women
7. Packing	March-December	Men, Women

Source: Field Survey, 7/02/2013

Thus, while women dominate all field work of the tea industry, the factory is largely a male-dominated area. Factory works show the gendered nature of labour where it was perceived that men were suited to handle machinery, while women are supposed to be distancing from technology. Thus, the division of labour in the Tea Estates is gendered and some tasks had come to be defined as men's work and others as women's work.

Gender differentiation is clearly visible since they were not engaged to work as Boidars, Munshis and Chaprasis. Power in this economic structure has been given to them only as Sardarin whose number is negligible as shown in Table 1.4:

TABLE 1.4: NUMBER OF RESPONDENT WOMEN SARDARIN EMPLOYED

Tea Estates	Respondent Women Labour	Women Sardarin	Percentage %
Nahorani	70	2	2.86
Sessa	69	1	1.44
Shakomato	66	0	0
Dhullie	59	1	1.69
Nirmala	15	0	0
Nya Gogra	71	2	2.82
Total	350	6	1.71

Source: Field Survey, 07/02/2013

From their narratives presented in Table 1.4, it is found that out of total 350 respondent women who worked in the Sample Tea Estates, only 6 women found to be assigned as Sardarin. There were two female Sardarin in Nahorani, two in Nya Gogra, one in Sessa and one in Dhullie Tea Estates. It is interesting to note here that in Shakomato and Nirmala, no women labour found to be assigned as Sardarin. The Table 1.4 revealed the fact that Tea Estates were not giving preference to increase the number of women Sardarin. By sketching the past experiences of the respondents, the above table shows the gender bias against female labour. Men dominated the supervisory staff in both factories and gardens.

CONCLUSION:

Women's labour in Tea Estates showed their gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves. Tea-producing through intensive labour remained very important occupation for the women of the surveyed Tea Estates. From the narratives of respondents, it is apparent that occupational mobility was less among the women workers and such deprivation is still exists in the Tea Estates. Women workers were born and brought up in the Tea Estates. Therefore, there was no opportunity for them to engage in any outside work other than plantation work. Due to occupational immobility they have to depend largely on the employers, as such and hence, being largely exploited in paid work.

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