

Gender, Identity Politics, and Emerging Underclass amongst Labour Force: A Study of Tea Gardens in North Bengal, India

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ABSTRACT

The present paper would try to examine emerging issues of sustainability and livelihood under the broader spectrum of gender and labour relation in tea gardens, especially post closure. The present discourse will focus on the sufferings and hardships of the displaced women workers as 'poorest of the poor' in the tea belt of North Bengal. Women workers emerging as 'underclass' with historical underpinnings of feminization of workforce, identity politics, gender exploitation and politics of 'exclusivity' would also be debated from feminists' Diaspora and folk literature. The paper also provides a 'gendered narrative of women plantation workers' collected through interpretative approach. Women as 'working class community', tolerated and withstood oppression and exploitation of colonial enterprise and co-opted with the patriarchal plantation space over centuries for their living & livelihood are the main 'stakeholders' of this paper.

Keywords: Tea plantation, women plantation workers, closure of tea gardens, Underclass, livelihood, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Context of Present Discourse

Tea industry historically has been the second largest employment provider in India. Tea plantations employ approximately 1.1 million workers with more than 50% of women labourers. However, over the years the pivotal role of tea plantations in providing stable and sustainable livelihood to tribal and other communities has been dwindling. Tea industry in North Bengal mainly Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling district has been facing turbulence since 2001 onwards. With the advent of globalization, open market economy and free trade the industry in general went through crisis. The crisis emanated out of high competition, excessive price wars by the emerging new players like Srilanka, Turkey, Kenya, and Indonesia leading to volatility in international tea markets. Further at the domestic level decline in auction prices of Indian tea added problems to the industry and led to frequent sickness and closures of tea gardens. Retrenchment and lay-off of workers became part of daily news in North Bengal region. During 2001- 08, a total of 22 gardens were closed down in Jalpaiguri District alone rendering 25,000 permanent workers jobless and

affecting about 95,000 people's livelihood. Each of the garden reported massive liabilities owed to the workers. In 18 gardens (data collected till 2010) workers were to be paid together Rs. 144,842,831.00 as Provident Fund (both employers and employees share), Rs. 46,206,762.91 as gratuity and Rs.175, 194,059.62 as salary, wages and other benefits. The total dues to workers was Rs.366,243,653.53, amounting to Rs.21,340 per head or about 17 months of wages @ of Rs. 45.90 per day (Indian Tea Garden Association, 2010). These lockouts were illegal as no prior notices were served to the workers. The Payment of Wages Act, 1936 and other labour laws were also infringed, as the owners failed to settle workers' dues. In many cases of small gardens' workers were not paid even sanctioned wage rates, provident funds, reproductive and medical benefits¹.

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For these plantation workers, hegemony of colonial ownership and its oppressive practices continued in post colonized India by the rich owners and feudal lords and thereafter by industrialists. In the aftermath of global era, closure of tea gardens (2001 onwards), displaced workers, squalor, starvation, illness and deaths confirmed vicious circle of age-old exploitation and indifference towards working class at the hands of garden owners.

The impact of loss of livelihood was especially severe on the women workers as they constituted majority of the workforce in the tea producing belt. These women were extensively involved in the plantations work for their livelihood over the centuries. Surprisingly enough, even after independence, they have been kept away from active unionization. Therefore, during the post closure crisis 'women's collective' failed to represent and voice their struggle & sufferings to the respective State authorities, social agencies or operators to seek relief, alternative livelihood or justice.

Though a significant number of these tribal women were sole bread earners for their family, yet they were seldom exposed beyond tea garden work environment. But post closure, these women were suddenly succumbed to the external world of market forces and various forms of exploitation and faced displacement, economic disempowerment, isolation (in their own identity struggle), psychological trauma, reproductive health hazards, and variegated forms of exploitations within and outside of their garden space. Many women workers committed suicides or made a life attempt, or tried finding out desperate solutions to explore other means of livelihood like breaking and collecting stones from the river bed, working illegally in factories in Bhutan – Bengal border, begging, petty thefts, giving their girl child for domestic work outside of the State or into the hands of pimps, where many became victims of illegal trafficking and flesh trade. Women

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workers went through an unimaginable plight, exploitation and deprivation during all these years. Even today such condition prevails to a large extent. Starvation, pre-mature deaths, women giving still births and deaths due to loss of blood have

FOCUS OF THE PRESENT PAPER

Keeping this backdrop in consideration, the present paper would try to examine emerging issues of sustainability and livelihood under the broader spectrum of gender and labour relation in tea gardens, especially post closure. The present discourse will also try to understand the sufferings and hardships of the displaced women workers as 'poorest of the poor' in the tea belt of North Bengal. Women workers emerging as 'underclass' with historical underpinnings of feminization of workforce, identity politics, gender exploitation and politics of 'exclusivity' would also be debated from feminists' diaspora and folk literature. The present work will dwell into the past and in the present to provide a 'gendered narrative of women plantation workers' collected from their 'oral history', focused group discussion, case studies backed by previous research, government documents and contemporary popular culture during colonial period. Women who tolerated and withstood oppression and exploitation of colonial enterprise and co-opted with the patriarchal plantation space over decades for their living are the main 'stakeholders' of this paper.

TEA PLANTATION & FEMINIZATION OF WORKFORCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Participation of women's labour force in the tea plantation industry in North Bengal has a very chequered and long history. Barring a brief interruption of a few years during the Second World War and the great depression of 1930s, tribal (Adhivasi) and Nepali women have all along comprised significant percentage of workforce (refer table -1) in this region. This is relevant even in present day composition of labour as well (Bose, 1993; Sen, 1994;96; Labour Bureau, 2008-2009; Census of India, 1901-31; Banerjee, 1989). This trend is in sharp contrast to the participation of women that has been strikingly low in other industries like jute, tobacco (bidi) making, paper mills etc. in the state of Bengal during colonized era. However, women participation otherwise was always low in Bengal

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Table1. Social Composition among Tea Growers cum Workers (2011-12)

District	Social Group				
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Castes (OBC)	Other	Total
Darjeeling	2062 (2.88)	3280 (4.58)	38416 (53.60)	27910 (38.94)	71668 (100)
Jalpaiguri	150980 (66.69)	1300 (0.57)	28088 (12.41)	46023 (20.33)	226391 (100)
Kuci Bihar	0	23255 (100)	0	0	23255 (100)
Uttar Dinajur	0	0	0	4581 (100)	4581 (100)
Total	153042 (46.96)	27835 (8.54)	66504 (20.41)	78514 (24.09)	325895 (100)

Source: NSSO 68th round on employment and unemployment, 2011-12, calculated.

Deep-rooted Bengali cultural values of hostility towards independent working women, the dominant patriarchal ideology of the state, lack of concern on the issues of women's work by the nationalist movement, trade unions and women's organisations, combined with the relative wealth and prosperity of the province acted as hindrances towards the growth and supply of female labour from and within the state (Banerjee, 1989; Bhadra, 1992; Mukherjee, 1995). But in the case of tea plantation, it was highly female dominated labour force starting from colonization till date.

The reasons behind women outnumbering men in tea plantations of North Bengal can be traced back in the capitalistic development of tea industry. It is difficult to comprehend the historical past of women's work in plantation industry without analyzing the specific trajectories of capitalistic expansion in this region. It can be argued as to why, time and again, throughout the history, the capitalist tea planters backed by the colonial state rules /legislations showed their preference for women labour? Was it to utilize women proficiently and profitability in accordance with their specific demand and necessity, or was it their patriarchal perception and prejudices towards women workers for selective work at plantations resulted to a dominantly feminized workforce in tea industry?

From early 18th century (1823), with the discovery of Tea leaf(s) by Major Robert Bruce of the British army, on colonized soil of upper eastern India especially in Assam and lower plateau of North Bengal, the major concern was the 'supply of labour'. Even though capital was not a problem for the tea industry from its very beginning for Britishers but in the midst of dense forest and rough mountains tracks, paramount challenges were how to bring a steady workforce, how to control and settle and make a favourable fertile land ready for settling

tea plantation or tea gardens in this remote region. The work was paramount for them from clearing forest land, to building bungalows, to plant tea bushes and meeting the increasing demand of tea in the international market. But it was a challenging yet profitable possibility for colonizers (Bhowmik, 1981; Bhadra, 1992; Chaudhury and Varma, 2002).

Local people, 'bhumiputras' (sons of the soil) of North Bengal region were unwilling to work in the tea plantations due to various reasons like the hazardous and arduous nature of tea cultivation, low wages and lack of exposure to wage work since they belonged to agricultural communities, many of them were farmers of small land holding etc. Further they did not allow their women also to work not even in the lure of extra wage earnings because their patriarchal social structure kept women housebound ((Xaxa,1985; Chatterjee, 1995; 2001; Chatterjee, 1995:45; Besky, 2014; Banerjee, 1989; Jose, 1987; Sen, 1999; Dev, 2002) . But according to the Scholar like Ghosh (1999), colonizers wanted docile nature of labour force so that they could exploit and manipulate maximum out of them which were not possible from bhumiputras. Therefore, imperial enterprise intentionally chose migrant labour, by displacing from their root and keeping them vulnerable as indentured labour, compelled to work in tea plantations. Hence, intention of keeping sort of erratic supply of labor who would also be illiterate, innocent and docile in nature, influenced the colonial planters to bring women labour migrated from outside of North Bengal and Assam (Chatterjee, 1995). The targeted area was whole Chotanagpur belt presently part of Orissa.

PLANTATION, FAMILY SYSTEM OF RECRUITMENT AS TOOL TO BUILD FEMINIZED WORKFORCE

A unique policy was introduced by colonial entrepreneurs was to recruit the whole family as

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an inclusive labour force for the plantation. This ‘family system of Recruitment’ and settlement also allowed children to work in the tea gardens with their parents with minimum wage. The status of ‘family recruitment’, as the ‘unfree’ or indentured labour contract tied them up under an ‘exclusive work status’ where they were given shelter, weekly ration (rice grain, salt, sugar and oil), free medication to all, and employment of the physically able family members including children. They emphasized specifically on young married women recruitment than men that is still relevant in recent gender and labour structure in tea gardens (refer table 2). Pre-condition was attached to the recruitment policy

that employed women would stay under a family structure tuned to patriarchal subjugation to gain control over their labour and sexuality. The newly formed organized labour was comprised only of Adivasi and Nepali communities into plantation hinterlands of North Bengal. Therefore, not only men, but also women and children were recruited though this system based on coercion, force, deception or regulations to substantiate demands for supply of labour. Such settlement of families as inclusive labour guaranteed colonisers more stable and self-reproducing workforce for their plantations that would work for generations to come and was proved successful.

Table2. Woman tea growers cum workers: Marital Status

District	Marital Status			
	Never Married	Currently Married	Widowed	Total
Darjeeling		22827 (54.41)	19125 (45.59)	41952 (100)
Jalpaiguri		55781 (79.11)	14734 (20.89)	70515 (100)
Koch Bihar		5491 (50)	5491 (50)	10982 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	1383 (100)			1383 (100)
Total	1383(1.11)	84099 (67.37)	39350 (31.52)	124832 (100)

Source: NSSO 68th round on employment and unemployment, 2011-12, calculated.

Further, the colonial planters’ family recruitment policy was also rightly perceived that the presence of their family members (women and children) in the tea plantations would help to stabilise the male migrants labour and prevent them from returning to their homelands. This proved to be true and considered as an index of their permanency of migratory resettlement (Chatterjee, 1995; Sen, 1999). As the recruiters took thousands of women as part of their labour force, it was conditional that they would stay under a family structured system tuned under patriarchic indices that would control their sexuality and reproduction and prevent them to be unfettered for future generations. This eventually resulted in more inclusion of women in the plantation workforce to meet both reproductive and productive need (Dasgupta, 1986; Engels, 1996; Sen, 1999; 2002; Chatterjee, 2001). Over decades, female labourers in the tea gardens became well accustomed that their role becomes imperative to this industry, especially in North-east India, that became atypical of a feminized labour force of plantation economy (Atkins, 1957; Sengupta, 1960; Varma, 2011).

In addition, by knowing hearsay, newly emerging capitalist production in North-eastern plantation economies and commercialisation of

agriculture that were proving wage based work in plantation, large numbers of poor, impoverished & marginal agricultural labourers from countryside migrated towards this part of India. Early 40’s labour force came from Bihar, UP, Orissa and even some part of south India. Further, the draconian colonial revenue policies, abusive family situations and spiraling rent demands pushed hundreds of families towards north Bengal seeking livelihood in plantation economy. Tea gardens were open for free recruitment, especially more for women as women had several nature of work to do at the garden and the most importantly ‘the plucking of the leafs’ that needed nimble fingers and tender hands as perceived by colonial male entrepreneurs.

These women, despite of having preoccupied with family chores and procreation, exhibited skill beyond their domesticity and became a steady efficient hand at the plucking job compared to men. As a result, work in tea plantations had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains of work. Routine and repetitive nature of the daily task like plucking of tea leaves, weeding, transplanting, manuring, pruning, nursing young tea plants etc were required to have quintessentially feminine and therefore needed women at a large number and the

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arduous work of maintenance of the tea plantations and factory work, required more physical strength, to be done by men in lesser numbers (Bhowmik, 1981, Chatterjee, 2001; Varma, 2005; Sen, 2002). Another lucrative reason to prefer women labour

was to keep wages low at maximum work. Women were paid much less compared to men, for doing the same task and hour all along till the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act of 1975 (Bhowmik, 1981; Sen, 1999; 2000).

Table 3. Male-female-adolescent and children since 1950 to 2000 as below:

Year	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
1950	-	-	-	-	948598 (100)
1961	399907 (49)	368464 (45.15)	25677 (3.15)	22012 (2.70)	816060 (100)
1970	342871 (46.36)	337364 (45.61)	23098 (3.12)	36313 (4.91)	739646 (100)
1980	372285 (43.97)	384641 (45.43)	31351 (3.70)	58382 (6.90)	846659 (100)
1990	453001 (45.91)	458519 (46.47)	24148 (2.44)	51113 (5.18)	986781 (100)
2000	572067 (47.13)	593571 (49.05)	46217 (3.82)	-	1210055 (100)
2008	-	381,474 (53.43)	-	-	-

Source: Compilation from various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India & Statistical Profile on Women Labour Bureau (2000-12)

Note: a). the category of 'children' and 'adolescent' labourers also include girls, but there is no gender disaggregated data available for these two categories. ; b) For 1950, data on labour employed is not available by the given categories. c) The employment of children below the age of 14 years has been prohibited in the tea industry under the Child Labour (Abolition & Regulation) Act of 1986. However, till 1990 the figures show the prevalence of child labour. d). Further male employment also includes office & managerial assistance staff in the plantations, 5). This includes combined figures for the women workers in three tea growing regions, namely, Terai, Dooars and Darjeeling Hills in the two districts, namely, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.

The reasons for such recruitment policy were: (a) the plantation work is only a special kind of agricultural work and is therefore, familiar to Indian women, as the vast majority of whom live in rural areas; (b) facilities have been given to male workers to settle on (coolie line), or in the vicinity of the plantations and to make their wives and families to work with them and (c) under the old system, labour contract was based on the principle of utilizing every able bodied person of the family and their labour and fixing the wage rates accordingly; many women had to seek employment in order to balance the family budget. Although, post independence, the system has been abolished, the wage system and the need for supplementary earnings still remains a significant concern even in present decades.

It was rather regarded as an impediment on the productive work of women. Reproductive work of women was not recognized but perceived by the colonizers as most significant to maintain a 'family system' of recruitment. Reproductive work was not merely giving birth to children, but also includes preparation of food to feed the man who goes to work whole day in tea gardens and nurture the family as well. For more than a century, these women workers have trans-generationally lived within their 'exclusive work status' of recruitment' & ethnic entitlement as a close-knit plantation community popularly called 'labour line' in the tea plantation enclave.

It is further interesting to note here, in the mountain areas and valleys of Darjeeling, preponderance of female workforce was of another additional reason can be considered as "pull and push factors". During the colonial regime, Britishers deployed the Gurkha soldiers, recruited from Nepal and Nepali migrants resided in Darjeeling. Gorkha Army was deployed to fight for British imperialist not only to suppress nationalist movements but also to contemporary colonial forces like Portuguese, France, Dutch and later during world war II, they fought war across the globe. However, British army did not recruit the lower castes comprising of Kamis, Damais and Sarkis as fighting soldiers but were taken as 'laskars' as part of the service group for the regiment. As a result, more and more Nepali men were sent away from Darjeeling, the female Nepali labourers remained on the tea plantations (Besky, 2014). As data revealed, from 1939-1944, the number of women workers compared to male workers increased significantly in the Darjeeling tea plantations, thereby changing the gender ratio of the labour force in these tea gardens (Dash, 1947).

Hence, it can be stated that tea plantation work was more of women's domain and therefore feminisation of labour force in tea gardens was an offshoot of well planned strategies of imperial enterprise. British colonial planters and military

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administrators used labour force by gender specification, where men were required for British army and women and children were made to employ in plantation either by coercion or force.

ORAL HISTORY & LIFE HISTORY AS METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Present research, was based heavily on qualitative research methods, more so with a socio-ethnographical approach. Collection of oral history & life histories as methodological tool was crucial as it helped me to narrate the lives of these women workers' life situation and emerging livelihood issues. Their collective voice demonstrated compelling stories of their journey through a transition of conquest, settlement or defeat with an extended reflection on the cultures of hierarchy, power dynamics, and gender discrimination in the living space of tea plantations, extended to surrounding villages. Further, oral history helped me to examine the inter-relation between women, work and gender identity within the plantation space. A 'gendered narrative' made me understand these women in the context of plantation economy in relation to class, identity and their given social-cultural structure (patriarchy) & space (tea gardens). It made me understand the covert operations of 'gender, labour and capital' in the plantation enclave & their 'exploited situation' caught within the prism of multiple identities inside the garden space as isolated, explicated and bereft of their 'exclusive status'. Oral histories and collective narratives enabled me to capture 'a gendered life experience' in tea gardens from an alternative perspective (feminist scholarship) that would have been otherwise missing from the mainstream labour studies. It was confirmed by the experiences shared by plantation women, that history did not only happen to colonized working men in plantation economy but also to women, whose narrative is impregnated with struggle, gender vulnerability and exploitation and the culture of silence over the centuries in plantation labour studies in North Bengal both in pre and post colonized India. These narratives as factual binaries within plantation space existed over centuries. For example, owners vs workers, male workers vs female workers, upper caste vs lower caste or general categories vs tribal communities, wage vs salary and so on evidenced a long history and culture of neglecting these women workers by the owners/management or the whole patriarchal social environment surrounding them. As it has been observed that be it open or closed, garden management /owner

always consider workers as undifferentiated economic beings defined only by their class or gender identity'.

GENDER, IDENTITY POLITICS, ADHIVASI QUESTIONS: AND IDENTIFICATION OF A NEW CLASS

Indigenous population of The Chota Nagpur regions, presently part of States like, Orissa, Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Bengal was the target communities for the colonial planters. They were predominantly adivasis like Oraon, Munda, Santhal, Khol, Ho and Kharia, who were extremely poor, famished and famine-ridden, unknown about the world outside their closet of community living (Tinker, 1974; Guha, 1977; Jain, 1988) and therefore easy target to be pulled into plantation labour force. Das Gupta (1992) stated "instead of the market mechanism, force, both overt and concealed, politico-legal mechanisms became of crucial importance in mobilizing plantation labour in North-east India". For example, Government of Bengal under the pressure of the powerful planters' lobby introduced the Transport of Native Labourers Act (III) of 1863 (amended in 1865), which encoded a superintendent of emigration, who was empowered to refuse embarkation passes, if any batch contained fewer than one female to every four male labourers (Chatterjee, 1995; Sen, 1996; 1994). Therefore, be it through political or legal force, or using deceptive strategies through local agents called "Arkits", women were indispensable part of plantation labour force in north Bengal and Assam and were enormously exploited. A woman worker's statement of Baloma Tea Estate in Assam before the RCLI recorded as "I go to work between 6/7 am in the morning, and I return home at 5p.m in the evening" and "I am even made to work when I am ill", (RCLI, 1931: 115). Women coolies (as called by the colonizers) were not even spared from arduous work during their pregnancy or permitted to stay longer than four to five days at home after child-birth as stated by (Varma, 2011) or Report of Labour Emigration into Assam (1884). Death of children were common as female coolies would carry the child on her back, while many of them would be dehydrated with heat or starved to death. Thus, through such kind of measures, almost every aspect of women workers' lives, including those that are supposed to be in the 'private sphere' was controlled by the colonial planters. Enclave plantation area was nothing but a fenced green prison for women labourers.

Such centuries old structure of exploitation, systematic social exclusion, economic deprivation under the 'exclusive status of plantation workers' raise the 'adivasi question' inextricably with gender & labour relation and their 'identity politics' in larger context. It is more pertinent in post globalised realm of closed plantation economy, where, women have become vulnerable to an extreme context to be exploited by her displaced labour, exclusive status, ethnic & gender identity, leading to starvation, death and flesh trade of 'her' or her own tribe (other young women).

'Identity politics' became a popular tool played by the new owners/management lobby as against these women within their lived reality of oppression, deprivation and social exclusion. Gender identity was pitted against other identity of working class in relation to her social positioning as 'adivasi'. It was easier for the owners' lobby to get rid off these women as they played 'these multiple identities' as weakness to exploit and lay them off the job unguarded. These women bereft of political identity or power as a 'working class' & socially secluded became extremely vulnerable to exploitations as soon they were exposed to the world beyond plantation enclave. A woman worker after the closure of garden shared " ...my husband was 39 and suffered frequent fever, and stomach pain². One day he complained too much pain, me and my son hospitalized him at Lakhipara hospital. We have free medication provision for general illness in complicated case; hospital may demand certain medicines to buy or blood to give? In my husband case they had told me to buy few medicines, i couldn't purchase. After a week of his third time of hospitalization he died, doctor told me 'heart attack'. I always think he was too young to have heart attack. "...since my husband passed away, I am always on look out for jobs outside our garden, some smaller gardens are giving hour basis job and at times, there are contractors who collect stones from rivers, I go and join other women. But this is not something we should do, should do our plantation work in the garden. However, I will hold this quarter

²Note: stomach pains are very common amongst male workers as when they don't have jobs or food to eat, they easily get local liquor (hadia) from any village quarters or gatherings of male workers in the evening between garden and 'coolie quarters' premises

(company provided place to stay) till end, if my son wants he can go to cities for better options".

The resistance proved their attachment towards garden soil and vulnerability of not knowing any other skill after displacement from their regular work. "we are here for generations; I grew here and got married here. If the management is refusing to provide us sustenance, we may die but won't leave the garden". I do not know any other world beyond these gardens' - this contextualized an appropriate representation of the above explanation.

Seeking alternative means of livelihood beyond plantation became highly challenging for them. Limited 'working skill', language disadvantage, lack of social mobility, inadequacy to adapt to outer world made them desperate for mere survival. The process of continuous negotiation to break away for more lower than their previous positioning of daily wages, casual work, lower & discriminatory wages with maximum work load, living inside garden areas without any provision of ration, electricity, water supply or medication are fewer examples of their desperate attempt to survive post closure. Punitive patriarchy that forced these women into deviation from their routine normal life to sex trade (knowingly or unknowingly) all provided an understanding of their continuous struggle of livelihood mainly due to their gender identity or ethnic identity, or due to their lack of exposure to life beyond plantation space. A woman of mid 40s shared her agony "its been more than five years, gardens have been closed, I tried very hard to keep my children with me, but after my husband died, I became helpless, I was scared that my children will die without food and medicines like their father. So I decided to send my son and two daughters in the city. The woman who took my children says that they are all fine and doing work in the city. It's been more than two years I haven't heard from them. Even though I feel, they should have been with me but it's too late now, I think I lost everything"

Therefore, women workers with their multiple identities (Gender/ economic/ ethnic/ caste identity) were in continuous interaction within the given space of tea gardens. The failure or the success of their actions exhibited their positioning as lower and the marginalized, yet thriving for negotiation and survival. Identity politics played a major role here as it was

indicated a collective struggle of women against oppressor be it management or the owners lobby. Further, as conditioned by the deteriorating economic situation in an enclave economic and social environment, the resultant hierarchies of patriarchal norms worsen the misery; can be well understood through their narratives that evidenced deprivation and misery. But looking deeper in the process, their role as ‘agency’ can also be understood. A respondent candidly shared *“garden have been closed for years now, we (women) all know , it is not going to open again, I have lost trust in the union as well. They are only interested to use us to come on the news; our situation is deteriorating day by day. To save our family, we have sent our sons to town or allowing our daughters to go to big cities, some never returned, neither most of us want them to return. It’s better to work and live there, than starve and die here. It is not my age (38+) to go far away from leaving my ill husband alone, further, why should I leave my own place? ...will do any work to survive till end but not leave the garden”*

The fear and despair of their present life situations that often felt through what they shared, a woman of late 20s said *“we are reducing by number day by day . Many of my friends died in past seven years. I am scared to go out of this area as I cannot even speak Hindi well. My children are very young; have to be here to help them to live till they are grown up to look for jobs. They demand fish and rice for meals but how will I give that, even if we hunt a bird we just have to burn it and eat with salt ,we don’t have enough spices to make curry. Another one shared that *“Sometimes few of us go to other gardens where gardens run by contractors. They give work not specific to the workers but to the workers who are demanding less wage and equal hours. I have worked so far in four gardens including my own. All are run by contractors or owners or management who never visited our ‘coolie line’. Garden may, not be open again fully. These days no party workers come in support. It looks like they have abandoned us. We also do not need them, i dont think they have helped us anyway or gave our long due wages to ease our struggle even for few month”* – substantiate their desperation of survival, vulnerability towards outer world and compulsion to live on in displaced livelihood & exploited situations.*

Above observations confirmed that be it employed or displaced, women plantation workers in their

garden enclave have been always considered as mere categories of social location or economic positionalities, they posit along the lowest axis of power positioning and identities in a ‘gendered way’ and therefore remained disadvantaged. But after the massive closure of tea gardens, emerging situations of displacement of work, growing economic impoverishment, poor and desperate negotiation with their alternative work and wage for survival, starvation and death, selling their children off the gardens or plantation region all indicates that these women became worst victim of closure and affected by the process of marginalization and socio-economic exclusion by the groups of powerful agencies, men or punitive patriarchal settling that favoured the exploiters than exploited. It specifies a transition from one form of exploitation to another, if not by owners anymore, it’s the newly emerging contractors of the gardens, or agencies outside the gardens exploiting their innocence, lack of knowledge, gender vulnerability, dire need for money or their rights and depriving them from all corners of possibilities of survival & basic livelihood. A class therefore emerges from and within the working class. A class lowest of low and poorest of the poor can be called as ‘underclass’ representing only ‘feminized displaced labour force’ of the closed gardens of terei of North Bengal.

UNDERCLASS, AN EMERGING CLASS WITHIN WORKING CLASS: OBSERVATIONS AND TREND

For the present discourse the term ‘class’ would indicate a woman workers’ position in relation to the means of economic production. The ‘class position’ of a woman in the plantation system is in the same positioning of their fathers and husbands as workers. This implies that women share similar ‘work statuses with their respective male class structure. But ‘gender’ indicates more complicated identification of social structures, practices and ideologies that perpetuate and reinforce the unequal position of a woman in a man’s world, such as patriarchy. But in context of Tea plantation system, patriarchy is not simply control over women’s body in the sphere of reproduction, but it is control over her total labour. Women’s labour is exchanged for consumption, which is determined by the male head of the household. This further leads to identify various forces that have operated to dominate the space & work identity of women

and placed them in a 'gendered way' at the lowest bottom of hierarchical axis conducive to exploitation. Women would work the same hour with lower wages (Act in 1975) as compare to male; managers and office staff represented high caste male Bengalis and low-caste remain workers, No opportunities of vertical mobility for women workers were provided within the tea gardens. Education is one of the social indicators that has been playing a very crucial role in social isolation and economic deprivation of these tribal women communities. It is also interesting to observe despite governmental intervention (though not enough) and other non-governmental efforts, these women workers still holds 'inferior' class of citizenship with minimum rights and are socially discriminated as a result of their ethnic identities and no educational or political empowerment. Low education rate (in Jalpaigudi illiterate constitute 38.72 %; below primary 20.37% and primary level constitute 40.91(NSSO, 2011-12) for these plantation workers and their daughters have kept them weaker to challenge the patriarchic structural hierarchy of work, wage and gender relation. Illiteracy has been the dominant key for the newly emerged managers/owners groups to exploit them to the maximum possible and by illegally formed employment agencies to trick them into fake promises and send them to places outside their plantation space. So, women, were not just mere categories of social location or economic positioning, they also adhere to the lowest rank of the 'power structure' and therefore vulnerable to extreme exploitation in the hands of powerful (owners/managers/newly emerged contractors) who could manipulate their multiple Identities within and outside tea enclave and resultantly placing women at lower status permanently in such 'male dominated economic structure & garden space'.

In addition, as a State policy, these tribal communities engaged in plantation work didn't have the right to own a land in North Bengal plantation region. Therefore, over the period, lack of entitlements, education and ethnic identity (schedule caste and tribe) all together became a critical area of concern linked to issues of marginalisation and exclusion. Women population as dominant representation of this community adds more complexity to the crisis as a whole, especially post the closure of tea gardens by making them more vulnerable of drastically

changing economic scenario of plantation economy.

Post globalization, when hundreds of tea gardens faced severe challenges to remain afloat and many became sick and significant numbers of gardens gradually were closed down with huge debt and dues on the face of workers, approximate displacement of the workforce are more than 80,000 or so. A closer look at their alternative means of livelihood and life situations post displacement where they negotiated and bargain for wages and sold their labour. Instead of permanent jobs, these women agreed upon hour basis contract wages and also agreed to negotiate with much lower wage rate (as volatile as Rs.120 - 165) per day and also faced irregular payment, extension of work hours uncounted as part of wage and severe reproductive health hazardous.

Post closure 2000- 2010, at the peak of crisis, women's employment on daily contract in the tea industry of West Bengal increased by 25.33 per cent as compared to the average daily employment of workers in this industry in that state witnessed a decadal drop (1998-2008) by 25.14 per cent (Labour Bureau, 2012:140). Women were comparatively preferred than male even during crisis period as they were out of active unionization, thus didn't have power to negotiate and docile to be exploited with lowest or minimum wages, irregular and unorganized ways. If a male worker is employed, his dependents will be all of his family members including parents and wife. But if a female worker is employed her dependents will be only her children. This is sheer patriarchic inclusion of gender and work culture. For the daily quota of plucking is usually fixed by the management in consultation with the unions. In most of the tea gardens in the Dooars it is between 26-27 kilograms. In some of the gardens where quality plucking is encouraged, this quota is more flexible.

The total quantity of tea leaves plucked by a worker in a day is measured by adding up the quantities arrived at each of the three weighing. Normally, if a worker falls short of the daily quota, then she is considered absent for the day and loses the current daily wage of Rs.45.90. Instead she gets an amount which is equal to the product of the actual quantity she has plucked and 50 paise. This system of payment is called 'parota' in tea garden parlance which is actually proportionate wages. On the other hand, if she

plucks over and above the quota, then she is entitled to the fixed daily wage plus an incentive amount called 'extra leaf price'. This is actually the product of the excess quantity of leaves plucked over 26-27 kgs. and 50 paisa. But during closure, even these minimum basics of wages were manipulated by the contractors or Operating Management Committee (OMC) clearly indicated a transition from one form of exploitation to another form of exploitation by the new form of power structure.

The formation of 'underclass', therefore, can be considered as an outcome of post closure of tea plantations driven by several forces like sickness & closure of tea gardens, displacement, poverty, exploitation of the 'gendered labour', identity crisis, identity politics & deprivation of 'the exclusivity of the work status' of women workers and so on contributing to a newly formation of class within the 'working class', a class more deprived, more excluded and exploited due to its gender specificity. The 'underclass' here is also more understood in terms of capital and production relation and also in relation to other factors like family system, reproductive role, gender and work relation in the plantation system. Therefore 'underclass' is characterized by not only economic indicators, but by ethnic identity, wage discrimination, gender specific exploitation, gender vulnerability, standard of living that are below poverty line(BPL), social isolation and so on, having its root in colonial history of exploitation to present context of 'plantation crisis' of patriarchal garden system of operations.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Present paper was an attempt to analyse feminization of labour force with an historical overview. The nature of recruitment that was women centric and various changes of within gender and work relation that took place has been discussed with reference to historical analysis of the development. The nature and pattern work, wages, the legislations that were brought by the state to ease out the function of the capitalist entrepreneurs in tea gardens and the absence of political participation of women workers – were few important factors that could explain the deep rooted exploitation of the plantation workers over centuries by the colonial planters. The present discussion has also tried to examine the interface between class and gender and also examined whether in the course of political struggles, gender has been

subsumed by class. The paper also tried to explore how deeply patriarchy has been entrenched and dominantly functional within the garden space in relation to gender and work culture, often backed by state by formulating laws and policies to safeguard owner's interest over workers. It argued how in Post colonial/post globalization, The plantation workers Act 1957 failed to protect workers' interest when gardens suffered sickness and closure. Thousands of workers with more than 55% of women were displaced with lakhs of rupees of dues of provident funds and wages, no promises to further jobs or availability of alternative livelihood. The status of 'working class' alone, appeared ineffective, especially for women workers as they had limited participation in the active unionization and were weak in their collective agential roles to address the thriving plight of poverty, starvation & displacement and exploitations.

Gender and Identity politics has also been an important part of the present discussion, as from the inception of British colonial enterprise in plantation recruitment system; it is the poor tribal communities that represented the labour force with a significant majority of women workers. Displacement from their root and replacing them inside the tea enclave by coercive forces made them victim of their life situation and caste identity. It was easy to trap these tribal communities as they were ridden with utter poverty, illiteracy and socially marginalized from the mainstream life of opportunities and therefore was easy to be beguiled with fake promises of 'work and good life'. The exclusive work status of keeping family, regulated wages, housing, medical facilities though apparently look favourable but these were the same factors that kept them isolated and secluded from the mainstream of economic opportunities & social life for centuries. The identity of 'adhivasi' question becomes more pertinent, when lack of worldly exposure and education made them more dependent on Tea plantation economy and vulnerable to various forms of exploitations.

Post closure of tea gardens, newly emerged contractors or short-term owner's only sought profit with maximum exploitation of their labour. Low wages, fear of no work, availability of no substantial alternative livelihood and their 'being women' all proved to be catastrophic in their subverted narratives of experience filled with sufferings. Death of their loved ones, fear & uncertainty of future, and selling their own

children for slavery of work or sex trade with no hope of seeing them again were traumatic to these women Under such tormenting and distressful context, there is an emerging formation of another 'class' which stays at the lowest bottom of all working class and can be called as 'underclass'. Thus 'underclass' becomes an offshoot of the forces like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, displacement, ethnic and 'gendered' identity post closure of tea gardens. Further, underclass is essentially gender specific and that are of displaced women workers.

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