

History, Marginality and Tea Garden Women: A Case Study of Jorhat District of Assam

*A thesis submitted to the Assam University, Silchar in partial fulfillment
of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Department of History*

Submitted by
Gautam Das

(Reg. No: PhD/3099/17, Dt.31.03.2017)

Under the Supervision of
Dr. Vulli Dhanaraju
Assistant Professor, Department of History
Assam University, Diphu Campus



**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
JADUNATH SARKAR SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
ASSAM UNIVERSITY, DIPHU CAMPUS**

JUNE-2019

- ✓ Majority women worker (82.5%) says that they do not join in the meetings because of male dominance in this field. It is revealed from the study that the tea garden labour organizations are fully male dominated.

- ✓ Regarding the service of Trade Union about 82% of women workers say that the union does not serve to the interest of women workers. In the plantation society the women workers are practically unskilled. They are illiterate and organizationally unsophisticated. They themselves are uninterested towards union and organizations and such type of inactiveness ultimately leads to their marginalization in the society.

- ✓ Out of 240 female respondents, there are 198 respondents who say that they have no time to attend the meetings of organizations. It is revealed from the study that majority women workers of tea gardens of Jorhat district are not prepared themselves to devote time for any organizations. It can be said that such type of inactiveness of plantation women compel them to accept their own exploitation.

CHAPTER-VII

CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary

The establishment of tea industry in Assam not only changed the existing demography of Assam but also changed the socio-economic history of Assam. The total area under

the cultivation is accounting for more than half of the country's total area under tea. With the establishment of tea garden in Assam, the tea companies were in great need of utilizing huge labour force for the growth of tea industries, which they could not manage locally. These indentured labour forces of tea gardens of Assam are now very important and integral part of the socio-economic life of Assam and also form the backbone of the Assamese tea industry.

The special feature of plantation industry is that it not only employs the men members but also the women and children above the age of 14 years and the women play an important role. Plantation is the only non-household industry in the organized sector where women's employment has increased. Of both male and female workers of plantation, it is the women who are the worst victims and the most discriminated groups in the society. Their participation in the economy and contribution to the household income became more evident but such participation has added more burden to their work with less recognition. These working class women are strictly socialized to work uncomplainingly, under patriarchal control, at any allotted task however labourious, physically harmful or badly paid it may be. They are also the denial of getting full membership of society due to their gender specific roles i.e. the traditional division of labour between men and women and assigned to them by the structural domination of the society. Women has been marginalized and forced to attain marginal status by the dominant group of the society. The tea garden women workers, apart from being marginalized by virtue of their gender, social status relating to caste, tribe and class are also significant to push them to a state of marginality.

In this context an attempt has been made in this study to examine the factors responsible for the marginalization of tea garden women and understand how the patriarchy and structural hegemony of the society affects their behavior patterns and life-styles. The tea plantation industry has a distinct from of productive organization which gives rise to certain specific social relations. This particular study emphasizes the role of plantation women in the productive process of plantation system, their social activities and steps to strengthening position, their plural voices against structural domination, their life and work outside the family in employment and their life and work within their family and the quality of living conditions.

Further view of the fact that plantation women's status and activities varies from tea garden to tea garden and from one group to another, data has been collected from members belonging to different ethnic, age, literate and illiterate groups. As the tea garden women workers are settled in 86 different tea gardens of different villages, Moujas, Community Development Blocks and Revenue Circles in Jorhat district; data has been collected mainly from two divisions Jorhat and Titabor.

7.2 Main Argument of the Study

This study justified the terms, 'history' and 'marginality' in order to understanding the historical exclusion of tea garden women, estranged by 'others' (planters, colonial polices and societal norms) while studying patriarchy, masculinity and state hegemonic policies in the history of Jorhat district of Assam. The statement of the problem is also constructed through the historical subjectivity of women and social exclusion of the tea garden women in Assam while dealing with various issues such as labour policies related to women and structural domination of the state and patriarchy and this study also look into the women responses and perceptions in construction of subjectivity of their plural voices in tea garden estates.

The feminist scholars reveal that the issue of marginality of women has been neglected in the academic field. They argue that traditional categories used for social analysis and their accompanying interpretive approaches often reinforce gender hierarchies and inequalities. While study gender and women issues in the field of research we need to address the following questions in the context of this study: Is gender inequality based on hegemony between men and women? How is power exercised and reproduced in order to construct the differences between male and female? What role does state play in marginalization of women? In many parts of the world, originally egalitarian gender relationship have been replaced by more hierarchical ones, and women have consequently been marginalized, removed from the positions of economic and political decision making. The hegemonic centred actions often resulted in new division of labour between the sexes, by which the dependency of women on men greatly increased. In this context the living conditions of women tea garden workers are very miserable and pathetic because of the implications of tea garden management. With the system of family employment

women have been engaging in plucking of tea, weeding and clearing and so on in the plantations. Plantation societies are defined by an extension of the patriarchal norms and social conditions.

It is to mention here that an extensive historiography carried out on the tea garden workers in Assam by the scholars. But most of these studies reveal the evaluation on labourers commonly of both sexes without exhibiting the affairs of the female workers especially. Neither such works appear to have considered women's issues such as nature of job environment, family conditions and level of consciousness about their rights though rest have been on health, education, social protection, and sanitary conditions, mode of payment etc. Most of these studies avoided the inclusion of women's adverse suppression by way of male domination, domestic violence, marriage system, economical and social status etc. The present study, however tried to fill up these deficits by giving special considerations on the women labourers of tea estates of Jorhat district of Assam.

7.3 General Findings of the Study

- ✓ Employment of women and children in large number was a remarkable feature of tea plantation. In proportion to men, a large number of women were employed in the tea plantation.
- ✓ The main reasons of the employment of women is the need of cheap female and need to create a stable labour force through generational reproduction led to a high demand for women migrants in the tea plantations of Jorhat district of Assam.
- ✓ During colonial period, one constant feature of worker life in the Assam plantation was sickness, undernourishment and high rate of mortality. The provision of medical care, sanitary facilities and sickness allowances were included in labaour laws, but their implementation was made not in a perfect way. It was reported in the archival records that there was no any facility for the children above twelve years in most of the tea plantation in Assam. At the same time the workers did not give any importance to the education of their

child. They pushed their children into employment to supplement family earnings instead of sending their child to school. The British tea planters considered the workers as inherently inferior human and they tried to establish their super authority over the labour force.

- ✓ During colonial period after examine the features of the wage structure in the Assam Valley tea plantation. It is cleared that the wage structure during colonial period was arranged under the indenture system. Under this system the workers were paid in differential payment rates of Rs-5 for men, Rs 4 for women and Rs 3 for children per month.
- ✓ The brutality of physical coercion, low wages, ill-treatment, harsh living and working conditions resulted in undernourishment, sickness, high rate of mortality and negative rate of reproduction of worker life in the plantations. Women workers experienced far worse treatment in their everyday life.
- ✓ The plantation society in Assam witnessed the contrasting lifestyles of workers and planters. The managers lived in Bungalows like palaces and in contrast the workers lived with their families in small huts with minimum basic requirements of daily life.
- ✓ The plantation workers began to resist in various forms against the physical coercion, economic and sexual exploitation of the European planters. Several other factors like refusal of leave, coercion to work at the end of festival periods, ill treatment, punishment for inadequate work and drunken behaviour, physical confinement etc. greatly resented the workers. Another form of resistance offered by the workers was absconding and desertion. Another form of resistance of the workers was the strike.
- ✓ Discrimination due to systematic and structural marginality has in its every possible form exploited the tea garden women workers. During colonial period such environment was created in order to keep the women workers captive.

They are discriminated not only within the family but also in their place of work.

- ✓ Form this study it is observed that apart from being marginalized by virtue of their gender, social status relating to caste, tribe and class are also significant to categorize the tea garden women labourers as a marginalized group.
- ✓ Due to unsatisfactory implementation of protective legislative provisions concerning women workers, there still remains a wide gap between these provisions and the facilities actually made available to them.
- ✓ There are still cases where women workers are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-à-vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services, etc. Several factors responsible for their plight are, indifferent attitude of the employers towards women workers, their weak bargaining power and in many cases the women workers themselves being unaware of their rights.
- ✓ This study shows that about 92.5% female respondents in Jorhat sub-division and 94.1% respondents in Titabor sub-division say that they are ignored in the society for their caste which is 86.11% and about 90.8% female respondents in Jorhat sub-division and 92.5% female respondents in Titabor sub-division say that tribe is the only factor that prevent them to enjoy a high status in society.
- ✓ About 86.6% respondents in Jorhat sub-division and 93.3% respondents in Titabor sub-division say that the basic cause of preventing women worker from enjoying a high status in wider social setting is the gender problem. It indicates that gender is seen as a system of social practices which produces and preserves gender differences.
- ✓ Out of 120 male respondents, there are 108 respondents who say female members are not allowed to take part in the decision making process of the family which is 90%. Out of 240 female respondents, there are 230

respondents who say that they are not allowed to take part in the decision making process which is 95.8 %. It is indicated that majority female members of tea gardens in Jorhat district are denied to accept as full member of family.

- ✓ About 82.5% female respondents in Jorhat sub-division and 86.7% respondents in Titabor sub-division say that they are not getting any facilities either from plantation authority or from the Government to develop their skill.
- ✓ About 66.7% respondents of Jorhat sub-division and 61.7% of Titabor sub-division say that they are not getting any facilities from the government. The study reveals that the economic imperatives of the management and the legal imperatives of the government are instrumental in keeping the women workers outside the benefit of such imperatives.
- ✓ This study indicates that provisions of the Plantation Act of 1951 are still not implemented properly for the welfare of the workers of tea gardens.
- ✓ About 83.3% of male respondents of Jorhat sub-division and 80% male respondents of Titabor sub-division said that they do not involve in the household activities and childbearing tasks. About 87.5% of female respondents in Jorhat sub-division and 91.7% female respondents in Titabor sub-division say that they do not get any help from their husbands in domestic works and child bearing activities. They have to maintain their family and children with their income. It is found here that a woman is treated more or less like a servant and has to do all household activities without any help from husband.
- ✓ About 75% of male respondents supported the division of labour on the basis of gender. About 77.5% of female respondents do not want division of labour on the basis of gender in society. The study reveals that majority male persons think that they themselves are naturally strengthen than female and more suited for heavy works. It is important to mention here that the process of division of labour on the basis of gender is still continuing in the tea gardens of Jorhat district.

- ✓ About 95.8% of female respondents say that they are not allowed to take part in the decision making process of the family. There are 90% male respondents who do not want participation of female members in the decision making process of family. It is found from the study that majority female members of tea gardens in Jorhat district are treated as inferior sex in the family.
- ✓ Majority plantation women, about 86.7% in Khangiyia, 83.3% in Garmur, 78.3% in Titabor and 81.7% in Nakachari Mouja say that they are deprived of getting a respectable position in family as well as in society. It can be said that the social conditions in which they live is traditional. Their ignorance, lack of consciousness and self-confident make them obedient both at work place and in the family.
- ✓ Out of 240 female respondents, there are 208 respondents depends on husband in every spheres of life that means the plantation society of Jorhat district is a patriarchal society where women are allowed to operate power within a set of patriarchal norms.
- ✓ About 80.9% female respondents of Jorhat sub-division and about 87.5% female respondents of Titabor sub-division say that they do not have the inheritance right means female members of the plantation society are denied to obtain equal rights and privileges.
- ✓ Majority respondents are not satisfied with their daily wages means plantation workers are paid very nominal amount of wage.
- ✓ Out of 120 male respondents, there are 90 respondents who say women are fitted only for light work that means division of works on the basis of gender is still continuing in the tea gardens of Jorhat. It is clearly revealed that such type of attitude of male persons led to inequality among sexes and degrading women position in society.
- ✓ Majority female workers are contributing to the economic strength of plantation industry means plantation women plays an important role in the

plantation economy. However, they cannot meet their daily needs from daily earnings that mean plantation workers are living in a state of poverty line. It ultimately pushes the tea garden workers to a state of marginalization.

- ✓ About 85.2% of respondents say that their work places are not hygienic. It is found that the tea garden management, other social organizations, local tea garden committees does not give proper attention to the development of workers.
- ✓ About 80.6% respondents of Jorhat sub-division and 82.5% respondents of Titabor sub-division are deprived of getting medical assistance. It is revealed that the inadequate medical facilities contribute to the pathetic condition of the workers.
- ✓ About 67.8% respondents in Khangiyia, 75.6 % respondents in Garmur Mouja of Jorhat sub-division 65.5 % respondents in Titabor and 70 % respondents in Nakachari Mouja of Titabor sub-division say that they are not getting sanitation facilities. It is indicated that the inadequate sanitation facilities contributes to the pathetic condition of the workers.
- ✓ About 80.6% workers in Jorhat 82.5% workers in Titabor say that their children do not able to get proper educational facilities. It is found that there is also negligence of giving proper educational facilities to the children of plantation workers.
- ✓ Out of 120 male respondents, there are 103 male respondents who say that they do not recognize women as equal partner due to the gender specific role determined by the society. Out of 240 female respondents, there are 189 respondents who say that discrimination based on person's biological sex is prevalent in the society for which they are not considered equal partner by their husband. It is found that in the plantation society of Jorhat district the female members are not given equal status with male members.
- ✓ About 96.7% male respondents of tea gardens of Jorhat have not any role against existing social system. There are only 2.5% female respondents who

desire to raise their voice against social discrimination. It is found that majority of male and female members of plantation society are not socially conscious. It can be said that plantation women are socialized in such a way that the social institutions condition them to accept their own exploitation.

- ✓ Most of the female respondents, about 96.3% have a fear of society and lack of confidence for which they cannot raise voices against social system means that women in the tea gardens of Jorhat district are socially unconscious.
- ✓ It is indicated that the plantation society of Jorhat district is male dominated and women are considered more or less as a commodity. The inequality between men and women are visible in every sphere of life.
- ✓ Out of 240 female respondents, there are 220 respondents who say in spite of making contribution to the family income women do not enjoy respect and status in the family affairs. They are forced to attain marginalize status by the dominant group of society. It is found that the patriarchal family system along with the inferior educational standard, economic position and power position are the sources of inequality among men and women in the plantation society.
- ✓ About 67.8 % respondents in Khangiyia, 75.6% respondents in Garmur Mouja of Jorhat sub-division and 73.3 % in Titabor and 70 % in Nakachari Mouja of Titabor sub-division are not aware of the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951. It is found that the level of awareness of the plantation workers about the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 is very low.
- ✓ About 63.8% of female respondents have not any interest to join in the Mahila Samittee that means most of women workers of tea gardens of Jorhat district are not interested to know about their own rights and privileges. It is revealed from the study that plantation women are yet to fully aware of political issues happening around them.

7.4 Some General Suggestions

- Since the plantation women are living in a very deplorable condition in the tea gardens of Jorhat, they are not getting any benefit from the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. So the study suggests necessary measures should be taken by the Government and the tea garden management for proper implementation of the provisions included in the labour laws.
- It is identified that girl child are stay back at home to look after the domestic activities, so, parents do not have any interest to educate her daughter. The children therefore, from their childhood watch their parents doing different kinds of plantation work and when they become adolescent they are quite acquainted with various types of plantation work and become interested work in the tea garden. So the study suggests for changing such type of attitude of parents towards girl child.
- Since women workers are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-a vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services, etc, an urgent intervention by way of legal framework and other measures are necessary for the equal development of plantation women.
- It is suggested that Welfare Scheme should be prepared for establishing equality of plantation women workers. They are deprived of the benefits and amenities like equal remuneration vis-à-vis their male counterparts, maternity benefits, proper child care services, etc. So the local communities, societies or groups should be engaged in establishment of women equality in the society.
- The plantation women are facing serious problem in the maintenance of her domestic work and plantation work. Most of them carry their baby child on back to the working place and keep the baby near the working place in the garden and watched by the elder one. So the study suggests for making necessary arrangement for taking care of the workers child.
- Women workers are considered as inferior sex and so they are deprived of getting appointment in the positions of *Sardar*, *Boidar*, *Chaprasi* and *Munshi* etc. These higher positions are given to the male workers of plantation.

Consequently, successful implementation of activities related to women empowerment has failed. So the study suggests for avoiding such type of gender discrimination.

- The plantation women are not allowed to take part in the decision making process of the family. In taking decision about the matters of family husband's willingness is final decision. In the process of taking decision women's opinions are not much valued. In spite of making material contribution to the income of the family, women do not enjoy respect or status in the affairs of the family. So the study suggests motivating the tea garden community in such a way that the women of society may enjoy equal rights and opportunity.
- It is found that women workers are not allowed to take any rest during delivery days and facing problem to attend work field and taking care of newly born baby. So the study suggests providing adequate medical facilities should be taken by the government.
- It is identified that since there is no any toilet and urinal facilities for women in the working place of tea gardens, it is suggested that the tea garden management should take necessary measures for providing such facilities.
- It is identified that the division of labour on the basis of sex is continuing in the plantation society. So the local communities, societies or group should be engaged in the changing of existing social system of plantation society.
- It is identified that plantation women have no say to the decision making process of the union, which is dominated mainly by the men. Therefore women are not interested to take part in the meetings of Trade Union. So the study suggests the Unions must take certain radical steps to give space to women in political process of the union activities.
- It is identified that the Government has taken various schemes for the welfare of tea tribe community. But these schemes are not properly implemented in the

areas of tea garden. It is suggested to implement welfare schemes with help of local committee, Tea Board and Trade Unions.