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Women's Labour in the Tea Sector : Changing Trajectories and Emerging Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of the changes within the Indian tea industry, one of the oldest industries in India is an important challenge while addressing the concerns of labour. It becomes all the more important to understand women's agency of labour in the changing plantation landscape, when women constitute more than half of the workforce. Among others, the change that the paper highlights is the decline of work participation rate of women in the tea plantation sector. However, their labour is examined in three different spheres; that of as an estate worker, as a worker in a small tea garden and as a tea grower reflects that they are significant contributors to the industry as well as to their household. Situating this dynamics of women losing out in employment on the one hand and their increasing role in the industry and household on the other, this paper provides an account of their negotiations at multiple spheres of work and life. The paper through case studies establishes across various contexts that women have negotiated and emerged from the contours of power and authority and their own spaces at work and the household. The paper also attempts to understand the small tea grower sector in terms of their number, gender dynamics and more specifically the socio economics of women small growers cum workers, which have been a grey area hitherto. A significant proportion of tea growers are also workers; marginal in terms of land holdings coupled with inherent marginalities of caste, ethnicity and gender. This answers the question why there should be the need to incentivise and reorganise women's labour for the industry. Measures beyond the rules and legislative frameworks, should address their marginalisation as visible through their inferior social indicators including literacy levels.

Introduction and Methodology

Participation of women in the tea industry has remained significantly high along with other plantation crops such as coffee and rubber. However, the nature of women's employment within such plantation crops needs serious assessment in the light of current concerns on declining female work participation rate (Abraham 2013). Through various literature, employment of women and children in particular to work in plantations as family labour is historically evident (Bhadra 1992; Chatterjee 2003; Das 1931; Das Gupta 1999; Raman 1992). With the system of family employment, both women and children were engaged in tea picking, weeding and clearing and so on in the plantations. Plantation societies are also defined by an extension of the patriarchal norms and social conditions.

The present paper in this context seeks to understand the implications to women's labour in such situation wherein the forces of production and patriarchal norms and social conditions interplay in their everyday life. It arises several questions. How such extensions infiltrate into women's capacity to negotiate their labour power? Has women's role as both producers and reproducers for the tea economy strengthened or enhanced in this historical trajectory? The main focus is to understand the women's agency of labour in their multiple spheres of work and work places through their lived experience as a worker, as an earning member of the family and as a key player in the industry.

Women's agency of labour here is understood as being juxtaposed between the normative and the natural settings of plantation life within which women act and enact their everyday lived realities.

Some of the specific questions that this paper addresses are 1) to examine women as worker in the plantations, worker in the small holder sector and as family labour in the small tea gardens. By taking women in these three spheres of work; to examine how their labour is same and different and how important they are in supporting to families? 2) Has the Work Participation Rate (WPR) declined for women in the tea plantation sector, which absorbs the highest percentage of female employment as compared to other crops? 3) Have women come up as an important income contributor since men migrated out due to the crisis in tea plantations? 4) Amidst such crisis, what are the tensions created in households for women in employment? 5) Are they moving into family labour especially in the small holder sector? And finally despite her strong presence in the tea sector whether the industry incentivise her and if not what are the possible ways out to positively reorganise women's labour in tea plantation and incentivise it? With such research questions, the methodology adopted for this study is subsequently underlined.

Methodology

The study is largely based on in-depth interviews of nineteen women; nine estate sector workers, four tea growers; five women working as paid labour in the small tea gardens and one working in a Project tea garden. The attempt here was to document the lived experiences of women from three spheres including estate sector, paid worker in the small holder sector and family labour in the small holder sector. Such lived experiences illustrate through their narrations, availability and non-availability of work and challenges both at the level of household and at work spheres. It also brings out the nuances and dynamics of gender and work within households. Through an interpretation of their narratives and attempts at ensuring objectivity within its analysis; the

possibility of biasness does gets accrued by the research. Based on a small sample size, the narratives bring forth an array of dimensions to women's labour. The estate sector and the small tea grower sector are located in different set of historical conditions. The research questions are explored within the historicity of marginalisation and deprivation of the plantation sector. The tea growing areas of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts in West Bengal were chosen since there is a preponderance of both the traditional estate and a burgeoning small tea grower sector. A review of secondary literature with a special focus on the key research questions corroborates some of the qualitative findings.

Apart from these qualitative insights, the paper also relies on official macro data that restates women's employment in tea sector. Gender-disaggregated data of workers on estate sector based on report of Labour Bureau (2012) on the Statistical Profile of Women's Labour 2009-2011¹ is used. Also since there is no official data available on worker cum owners of small tea growers, the present paper considered the unit level data of NSSO 68th round (2011-12) on employment and unemployment in which "tea growers" (NIC code 01271) is a category under the National Industrial Classification (NIC) 2008. This was taken as a valid category to locate small tea growers by distributing them across their area of cultivated land and occupational groups in the major tea growing districts of six Indian states. It should be noted that the data presented in the paper pertaining to small tea grower are restricted to men and women tea growers who possess less than 5 hectares of cultivated land as well as women tea growers who belong to the occupational category of agriculture labourers. Other than these macro data, the paper draws from the field study located in a specific geographical locale therefore generalisations based on the study should be avoided.

1 Data on labour from the Tea Board of India is available only till year 2007.

This paper is presented in four sections. After the introduction and methodology of the study the second section contextualises women and work in tea plantations based on insights from existing social science literature as well as macro data on employment from available data sources. Third section, drawing from the fieldwork attempts to locate women in three kinds of organisation of production; as estate worker, as worker in small tea gardens and as family labour in own tea gardens. It draws up on an analysis based on discussions with women as workers and growers that opened a range of issues; of dissent, discontentment, land rights, availability and non-availability of employment and moreover how they value their labour power. Changes in the Indian tea plantation economy may have resulted in changes in women's labour into such organisations of production. The fourth and concluding section discusses why and how given such a situation, must women's agency of labour be organised and incentivised as it is an integral part of the industry.

II

Women, Work and Employment in Tea Plantations

Women's work has traditionally been divided into the area of production (both economic and social) and reproduction from time immemorial. With the intensity of specialisation, women's work became more segregated and sexual division of labour became a dominant agenda. Their participation in the economy and contribution to the household income became more evident. Such participation has however added more to their burden of work with less increase in wages/recognition especially in the organised sector.

Women's labour is central to the economies of production; more so in the case of production of plantations commodities such as tea and coffee. Employment of women in plantations historically was sought by the planters in order to "contain the male labour force" and to "ensure

a steady reproduction of ‘cheap’ labour” as recruitment costs were expensive. Quite plausibly, planters saw women adapting well to the plantations’ most tedious and prolonged labour of tea picking (Chatterjee 2003). The men workers also pluck tea leaves but it is generally found that the quantity and quality of tea leaves are not as high as that of female pluckers (Bhadra 1992). As Engels (1993) notes the strategy of setting up of ‘family units’ of single men and women; conducting ‘depot marriages’ were some of the coercive measures for recruiting men and women that enabled the production and reproduction of labour in the plantations. Thus, one of the important features of tea industry in India is the proportionately higher level of female employment in cultivation and production. Engagement of women’s labour is higher in tea plantations because of their gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves in particular and for maintaining a steady social reproduction of labour.

Women in employment across the plantation sector (Table 1) based on the data from the Labour Bureau (2012) reflects that 53.27 percent of women are employed across all plantations (coffee, tea, rubber and others) in 2008. It has been highest for coffee with 62 percent, followed by tea with 53.43 percent during this period (Table 1). As stated earlier, the nature of cultivation of these crops is one of the key reasons for the requirement of female employment. Also, why women are compelled into paid labour reflects both the social relations of production within plantation life and intra-household gender dynamics. Although the proportion of women workers in tea plantations have marginally increased from 49.46 to 53.43 percent over a decade (1995 – 2008), but in terms of absolute numbers it has almost halved from 6, 03,640 to 3,81,474 respectively. It appears to be worst hit in the year 2001, the beginning of the crisis period when it engaged only 172,723 women workers.

Table1: Women in Employment across Plantations

Year	Coffee	Rubber	Tea	Other Plantation	Total
1995	16,133 (45)	10,731 (32.81)	603,640 (49.46)	2,989 (48.35)	633,493 (48.88)
1996	21,746 (60)	9,743 (39.06)	521,740 (51.52)	2,400 (50.46)	555,629 (51.51)
1997	9,010 (51)	10,250 (40.11)	389,862 (51.06)	3,186 (51.78)	412,308 (50.72)
1998	15,833 (56)	7,426 (33.61)	437,505 (48.89)	2,633 (46.61)	463,397 (48.73)
1999	13,139 (50)	6,445 (34.23)	424,564 (49.79)	2,303 (51.31)	446,451 (49.49)
2000	13,979 (48)	10,714 (40.37)	451,941 (50.05)	3,588 (52.89)	480,222 (49.73)
2001	17,291 (55)	11,620 (41.26)	172,723 (53.64)	3,699 (48.95)	205,333 (52.79)
2002	13,169 (58)	12,475 (42.53)	355,954 (53.48)	2,316 (54.84)	383,947 (53.18)
2003	12,771 (58)	12,984 (42.17)	329,796 (53.61)	2,760 (49.96)	358,311 (53.21)
2004	12,771 (58)	9,974 (41.69)	364,961 (52.81)	2,150 (56.62)	385,553 (52.57)
2005	12,730 (59)	10,008 (38.78)	330,696 (52.82)	2,148 (56.03)	355,582 (52.49)
2006	10,147 (56)	9,804 (37.71)	219,283 (52.01)	1,886 (59.03)	241,120 (51.41)
2007	11,016 (59)	7,145 (38.76)	335,538 (55)	2,895 (45.33)	356,594 (54.56)
2008	13,436 (62)	6,371 (37.16)	381,474 (53.43)	2,580 (48.97)	403,861 (53.27)

Source: Labour Bureau (2012): Statistical Profile of Women, Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages, calculated

The decline of work participation rate of women in tea plantations across states is evident from the gender disaggregated data (2000-2008) across the tea producing states in India (Annexure I). As the All India level show, similarly from the larger tea producing state i.e. Assam there has been a significant drop by 18.65 percent of women in employment from 2000 to 2008. Likewise it appears to be worst hit in Tripura where it has almost halved and in Kerala another significant drop of women's employment by 54.02 percent. West Bengal and Tamil Nadu appear to be better with a drop of 12.83 percent and 4.99 percent respectively². This data nonetheless reiterates the need for women's labour in the production and cultivation of this internationally traded commodity tea. According to recent statistics, the total number of tea estates All India in 2012 stands at 1412 with 11, 28,458 as average daily number of workers³. The magnitude of informal workers are however not been officially estimated for the plantation sector.

Many studies (Action Aid 2005; Talwar et al 2005; CEC 2007; Rasaily 2008) had examined the labour conditions at the time of the crisis and post-crisis periods. The situation arose mainly due to domestic over production and steep fall in international tea prices. This impacted alarmingly throwing people out from regular employment that resulted in starvation linked deaths, suicides and subsequently induced large-scale out-migration. Employment of women workers in other crops such as coffee and rubber too had substantially declined during this period. Ramifications of the crisis period witnessed by international competitiveness, unremunerative prices, closures and abandonments of tea estates appear to have hit employment of women. Work Participation Rate (WPR) per se has substantially declined for women workers in the tea plantation sector.

2 Percentages calculated as per the available data under Labour Bureau.

3 Ministry of Statistics, GOI.

Earlier set of primary studies such as Rachel Kurian's (1982) work on the Sri Lankan tea plantation gives a historical as well as contemporary analysis of this industry with special reference to women workers. She argued that the 'wants' of the female workers are suppressed by the 'needs' as perceived by the management, rather than the real wants of the woman herself. Issues of male dominance, less participation in trade union activities by women; physical and sexual violence are some of the inherent factors that determined women's conditions of employment and survival.

Jain and Reddock (1998) have compiled eight case studies of women workers in plantations internationally. Aspects of women's position and their struggle for existence runs as a common thread across studies of sugarcane plantations in Fiji Islands, tea in India, Sri Lanka and Cameroon to rubber and other crops in Sumatra and Indonesia. However, indications of poor literacy levels and unmarried status as enhancing positions within plantations societies needs to be carefully scrutinised as plantation societies as argued earlier are extensions of the patriarchal social relations of production.

Mita Bhadra's (1992) work on women workers in West Bengal mentions the need to take up employment by women as an economic necessity and not for their own individual needs. They are also found to be more committed to their work as pointed out in her study. Bhadra's (2004) subsequent paper on gender dimensions of tea plantation workers in West Bengal reiterates the need to examine women's labour in the context of gender division of work, organisational set-up of plantation, nature of migration and settlement, apart from adaptation and adjustment in plantation work along with commitment and absenteeism. However her analysis that aspect of low aspiration and illiteracy makes women committed calls for reevaluation of such a perspective (Bhadra 2004: 54). And the underlying assumptions that in tribal societies, there is sexual equality (Jain 1988) need a serious re-examination.

The industry as such having recovered from the earlier crisis period had much to do with the changes in the international context than the issues at the domestic front. Recent attempts at mechanisation of tea leaves-picking as experimented in a few tea gardens has increased the quantum of leaves picked; but has affected quality and foliage of the tea bushes, apart from the fact, that it overthrows a sizable proportion of women workers out of employment. The crisis for tea plantation labour is that they do not have supplementary income and their wages are determined through the calculations under family employment. Sumitha (2012) argues that the plantation sector which generated large number of jobs especially for women has presently become economically and socially unviable due to eroding international competitiveness. Also the concern is whether supplementary jobs available for tea plantation workers take care of their livelihood concerns since employment days available in tea plantation is relatively less. Such changes multiply vulnerabilities along factors of age and gender.

Studies such as Rasaily (1998) have noted that the increasing pressure of earning in order to run the hearth is vested with the female member of household. More than fifty percent of the women respondents were single earners of the household with their male counterparts either engaged in service-based occupations such as blacksmithery, carpentry etc, or were not eager to work in the tea gardens (Rasaily 1998). So much so, that this burden of earning gets exacerbated wherein daughter-in-laws become the soft targets to enter into employment through the system of replacement. Such a system of employment, *badli*, in plantation parlance, guaranteed employment as well as a labour quarter for the next generation of workers' families. But what happens when the possibility of such jobs transfers within families or neighbours get eroded? What are larger surmounting issues for tea plantation workers? Where do they, especially women move for employment? Also, what are the ways in which the management ensures such erosion? Phulmani, aged 45 became a regular worker in one of the tea estates of *Terai* region of

North Bengal⁴ after many years of labour as *bigha* and casual worker. She was recently asked to switch back to *bigha* work by the Assistant manager. She said that she has been suffering from gastritis and not been keeping well for over two years made her irregular at work. Also, she currently holds a job card through MGNREGA. She says,

“...How does the manager know as to where I go when I am absent? And why does he want to know? My husband can ask, my son can ask; but why should he ask? Where will I run away and go? I was very hurt. Our *sahebs*, if they threaten us (*dhamki*) and will say come and work in our house and tomorrow may say, give us a massage (*yaha waha daba do*). I am not one of them. He is a horrible person. These managers cannot harm us, however ‘big’ they are...”⁵

The politics of dominance and subservience operate very much in plantation life that also dictates their employment status as well as their everyday social life. The contours of sexuality also underlines within this subservience for women especially through the hierarchies of power. Given the fact that she had some political (read local) trade union connections so that she could safeguard her regular employment as against a few women workers who lost their regular employment in another tea garden as they had fought for their right to cultivable land.

These women, along with other workers had captured (*dakhal*) some land within the estate meant for subsistence use⁶. The management of this particular tea garden had expelled them from their regular employment. The workers had been engaged in subsistence farming in these plots of land that were earlier tilled by their forefathers. They

4 Tea is grown in three geographical regions of North Bengal; the *Terai*, the *Dooars* and the Darjeeling region respectively.

5 Personal Interview with Phulmani, Sukna T.E., 16 January, 2014.

6 Discussions with five women who were earlier permanent workers at Gulma and Morengaon T.E., 18 January, 2014.

found that few of the adjacent plots within the estate land were getting sold that made them insecure about their right to cultivable land. This raised questions of both food and economic security⁷. A local (*adivasi*) leader in this case had directed them that they should construct and live in the *kuccha* houses in these respective plots. Although these are not *patta* lands, they feel that it has been with them for generations, and they have a right. Fifty year old Mariam Oraon says,

“...It was this leader who fragmented into tiny plots and asked us to occupy. This was sometime in 2002. He then joined hands with the management and asked us to go back to our labour quarters. We were also ensured by him that new labour quarters would be constructed and two members from each family would get employment. For eight years we have our land. The leader hoodwinked us. We came back to our land that our forefathers cultivated for the past 50-60 years. On 14th May 2011, the manager slammed 2-3 cases on us and gave us a notice and we were out of employment. Twenty-five of us were regular workers”.⁸

These are mostly women workers. Some of them currently hold job cards under the MGNREGA programme. Wages paid under this programme is Rs 169⁹ per day although the payment of wages is received only after 2-4 months. Women mostly prefer to work as casual labour outside the tea garden. The *Terai* region where this tea garden is located is in close proximity with small towns and places like Siliguri, Mallagudi where they could get work as casual workers. In construction work,

7 Tea estates are leased out as tea grant lands by the state to a lessee for tea cultivation. Workers during the establishment of such estates were given quarters as well as small plot of land for subsistence farming. This was to tie the worker to the plantation as well as to ensure their survival.

8 Personal interview with Mariam Oraon, Sukna T.E., 17 January, 2014.

9 As per the notification of GOI, w. e.f. 01.04.2014, the revised wage rate under MGNREGA is Rs 169 for unskilled worker, Rs 253.50 for semi-skilled and Rs 338 for skilled worker (Viewed at <http://nregsburdwan.com/download.php?Mid=81&Cid=3449>, on 09.04.2014).

women are paid Rs 160/- per day as compared to the men who are paid Rs 200/- per day. Availability of work however is irregular. The *Terai* region is better off in comparison with the Dooars region of North Bengal where possibilities of alternative employment is located to working in precarious work conditions in the dolomite mines in the bordering areas of neighbouring Bhutan or moving out for employment.

Trade union movement so far as the tea plantation belts in North Bengal are concerned appears to have further fragmented with increasing political fragmentation and the surge for identities based on ethnicity resulting in further mushrooming of political parties and trade unions. The biggest jolt faced by the workers in the tea plantations was during the period of crisis when tea gardens were either locked out or abandoned, and there was complete distrust and anarchy in these tea estates.

As argued earlier for the case of plantation sector, participation of women was due to the historical necessity of women's labour for both production and reproduction. However, what is important here is to reiterate that women's participation continues, a) not just of an economic necessity but b) more ridden with the flexible role of men who abjure both paid and unpaid labour. Munni Bhuiya, aged 52 has been working in the tea estate ever since she got married in 1964 as a casual worker in one of the tea estates in *Terai*. Her husband is a permanent worker in tea picking and pruning activities in the same tea garden. She has three sons but none have a permanent job. She had a daughter, who died of blood dysentery at infancy. She was the eldest child. Two of her sons live with them. Her sons work as casual labour in the garden. They pluck and prune. She says,

“...The gardens are far off in two areas in particular towards Salbari and the other towards Gulma T.E. We go at 7.30 am though they call us for work at 7 am. We need to attend to the house; give food to the boys/men and children and if someone falls ill, need to

feed the person and then leave for work. I wake up at 4.30 am. Light the fire, cook *roti*, *chai*, *subzi* and rice for 12 noon. I am busy with work so since I don't get time to eat, I carry two *rotis* with me and eat at work. I have no girls in the house; the boys don't work so I have to do the entire work and thus don't get time to eat at home. I eat there at 9 am. I come back home at 12 noon and need to go back to the garden at 1.30 pm and then get back at 4.30 pm. When I come home in the afternoon, I wash the dishes, clothes, take bath. There is a well here. I get back at 5 in the evening and again cook food for the night and sleep by 9.30-10 pm. My health is not fine. My back aches, my feet and hands pain. I'm ageing; don't have the energy as earlier..."¹⁰

Her eldest son holds a job card. Her husband says "he doesn't go to work. Instead wants to convert the card into his mother's name". Women have to take responsibility of both the physical and economic burden of a household. The expectation that women (read mothers in particular) are required to provide food, care is engrained on the patriarchal set up among the *adivasi* communities as well. Scholars have argued that there is sexual equality among the *adivasi* community in the plantation sector (Jain 1988). However, the gender equations have not improved with respect to burden of work, economic contribution, leave aside care and domestic work. Her inability to negotiate with the male members of her household and the 'natural burden' of care and pressure to earn also falls on the daughter-in-law. Along with the expectation of an economic contribution the physical burden of collecting firewood (fuel) for future use (during the monsoons) is indirectly and entirely vested on the women as they are responsible for the hearth. She says, "When I go to fetch firewood the load is heavy and then I get pain". She alone fetches firewood from the forests. On asking if her husband fetches firewood she immediately replied.

10 Personal interview with Munni Bhuiya, Gulma and Morengaon T.E., 18 January, 2014.

“..He collects from the garden (twigs n figs, locally called *jhikra*). He hardly goes to the forest. When I asked her husband what all work he does; she replied instead, “he plays with the grand children. He retorted, “There are two grandsons in the house. Their mother goes out for casual work (construction (*mistri* work). I have to look after them too. Everyone leaves for work...”¹¹

She continues...

“...I cook food and leave to fetch firewood. At 11.30 am we leave and we get back at 3-3.30 pm. It is very far. We reach there at 12-1 pm. We do not cut trees, just pick up broken pieces. There are many people who go about 100-150, mostly women. We collect for the monsoons. We store it somewhere in the house...”¹²

Plantation work is characterised mainly with two important seasons. One is the tea leaves picking season that starts from March and extends till September-October. Workers in this season engage longer hours as overtime to earn extra. The daily-rated permanent workers earn Rs 95/- per day and Rs 1 per kg (as extra leaf price or e.l.p) of extra leaf picked after the stipulated *tikka* (task)¹³. The e.l.p increases by 0.50 paisa after five kilograms over the stipulated task. Earlier, before such systems were formalized; workers were given *bakshisk* (reward), when then picked extra tea leaves during abundant foliage.

Fortnightly income according to Karuna Majhi, aged 50, is Rs 1000/- after deductions for provident fund etc. Depending upon the climate, soil and garden conditions, the quality and quantum of tea leaves plucked varies during this period geographically. In the months of November till January, the tea bushes are pruned and attended to. And

11 Ibid.

12 *ibid.*

13 The *tikka* or task is 26 kilograms per day. Based on discussions with workers representatives, Sukna T.E

no tea picking takes place during this period. It is during this lean season, when earnings are less as there is no overtime work; women workers as illustrated earlier have the burden of collecting firewood to stock for the monsoon. In the *Terai* and other regions too, elephant attacks are commonly reported. Women although they move in groups, are highly vulnerable to such attacks in forests and even in their dwellings in pockets within the estate where there is no electricity. Absence of subsistence farming within the tea estates due to non-availability of land and grazing areas compound their vulnerabilities.

If we examine the Human Development Index (HDI), as per the West Bengal Human Development Report 2004, of the tea producing districts of West Bengal, Jalpaiguri ranks tenth and Darjeeling fourth out of its eighteen districts¹⁴. As per 2001 Census, 18.87 percent of the total district population of Jalpaiguriis Scheduled Tribe and female literacy is astonishing low with 12.52 percent only. None of the sons of Munni Bhuiya have studied beyond primary education¹⁵. Electricity rates although subsidised for tea estate workers, amounts to according to Munni Bhuiya, Rs 600 for three months which is difficult for them to afford. She says, “We don’t have television, ceiling fan or music box. Out of anger we disconnected the line because if we have any of these, our bills will increase. There is only one permanent worker in the house. We have great difficulty”.¹⁶ Interview with her was conducted in the evening when it was getting dark. The compound and house was barely

14 West Bengal Human Development Report (2004), p 219. Based on indicators such as literacy rate, infant mortality rate, school enrollment rate, life expectancy rate; health, education and income indexes. Available at http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/stateplan/sdr_pdf/shdr_wb04.pdf.

15 Drop-out rate is high in the tea growing districts. For details see Rasaily (2013): p 82-83 in *Identity and Politics of Exclusivity in the North Bengal Tea Plantations: A Few Reflections in Labour and Development*, Vol. 20 (1), June 2013, pp. 77-88.

16 Personal interview with Munni Bhuiya, Gulma and Morengaon T.E., 18 January, 2014.

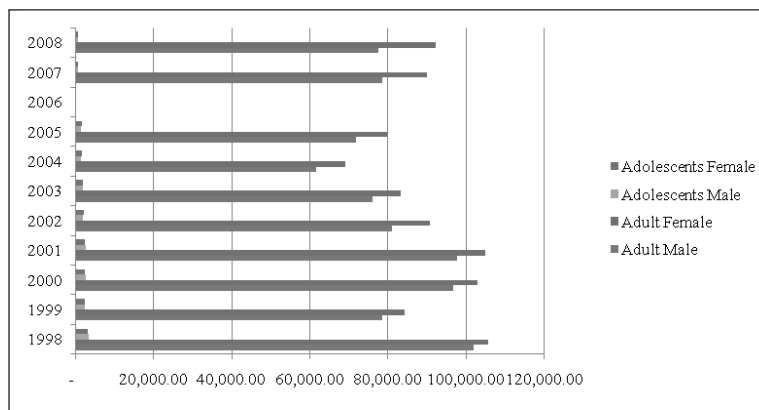
visible. She was holding her grandson and was trying to pacify him with a biscuit.

Boundaries of women's work in tea gardens are difficult to define. It gets extended from the domestic sphere to paid and even unpaid work outside the realm of the household. Their inability to negotiate within the household for the case of Munni Bhuiya as compared to Phulni who could safeguard her permanent employment through negotiations on the one hand and women's prioritisation of land as against employment on the other, reflects the trade-offs that they need to make. Some like Lati Majhi, aged 45, are thankful only to 'God' for their job and employment despite the difficulties of plantation life and its work conditions. She appears complacent in her own right. With great difficulty she has educated two of her five children. Her eldest son is an undergraduate and works in a private company and her daughter is in Higher Secondary whom she hopes would go to college in future. She is sure that after her retirement her daughter-in-law would do garden work¹⁷.

Occupational mobility as Mishra et al (2013) argue is practically non-existent for a tea plantation worker. Amidst such uncertainties, workers know that their children have no option but to take up garden work. Chart I based on Annexure II reflects the preponderance of employment of women as compared to male in tea plantations in West Bengal along with a small presence of male and female adolescents. There is a steady decline in male employment as compared to female employment. The latter however having only marginally increased. The Work Participation Rate of female workers in the case of the organisedestate sector per se has declined. This could perhaps be attributed to the overall global changes in the plantation economies, substantial growth of the small holder sector; along with increasing informalisation and casualisation of labour. Some of these elements are examined in the subsequent sections.

17. Personal interview with Lati Majhi, Sukna T.E., 9 January, 2014.

Chart I: Sex-wise Average Daily Employment in Tea Plantations in West Bengal (1998-2008)



Source: Labour Bureau (2012): Statistical Profile on Women Labour (2009-11), Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI, Chandigarh.

Migration, as highlighted earlier, was one of the tangible impacts of the crisis in the tea plantation sector. Migration of male members of tea workers' family was noted from places like the *Terai* region where avenues for alternative employment were not that scarce. The MGNREGA programme, somehow created a benchmark on wages for plantation workers but also resulted in labour shortage for the management. The disinterest to work as plantation labour coupled with poor economic conditions and rising cost of living push men and women to migrate for work. A little over seventeen years of age, Phulmati Oraon, holding her sixteen month old daughter says that her husband along with few men left the tea garden two weeks back to work in Kerala¹⁸. She is completely unaware about the exact place, duration and nature of work. All that she knows is that he would be earning Rs 400/- per day.

18 Interview with Phulmati Oraon, 15 January, 2014, Gulma Tea Estate, North Bengal.

“Expenses are there, that’s the reason he has gone out for work or else why would he go?” she says. Her mother-in-law, a widow is the only family member with a permanent job. Both the daughter-in-laws work as casual labour. Casual workers get no other benefit. They are given Rs 55/- to buy *chappals*, umbrella, *tirpal* (tarpaulin, to wrap around their waists) and *ajholi* (sack, to keep tea leaves). Casual workers are termed as *faltu*¹⁹ or *bigha* workers in North Bengal. Her elder sister-in-law is nineteen. She too has a two year old son. Phulmati says,

“...If we work for all twelve days we earn Rs 1000/- fortnightly. Women with children can work for only 5 days sometimes 6-7 days. Only those who don’t have children to take care of can work continuously. Children fall ill, how can we work? It rains heavily during the monsoons, how do we pluck with umbrellas, and *tirpal* (used to wrap around their waist while at work) and with a child. Where do we keep the child and work...?²⁰

The tea garden houses a crèche but according to Phulmati there are many children. She also fears that this facility would be discontinued soon. Sen’s (2008) work is relevant in this context as she traces historically the ‘coincidence’ of the decline of female labour force in industries with the improvement of wages and working conditions (Sen 2008: 82-83). She argues how “working class motherhood became a practical and ideological instrument to reduce female workforce participation” (ibid: 82). How women’s agency of labour is understood in the current economic situation is imperative. Another point that she raises is that “women are flexible workers –more for their family than the employer” (ibid: 107). It could be argued here that the “family’s particular requirements” as illustrated in the earlier cases of casual tea estate workers “limits on

19 It’s literal meaning is ‘extra’.

20 Personal interview with Phulmati Oraon, Gulma and Morengaon T.E., 17 January, 2014.

their flexibility in the labour market". Earlier set of studies (Singh 1987; K. Sardamoni 1991) have already articulated women's triple burden of work, absence of child care facilities that compels the sibling, usually the elder girl child to assist in domestic work and invariably drop out of school followed by early marriages/pregnancy and the parallel requirements to undertake both paid and unpaid work.

Phulmati says that her mother-in-law, the only permanent worker in the family; has a job card but she is unaware as to who would be using the job card. Domestic compulsions and/or the non-availability of regular work force women to take up casual jobs and be debarred of some minimum benefits under the Plantation Labour (Amended) Act 2010 especially food security²¹. A study by Labour Bureau (2009) on the Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Plantation Industry 2008-09 apart from other indicators, analyses the extent of social security provisioning under the Plantation Labour Act 1951 for women plantation workers. The Labour Bureau survey was conducted across plantations growing crops such as tea, coffee, rubber and cardamom. The survey from its select sample size found that 54.5 percent of the women workers were not literate. Women were engaged in manual jobs mostly as plantation labour as compared to men where 82.3 percent of non-manual jobs are undertaken by men (Labour Bureau 2009: 16). Such trend was similar in case of other plantation crops. Benefits such as Maternity Benefit were provided by 73.5 percent of the units surveyed, 37.1 percent provided crèche facilities. And about 97.9 percent of workers were provided with housing facilities in the case of tea plantations. Specific welfare facilities for women workers such as washing facility, separate urinals, rest shelter were provided by only 6.1 percent, 7.6 percent and 6.8 percent of units respectively (Ibid).

21 A permanent worker gets weekly ration of three kilograms of rice and two kilograms of flour. No sugar or kerosene oil is given (Personal interview with Munni Bhuiya).

III

Women and Labour in the Small Tea Grower Sector

What is it for women as workers and tea growers in the small tea grower sector in West Bengal? Is it different for them as compared to the estate sector workers? These questions are explored in the following section. The importance of estimation of women's labour in the small tea grower sector that was earlier invisible is documented in this section. For this paper the ensuing data from the NSSO reflect some important characteristics on the small tea growers and women tea growers/cultivators who are also workers. Even though NIC category of tea growers encompasses all growers, the data on cultivated land of tea growers under this industrial category validates that it consists mostly of small growers who possess less than 5 hectares of land. For instance, in the case of West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu that all growers possess land less than 2.5 hectares (see Annexure III). In the states of Tripura (Rural) and Assam (Rural), 98.49 percent and 97.34 percent of tea growers had cultivable land less than 2.5 hectares. Only a small fraction of 1.51 percent in Tripura (R) and Assam (R) had cultivable land between 7.5-10 hectares (ibid). Similarly, data also show that population under this NSSO category is agriculture labourers and small crop growers (see Annexure IV). And in the tea growing districts of Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Golaghat in Assam, more than 90 percent of the tea growers are also agriculture workers. Similarly, in the tea growing districts of West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, tea growers are also workers, reinforcing their marginal position.

Data thus enable us to assert that as much as 80 per cent of the small tea growers are also subsistent farmers. Annexure V provides the gender wise distribution of tea growers in the tea growing states of India. It reflects that there is a notable percentage of women tea growers in most of the major tea producing states and their share as tea growers and workers are highest in Tripura (54.65 percent), followed by Tamil Nadu (47.74 percent), West Bengal (42.3 percent), Arunachal Pradesh (40.48 percent) and Assam

(38.24 percent) and lowest in Kerala (20.87 percent). There are inter-district variations as in the case of Tripura with a much higher percentage of women in West Tripura that requires careful investigation.

If we examine specifically for West Bengal, 58.54 percent out of 71,669 tea growers cum workers are women in Darjeeling. In Jalpaiguri district, only 36.89 percent out of the 2, 26, 392 tea growers cum workers are women. The social group profile of these women tea growers cum workers shows the possible other layers of their inferior position. As it is evident from Table 2, there is a significant presence of women from marginalised communities including *dalits* and *adivasis* in the tea growing districts of West Bengal. For instance, in Jalpaiguri district 66.69 percent are Scheduled Tribe out of 2, 26,391 women tea growers cum workers. In Koch Bihar hundred percent of the tea growers cum workers are Scheduled Castes. In Darjeeling district however, higher percentage is for the OBCs and Others. While marginalized sections are to a greater extent historically absorbed in the estate sector in Darjeeling.

Table 2: Social Composition among Tea Growers cum Workers (2011-12)

District	Social Group				Total
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Castes (OBC)	Others	
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)
Koch Bihar	0	23255 (100)	0		23255 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	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.

As discussed elsewhere in the paper most of the women tea growers are also workers in West Bengal. Other than a small share of landed class in Jalpaiguri district, these women belong to the occupational category of agriculture labourers (Table 3).

Table 3: Women tea growers cum workers - Occupation Specific

District	Principal Occupation			
	Directors and Chief Executives	Personal Care and Related Workers	Agriculture, Fisheries and Related Labourers	Total
Darjeeling	–	–	41952 (100)	41952 (100)
Jalpaiguri	12421 (14.87)	591 (0.71)	70515 (84.42)	83527 (100)
Koch Bihar	–	–	10981 (100)	10981 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	–	–	1383 (100)	1383 (100)
Total	12421 (9.01)	591 (0.43)	124831 (90.56)	137843 (100)

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

It is important to point out that the growth of the small tea grower sector in West Bengal in particular was initiated by the Tea Board of India through the so-called “Project Tea Gardens”. Project tea gardens were started by the Tea Board of India in order to cater to the international market especially USSR during the early 1980s²². This intermittent period i.e. early 1980’s till 1999 (before crisis) in the tea sector is important because there was land usurpation as well as conversions of agricultural

22 For details see Rasaily (2013): Changing Land Utilisation Patterns in West Bengal: Some Policy Imperatives, DP 22, CDS, Trivandrum.

land into tea cultivation. What such shifts did to questions of food security and agrarian relations is an important dimension to be explored exclusively.

At present there are around 80-100 project tea gardens in Jalpaiguri district and 75 percent have less than 25 hectares of land²³. The farmers and cultivators are mostly dominated by the Rajbanshi community²⁴ especially in Rajganj block, Jalpaiguri, the area of study on small tea growers. The Rajbanshi mostly have title deeds to their land. This area was settled during the post Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 war²⁵.

During the early 1980's with increasing profits in tea coupled with poor agricultural returns to the cultivators and farmers; a large number of agricultural land were sold in return for permanent employment. Bengali entrepreneurs, who had experience with tea in the plantations of Assam, started such Project tea gardens²⁶. This resulted in further pauperisation of the already marginalised communities. Only a few, who retained their land, now, continue as cultivators of tea along with other crops like paddy. With a predominance of 80-100 such gardens where work although is regular, possibly for the older workers; the applicability of the Plantation Labour Act (2010) is blurred as there is no specific data on the extent and characteristics of such Project tea gardens.

23 The state government gave approximately four acres of land, a house and two cows for subsistence. Personal interview with a small grower and member of CISTA, Jalpaiguri, 13 January 2014.

24 Rajbanshi community is a tribal community, earlier practicing animism with recent converts to Hinduism and Christianity in few pockets. They originally belong to the Great Kamtapur that got divided into different states and interspersed with countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. The Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) has been instrumental in demanding Kamtapur, a separate statehood.

(<http://wbnorthbengaldev.gov.in/htmlpage/Rajbongshi.aspx>).

25 Discussions with small tea growers, Jalpaiguri, 13 January 2014.

26 Ibid.

Malati Oraon, a forty year old *adivasi* widow, originally hails from Ranchi but has no connection to that soil, appeared nervous and hesitant to talk. She has been working in a project garden for over nineteen years. Her husband was a permanent worker in the same tea garden. She has no land. Provident Fund is deducted as there are thirty-seven permanent workers in this particular garden where she works. They do not get food grains under the PDS but Rs 3/- per day for food grains is inclusive in her daily wages. There is no other form of security for her except employment. She laughs aloud when asked about her wages. She gets Rs 500/- per week, paid at the rate of Rs 95/- per day²⁷. Such project tea gardens are interspersed in some areas with tea workers cultivating on their own *khet* (cultivable land).

According to the Tea Board of India (2008), 26.5 percent of the output is contributed by the small holder sector; the members of Confederation of India's Small Tea Growers Association (CISTA)²⁸ however assert that about 35-38 percent is contributed by the small holders²⁹. They argue that the estate sector buy green leaf from the small holders through brokers in order to meet their production targets and mitigate deficiency. Hannan (2013) in his paper on Organisational Innovations and STGs in India locates the changing nature of the organisational structure of tea plantations and raises questions of survival for the small holder sector. He argues that there is a need to streamline through various existing innovative mechanisms the fragmented nature of small holders engaged in cultivation of tea. There are however no

27 Personal interview with MalatiOraon, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

28 CISTA is a national federation of small tea growers associations from across the tea producing states of India. For details, please visit <http://www.cista-india.net/>

29 Ibid.

specific studies on women's labour and conditions of labour in the small tea holder sector in India. The subsequent sections provide a profile on women tea growers cum workers in North Bengal and high light through case studies the dynamics of work both as a tea grower and worker.

Thus for further analysis the NSSO data (2011-12) is restricted to women tea growers who are also workers in the garden. This is done by taking the occupational category 'workers on own farm' as available in NSSO code no 920. This group comprised of tea growers cum workers. The socio-economic profile presented below of women is extracted in such a way that only women tea growers who are also workers are considered. This is accomplished by segregating data for women who are also workers in their own farm. Indicators of social composition, religion, marital status and education (Tables 4-7) are given for this category in order to corroborate the quantitative findings. Such socio-demographic profile provides an inking on this segment of the small tea growers cum workers in North Bengal.

Education, a crucial human development indicator for this populace to corroborate with earlier findings; the NSSO data reveals that in Uttar Dinajpur, all have received informal education, possibly through the *madarsa*; while the percentage of non-literates was high in Koch Bihar and Jalpaiguri with 50 percent and 38.72 percent respectively (Table 4). Koch Bihar with 100 percent Scheduled Caste reflects a dismal education level with the remaining fifty percent having education below primary level. Darjeeling appears to be fairly better with 49.50 percent below primary level and 50.50 percent at primary level of education as compared to other districts. As far as literacy is concerned for Jalpaiguri district, 38.72 percent of women as small farmers cum workers were not literates and 40.91 percent have attained only primary education and 20.37 percent below primary.

Table 4: Women tea growers cum workers: Education

District	General Education				
	Not literate	Below primary	Primary	Others	Total
Darjeeling	–	20765 (49.50)	21187 (50.50)	–	41952 (100)
Jalpaiguri	27306 (38.72)	14361 (20.37)	28848 (40.91)	–	70515 (100)
Koch Bihar	5491 (50)	5491 (50)	–	–	10982 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	–	–	–	1383 (100)	1383 (100)
Total	32797 (26.27)	40617 (32.54)	50035 (40.08)	1383 (1.11)	124832 (100)

Source: NSSO 68th Round on Employment and Unemployment, 2011-12, calculated.

Others: Include *madarsa* education for Uttar Dinajpur.

Darjeeling district reflects a miniscule percentage of women in the select segment belonging to the marginalised communities and with 91.18 percent as OBCs. Koch Bihar district has a hundred percent Scheduled Caste composition while there is a complete absence of this category in Jalpaiguri district that has 73.9 percent as Scheduled Tribe (Table 5). While in Uttar Dinajpur that predominantly consists of Muslims as the subsequent Table 5 shows, 100 percent are from other Social Group

With respect to religion, given the social composition in Darjeeling, Buddhism is practiced with a stronger presence of Hinduism in Koch Bihar, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri (Table 6). At Uttar Dinajpur, the said segment belongs entirely to the Islamic faith given its historicity of settlement from the erstwhile East Pakistan. While Christianity was found present only in Jalpaiguri district that reflects the *adivasi* community in majority. .

Table 5: Women tea growers cum workers: Social Composition

District	Social group				Total
	Scheduled Tribe (ST)	Scheduled Caste (SC)	Other Backward Castes (OBC)	Others	
Darjeeling	2062 (4.92)	1640 (3.91)	38249 (91.18)	-	41951 (100)
Jalpaiguri	52110 (73.90)		487 (0.69)	17918 (25.41)	70515 (100)
Koch Bihar		10981 (100)			10981 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur;				1383 (100)	1383 (100)
Total	54172 (43.40)	12621 (10.11)	38736 (31.03)	19301 (15.46)	124830 (100)

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

Table 6: Women tea growers cum workers: Religion

District	Religion				Total
	Hinduism	Islam	Christianity	Buddhism	
Darjeeling	39890 (95.08)	-	-	2062 (4.92)	41952 (100)
Jalpaiguri	47653 (67.58)	-	22862 (32.42)	-	70515 (100)
Koch Bihar	10981 (100)	-	-	-	10981 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	-	1383 (100)	-	-	1381 (100)
Total	98524 (78.93)	1381 (1.11)	22862 (18.31)	2062 (1.65)	124829 (100)

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

Data on the social composition for this specific segment shows that 73.9 percent from Jalpaiguri district belong to the Scheduled Tribe and 32.42 percent were Christians by religion and 20.89 percent of women were found to be widows in this category. A significant percent of widows (45.59 percent) were found in Darjeeling (Table 7). There is however no separate evident to argue such a prevalence.

Table 7: Women 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.

Being a widow here is more than managing a female headed household. It combines the stigma of layered marginalisation for women, especially from *dalit* and *adivasi* communities other than the economic burdens of everyday life. Monibala Oraon, aged sixty and Shanti aged thirty eight are both widows working in a small tea garden. There were thrown out of employment from the project tea garden after the death of their spouses. They both belong to the marginalised tribal community. Monibala has been working in a small tea garden since six years. She was earlier working in another tea garden for five years. She came to this village after marriage. She lost both her children. They died due to

illness (measles she suspects) at ages one year and the other was barely three months old. She has worked earlier in the paddy farms (*matirkaaj*) and jute cultivation (*pateerkaaj*). She had about 1.5 *bighas*³⁰ of land.

Her husband died after retirement after working for eight years. He was a permanent worker but she did not get his job as *badli* and instead was asked to quit the job at the project tea garden after his demise. She then sold 0.5 *bigha* of land and the rest she has grown mustard. She has two nephews. She says “whoever takes care of me in my old age when I won’t be able to work; I will give them the land”³¹. She gets Rs 80/- as *hazira* per day. She lives all by herself and is entirely dependent on the daily wages through labour. Her inability to negotiate gets compounded with age, as she is incapable of doing ‘hard labour’. Her widowhood coupled with the absence of her children, leaves her more vulnerable.

Payment by the small tea growers to the workers vary from Rs 80/-100/-. When the foliage is in abundance they float labour from one garden to another and even pay more (Rupees 3 per kilogram). It appears that workers cannot negotiate much on wages as they also need regular employment. In the estate sector, during the monsoons, which is the peak season of abundant foliage the supervisors at times, may choose to deduct 4-5 kilograms of tea leaves, for its moisture content. Women work harder and longer during the peak season in order to earn some extra income.

Shanti because of age appears to be physically stronger than Monibala. But she too is childless and a widow. She has mortgaged some agricultural land to an adjacent cultivator. Her financial incapacity to get back her land by working as a worker in a small tea garden makes

30 One *bigha* (measurement of land in West Bengal) is equivalent to 0.3306 acres or 0.1338 hectares.

31 Personal interview with Monibala Oraon and Shanti, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

her to think of moving out of the village. She says that she might seek employment outside. It has not yet been a year of her husband's demise. She was pregnant and was at her natal home when he died. She had a miscarriage. She too lives alone³².

There are women (single) as tea growers who also labour in their own garden. Forty-five year old Bhanumati Rai, a widow, a *Rajbanshi*, single handedly brought up her children after her husband's demise by working in a project tea garden. Her sons were studying while she was doing paid work and was also tending to her own garden. She says with pride,

“..I used to do all the work. I nurtured the garden. There was nothing there. I planted the saplings, saw them grow, nurtured them and then picked the tea leaves. Thereafter ten people joined to work as labour. I have struggled a lot. There were days when I have starved and have managed the house...”³³

She left her regular employment to work in her own field once the garden was set and as her health was also not keeping fine. She goes late to work in her own field at around 8 am after finishing with the household chores. She says

“..I wake up at 5 am. Finish all the chores within one hour. Cook something; however it is, in the morning. They will eat. I keep all the utensils and dishes aside and come back and wash them in the evening. After I come back from the garden my household work continues till about 7-8 pm. I leave at eight in the morning for work. By listening to all my work, will you get me a daughter-in-law to solve my problem?! When I cook boiled potatoes and rice, my sons scream, ‘who will eat boiled potatoes?’ My youngest son troubles me a lot...”³⁴

32 ibid.

33 Personal interview with Bhanumati Rai, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

34 ibid.

She has three sons. Although she got her eldest son her job, she feels that his work will not become permanent, as there was some land dispute. The land that she owns is adjacent to the project tea garden where her son currently works. Workers have to cross her garden to go and pluck tea. So for one year she blocked the path as the *mallik* was creating problem. She says,

“...He removed my son from work for 10 days. Then my son encroached about 7-8 *bighas* of land. My piece of land is in between two of his garden plots. So the workers have to walk around the entire garden to reach work. This went on for a year. We then came into an agreement. I told the *mallik* that you give my son the job and I will allow the labour pass through my garden. I twice gave the *mallik* in writing that my son has to get a service in his tea garden in my replacement...”

The pressure on women to provide or facilitate secure employment for their children (read sons) gets invariably shouldered on women irrespective of her power relations with the household and the village as her lived social world. Gyanobala Rai, worker in a small tea garden also owns a small plot of land on which she cultivates tea. She works both as paid labour in the small tea garden and rushes back to work in her own field. Her husband, due to ill health, is unable to assist her much in the field. Her elder son left the house after a fight. She does not know where he is. Her younger son was working in a Bought Leaf Factory (BLF) nearby met with an injury and lost two of his fingers. She was running helter-skelter (to the manager of the BLF and the Village *Pradhan*) for compensation and to get him work as a supervisor but to no avail. He is unable to help her in the field. She says in apprehension,

“...tea garden work dries your body (*sharir ko sukha deta hai*). It is not the same as in agricultural farming (*khet*). There is no time to drink water or eat food. I don't know how I will run my *sanghsar*

(world)³⁵. I cannot hire labour to work in my garden. I don't have that kind of money..."³⁶

Unlike Gyanobala Rai, Shanti Das, a co-worker has her husband to attend to their own tea garden while one of her sons works at the BLF. He works as a technician, operates the rolling machine. He lives in the factory itself as he has to work for long hours she says. He gets paid Rs 5000/- per month. He has studied till Class VI. All her three sons have dropped out of school. Her father in-law had some land that he sold off to the adjacent small grower for Rs 14,000/- per *bigha*. She has no idea of the size of the land³⁷.

Kunumati Rai, a *Rajbanshi*, another small tea grower cum worker less than forty years of age; hires outside labour of 8-10 workers depending on the requirement. She too goes for work in the tea garden. Her children are young and are studying. They do not help in any household work she says. She completes all the household chores and since it is her own tea garden she could "chose" to reach late to the field. She however oversees the workers, tea picking, weighing as well as pick-up transport by the Bought-leaf factory (BLF). She laments that the production this time was not good as she did not take care of pests in the garden. Her husband runs a poultry farm because of which she does all the work both within the house and in the field. She also attends to some paddy farm that they have. She hopes that her son would take up managing the garden³⁸. Women are thus found to be moving into family labour in the case of the small tea grower sector. This of course adds to the status of unpaid labour.

35 Here it implies the household as her world.

36 Personal interview with Gyanobala Rai, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

37 Personal interview with Shanti Das, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

38 Personal interview with Kunumati Rai, Jalpaiguri, 13 January, 2014.

The above section sought to highlight through the narratives and NSSO data the dynamics of women's work in the small tea grower sector both as tea grower cum worker. The economic burden across all the three spheres of work is evident through the case narratives. The predicament for plantation labour is employment security and its inherent insecurities with the absence of entitlements for workers in small tea gardens and land rights for the estate sector workers. When we examine women's labour in all the three spheres through such case narratives, it is visible that across all such spheres of labour including family labour; the social conditions and familial roles and responsibilities are juxtaposed in their everyday life. Women, irrespective of their spheres at work, are engaged in economically supporting their families and shouldering the burden of not just child care but also ensuring security of employment for their sons through negotiation both within and outside their domestic threshold. In the trajectory of Indian tea sector economy, negotiations of women's labour must not be limited to domestic or work spheres but to be translated into rights; to entitlements and as a key stakeholder to the Indian economy.

IV

Concluding Remarks

The approach to women's labour in the context of the rigours of plantation life should not be viewed as women being the 'adaptable', 'flexible', 'subservient', or 'docile' worker. Instead, measures beyond the rules and legislative frameworks, their marginalisation as visible through their inferior social indicators including caste, ethnicity and literacy levels must be addressed in order to enable them to grow as entrepreneurs in their own right. If this is understood as empowerment; empowerment need not necessarily be advocated by establishing SHGs but through the elementary requirement of education and access to employment. Women who have toiled enough to provide education and better future to their children are found struggling to negotiate for

their employment; in this case it appears to be inclined towards sons, probably as a future source of support within the gendered matrix of patriarchy.

Given the dismal state of education as a human development indicator for the tea workers and small growers' community it is imperative that their employment is guaranteed and retained for the future generation. In the areas where small tea growers are cultivating tea and project tea gardens are in full bloom, it is said that there would be no dearth of employment. Discussions with the small growers revealed that out-migration has drastically reduced from these areas as both men and women were getting employment in these tea gardens. Sporadic work under the MGNERGA has also curtailed out-migration. In the case of estate sector, workers are entirely dependent on employment as provided by the estate sector and out-migration preferred, an aftermath of the crisis period.

Unlike other pockets of North Bengal, the *Terai* region experienced less degree of crisis at the time of closures and abandonments across the tea gardens in North Bengal. So the experience of loss of income and livelihood has not been that stark as in case of the workers in Dooars tea estates. Women workers and tea growers here are central to the Indian tea economy. Cases as illustrated reflect the variations in levels of negotiations both within and outside the household to retain employment either for herself or family member (usually son) as permanent worker.

The reasons for change in Women's Work Participation and in forms of employment (from permanent to casual, from paid to family labour in STG), other questions like entitlements that compel women to move of regular employment are established through this study. Such changes have much to do with the macro changes in the tea plantation economies. The Indian tea industry faces stiff competition with countries such as China, Kenya and Sri Lanka given the type of production relations

in these countries that directly control cost of production. Such changes have much to do with the macro changes in the tea plantation economies. Labour retention presently has been an important challenge to the Indian tea industry.

The growth of the small holder sector emerged at a time when there was a steady market and tea prices were in boom. This being an important transformation in the trajectory of the tea plantation sector; policy makers must address as labour in the small holder sector is excluded from the purview of any form of social security unlike the organised sector workers. The estate sector workers are also experiencing changes as some of the cases narratives illustrate; i.e. casualisation of labour, losing out on cultivable land, regular employment and so on. Issues of land rights however remain contested in the tea grant lands.

Data from the small holder sector corroborate that the social conditions of labour is similar to the estate sector with workers and dependents belonging to marginalised communities with a high percent of non-literate populace. Any kind of policy formulation must take into account this marginality as indicated through the NSSO data for the small tea growers. Women's agency of labour is imperative in the present situation of the tea industry. Therefore, the industry must take strong steps to elevate their conditions and ensure that this agency of labour is strengthened.

Annexure I: Gender-Disaggregated Data on Average Daily employment in Tea Plantations (2000-2008)

State	Year	Male	Female	Total
Assam	2000	301,322 (52.15)	276,483 (47.85)	577,805
	2001	-		-
	2002	175,476 (47.51)	193,863 (52.49)	369,339
	2003	172,754 (47.47)	191,193 (52.53)	363,947
	2004	227,349 (48.55)	240,970 (51.45)	468,319
	2005	186,072 (48.46)	197,912 (51.54)	383,984
	2006	165,011 (49.48)	168,465 (50.52)	333,476
	2007	160,479 (45.54)	191,896 (54.46)	352,375
	2008	215,229 (48.01)	233,033 (51.98)	448,332
Himachal Pradesh	2000	116 (51.56)	139 (61.78)	225
	2001	66 (36.07)	117 (63.93)	183
	2002	124 (52.32)	113 (47.68)	237
	2003	22 (30.99)	49 (69.01)	71
	2004	23 (48.94)	24 (51.06)	47
	2005	49 (34.51)	93 (65.49)	142
	2006	46 (35.94)	82 (64.06)	128
	2007	64 (42.11)	88 (57.89)	152

Cont'd.....

State	Year	Male	Female	Total
	2008	65 (29.55)	155 (70.45)	220
Karnataka	2000	694 (37.82)	1,141 (62.18)	1,835
	2001	1,454 (41.31)	2,066 (58.69)	3,520
	2002	1,818 (44.04)	2,310 (55.96)	4,128
	2003	1,063 (30.99)	2,367 (69.01)	3,430
	2004	1,023 (42.84)	1,365 (57.16)	2,388
	2005	951 (40.55)	1,394 (59.45)	2,345
	2006	797 (41.62)	1,118 (58.38)	1,915
	2007	188 (30.82)	422 (69.18)	610
	2008	738 (40.89)	1,067 (59.11)	1,805
Kerala	2000	23,567 (41.88)	32,706 (58.12)	56,273
	2001	21,446 (41.24)	30,553 (58.76)	51,999
	2002	12,995 (31.18)	28,678 (68.82)	41,673
	2003	11,337 (38.00)	18,496 (62.00)	29,833
	2004	15,359 (44.50)	19,152 (55.50)	34,511
	2005	15,359 (44.50)	19,152 (55.50)	34,511
	2006	15,359 (44.50)	19,152 (55.50)	34,511

Cont'd.....

State	Year	Male	Female	Total
	2007	17,679 (45.43)	21,239 (54.57)	38,918
	2008	17,678 (45.42)	21,235 (54.56)	38,918
Tamil Nadu	2000	21,774 (41.02)	31,307 (58.98)	53,081
	2001	25,764 (45.06)	31,417 (54.94)	57,181
	2002	34,604 (49.08)	35,901 (50.92)	70,505
	2003	21,237 (40.97)	30,596 (59.03)	51,833
	2004	17,158 (36.32)	30,085 (63.68)	47,243
	2005	18,127 (38.96)	28,400 (61.04)	46,527
	2006	15,827 (36.71)	27,282 (63.29)	43,109
	2007	16,636 (37.91)	27,246 (62.09)	43,882
	2008	17,484 (36.96)	29,818 (63.04)	47,302
Tripura	2000	6,213 (49.43)	12,285 (50.57)	12,285
	2001	2,648 (48.08)	5,100 (51.92)	5,100
	2002	2,573 (47.25)	4,878 (52.75)	4,878
	2003	2,824 (46.45)	5,274 (53.55)	5,274
	2004	3,410 (44.62)	6,158 (55.38)	6,158
	2005	3,026 (41.72)	5,192 (58.28)	5,192

Cont'd.....

State	Year	Male	Female	Total
	2006	3,100 (62.71)	8,313 (37.29)	8,313
	2007	5,070 (31.25)	7,375 (68.75)	7,375
	2008	3,290 (52.70)	6,955 (47.30)	6,955
Uttar Pradesh	2000	53 (30.64)	120 (69.36)	173
	2001	3,388 (54.72)	2,803 (45.28)	6,191
	2002	3,185 (53.88)	2,726 (46.12)	5,911
	2003	-	-	-
	2004	-	-	-
	2005	-	-	-
	2006	-	-	-
	2007	-	-	-
	2008	-	-	-
Uttrakhand	2000	-	-	
	2001	52 (31.52)	113 (68.48)	165
	2002	52 (33.55)	103 (66.45)	155
	2003	49 (32.24)	103 (67.76)	152
	2004	-	-	
	2005	-	-	
	2006	46 (35.38)	84 (64.62)	130
	2007	60 (31.25)	132 (68.75)	192
	2008	463 (35.24)	851 (64.76)	1,314

Cont'd.....

State	Year	Male	Female	Total
West Bengal	2000	97,485 (48.42)	103,832 (51.58)	201,317
	2001	98,047 (48.10)	105,809 (51.90)	203,856
	2002	82,266 (47.10)	92,413 (52.90)	174,679
	2003	76,487 (47.61)	84,168 (52.39)	160,655
	2004	62,405 (47.15)	69,955 (52.85)	132,360
	2005	72,673 (47.38)	80,719 (52.62)	153,392
	2006	-	-	
	2007	77,166 (46.32)	89,445 (53.68)	166,611
	2008	77,065 (45.58)	92,025 (54.42)	169,090

Source: Labour Bureau (2012): Statistical Profile of Women Workers, 2011-12, Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI, calculated

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages calculated

Annexure II: Average Daily Employment in Tea Plantations in West Bengal (1998-2008)

Year	Adult		Adolescents		Total (Male + Female)
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
1998	101,897.00 (47.64)	105,645.00 (49.40)	3,225.00 (1.51)	3,102.00 (1.45)	213,869.00
1999	78,518.00 (46.99)	84,081.00 (50.32)	2,202.00 (1.32)	2,299.00 (1.38)	167,097.00
2000	96,620.00 (47.31)	102,888.00 (50.38)	2,549.00 (1.25)	2,186.00 (1.07)	204,243.00
2001	97,575.00 (47.11)	104,689.00 (50.55)	2,491.00 (1.20)	2,362.00 (1.14)	207,117.00
2002	80,992.00 (46.20)	90,719.00 (51.75)	1,628.00 (0.93)	1,980.00 (1.13)	175,319.00
2003	75,917.00 (46.73)	83,046.00 (51.12)	1,685.00 (1.04)	1,798.00 (1.11)	162,446.00
2004	61,531.00 (46.26)	68,851.00 (51.77)	1,224.00 (0.92)	1,392.00 (1.05)	132,998.00
2005	71,785.00 (46.61)	79,568.00 (51.67)	1,234.00 (0.80)	1,415.00 (0.92)	154,002.00
2006
2007	78,392.00 (46.26)	89,950.00 (53.08)	562.00 (0.33)	573.00 (0.34)	169,477.00
2008	77,549.00 (45.38)	92,209.00 (53.96)	573.00 (0.34)	566.00 (0.33)	170,897.00

Source: Labour Bureau (2012): Statistical Profile on Women Labour (2009-11), Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI, Chandigarh.

Note: Figures in parentheses are calculated percentage

Annexure III: Tea growers and Cultivated land

	0 to 2.5 hectares	2.5 to 5 hectares	5 to 7.5 hectares	7.5 to 10 hectares	Total
Rural					
Arunachal Pradesh	0	247 (37.71)	408 (62.29)	0	655
Tripura	16069 (98.49)	0	0	246 (1.51)	16315
Assam	431805 (97.34)	7004 (1.58)	2408 (0.54)	2408 (0.54)	443625
West Bengal	62239 (100)	0	0	0	62239
Kerala	48810 (100)	0	0	0	48810
Tamil Nadu	43039 (100)	0	0	0	43039
Total	601962 (97.93)	7251 (1.18)	2816 (0.46)	2654 (0.43)	614683 (100)
Urban					
Tripura	3245 (100)	0			3245
Assam	938 (39.12)	1460 (60.88)			2398
Tamil Nadu	24395 (100)	0			24395
Total	28578 (95.14)	1460 (4.86)			30038 (100)

Source: NSSO 66th round on employment and unemployment, 2009-10, calculated

Annexure IV: Tea growers in major Indian states/districts across occupation, 2011-12

States/ Districts	Directors and Chief Executives	Market Gardeners & Crop Growers	Market Oriented Crop and Animal Producers	Subsi- sistence Agricul- tural Workers	Machinery Mechanics and Fitters	Food Processing and Related Trades Workers	Motor Vehicle Drivers	Messen gers, Porters, Door Keepers and Related Workers	Agricul- tural, Labourers	Mining and Construc- tion Labourers	Manufac- turing Labourers	Total
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Arunachal Pradesh												
Lohit		500 (36.71)								862 (63.29)		1362 (100)
Changlang		796 (78.89)								213 (21.11)		1009 (100)
Tirap		435 (17.35)								2072 (82.65)		2507 (100)
Total		1731 (35.49)								3147 (64.51)		4878 (100)
Tripura												
West Tripura									8787 (100)			8787 (100)
North Tripura				2304 (100)					-			2304 (100)
Total				2304 (20.77)					8787 (79.23)			11091 (100)

Cont'd.....

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Assam												
Lakhimpur		-	-			-		-	7804 (100)	-	-	7804 (100)
Tinsukhia		23562 (22.78)	-			5703 (5.51)		203 (0.20)	59046 (57.08)	-	14933 (14.44)	103447 (100)
Dibrugarh		232 (0.18)	-			4549 (3.54)		-	118122 (92.01)	5479 (4.27)	-	128382 (100)
Sivasagar		2624 (2.31)	4421 (3.88)			-		13283 (11.67)	93467 (82.12)	-	-	113795 (100)
Jorhat		9005 (8.89)	-			-		-	92308 (91.10)	-	-	101313 (100)
Golaghat		1911 (5.24)	-			-		-	34532 (94.76)	-	-	36443 (100)
Cachar		17351 (34.99)	19271 (38.86)			-		-	12969 (26.15)	-	-	49591 (100)
Sonitpur		-	-			-		-	124323 (100)	-	-	124323 (100)
Total		54685 (8.22)	23692 (3.56)			10252 (1.54)		13486 (2.03)	542571 (81.58)	5479 (0.82)	14933 (2.25)	665098 (100)
West Bengal												
Darjeeling		-	-					-	69362 (100)			69362 (100)
Jalpaiguri		24842 (10.97)	-					10188 (4.50)	190601 (84.19)			225631 (100)

Cont'd.....

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Koch Bihar	1292 (5.56)	-							21963 (94.44)			23255 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	-	1884 (38.18)						-	3051 (61.82)			4935 (100)
Total	26134 (8.09)	1884 (0.58)						10188 (3.15)	284977 (88.18)			323183 (100)
Kerala												
Wayanad	-								18270 (100)			18270 (100)
Idukki	8816 (64.74)								4801 (35.26)			13617 (100)
Total	8816 (27.65)								23071 (72.35)			31887 (100)
Tamil Nadu												
Theni	736 (1.61)				4210 (9.20)		8420 (18.41)		32373 (70.78)			45739 (100)
Nilgiris	18097 (13.88)				-		-		112255 (86.12)			130352 (100)
Coimbatore	-				-		-		11200 (100)			11200 (100)
Total	18833 (10.06)				4210 (2.25)		8420 (4.50)		15828 (83.20)			187291 (100)

Source: NSSO 68th Round on Employment and Unemployment, 2011-12, calculated

Annexure V: Tea Growers across Gender in Major Tea Growing States of India (2011-12)

State/District	Male	Female	Total
Arunachal Pradesh			
Lohit	992 (72.83)	370 (27.17)	1362 (100)
Changlang	796 (78.89)	213 (21.11)	1009 (100)
Tirap	1116 (44.50)	1392 (55.50)	2508 (100)
Total	2904 (59.52)	1975 (40.48)	4879 (100)
Tripura			
West Tripura	2934 (33.01)	5953 (66.99)	8887 (100)
North Tripura	2329 (85.69)	389 (14.31)	2718 (100)
Total	5263 (45.35)	6342 (54.65)	11605 (100)
Assam			
Lakhimpur	7804 (100)	-	7804 (100)
Tinsukhia	66246 (64.04)	37201 (35.96)	103447 (100)
Dibrugarh	84381 (65.73)	44001 (34.27)	128382 (100)
Sibasagar	58770 (51.63)	55051 (48.37)	113821 (100)
Jorhat	59693 (58.54)	42269 (41.46)	101962 (100)
Golaghat	19177 (52.62)	17266 (47.38)	36443 (100)
Cachar	54636 (97.5)	1379 (2.5)	56015 (100)

Cont'd.....

Sonitpur	64420 (51.8)	59903 (48.2)	124323 (100)
Total	415127 (61.76)	257070 (38.24)	672197 (100)
West Bengal			
Darjeeling	29717 (41.46)	41952 (58.54)	71669 (100)
Jalpaiguri	142865 (63.11)	83526 (36.89)	226391 (100)
Koch Bihar	12273 (52.78)	10981 (47.22)	23254 (100)
Uttar Dinajpur	3198 (69.81)	1383 (30.19)	4581 (100)
Total	188053 (57.70)	137842 (42.30)	325895 (100)
Kerala			
Wayanad	14700 (77.91)	4167 (22.09)	18867 (100)
Idukki	11003 (80.80)	2614 (19.20)	13617 (100)
Total	25703 (79.13)	6781 (20.87)	32484 (100)
Tamil Nadu			
Theni	21459 (46.92)	24280 (53.08)	45739 (100)
Nilgiris	71068 (54.32)	59765 (45.68)	130833 (100)
Coimbatore	5600 (50)	5600 (50)	11200 (100)
Total	98127 (52.26)	89645 (47.74)	187772 (100)

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

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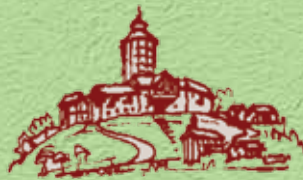
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