Chapter-VII
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE TEA PLANTATIONS

7.1 EMPOWERMENT DEFINED

Empowerment is a multidimensional process which enables a person to realise his or her identity in the various spheres of life. It consists of the person's greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making, greater control over the circumstances that influence his or her lives and greater freedom vis-a-vis the overpowering influences of customs, beliefs and traditions. Empowerment has to be acquired, and once acquired, it needs to be exercised, sustained and practised.¹

Need for empowerment of people who are trailing behind lies in the very definition or description of empowerment. The concept of 'development with empowerment' is meant for closing the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged sections of people. In this connection Manoranjan Mohanty observes:

Ostensibly, empowerment as an objective of economic development should be a welcome addition to the democratic discourse. After all, oppressed groups ranging from unorganised workers and poor peasants to tribal people, dalits and women have been engaged in a struggle for power and should normally judge the development process in those terms.²

In the World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhegen in 1995 'empowerment' figured prominently as an objective. The declaration signed by the heads of the States stated the following:

We affirm that in both economic and social terms, the most productive policies and investments are those which empower people to maximise their capacities, resources and opportunities.³

At another place in the declaration, the focus on empowerment was even more pronounced:

³ Ibid, p 1434.
Empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and the well-being of our societies.\footnote{Ibid, p 1434.}

The Governments of India's country paper for Copenhagen Summit had mentioned, in this connection, that the oppressed should be empowered so as to be able to help themselves in breaking the social, economic, cultural and psychological barriers and to convert themselves from being passive recipients of government programmes to active participants.\footnote{Ibid, p 1435.} The paper described 'empowerment' of the disadvantaged sections of the population as the process of "organising them into informal groups, formal associations, trade unions, cooperatives etc. for exerting collective pressure, articulating demand and effectively participating in the decision-making process with the ultimate objective of building foundations of individual and collective self-reliance."\footnote{Ibid, p 1435.}

The question of empowerment of women becomes relevant in the aforesaid context. As we know, till today, in no society women enjoy the same opportunities as men; inequality between women and men persists – in their access to education, health, nutrition and in their participation in the economic and political spheres. Logically, therefore, empowerment of women is considered today a \textit{sine-qua-non} for removing the gender-based disparities that are prevalent practically almost in all spheres of life.

\subsection*{7.2 INDICATORS OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN}

For measuring women's empowerment, the concept of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) was developed by the United Nation's Development Programme (UNDP). The Human Development Report (HDR) 1995 brought out by UNDP estimated GEM for 116 countries which shows that India ranks 101 in the list of countries in terms of empowerment of women.\footnote{UNDP: \textit{Human Development Report 1995}, op. cit, pp 83-5.}

Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) concentrates on participation of women in three different spheres – economic, political and professional for measuring the level of empowerment of women. GEM concentrates on three selected variables:\footnote{Ibid, pp 82-3.}
i) For power over economic resources based on earned income, the variable is women’s share of earned income.

ii) For access to professional opportunities and participation in economic decision-making, the variable is women’s share of jobs that are classified as professional, technical, administrative and managerial.

iii) For access to political opportunities and participation in political decision-making, the variable is the share of parliamentary seats.

In the GEM income is evaluated as a source of economic power that frees the income-earner (i.e. women) to choose from a wider set of possibilities.

As far as the second variable is concerned, while administrative and managerial jobs lie closer to decision-making, professional and technical jobs represent opportunities for career development.

The third variable is access to political opportunities and participation in political decision-making. As the HDR (1995) notices, “Politics remains an obstacle course for women.”9 One of the best indicators of political participation would have been women’s share of representation in local bodies, such as municipal councils, but these data were not available for many countries. So, the variable chosen for the GEM in HDR (1995) was women’s representation in parliament, in both the upper and lower houses.

The HDR (1995) finally notes:10

The GEM is not meant to be a prescriptive index, with the intent of setting universal cultural norms. What is crucial is not achieving a certain percentage representation in selected political and economic arenas, but providing equality of choices to both women and men. The GEM examines outcomes in economic and political participation. These outcomes could be caused by structural barriers to women’s access to these arenas or they could be the result of choices by both women and men on their desired roles in society. This is a matter for the people of each country to determine for themselves.

9 Ibid, p 83.
Despite its utility in measuring the differences in the levels of empowerment across different regions and countries of the world, the GEM suffers from some serious methodological and other deficiencies that raise questions about its applicability to the developing countries' context. One may consider here the income variable as is counted by the GEM. While it is true that women's access to independent sources of income is positively related to their participation in household decision-making and the treatment they receive from family members and while confining women's work to the domestic and subsistence sectors reduces their power vis-a-vis men in the household, it is also a fact that in the context of a developing country, share of earned income does reflect women's access to resources. It has been found that for the large masses of such working women, the actual access to the incomes which they earn is often determined by the male head of the family.\footnote{Aasha Kapur Mehta: "Recasting Indices for Developing Countries: A Gender Empowerment Measure", \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, Vol. XXXI, No. 43, October 26, 1996; pp ws 80- ws 86.}

Similarly, with regard to the second variable (i.e. percentage share of women in administrative and managerial positions as well as in professional and technical jobs), it can be said that the educated women in administrative, professional or technical positions are a very limited subset of the female workforce in a developing country and any measure of economic empowerment based solely on this marginal category fails to throw any light on the status of the large mass of rural and urban women.\footnote{Ibid, p. ws 80.} Equally important is the fact that the number of seats held by women in Parliament in a vast country like India is unlikely to be an effective indicator of the level of political awareness and strength of the crores of illiterate and ignorant women bound by their traditions in the countryside.

In view of these limitations of GEM, scholars have suggested some additional variables for measuring empowerment of women in a developing country. Aasha Kapoor Mehta, in her paper "Recasting Indices for Developing countries: A Gender Empowerment Measure" suggests some additional variables like women's relative literacy rate (vis-a-vis males') and proportion of female participation in trade unions and other bodies particularly in decision-making and control.\footnote{Ibid, p. ws 81.}
In another paper, Chhabi Sinha proposes a framework for women's empowerment that could be better suited to a developing country, like India. The framework proposes the use of such key development indicators as women's relative access to resources (including their education and training) and women's exposure to the outside world.\textsuperscript{14}

Based on these observations, the present study seeks to assess the level of empowerment of women in the selected tea estates on the basis of following four indicators:

i) earned income and women's relative control over their own earnings.

ii) Women workers' relative representation in the supervising or administrative categories.

iii) Women's representation in the decision-making positions in trade unions (given the fact that within the confines of a particular tea estate a trade union plays the role of a mediator between the macro political world on the one hand and the plantation workers on the other), and

iv) the relative status of women's education (given the fact that education by widening the range of choices opened before a woman leads to her empowerment).

7.3 STATUS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SAMPLE TEA ESTATES

An attempt is made in this section to have an idea of the status of empowerment of women in the six selected tea estates in terms of the empowerment indicators as finally selected in the proceeding section. It needs to be mentioned that no attempt has been made by us to construct the GEM indices, firstly because the indicators chosen by us for assessing empowerment of women in the sample tea estates are not the same as the ones used by UNDP for calculating GEM values for different countries (which means that GEM values if calculated for the estates can not be compared with the values obtained by UNDP at all India level), and secondly because of the fact that, as GEM values based on the same parameters are not available for other plantation regions, the values even if calculated for South Assam

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. ws 83.
are unlikely to provide any measure of the empowerment of women in this region relative to other tea growing or plantation regions of the country. Hence, we restrict our endeavour in this section only to presenting an overview of the position of women based on the selected indicators which might provide a broad idea about the level of their empowerment.

7.3.1 EARNED INCOME AND WOMEN'S CONTROL OVER OWN EARNINGS

Broadly speaking, share of women workers in the earned income of all plantation workers depends on the following two variables:

i) Proportion of women in the workforce; and

ii) Ratio of female wages to male wages.

Our survey indicated that the proportion of female labourers to total labourers in sample tea estates ranged from 35.7 per cent (in Lallachhera T.E) to 56 per cent (in case of Manipur T.E.). Taking all the six tea estates together, women constituted in 2000 about 48.2 per cent of all labourers. (cf. Table 4.II in chapter IV in this thesis).

As regards the second variable above, it is known that with the enactment of Equal Remuneration Act 1976, wages of female labourers have been brought at par with the same of male labourers. However, despite this equality among males and females, it was found by us that because of the recruitment of a higher proportion of the females as temporary workers (the number of working days for a temporary worker is generally much less than that of a permanent worker) as compared to the males, and also because of non-availability of promotion prospects of women workers (meaning thereby their confinement solely to the lowest paid category), the average annual earnings of female workers were lower than those of the male workers in the same tea estate. As dependable data regarding the annual earnings of all workers in the sample estates was not available to us from any source, we enquired from the sample women workers regarding their weekly earnings vis-a-vis the earnings of their male counterparts. It could be seen that, the average earnings of women workers in the six selected tea estates varied between 90 per cent and 100 per cent of the earnings of their
male colleagues (although at the individual level many women workers even reported a higher weekly earnings than that of their male counterparts).

The equality of wage rates between male and females of course fails to reflect properly the actual status of women in the income front. As had been mentioned earlier in chapter V, majority of the women reported that they did not have exclusive control over their own earnings. Only 25.7 per cent of the respondents, taking all the six sample estates together, could retain their entire earnings in their own hands, while 43.3 per cent of the respondents had only partial access to their earnings and they used to hand over the rest of their earnings to the male heads in their respective families. No less than 31 per cent of the respondents reported that they had to hand over their entire earnings to their respective husbands and other senior male members of the family. Thus women’s access to their own earnings was found to be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>Access</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>100% access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>Partial access (taken as 50% access)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Zero access</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the above basis, we calculated that women had their control over only around one-fourth of the total income earned by all workers in the sample tea estates (which meant that male workers had their control over three-fourth of all workers’ earned income). These estimates, in fact, provide a telling testimony to the actual status of women’s empowerment in the tea estates on the income front.

7.3.2 WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN THE SUPERVISORY OR ADMINISTRATIVE CATEGORIES

It has been shown in Chapter IV that women labourers in all the six sample estates are placed in the lowest layer of organisational hierarchy, while males occupy all the supervisory, managerial, clerical and technical positions. Women do not have any access as yet to the jobs in the technical, managerial and administrative category. This means that women workers in terms of this specific empowerment-indicator practically score a zero, as they are not holding any decision-making position at their workplaces; rather their tasks are directly or indirectly
controlled and supervised by the males in the industry. In fact, the absence of promotion prospects of women workers was found by us to be an important feature of the tea plantations in South Assam.

7.3.3 WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS IN TRADE UNION

The primary function of trade union is to promote and protect the interests of its members. After the 1950s the trade union movement spread rapidly in tea plantation industry. Since, then, trade unionism among women workers made rapid progress. A survey conducted by the Labour Bureau in the late 1970s showed that women constituted 52 per cent of the total trade union membership. Our study of the six sample tea estates in South Assam showed a similar trend. Information regarding respondents' membership of trade unions and their participation pattern in the union activities were collected through the interview schedule and are presented in Table 7.1.

---

Table 7.1: Respondents' Participation in Trade Unions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the sample tea estates</th>
<th>Total No. of Respondents</th>
<th>Unionised Respondents</th>
<th>Unionised respondents who attend union meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcuttipore</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silcoori</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koomber</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattikhera</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lallachhera</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>288</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the percentages to total unionised respondents in the given tea estates.

'-' indicates nil.

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

Table 7.1 reveals that 288 out of the 300 sample respondents (96.0 per cent) taking all the six selected estates together were members of trade unions. Only twelve of the respondents reported that they were not members of any trade union. However, among the unionised respondents none was there who reported that she attended union meetings regularly. About 83.3 per cent (240 out of 288 respondents) of the respondents attended union meetings occasionally and 16.7 per cent of the respondents (48 out of 288 respondents) reported that they attended meetings only once or twice in a year.

To know in detail about the women's participation in the decision making positions in trade unions, it may be worthwhile at this stage to consider the organisation structure of a trade union.

It has been mentioned earlier in Chapter II that the three important operating trade
unions in the tea plantations in this region are the Barak Valley Cha Shramik Union (BVCSU), the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha (BMS) and the CITU. Majority of the labourers of tea estates in this region are members of BVCSU. It was found that all the unionised respondents in the selected tea estates were the members of BVCSU. In view of this we tried to know the details regarding the organisation structure of BVCSU and the extent and pattern of women representation therein.

There is a four-tier hierarchy in the organisation structure of BVCSU. Garden panchayat, which is at the grass-root level, consists of minimum five and maximum eleven members depending upon the total number of members in a particular tea estate. Among the members of garden panchayat, there may be minimum one or maximum three female members depending upon the total number of panchayat members. That is, number of male panchayat members is much higher than the number of female members. These panchayat members are selected or elected for two years. Generally members are selected in a general meeting at the garden level.

The panchayat members select one President and one Secretary from amongst themselves. In the six sample estates, no female garden panchayat member was found serving as president or secretary. Garden panchayat lies at the fourth or lowest layer of organisational hierarchy of BVCSU.

In the third layer of the hierarchy there is one General Council Body consisting of seventy members. This body is formed by selecting seventy members amongst the members of the garden panchayats. This body is formed for four years. BVCSU has divided the tea estates of Barak Valley in which it has remarkable influences into seven circles on the basis of their geographical location. Each of these seven circles elect ten members to the General Council of the union from amongst the panchayat members of the gardens under their respective jurisdiction. Of these ten members elected from each circle, maximum two may be female members. Thus, in the General Council, maximum fourteen female members may be elected by the seven circles of the union.

In the second layer of the organisational hierarchy, there is a Working Committee or Executive Body consisting of twenty eight members. Members of General Council of the union elect these twenty eight members. Each ten members elected by each circle of the union to the General Council in their turn elect four members from amongst themselves to the Executive
Body. In this way, the Executive Body consisting of twenty eight members is formed. There is no such rule as to the compulsory election of any female member in the Executive Body. It was reported to us that there were three female members in the Executive Body of BVCSU in 2002-03. That is, the ratio of female members to male members of Executive Body stood at 3:25.

The topmost layer of the organisational hierarchy consists of office bearers at the district level. These office bearers are the decision-making-authority. The office bearers, on behalf of all members of the Union, hold negotiation with the Government and with political leaders on relevant issues. Members of the General Council and of the Executive Body elect office bearers for four years. It was reported that, in 2002-03, there were sixteen office bearers in BVCSU. Among these sixteen none was a female.

Thus the final picture with regard to women’s representation at the various level of the union-organisation (excluding the bottom or panchayat layer) was found to be as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation layer</th>
<th>Total functionaries</th>
<th>Number of women functionaries</th>
<th>Women representation (Col. 3 as % of Col.2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd layer: General Council</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>14 (maximum)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd layer: Executive Body</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3 (actual in 2002-03)</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top layer: District level office bearers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>NIL</td>
<td>NIL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As may be seen from above, women labourers’ representation at the level of the General Council and Executive Body was very poor and their representation at the top most decision-making layer at the district level was nil. Women labourers were found to be generally primary and passive members of the union. On enquiry, it was also found that not a single item that was exclusively an women’s issue did figure prominently during the last three years (i.e. 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2000-03) within the agenda of the trade union. Thus, for all practical purposes, women workers were marginalised entities within the organisation structure as well as the agenda of the trade unions.

7.3.4. STATUS OF WOMEN’S EDUCATION

Educational attainment reflects the knowledge status of an individual, which is a goal as
well as a means of human development. Education can expand choices and opportunities in life. For women in the developing countries, education is a means to empowerment.16

Educational attainment of the respondents in the selected tea estates has been measured by us by using two variables, namely, literacy rate and educational standard of the respondents. With regard to these, information had been collected through interview-schedule and are presented in Table 7.II.

### TABLE 7.II: LITERACY RATE AND EDUCATIONAL STANDARD OF RESPONDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample tea estates</th>
<th>Literate Respondents</th>
<th>Illiterate Respondents</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>below primary standard</td>
<td>primary standard</td>
<td>Middle standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcuttipore</td>
<td>8 (21.1%)</td>
<td>2 (5.2%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silcoori</td>
<td>6 (18.8%)</td>
<td>3 (9.4%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koomber</td>
<td>15 (21.5%)</td>
<td>4 (5.7%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattikhera</td>
<td>20 (20.8%)</td>
<td>6 (6.3%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>5 (14.7%)</td>
<td>3 (8.8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lallachhera</td>
<td>5 (16.7%)</td>
<td>3 (10.0%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>59 (19.7%)</td>
<td>21 (7.0%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in parentheses indicate the percentages to total respondents surveyed in the given tea estates.
'-' indicates nil.

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

As is shown in Table 7.11, taking all the sample estates together, 73.3 per cent of the respondents were illiterate. Only 26.7 per cent of the respondents were found to be literates. 19.7 per cent of all respondents were literate below primary standard and 7.0 per cent were literate up to primary standard. Not a single respondent was found educated up to middle standard or beyond this level. The literacy rate among the respondents was thus much lower than the female literacy rate in South Assam (60 per cent according to the Census of 2001). It means that education which is the surest means of emancipation has not reached the majority of women labourers in tea plantations in South Assam.

7.4 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: SOME RELEVANT ISSUES IN THE CONTEXT OF TEA PLANTATIONS

Literature dealing with women's question have focussed in particular on the determining role played by the following three forces in the context of women's empowerment: 17

i) education;

ii) organisation (like the trade unions, voluntary organisations etc. that have the potentiality to contribute towards empowerment of women; and

ii) the government.

Considering the overriding importance of these forces as determinants of the progress of empowerment of women in any given social or geographical setting, we make an attempt in this section to assess how these forces actually work in the context of the tea plantations in South Assam. Such an exercise, it is believed, would throw some light on the prevailing constraints to empowerment of women workers in the tea plantations in this region.

7.4.1. EDUCATION.

The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 made it mandatory for all tea plantations to provide educational facilities to the children of workers. It was found in course of the survey that, there is a school (primary or middle standard) in each of the six sample tea estates. But despite this, the general picture prevailing in the estates with regard to women's education was far from encouraging. Table 7.III may be considered in this connection:
### TABLE 7.III: PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL-GOERS AMONG THE MALE AND FEMALE CHILDREN OF THE RESPONDENTS (IN 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample tea estate</th>
<th>Male Children of school going age</th>
<th>Female Children of school going age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>Number attending school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcuttipore</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silcoorie</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koomber</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattikhera</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalachhera</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** School-going age means any age in the range of 6 to 16 years.

**Source:** The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

As may be seen from Table 7.III, a large proportion of the children of school-going-age of the respondents in the sample tea estates are not attending schools. It was found that among the boys of school-going-age-group, taking all the sample units together, 76.1 per cent were attending schools, whereas among the girls of school-going-age-group only 45.9 per cent were attending schools during the reference year. Detailed information regarding the literacy level of the girl children of the respondents as well as the information regarding the dropouts and illiterates are presented in Table 7.IV:
## TABLE 7.IV: STATUS OF EDUCATION OF GIRL-CHILDREN OF SCHOOL-GOING AGE OF THE RESPONDENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Estate</th>
<th>Number of girls attending School</th>
<th>Drops-out</th>
<th>Total literate girls (cl. 5+ col.)</th>
<th>Illiterate</th>
<th>Total number of girls of school going age (cl. 5+ col.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>at primary level</td>
<td>at middle school level</td>
<td>at high school level</td>
<td>total school goers</td>
<td>at primary level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcuttipore</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silcoorie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koomer</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hattikhera</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipur</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lalachhera</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>(33.4)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures in the parentheses indicate the percentages to total number of girls of school-going age of the respondents.

'-' indicates nil.

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.
It is revealed by Table 7.IV that amongst the girl children of school-going age of the respondents, only 169 girls (i.e. 45.9 per cent) were actually attending schools. Of all the girl children of the respondents in the school-going age-group, 33.4 per cent were found to be students at the primary level, 10.1 per cent were students at the middle-school level and only 2.4 per cent were students at the higher levels. 41.9 per cent of the girls had dropped out of schools at various stages of their studies and 12.2 per cent had never gone to any school and hence were illiterates.

Apart from the relatively low level of enrollment (vis-a-vis the male children in the plantations; cf. Table 7.III in this chapter), the other feature that drew our attention in the given context was the high dropout ratio among the girls in tea plantations in South Assam. In course of the interviews, we specifically tried to know from the respondents the reasons that prompted their girl children to drop out from the schools. The reasons cited by the concerned respondents (i.e. those respondents whose daughter in the school-going age-group had dropped out as per their own statements) could be grouped into four categories and are shown below in Table 7.V

### TABLE 7.V: REASONS CITED BY THE RESPONDENTS FOR DISCONTINUANCE OF DAUGHTERS’ EDUCATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons cited</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) The daughter had to extend help in household works and take care of younger brothers and sisters at home.</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>68.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) The daughter could not continue her studies because she found it difficult or was not willing to go to school.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) The parents felt that in the life of a woman worker, education hardly has any meaning.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) It was not possible to bear the cost of education of the daughter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number of respondents in this table denotes the number of only those married respondents whose daughter or daughters as per their own statements had dropped out at one or the other stage of their schooling.

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

150
Table 7.V shows that, the most common reason behind the dropout from schools among girls is the unequal gendered division of labour at home as 68.3 per cent of the concerned 164 respondents indicated that their daughters had to leave the schools for they had to help in household works and take care of younger children. The reasons stated by the respondents thus reflect the inferior status of daughters in the family and hence of their unequal treatment (vis-a-vis the male children) within the family.

Thus, from the above analysis, it is clear that sociocultural factors and existing asymmetrical gender relation within family are the major constraints which stand in the way of spread of education among women workers in the sample tea estates. Besides these, there are also other constraints, which retard the progress of education among the children of tea plantation labourers irrespective of gender. The most important among these reasons were the ones related to the quality of educational infrastructure and the quality of teaching-learning arranged for the children in the tea estates. The prevailing situation in the tea estates in this regard may be summarised in the following way. As the plantations usually lie in isolated pockets and the modes of communication with the outside world are far from satisfactory, the only source of education for workers’ children is the Primary or Middle Standard schools in the plantations. These schools are often badly maintained. They do not have the requisite class rooms or the required number of teachers. Moreover, since in most of the cases, the teachers reside outside the gardens they are reportedly often not regular in their attendance. Children, in fact, get little help from the schools. At the same time, because of very poor educational standard or illiteracy of the parents, they do not get any guidance at their homes also. Therefore, when the children are promoted to higher classes, the prescribed lessons appear to them as very difficult and this induces many of them to leave the schools keeping their studies incomplete. Neither the Government nor the management in the tea estates seem to be paying any attention to these practical difficulties encountered by the school-going children of the plantations workers.

7.4.2. TRADE UNION

It was found that in the sample tea estates the Trade Union was the only operating non-official organisation that had large scale membership of women. In fact, trade unions are channels whereby women workers like their male counterparts have an opportunity to air their grievances and take action for redressal of the same. However, as had been noticed, the
passive participation of women in union is a general feature in the context of tea plantations and this reflected the low level of empowerment of women. In particular the following facts could be noticed:

i) Women workers generally hold subordinate status in the unions and thereby remain marginalised in the trade union. Often the organisational structure of a trade union is such that very few female members are actually elected to the different bodies of the union. In the given situation, the female members are generally unable to assert themselves or even effectively raise their voices in the various levels of the union leadership.

ii) The other problem is linked to women’s ignorance which in turn results in their lack of interest in union activities. In this connection, Table 7.VI may be considered which lists the reasons cited by the respondents in sample tea estates for their joining the trade unions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for joining trade unions</th>
<th>Number of unionised respondents</th>
<th>% of unionised respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Joined as husband or other members of the family are members of the union</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Joined after having been persuaded by union leaders</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Joined after considering the important role played by trade union in protecting the interests of workers</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) No clear reply</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>288</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

It is evident from Table 7.VI that the most common reason for joining a union was that the husband or the father was a member of the union, as was stated by 83.7 per cent of the unionised respondents. 9.4 per cent of the unionised respondents stated that they had become members of the union after having been influenced by the union leaders. A very negligible
portion (2.4 per cent) of the unionised respondents reported that they had joined the union after properly assessing or realising the necessity of joining trade unions.

We placed before the respondents a second question whether as members of a trade union, did they know anything about the activities handled by a trade union.

The responses given by 288 unionised respondents are summed up in Table 7.VII.

### TABLE 7.VII: AWARENESS OF THE UNIONISED RESPONDENTS ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIONS OF WHICH THEY ARE THE MEMBERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent category</th>
<th>Number of unionised respondents</th>
<th>% of total unionised respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Respondents who have no idea about the range of union activities</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Respondents who know only moderately about the range of union activities</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Respondents who know well about the range of union activities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

It is clear from the Table 7.VII that majority of the unionised respondents (61.1 per cent) are ignorant of about the range of activities that are handled by a union. About 37.2 per cent of unionised respondents stated that union is meant for bettering their conditions, i.e. they know only moderately about union activities. The responses of only 2.4 per cent of unionised respondents indicated that they took some interest in union activities and also had a fair idea about the various activities that are handled by a union.

Thus, it is clear that majority of unionised respondents are ignorant about the role and activities of trade union. Hence they do not show any interest in union activities and prefer to remain as passive members of union. This passivity of the women members combined with the males’ monopoly over union leadership explains to a large extent why those issues that were exclusively of the women’s never figured prominently in the agenda of the dominant
trade union in the tea plantations in South Assam.

7.4.3 GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN

Within the framework of Indian constitution, a number of legislative measures have been taken by the Government from time to time for achieving emancipation of women and for improving their status. Some legislative measures, such as those relating to marriage, property rights, prevention of dowry and child marriage etc. have been adopted with a view to protect women from various social inequalities and evils. Some other legislative provisions made by the government are meant for the protection and welfare of women workers in the organised and unorganised sectors particularly in the areas of (i) maternity benefits, (ii) regulation of night duties (iii) underground work (iv) equal remuneration (v) prevention of discrimination in employment and occupation (vi) hazardous working conditions (vii) separate toilet facility for women in the workplace (viii) creche facility etc.\(^\text{17}\) Apart from the legal measures, a number of developmental programmes specifically meant for women had been initiated by the government. Particular mention may be made of the comprehensive plan for women that was formulated by the Department of Women and Child Development of the Government of India called 'The Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000.'\(^\text{18}\) In this perspective plan, the empowerment of women was recognised as the central issue for effective improvement in the status of women.

Within the given parameters of the aforesaid plans and policy measures, education has been identified by the government as important aspect of women’s development and a powerful means of their empowerment.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 was in fact a landmark in the approach to women’s education. It gave overriding priority to the removal of women’s illiteracy.\(^\text{19}\) A number


\(^{19}\) K.C. Vashistha : ‘Metamorphosis in Women’s Education at the Turn of Century’ in Association of Indian Universities (ed); *Education and Women’s Empowerment*, New Delhi : AIU, 1999; pp 78-79.
of measures were suggested to achieve the stated objectives of the Programme of Action as envisaged under NPE. The plan enunciated that every educational institution should take up active programmes for the development of women. Special programmes should be developed by institutions to promote general awareness and positive self-image amongst women through programmes like discussions, street-plays, wall papers, puppet shows etc. The plan also enunciated measures to change the sociocultural factors that are operating as constraints in women's education.

Our field survey revealed that while the plans, programmes and policies and legislative measures adopted by the Government were expected to act directly so as to protect the interests of women and also to empower them, in most of the cases these measures were not being properly implemented.

Firstly, information regarding legislative measures for protection of women from social evils did hardly reach the women workers in plantations in South Assam. Tables 7.VIII may be considered in this connection:

TABLE 7.VIII : RESPONDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE LEGAL PROVISIONS CONCERNING PROTECTION OF WOMEN FROM SOCIAL EVILS AND INEQUALITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Category</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>% of total respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Respondents with zero awareness</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Respondents with low to moderate awareness but who do not know how make use of the laws</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Respondents with low to moderate awareness, but who are unable or unwilling to move to the Court.</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Respondents with high awareness</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) No response</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The information were collected from the sample respondents in the selected tea estates through direct personal interview.

Association of Indian Universities (ed); Education and Women's Empowerment, New Delhi: AIU, 1999; Appendix-1, p 178.
It is evident from Table 7.VIII that information regarding the legal provisions made by the Government had not yet reached a large number of the respondents. When asked whether the respondents knew something about those laws that provided protection to women workers in particular, 29.3 per cent of the respondents expressed their ignorance about these laws; 39 per cent stated that they knew that there were some laws like the ones providing guarantee for equal wages of women, or those relating to maternity benefits, creche facility etc. but they stated that they did not know how to take help from these laws. About 24.7 per cent of all respondents revealed that although they knew about these laws, they were unable or unwilling to move to the Court for seeking protection under the laws. 7.0 per cent of the respondents did not give any clear reply to this question.

It was noticed that there were often serious deficiencies at the level of actual implementation of plans, policies and programmes. For instance, one may consider here the situation prevailing with regard to maternity benefits. The casual women workers who now constitute a sizeable proportion of the total female labourers serving in the tea estates often did not enjoy maternity benefits. This was seemingly in violation of the Maternity Benefits Act 1961 (discussed earlier in Chapter IV). Another instance of non-implementation or tardy implementation may be found in the arrangements made by the tea estate authorities with regard to creche facility. It was found by us that creche facility which is to be provided by each planter, is often not being provided properly to the women workers. This has a bearing on working condition of women and particularly on the education of girl children. Similarly, inadequate school infrastructure, improper maintenance of schools and insufficient number of teachers in the garden schools were found to be the general features in all the sample tea estates.

It has already been mentioned that special programmes were enunciated by NPE (1986) to promote general awareness and positive self-image amongst women through various types of programmes. For instance, Action Plan under NPE enunciated that every educational institution should take up by 1995 active programmes for the development of women. All teachers should be trained as agents of women’s development. But during the course of the study, it was found that no such step was taken up by any school in the six sample tea estates.

Thus, with regard to the government initiatives concerning women’s empowerment in the tea plantations, it could be noticed in the context of South Assam that there still existed a
wide gap between the goals enunciated in the declared policies, plans and programmes on the one hand and the actual situation that prevailed in the tea estates particularly in the matter of implementation of the said policies and programmes.

It could also be noticed in the context of South Assam that women hardly have any representation worth the name either at the policy-making level or at the level of actual implementation of Government policies and programmes. As has been the case with developing countries in general, so also in the context of tea plantations in South Assam, Women's voices in the policy making arena often remain unuttered, unheard and hence unattended.

21 In India, for instance, Women held in 1994 only 7.3 per cent of the total seats in Parliament. cf. UNDP (1995), op cit, p 85.