Chapter VIII

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this concluding part of the thesis we present the summary of our broad observations.

Chapter I of the thesis introduced the topic and specified the objectives and scope of the study. While introducing the problem the chapter noted that persisting inequality between men and women in different spheres of their lives and activities and the continuing exclusion of women from many opportunities have of late attracted the attention of development thinkers across the world. It is often argued from different quarters that the inequality between men and women in their power relations results largely from the differential in their income earning ability. Logically, therefore, emphasis is sought to be placed on improvement of women's participation in economic activities and their income earning power. The premise underlying such a move has been that a higher labour force participation rate and consequent rise in women's income-earning ability *per se* would alter the relations between genders in women's favour.

Viewed from the above angles, the labour situation in tea industry in India appears to be an ideal case to study. Not only one notices in the tea industry a relatively high percentage of females in workforce, but the inequality of wages between men and women is also guaranteed in tea plantations through implementation of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. However, what seems to be a paradox is that in the tea plantations the high workforce participation rate of women and their attainment of wage equality (with males) have not brought commensurate rise in women's status – either in the workplace or within their families. The available evidences in the context of tea industry indicate women workers’ continued subordination to men and their deprivation in a variety of forms.

The paradox as noted above gives rise to a number of questions: How gender relations actually work in the two domains of the women workers in tea industry, i.e. in their workplaces and also in the realm of their families? What is the impact of these relations on women's lives and status? How women do perceive and respond to their deprivation? What factors within women's micro and macro context constrain the process of their empowerment?
Against the given backdrop an attempt has been made in the present study to analyse the links between the three issues of gender, work and deprivation in the context of tea plantation in South Assam. The objectives of the study were as follows:

i) To examine the specific characteristics of work in the tea plantations and see how works are actually organised in the tea estates in South Assam;

ii) To assess the implications of the given mode of organisation of work for women's roles and status in work places.

iii) To assess how work outside the work places, particularly in the realm of families of the plantation labourers are shared by the two genders and identify the bases of women's deprivation in their household domains.

iv) To see how women perceive and respond to their gender-specific deprivation.

v) Finally, to have an overview of the status of women's empowerment in tea plantations and evaluate the role being played by institutions like state and the trade unions in relation to empowerment of women.

The geographical coverage of the study is the tea plantations in the three southern most districts of Assam, viz. Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. These three districts, which collectively constitute the Cachar 'Tea district' (as per Tea Boards' area classification), are one of the oldest and the most important tea growing regions in the country.

Field Survey for collection of data was conducted during 2001-2002. However, for compilation and analysis of time series data pertaining to different aspects of operation of the tea industry in South Assam, the period from 1950 to 2000 was broadly covered by the enquiry.

Chapter II focused on the socio-economic context of the enquiry. At first, a brief reference was made to the early history of tea plantations in South Assam. Indigenous tea was first discovered in South Assam in 1855. Following the keen interests taken by the British Government, cultivation of tea commenced in the year 1956 with great success. In the initial years of the industry's growth, all the companies engaged in tea plantation were sterling companies. Although, gradually some Indian companies made their inroads into the tea industry, the dominance of European capital remained more or less unchallenged till the Second World War.
Tea industry in Cachar experienced significant growth particularly during the post independence period. Production of tea, which was only 19,827 kgs in 1951 rose to 53,000 kgs., thereby registering a growth of 170.7 per cent during the five decades over the 1951 level. There was also significant gains in labour productivity.

The data presented in Chapter II showed that the average daily number of labour employed in the tea plantations in South Assam in 1999 was 67191. About 46.2 per cent of total adult labourers in the tea plantations in South Assam (in 1998) were females and the rest males. The female labourers serving in the 116 operating tea estates in South Assam in 1998 together constituted about 11.5 per cent of the total female labour force in the tea industry in Assam as a whole.

Most of the labourers currently employed in the industry in South Assam are third or fourth generation migrants. From its very beginning the tea industry in this part of the country was dependent on import of labourers from other regions of India. As a result, large-scale immigration of labourers from the tribal areas belonging to the present West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chattishgarh, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and U.P. followed. The trend continued until August 1950, when the practice of immigration of labourers into Assam was finally discontinued. Currently the chief modes of labour recruiting in the tea garden of Cachar are:

i) hiring directly from within the organization;

ii) hiring directly from outside sources on temporary or casual basis;

iii) hiring labourers from outside the estate through labour contractors;

iv) hiring labourers through the employment agencies set up by the Government.

All the available historical accounts suggest the prevalence of an oppressive regime in the industry’s early days in this part of the country particularly with regard to the management and compensation of labourers. The Minimum Wage Act 1948 was the earliest legislation in independent India, which sought to protect labourers from exploitation. Yet till 1961, the average monthly earnings of a labourer in tea plantations was much lower than that of a worker in most other labour intensive manufacturing industries in India. Earlier in 1951, the Plantation Labour Act was passed. The Act had made it obligatory for tea estates to arrange certain welfare and amenities for the plantation workers. But the manner of its delayed
implementation or even non-implementation in many estates in South Assam till date has remained a matter of widespread criticism. In 1961, the Central Wage Board for plantation was set up. An important role was assigned to the Wage Board in fixation and revision of basic wage rates of male and female labourers in tea plantation industry.

From the point of view of the women workers in tea plantations, the enactment of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 was an important milestone. By means of this Act, the wages of female labourers in the tea plantation industry were brought at par with the wages of male labourers.

The analyses of the ownership structure and of the producers’ organizations in South Assam showed that from the very early days of the industry, the owners of the tea estates of South Assam had been well organized. Till independence, British tea planters had been enjoining the protection from the British Government. During that period planters could take part in decision-making process of the Government through their representatives in the legislative assemblies. Naturally, the legislations, which were passed from time to time, were framed keeping in view the interest of the planters. On the contrary, there was no organization of plantation labourers till 1920 to defend their rights and interests.

After independence, the ownership of tea estates gradually passed on to the Indian hands. Also a series of legislation were passed by the Government to regulate various aspects of the industry’s operation and to protect workers’ interest. Nevertheless, the legacy continues. The owners of the tea estates (comprising sole proprietors, partnerships and joint stock companies) are currently organised under two producers’ organization namely the Surma Valley Branch of Indian Tea Association (ITA) and Barak Valley Branch of Tea Association of India (TAI). These two associations act as powerful lobbies for protection of producers’ interest not only in representing before the Government on various issues but also in the negotiation with the labourers on wage revision, bonus and other related matters.

The labourers in the tea industry, on the other side, organise themselves through their trade unions. In South Assam comprising the three districts- Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, three trade union organizations are predominant in the tea plantations. These are Cachar Cha Shramik Union (affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress or INTUC), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangha (BMS). Of these three, the Cachar Cha Shramik Union has influence over majority of the tea estates in South Assam.
Chapter III delineated the conceptual framework of the study and presented an outline of the methodology, sample design and database. It was noted that, in the literature, gender had been generally described as ‘social construction’ of sexual identity. Sexual identity of a human being is derived from his or her birth and hence ‘given’ to begin with. But gendered identity is socially and culturally constructed. Being a social construction, gender seeks to create a difference between the males and the females in terms of their positioning in the society, roles, right, rewards and prescribed behaviour. Central to this concept of gender is the unequal power relation between the two genders. This unequal power relation actually means male domination and subordination of the female. This ‘domination-subordination’ pattern in-built within the gender relation is observed in all spheres of life – public and private, where both the genders are constituents or actors.

To begin with one may consider the gender relation as is found to be operative in the household domain. The household works are accomplished as a social process with participation of both the gender; and gender hierarchy through gendered division of labour decides the respective responsibilities and rights of males and females involved in the process.

It is equally important to consider in this connection the gender-relation as is operative in the workplace i.e. in the public sphere of life. In the public sphere, efforts are made collectively to produce and maintain both material goods and human beings and thereby relationships are reproduced. These activities constitute a ‘social process’ precisely because such works are imbued with social value. These works not only have use-value but have exchange-value too. In the workplace, where works are accomplished as a social process, both the genders participate in the process and here also gender hierarchy decides the respective roles and rights of males and females involved in the process.

Herfi Hartman (1997) has shown in her work how patriarchy by shaping the gender-hierarchy regulates gender-relation in both the aforesaid two domains of women, i.e. the workplace and the household domain. Patriarchy operates by controlling women’s labour power and sexuality in the public sphere and via the gendered division of labour in the private sphere. In the public sphere women perform jobs in the lower category for lower wages and in the private sphere they perform domestic labour without any wages thus producing merely use value and not exchange value.

The survey of literature undertaken in Chapter III in fact not only provided us with a
framework of analysis, but also the broad parameters along which the study was to be conducted.

The study being an exploratory one was based on primary data collected from sample women laborers of the tea plantations of South Assam.

For the purpose of collection of primary data, sample respondents were selected by two-stage sampling exercise.

In the first stage, six tea states from among the operating tea estates in South Assam were selected by using the purposive sampling technique. Among the six tea estates selected for the purpose, three estates were of the "very-large" (i.e. having size above 400 hectares) category, while the other three estates belonged to the 'other' (size: 0-400 hectares) categories.

In the second stage, sample female labourers numbering 300 were selected on random basis from each sample tea estate. Total number of adult women labourers in the year 2000 (permanent & temporary) who were residing inside the garden and working in the estates constituted the sampling frame for each of the sample tea estate. About 10 per cent of such resident women labourers in each sample estates were selected on a random basis as sample respondents for the purpose of the study. The relevant information from the respondents was collected through direct personal interview. For this purpose a carefully designed interview schedule was used. The study also made use of a good deal of secondary data that were available from various sources.

The findings of the survey were presented in Chapter IV, V, VI and VII.

Chapter IV examined the linkages among gender, work and deprivation in the sample women workers' respective workplaces. Through a brief survey of literature, the following parameters were chosen for the purpose of the enquiry:

1. Proportion of women in the total workers.
2. Tasks assigned to women workers in their workplaces.
3. Women's placement in the organizational hierarchy.
5. Promotion prospects of women.
6. Wage paid to the women labourers.
7. Working condition of the women labourers.
8. Women's dignity in their workplaces.

It was seen that female labourers constituted nearly half of the total labour force in the sample tea plantations in South Assam. After discussing briefly the process of tea manufacturing, it was seen that major tasks involved in the production process of tea are to be carried out in the field. It was observed that almost all female workers were assigned the tasks, which are performed in the fields. Among the field operations, the main task assigned to women is tea plucking which is the most important task in field operations because quality of tea depends on quality of the leaves plucked. Tea plucking needs manual dexterity and speed, but is an unskilled occupation.

Analysing the prevailing mode of organisation for work in tea plantations in South Assam and women workers' placement in the organizational hierarchy, it was found that almost all the women workers were employed in the lowest and least-paid category of jobs. The males occupied nearly all the supervisory, managerial, clerical and technical positions. That is, almost all the women workers were directly or indirectly supervised in their workplaces by the male staffs of the other three categories. Thus, the study showed that the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of estate organization acted as one of the means of deprivation of women workers.

The prevailing practice of large-scale recruitment of workers on temporary basis was found to be against the welfare of workers regardless of gender. The percentage of women workers serving as temporary workers was higher than that of the male temporary workers in the tea estates. This was due to the fact that women workers were mainly assigned the task of plucking of tea-leaves where demand for labour is only seasonal. This growing practice of dependence on temporary women workers enables the estate management to increase their profit level in two ways. Firstly, these temporary workers are not entitled to any of the fringe benefits. Secondly, women workers with proficiency in the plucking operation could contribute more to production (than temporarily recruited male labourers), which also led to higher profit. This was another form of gender-specific deprivation prevalent in the plantations in South Assam.
It was found that, in the sample tea estate, majority of workers—male and female, were employed in the unskilled jobs in the bottom layer of the organization structure. However, whereas at least some of the male labourers were periodically being given promotions to supervisory levels (i.e. at the level of 'Sardars'), no woman in the sample tea estate ever got promotion. Absence of promotion prospects of women workers was seen as another area where women were deprived of enjoying equal opportunities and rights (as their male counterparts). It was found that in the case of women labourers of tea plantations in South Assam, in spite of having both seniority and efficiency, the prospects of promotion was almost non-existent.

Regarding wages, although the wage rates are same for all workers—males and females, temporary and permanent, it was observed that the higher incidence of temporary recruitment among the women workers combined with the denial of many service benefits to temporary women workers and the prevailing policy of recruiting and confining women workers only to the lowest paid strata of the organizational hierarchy—acted to keep the average annual wage-earnings of women labourers at levels that were lower than that of the same of male workers.

The working condition of the women workers in the sample estates was also found to be wanting in many respects. Firstly, a considerable proportion of male workers enjoy the privilege of working indoor within the factory shades (where working condition is obviously better than that of field operations). As against this almost all the female workers were found engaged in field operations and only a very small proportion (compared to the males) could enjoy the privilege of working indoors in the factory. Secondly, the relatively large number of women who were recruited only as temporary workers were unable to entitle themselves to the various forms of protection or job-related benefits. Thirdly, the study revealed that non-availability of some of the essential facilities in the workplace (like the creche facility) had created additional hardships for women.

Dignity in the workplaces depends to a large extent on the position that a worker holds. The study revealed that women labourers of the six sample tea estates were mainly placed in the lowest category of jobs, which reflected their low dignity in the workplaces. Along with this, their illiteracy and lack of awareness were found standing in the way of their moving upwards along the dignity chain.
The analysis in Chapter IV clearly pointed to the operation of gender-hierarchy in workplaces and the resultant subordination and deprivation of women workers in various forms.

**Chapter V** focused on the gender relation in the families of the women workers. In the chapter, gender relation was studied from two angles-

i) pattern of sharing responsibilities or roles between the two genders and

ii) their pattern of sharing of rights.

Regarding the sharing pattern of responsibilities, it was found that despite bearing almost equal financial responsibilities, women workers in the sample tea estates had to bear on their shoulders about two-third of the total domestic work-load. The study revealed that the household works which are of a repetitive nature and more time consuming were carried out by females, whereas the men generally performed less time consuming and less frequent household works. That is, a woman worker’s responsibility increased with her taking up a job to earn money because her domestic roles continued to remain as before.

Regarding the sharing pattern of rights enjoyed by the two genders, it was found that the share of rights enjoyed by women workers in their familial domains was lower than that enjoyed by their male counterparts. Firstly, male domination in the families of women workers with regard to decision-making was found. That is, women workers were found as not participating equally with their male counterparts in the decision making process within the families. Secondly, it was found that women workers’ share in the right to spend in the sample tea estates was not at par with men’s share in the right to spend. Thirdly, with regard to savings also only 25 per cent of the women surveyed reported that they had savings in their own names. 23.7 per cent of the respondent women had savings in joint names and others had no savings. Fourthly, majority of the women workers were found as having only partial control or no control over their own income. This was another strand of their deprivation within families. But it had also other fallouts. For instance, the respondents often were unable to check the misuse of family income by their husbands or other male members who incurred regular expenditure on liquor. The study revealed that regular consumption of liquor by majority of respondents’ husbands caused extra hardship to them in a variety of ways. Sixthly, it was found that women workers did not enjoy the same degree of freedom as their male counterparts.
regarding mobility outside their locality. Prior permission from husbands or male senior members was to be taken for visiting any place outside the garden. This was found to be the case for more than 80 per cent of the respondents. Seventhly, practices like dowry etc. have made their inroads into the society of plantation labourers in this region. This has definitely adversely affected the status of women in their society.

Thus, the study after analyzing the sharing pattern of responsibilities and rights among the two genders in the realm of families of the women plantation labourers could observe that an asymmetrical gendered division of labour in favour of men prevailed in the families of plantation labourers in South Assam. The intra-household ‘domination-subordination’ pattern of gender relation structured by gender hierarchy, that operates in the tea plantations in this region, means that women have a larger share of responsibilities and lesser share of rights. This unequal gender relation in turn reflects the ongoing gender specific deprivation of women workers in their familial domains.

Chapter VI analysed how the women plantation workers responded to their gender-specific deprivation in workplaces as well as at home.

The survey of relevant literature, undertaken in the first section of the chapter pointed to the fact that a person’s behaviour, more particularly, his or her reaction pattern vis-a-vis specific situations were conditioned to a large extent by the person’s own perception of the given objective realities confronted by him or her. Hence, women workers’ response to their subordination and gender specific deprivation in workplaces and in their respective families could be best explained by linking the same to their cognitive perceptions and interpretations of the prevailing gender-relation as shaped by their values, beliefs, expectations, inner needs and particularly by their self-image.

Given the fact that a person’s perception in reflected by his or her attitude, an attempt was made in the chapter to assess the attitude of the sample respondents with respect to the prevailing gender relation in their workplaces. For this purpose, Likert-Type scaling technique was used and five specific aspects of the prevailing gender relation in the workplaces of the women workers were considered.

It was found that majority of the respondents considered themselves equally capable as their male counterparts working in the same category or layer of the organization structure
and hence made explicit their expectation regarding equal compensation package or equality of status of employment (i.e. permanent status as against temporary recruitment). However, majority of the respondents were found to be not averse to accepting subordinate positions under the male sardars or supervisors and even did not aspire to acquire those higher positions.

Our detailed discussions at the informal level with respondents revealed that it is not only the value system but a woman's real-life experience that plays a decisive role in shaping her perception. As the surveyed women have been working in the lower levels of organization hierarchy for a long time with their male colleagues, they gradually could acquire the confidence that they can handle the given jobs (for example, plucking and other field operations) as good as their male colleagues. This confidence via the positive impact on self-image induced them to assert their claim for equality of pay-pockets and of employment status. The possibility of gaining confidence in the matter of handling of supervisory, managerial and clerical jobs was totally absent, as in all the sample tea estates, it was noticed that these higher positions were manned solely by the males. Women's non-acquaintance with this kind of jobs was the reason behind their lack of confidence as regards their own capability in handling such jobs. In the given situations, the belief that women were generally not suitable to handle supervisory, administrative and managerial jobs continued to remain unchallenged.

It was found that on the whole the attitude of the women workers reflected their continued attachment to the patriarchal beliefs, value system, structuring of genders within their respective organizations. Participation in the workforce had a positive impact on the surveyed women enabling them to acquire confidence, improve self-image and assert their rights as equal partners of progress. However, the positive influence generated by a higher workforce participation rate was being neutralized to a large extent by the prevailing gender-hierarchy at the places of work and women's sole confinement to relatively low paid unskilled jobs. As values, beliefs, expectations, self-image and confidence are linked closely to one's real-life work experience, continued subordination of women in the workplace and the incompleteness of her work-experience had inevitable fallouts on women's attitude, perception and the resulting response. The procedure adopted for assessing the attitude of the women workers towards gender-relation in their families was more or less the same as that followed earlier for assessing their attitude towards gender-relation in the workplaces.
It was noticed that majority of the respondents aspired to have full control over their own earnings and sought to contribute equally as males to decisions concerning important family matters. However, surprisingly, the same respondents in a large majority of the cases were ready to accept the asymmetrical gendered division of labor and their subordinate status in their families.

Overall, the attitude of the surveyed women workers to the existing gender-relation within their respective families indicated the following:

i) The respondents despite their participation in wage-labour were found to be still attached to and guided by the patriarchal value system particularly in the matter of sharing of rights and responsibilities by two genders in their household domains. However, the degree of their attachment to the said value system has come down over time and is now very low (as is indicated by the overall mean score of -0.07)

ii) The reason why the respondents were not in a position to assert their claims for gender-equality in the family in a more forceful manner may be traced to their specific objective realities. While their participation in the workforce in tea estates gave them independent sources of income and thereby was playing a positive influence on their self-image (that induced them to aspire for having full control over their own earnings or for equal participation in family's decision making process), their illiteracy, ignorance and lack of empowerment, by way of playing a negative influence on their self-image retarded their progress to gender equality and made them adhere to the patriarchal scheme of gendered division of labour and gender hierarchy within the household domain.

iii) The responses of the surveyed women are indicative of the fact that participation in the workforce, unless it is backed by education and empowerment, cannot alone introduce the desired level of changes in women's attitude towards their own status and rights.

In view of the determining role played by a woman's self-concept in the process of her perception of deprivation and then in shaping her reaction to such deprivation, it was necessary for us to examine the women workers' perception of their own value and role as women. One
way of assessing the self-concept of women was to examine the attitude of the married
women respondents to their own daughters (vis-a-vis sons, if any). In this connection, the
following five questions were specifically examined.

i) daughter-preference, if any (as against son-preference), in-built within the
respondents’ parenthood aspiration;

ii) value attached by the respondents to daughter’s employment (vis-a-vis sons’
employment);

iii) value attached by the respondents to daughters’ education (vis-a-vis son’s
education);

iv) role visualized by the respondents (in relation to the domestic division of labour)
for their daughters when these daughters would grow up as women; and

v) the right or freedom (like the freedom of mobility) that the respondents are
ready to give to their daughters (vis-a-vis the sons).

The major findings that came out from the exercise were as follows:

Firstly, majority of the respondents (53.9 per cent) had a gender bias in favour of
male child within their present or past motherhood aspirations. Also, majority of the respondents
(63.2 per cent) in course of their interviews expressed their bias in favour of son’s education
(vis-a-vis the education of their daughters). The continued attachment of majority of the
respondents to the patriarchal pattern of division of labour and value systems were equally
manifest while dealing with their daughters’ roles in relation to domestic responsibilities or the
freedom of mobility of their grown-up daughters. Only on the question of assigning priority to
future employment of their sons and daughters, the respondents’ attitude seemed to be
somewhat different. An overwhelming majority (71.5 per cent) of the working mothers felt
that for them the employment of both sons and daughters were equally important. Being
workers and earners, these women could realize from their real-life experience how important
it was for a woman to have an employment not only for her own sake but also for the sake of
her poverty-ridden family. On enquiry, many of the surveyed women clearly stated that their
concern for daughters’ employment was linked to both the subsistence considerations
(incremental family income) and status considerations (women’s autonomy and financial
security).
On the whole, the respondents’ attitude reflected their continued attachment to patriarchal value system and gender-hierarchy and of their relatively poor self-image as shaped by their given values and believes and the real-life work experience both at their workplaces and in families.

After examining the perception of the women workers as regards their gender-specific deprivation at their workplaces as well as in homes, an attempt was finally made in Chapter VI to ascertain the pattern of response of the women workers to specific situations of their perceived gender-specific deprivation. For this, ten specific situations covering both the workplace and the home domains of the respondents were identified and women’s responses to these situations, as reported by them during the interview, was measured by applying a scaling technique.

It was noticed that the respondents practically offered no resistance to their deprivation. On being asked how the women reacted to the specific situations of their perceived deprivation at their workplaces, majority of the respondents either preferred to remain silent or clearly expressed their helplessness. While redressal of the gender-specific deprivation at workplaces called for collective resistance that could be put forward by trade unions or similar other bodies, it could be noticed that, none of the respondents did make any mention of the trade unions of which they also were the members. Detailed discussions with the respondents on the trade-union issue subsequently brought into light two facts: Firstly, majority of the women did not show any faith in their respective unions for the purpose of redressal of gender-specific deprivation at workplaces; and secondly, the male domination in the leadership of trade unions and the in-built patriarchy operative therein rendered these bodies practically inaccessible to women particularly on such issues that posed women directly against men at their workplaces.

The resistance offered by the women to their deprivation in families, of course, was found to be varying between zero resistance to a high degree of resistance. The picture in the household domain could be summed up as follows:

i) The degree of resistance offered by women was relatively low in case of gendered division of labour within families in situations of deprivation of women from freedom of mobility. This was a testimony to the overriding influence of traditions on the life, attitude and actions of the working women in the tea plantations in South Assam.
However, the dissenting respondents (i.e. those respondents who disapproved a given situation) reported that they would react rather sharply to any attempt by the male members in the families to deprive them from having their control over own incomes. The dissenting women also proposed to offer moderate to high degree of resistance to any situation that did not permit their due participation in family’s decision making.

The fact that not a single woman opted in favour of ‘very high resistance’ in turn indicated that the women in general do not have any faith on the ability or potentiality of a trade union in resolving women’s issues. If this is true, in case of workplace deprivation, this is equally true in cases of deprivation in the household domains.

Chapter VII presented an overview of the status of women’s empowerment in the tea plantations in South Assam. While examining the relevant issues, the Chapter also had a brief review of the role played by such institutions as the State and the trade unions in relation to empowerment of women in tea plantations.

For the purpose of the analysis, empowerment was defined as a multidimensional process which enabled 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 the influences of customs, beliefs and traditions.

The study sought to assess the level of empowerment of women in the selected tea estates on the basis of the 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, and

iv) the relative status of women’s education.

As regards the first variable, it could be noted that despite the equality of wages among males and females and the presence of a high percentage of females in the plantation
workforce, women workers’ actual control over earnings was very low. Majority of the women interviewed by us reported that they did not have exclusive control even over their own earnings. A tentative estimate made in the chapter suggested that women had their control over only 22 to 25 per cent of the total income earned by all workers in the sample tea estates. This meant that the male workers in the estates had their control over 75 to 78 per cent of all workers’ earned income.

As far as the second variable is concerned, it was noticed that in the sample tea estates women did not have any access as yet to the jobs in the technical, managerial and administrative category. Their tasks were being directly or indirectly controlled or supervised by males in the industry.

Similarly, although 96 per cent of the respondents taking all the sample estates together were members of trade unions, the women labourers did not have any representation at the top most district level decision making layer of the trade union. 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 extensively an women’s issue did figure prominently during the last three years (i.e. 2001-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03) 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.

The status of women’s education in the sample tea estates was also found to be not encouraging. 73.3 per cent of the women workers interviewed by us were illiterate. The literacy rate among the respondents was thus much lower than the overall literacy rate or the female literacy rate in South Assam. It means that education which is the surest means of emancipation has not yet reached the majority of women labourers in the tea plantations in South Assam.

The analysis in Chapter VII further pointed to the fact 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 estates. Among the other constraining factors, the most important were seemingly the ones that were related to the inadequacy of educational infrastructure and the quality of teaching-learning arranged for the children in the tea estates. Neither the Government nor the management in the tea estates were found to be paying due attention to the practical difficulties encountered by the
school-going children of the plantation workers.

Finally, an attempt was made in Chapter VII to see how the women workers stood vis-a-vis the trade union and the state, as far as the issues related to empowerment were concerned. With regard to the trade unions, 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.

It was seen in course of the survey 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.

Turning finally to the initiatives of the Government for empowering women, the study found that a number of legislative and policy measures had been taken by the Government for empowering women. However, the impact of these measures on actual empowerment of women has so far remained doubtful. Firstly, information regarding the various measures adopted by the Government often did not reach the women workers in plantations in South Assam. Secondly, there were often serious deficiencies at the level of actual implementation of plans, policies and programmes. Finally, because of inadequate representation of women both at the policy-making level and at the level of actual implementation of policies and programmes, the women's point of view generally remained sidelined and unattended.

Thus, the study revealed that patriarchy operative within the structure of trade unions or of the Government significantly curtailed the possibility of empowerment of women workers in the tea plantations.
To sum up, the study pointed to the fact that wage employment in the tea plantation industry, rather than providing the necessary condition for women workers’ emancipation served to reinforce the unequal gender-relation prevailing in their places of work as well as in their respective household domains. The relatively high workforce participation rate per se could not bring any remarkable change in the women labourers’ perception of their own identity or in their self-image. As a result, the resistance offered by the women labourers to their gender specific deprivation was often so weak as not to lead to any change in the terms under which their labour is made available to capital at their workplaces or to the social process that operates in their household domains. The low level of resistance offered by women workers of course reflects the low level of empowerment of women in the tea plantations in South Assam. Hence, the study laid emphasis on empowerment of women. Institutions like the Government and the trade unions can contribute meaningfully towards the empowerment of women. However, the prime initiative must come from within the rank of women workers themselves. Given the patriarchy of the society, the capital, the State and the working class movement, women plantations labourers need to organise themselves within the framework of an autonomous women’s agenda. Only such a course would ensure their meaningful and more active participation in the working class movement and thereby would strengthen the movement itself. At the same time, this would enable women to secure their rights and thus pave the way for their emancipation and for their emergence as equal partners of progress.