Chapter-I
INTRODUCTION

Gender commonly refers to the social construction of sexual identity. With socially constructed gendered identities, males and females are positioned differently in human society over a wide range of variables, such as, behaviour, roles, functions, rights, opportunities, responsibilities and rewards. The reality that women do not share equally with men with regard to these dimensions is universal, although the gap or the extent of inequality between the two genders differs widely across culture. It is often argued that the inequality between men and women in their aforesaid power-relations results largely from their differential income-earning ability. Logically, therefore, emphasis is placed on improvement of women’s income-earning power. The two ways through which this is sought to be achieved are: firstly, by raising the work-force participation rate of women and secondly, by securing for them equality in the matter of wages and other job-related benefits.

Questions, of course, arise: can a higher labour-force participation rate and consequent rise in women’s income-earning ability per-se alter the relations between genders in women’s favour? To put it otherwise, in those situations where the work-force participation rate of women is high and they also earn equal wages as men, do women actually experience improved gender-relation in terms of equality of status?

Viewed from the above angles, the labour situation in tea industry in India appears to be an ideal case to study. Not only the equality of wages for women has been guaranteed in tea plantations through implementation of the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, but there are other features which deserve attention:

Firstly, in tea plantations, the proportion of women in the labour force is notably high. In 1994, for instance, women constituted nearly 51 per cent of the total adult labourers employed in India.

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Secondly, the labour-intensity of operations in tea plantations, combined with the high percentage of females in work force, has led to a significant concentration of women-labourers in tea industry. Tea industry, accounts for more than four-fifth of the total female recruitment in the plantation sector at the national level.\(^4\)

Thirdly, as it is a usual practice in tea estates to employ both the male and female members of the family, in the tea-labour households, women's work-force participation rate is very high. This, in turn, means that unemployment among women in the tea-labour households is either nil or only seasonal in nature.

The concentration and the high proportion of women labourers in the tea industry have been partly due to the specific nature of tea industry where female hands are considered ideal for certain operations like the plucking of tea leaves. But more important is the fact that, the female recruitment in the plantations reflects a well- thought-out labour strategy pursued by the tea garden owners. Firstly, till the implementation of the Equal Remuneration Act (1976), female labour was relatively cheap. Secondly, in certain jobs, females always perform better than males, which means that productivity of the female labourers is higher than male productivity. Finally, female recruitment enables a whole family of the labourers to settle within or in the vicinity of tea estates. Thus, by recruiting females, the tea planters can ensure for themselves higher average labour productivity, lower cost of production per unit, steady supply of labourers throughout the year and also additional hands in peak plucking seasons.

However, what seems to be a paradox is that, in the tea plantations, the high work-force participation rate of women and their attainment of wage-equality (with males) have not brought commensurate rise in women's status – either in the work place or within their families. The evidences available to us indicate women workers' continued subordination to men and their deprivation in a variety of forms. Some instances of the ongoing deprivation are: women’s near-total confinement in fieldwork where the skill-content of the job is low;\(^5\) the denial of housing and other job-related benefits to a large section of the women labourers serving


with the temporary status; \(^6\) women’s limited role in family’s decision making\(^7\) and their limited access to formal education.\(^8\)

The paradox as noted above gives rise to a number of questions:

i) How gender-relations actually work in the tea-labourers’ work places and in the realm of their families? What is the impact of these relations on women’s lives and status?

ii) Are women deprived because of the fact that they are ‘workers’ (i.e. the ones capable of producing surplus value)? Or is the specific form of deprivation of women labourers linked to the fact that, apart from being ‘workers’ they are ‘women’ too?

iii) How women do perceive and respond to their deprivation? What factors within women’s micro and macro context constrain the process of their empowerment?

In this connection, the following two features of the tea industry demand due attention:

Firstly, tea industry – via its export-market orientation and dominating presence of big industrial houses – have all along been linked to the operation of the global capitalist system. As the reference to the tea estates’ labour recruitment policy suggests, the prevailing mode of production in the tea industry must have been playing a vital role in the process of shaping or reshaping of gender relations.

Secondly, tea estates (in North-East India, in particular) within the framework of the above production relations, operate like ‘enclaves’ which provide little scope to its labourers to freely interact with the world outside the estates. These labourers who are mostly immigrants had come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Yet by virtue of their living together for many decades in the so called ‘coolie-lines’ in near-total isolation from the rest of the world,

\(^6\) In 1974, of the 10,89,874 labourers on roll in the tea industry in India, 8,70,702 were in the resident category and the rest were recruited from outside (non-residents). Among the non-residents, about two-third were having temporary status and one-third permanent. Also the data show that, compared to males, a higher proportion of female labourers were in the non-resident category and serving with a temporary status. See, Tea Board of India: *Tea Statistics 1994-95*, Calcutta; pp 138-47.

\(^7\) GOI (1980), op cit, p 86.

\(^8\) GOI (1980), op cit, p 78.
the tea labourers have developed common life styles, sets of values, family norms and even gender-related behavioural codes.

The above two points taken together suggest that the interpenetration of class, community and gender is seldom as visible and prominent as is the case within the tea industry.

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 plantations in South Assam.

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study is to analyse the linkage between three major issues: gender, work and deprivation by locating these within the specific socioeconomic contexts of the women labourers in tea plantations in South Assam. To be more specific, the following are our study objectives:

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.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The ground-breaking *Towards Equality* report published by the Government of India in 1974 stated clearly that the Indian State by and large had failed to implement the policy of not
discriminating on ground of gender. Earlier, with the publication of Ester Boserup’s book *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970), the concept of ‘Women in development’ had become popular and since then women were viewed as ‘welfare recipient’ by our policy makers. The focus was on minimising the disadvantages of women by equalising educational and employment opportunities within the existing framework of development programme. But the problem with this approach were:

(i) it basically treated women as an object to whom fruits of development must flow, and

(ii) while talking of their integration to development process through increased participation in public spheres, it practically ignored their role in familial spheres.

Around mid-1970’s the neo-Marxists feminists began looking at the relationship between women and development. But ‘Women and Development’ approach, like the ‘women in development’ approach considered only the productive aspects of women’s lives ignoring thereby their reproductive roles. There was not an adequate theoretical account of the social activities surrounding reproduction and the nurturing of human being.

The ‘Gender and Development’ approach which later became popular since the 1980’s proposed to view women not as objects, but as subjects, as active agents of change. The approach of Gender and Development took into account the totality of women’s lives while analysing systematically the unequal relations between men and women in all spheres of life. This change in perspective naturally moved women from margin to the centre. Instead of asking for benevolence or welfare, ‘Gender and Development’ approach talked of empowerment of women i.e. of women’s gaining of control over their own lives. It was also increasingly being realised that gender specificity as a framework of reference offered too narrow a canvass to permit meaningful analysis of gender issues. Indeed, women’s issues seldom are women’s

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12 Ibid, p 3073.
13 Ibid, p 3076.
14 Ibid, p 3072.
issues alone and are invariably tied to the broader issues of development and deprivation. As Saraswati Raju rightly observes:

There may exist variations within the gender-specific groups whereby a certain section of women are better off than a certain section of men. This variation may render women comparable to men across gender. As such both men and women may constitute a social class formation to operate as an exploitative or alternatively as exploited groups. Gender relations then may actually become class relations articulated through the exercise of power. The foregoing analysis suggests that over the two decades following the mid-seventies, two major changes have taken place in the perspective of researchers. The first one is the incorporation of the gender-perspective in the analysis of capital labour relation. The other important change has been the gradual replacement, since the late – 1980s of the earlier frame of ‘women in development’ by that of ‘gender and development.’ This latter shift signifies the implicit recognition by researchers that gender issues at any given point of time reflect in a particular form the exploitation pattern that works within and is reinforced and institutionalised by the wider socio-economic, regional and cultural contexts and hence, these issues need to be analysed within the theoretical premises of social class formation and their exploitative relations.

In fact, the aforesaid realisation in the sphere of women studies points to the fact that the interface between ‘gender’ and ‘context’ is crucial to understanding women’s work and their deprivation and the same need to be studied by undertaking micro-level investigation in different spatial, occupational and cultural settings. This indeed provides justification to this research endeavour covering the female plantation labourers in South Assam.

The available literature on tea plantations in South Assam which include the various survey reports published by the Government as well as by the industry itself and the studies conducted by individual researchers, although not adequate, furnish a good deal of information

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17 Mary E John (1996), op. cit, p 3071.
18 Saraswati Raju (1991), op. cit, p 2836.
on various aspects of operation of the tea industry. The literature focus in particular on:

a) the history of tea industry in South Assam and the trends and pattern of labour immigration in the tea plantations in this region (Hunter: reprint 1990; Allen 1905; Dutta 1965 and 1996; Griffiths 1967; Bhattacharjee 1977; Chatterjee 1986);\(^{20}\)

b) ownership pattern and the managerial as well as technical aspects of growth (Paul 1974; Tea Board 1981; Sen 2001);\(^{21}\)

c) size and composition of the work force, wage-structure, working conditions and labour productivity (GOI 1952, 1966, 1980);\(^{22}\)

d) capital-labour relation, trade union movement and social class formation in tea plantations (Bose 1954; Guha 1977 and 1981; De 1981; Sarma 1990; Mazumdar 1998);\(^{23}\)

However, very few studies have been conducted so far on women plantation labourers.\(^{24}\)

A glance over the concerned literature indicates that the analyses so far have been wanting at least in two respects.

Firstly, the analyses have proceeded along a narrow conceptual terrain. There has not been any worthwhile attempt by the concerned investigators to trace empirically gender issues


to the dynamics and interplay of women labourers' specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

Secondly, the two domains of women – the home and the workplace, have often been treated as 'exclusive territories'. Questions now are being raised as to whether the two domains of women (and hence the two forms of inequality and deprivation) can really be treated as independent of each other? The earlier surveys do not throw enough light on the crucial interconnection that may exist between the two spheres of women's operation.

The present study, within its specified limits has sought to academically address some of these unresolved gender-related issues.

1.3 HYPOTHESES

Based on our study of available secondary data and random discussion with knowledgeable persons including a cross-section of tea labourers (of both sexes), garden managers and trade unions officials, the following hypotheses had been formulated for the study:

1. The Women labourers in the tea plantations contribute no less than their male counterparts towards work either at their workplaces or in their household domains.

2. The women labourers are denied an equal share of the rights and privileges in their workplaces as well as in their families.

3. The resistance offered by the women workers to their gender-specific deprivation is generally weak.

4. The low level of resistance offered by the women labourers to their gender-specific deprivation reflect the low level of their empowerment.

5. Institutions like the State or the trade unions, who are in charge of providing the protective umbrella, do not adequately address the issue of women's empowerment.

1.4 SCOPE AND LIMITATION

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 Board’s area classification), are one
of the oldest and most important tea-growing regions in the country. The data released by the Tea Board of India show that, in 1998, there were 116 tea estates operating in the area contributing 11.1 per cent of the total tea production in Assam and employing about 11.5 per cent of the total female labour force in the tea industry in this state. In terms of area, tea plantations in this region account for about 8 per cent of the total area under tea at the All India level.

Field survey for collection of cross sectional data from sample tea estates was conducted during 2001–02 which is the reference year for the study.

However, to assess the general trends at the micro level, compilation and analysis of time series data pertaining to different aspects of operation of the tea industry in South Assam are necessary. For this, broadly the five decades proceeding the reference year are covered. As mentioned earlier, it is only after the independence of the country that the continued deprivation of women in various spheres of their operation gradually emerged as a major concern for policy makers in this country. From the point of view of women labourers in tea plantations, the enactment of Equal Remuneration Act in 1976 is considered to be a major breakthrough. The tea plantations in South Assam, which experienced a long spell of stagnation during the 1950s' and 1960s', started recovering since the early seventies and witnessed significant growth thereafter. Considering all these, the period from 1950-2000 is covered for compilation and analysis of time series data.

It is also necessary to specify the limitations of our enquiry.

Firstly, the focus of the enquiry is confined to the three plain districts (i.e. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj) in South Assam.

Secondly, within the spatial limits, the universe of our enquiry is the female labourers in the industry. Tea labourers are commonly classified as adults (Males and Females) and non-adults (adolescents). For the purpose of the enquiry, only adult female labourers (i.e. those whose age is eighteen years or above) working in the plantations are considered.

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26 Ibid, pp 31-32.
1.5 CHAPTER SCHEME

The study has been divided into eight chapters:

Chapter-I is an introductory one. This chapter presents a statement of the problem and specifies the objectives, hypotheses, scope and significance of the study.

Chapter-II examines the character and growth of the tea industry in South Assam from a historical perspective. The chapter also highlights the ownership structure of tea estates, producers' organisations and trade unions operative at present in the tea plantations in South Assam.

Chapter-III through an extensive survey of literature delineates the conceptual framework of the study. The chapter also presents an outline of the methodology, sample design and data base.

Chapter-IV assesses the implication of the prevailing mode of organisation of work in tea plantations for women labourers' role and status in their work places.

Chapter-V examines how work in the realm of families of the plantation labourers are shared by the two genders and attempts to identify the bases of women's deprivation in household domains.

Chapter-VI analyses how women plantation workers perceive and respond to their gender-specific deprivation in work places as well as at home.

Chapter-VII presents an overview of the status of women's empowerment in tea plantations. In the process, the chapter evaluates the role played by such institutions as the State and the trade unions in relation to empowerment of women in tea plantations.

Chapter-VIII presents the summary of findings of the study.