CHAPTER - 3

AN EXPLOITATIVE LABOUR REGIME:
WOMEN LABOUR IN TEA GARDENS

While the previous chapter dealt with issues and problems of the Garden Management that made women recruitment in tea industry an economic necessity, 

An Exploitative Labour Regime: Women Labour in Tea Gardens sketches gender division of plantation work, women’s productive role, and power relations at workplace, their work composition and Estate hierarchy, wage payment system and their remuneration through the past experiences of respondent women labour of the surveyed Tea Estates.

It is interesting to note that the United Nations Organization states that women do two-thirds of the world’s work and due to their work they receive 10 percent of all income and own 1 percent of the world’s means of production; while men by implication perform one third of the world’s work and receive 90 percent of the income and 99 percent of the means of production.¹ It becomes imperative for feminist engagement with socio-economic issues because feminist theory provides new insights to women’s labour. Their engagement therefore should begin with an examination of women’s labour in all forms such as in workplace, in factory or industry and in the household of Tea Estates under survey. Even today Estate hierarchy and gender division of plantation work exists in surveyed Tea Estates. In this context, it is essential to understand the nature of labour performed by women at the workplace.

Tea plantation is a labour intensive industry in which a large number of manual workers are required round the clock. The success of the tea industry depends upon the labour of both men and women whose laborious efforts produce the green crop.

¹ Cited in Maria Mies, Veronika Thompson, et.al (eds), Women : The Last Colony, New Delhi, 1988, p. 159.
Due to the hard labour of millions of labourers, tea industry occupies an important position in the economy of Assam. Unlike most other industries technological progression has not been able to ease the importance of labour in Tea Estates. In Tea Estates, labour is a vital factor in every stage of agricultural operations and manufacture which include cultivation, plucking, manuring, irrigation, weed control, pest control, transportation of green leaves, withering, rolling, fermenting, drying, weighing and packaging. Being a space where people work as well as stay, the understanding of how tea plantations function is important for any analysis on gender relations.

Labour is one of the factors of production and it is a human effort directed towards producing commodities. Through the expenditure of labour power, production takes place. Karl Marx was the first who investigated thoroughly the quality of value creation of labour. For instance he said that labour is the worker’s own life activity which the workers sell to another person to secure the necessary means of subsistence. Women labourers played an important role in pre-capitalist society where they had to perform both the productive and unproductive activities. The male members also performed labour along with female members in the society. Thus there existed a certain kind of collective labour. But, in case of capitalist economy, the surplus goes to the capitalist and here labourers work for the wages. In case of women labourers, their labour was distributed in public production and household production.

It was Marx who first pointed out the distinction between wage labour which is also termed as ‘paid labour’ and domestic labour or ‘unpaid labour’ and its emergence under capitalism. He stated that domestic labour produce use-value instead of exchange-value and so is regarded as ‘unproductive’ by the capitalist regime. He believed that domestic labour is real as well as productive. Women labours in Tea Estates are burdened with dual roles such as unpaid and paid or household work or

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2 Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, p. 34.
economically productive work. This dual role bears great significance yet they are still being exploited at home as well as at workplace. Their contributions to productivity are mostly invisible as their domestic contributions are overlooked.

A micro study which was conducted in the Himalayan region mainly to understand the extent of women’s contribution to agriculture, it is found that on a one hectare firm, a pair of bullocks worked for 1064 hours, a man for 12 hours and women for 3485 hours in a year. Maria Mies (1986) on the other hand in Andhra Pradesh found that during the time of agricultural season, the work day of women agricultural labourer lasts for 15 hours where she gets an hour’s rest, while her male counterpart works for 7-8 hours with 4 hours’ rest in between. Again in Uttar Pradesh in a report of the National Commission on self-employed women and women in the informal sector, the Director of Social Welfare stated: ‘in the State, in unorganized sector there are no women.’ When the Commission probed and asked ‘are there any women who go to forest to collect firewood’? ‘Do they have cattle in rural areas’? The Director argued that ‘of course, there are many women who are doing that type of work’. Mencher and Sardamoni in Muddy Feet Dirty Hands, refer to the Second Agricultural Labour Enquiry Report which mentions that women were mostly employed in agricultural operations like weeding and seldom in tough operations like ploughing. They state that it is a general assumption that all female jobs require lesser strength. In this context, the authors quote a comment of a male anthropologist who reported that when a man is asked as to why males did not perform transplanting and weeding work, he got this reply: ‘in the mud and in the

4 Carol S. Conrod, Chronic Hunger and the status of Women In India, June 1998, article accessed through www.thp.org, accessed on 02/09/2014.
5 Ibid.
rain, no man can keep standing bent over all day because our backs would hurt too much’.6

The three instances show how women’s work is both invisible and ignored. The cases have been cited for a better understanding of women’s contribution within the household and outside, to the tea industry. There appears a total disconnect in terms of women’s work and perceptions about their labour. Thus, women’s works are invisible to the policy makers. The traditional economically productive work done by women may be categorized into three categories: home-based production activities which have exchange value in the market, home-based production for family consumption and paid employment outside the home.7

The justification for women’s employment in tea plantations as argued by the ILO had been thus: ‘since plantation work is only a special kind of agricultural work therefore, it is familiar to Indian women.’8 This argument thus meant that women are supposed to be familiar with agricultural work and as tea plantation work is also agricultural in nature, there ought not to be any hesitation on the part of the women to work on tea gardens. Amongst the various field crops, tea plantations employed more labour per hectare than any other crop. Like many other industrial sector, tea industry allowed women to work as wage earners. But, women’s paid labour is still very far from being the main part of their labour or the main part of their contribution to the standard of living of society.9 In Sample Tea Estates, permanent labourers got involved in their duties till the time of retirement.

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8 "Industrial Labour in India", International Labour Organisation, pp. 35-36.
Committee on Labour at its meeting in Guwahati on 6 February, 1991 decided that ‘the period of employment of temporary workers should be extended from six months to eight months in a year’.10

In the Tea Estates of Sonitpur, from 1983 to 2008 and upto recent times, women labour played an important occupational role in workplace. Both permanent and temporary workers are engaged in the workplace of Tea Estates of Sonitpur.11 Their high work participation contributed immensely to the economic development of Assam since the market profit of tea mainly depend on the quality of plucking tea leaves where female dominance prevailed. Lambert has pointed out that: ‘some sections of the Indian working force are “over committed” in the sense that they wanted to attach to their employers without earning much of their prospects’.12 In that sense, workers of Tea Estates are ‘over-committed’ especially the women labourers. In the Sample Tea Estates, they engaged not only in the task of plucking leaves but also in different activities like digging fields, watering the plants etc. which require a lot of physical labour. Inspite of productive and reproductive role, rights of women workers were discriminated. Their upward mobility in the job was very much restricted. They were not satisfied with the Estate Authority. They even could not raise their problems before the Management because women in supervisory staffs were less in number, as such and hence, they are being exploited.

In the Tea Estates under survey, the capitalization of production has significant implication for female labourers because, higher status jobs were dominated by male workers while women were concentrated in labour-intensive and time-consuming

10 Memorandum of Settlement on Additional Employment and Medical facilities and other issues and termination of strike in tea gardens in West Bengal, Indian Tea Association, Circular no. 13, 22nd July 1999, Calcutta.

11 As per the Ministry of Commerce and Industry Report, 2007, nearly 85 per cent of the total working labour in Assam is permanent, but seeing the ground reality and the amount of casual labour available in each tea garden, the veracity of the actual information on permanent workers is doubtful and debatable.

tasks. Moreover, women’s role as daily rated field workers and the reproduction of labour force is viewed in terms of efficiency. The life and tasks of women labourers reflected that they were essential for the tea industry but enjoyed a low status and subjected to male supervision and authority which is often expressed in physical abuse and violence. In the Sample Tea Estates women were either given lower jobs or the jobs which they handle are traditional and marked as women's job.

Throughout the world the notion of women labour has started to play a primary place in economic life. Women in the Sample Tea Estates of Sonitpur recruited themselves for labour only to fulfill the basic needs of their families and for the betterment of family life. It has been noticed that married, unmarried, widow, single, elderly and even all caste and religious women are engaged in labour. The occupational role of women workers in the Tea Estates was very extensive. It has been seen that a large number of women were working for they considered themselves as expert in the task of plucking which is a challenging job. ‘Throughout Asia, picking of tea leaf is a women’s work and only women have the patience for this task’. Besides women, men and children are also employed in plucking but women clearly dominate in this sphere as 80 percent of the pluckers in North-East India and 82 percent of the pluckers in South India are female.

Women work longer hours than men in their work as tea pluckers, because the demand for plucking labour is generally greater than the demand for men’s work in Estate maintenance. The longest plucking season generally extends from March to December and therefore a good plucker earned well during the peak plucking months. During hot and wet summer months, the plucking job is very risky as women are exposed to snake bites and insect stings. Moreover, there have been cases of attack by leeches, wild boar etc which sometimes hide among the tea

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13 Mita Bhadra, Gender Dimensions of Tea Plantation Workers in West Bengal, Indian Anthropologist, Vol. 34, No. 2, December 2004, p. 66.
15 Minoti Phukan, Behind the Cup That Cheers, Indian Farming, 1988, pp. 21-22.
bushes. Hence, inspite of such risk associated with the plucking of tea leaves they continuously worked on Tea Estates being more efficient than men.\(^\text{16}\)

In an interview with Basanti Nunia, who is still working in Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, she expressed:

> During season time, i.e. during the monsoons when production of tea is at its peak, the women workers were able to earn a lot of incentives based on the amount of extra kilos of tea leaves. They were able to pluck in addition to the minimum kilos required to get their daily wage.\(^\text{17}\)

Thus, women did hard labour to balance the family budget and are still doing labour to fulfill their family needs. Men are also engaged in plucking, but the number is not large as that of women.

It is important to note that the high quality of brew is largely determined by the standard of plucking. Plucking work usually starts at seven in the morning. At around 11 a.m., they get a *chai* break which to them was a welcome break but in reality, it is very harmful for health and the plucker got midday break for meals after which they again resume their work. During the course of plucking day a specific area was assigned to each plucking group and they usually move in rows among the bushes. ‘The work of plucking began once the new shoots developed five leaves and a bud in addition to a small leaf at the foot of the shoot, known as the sheath leaf or *jhanum*’.\(^\text{18}\) Women accumulate the tea leaves with great skill and swiftness by breaking the stems with their nimble fingers. They carried a basket on their backs which is supported by a strap round the forehead and leaves were thrown into the basket while plucking with both hands from the bushes.

During the time of field visit an attempt has been made to collect data on total permanent and temporary male and female workers from the Estates Authority.

\(^\text{16}\) D. Curjel’s Report, Women Labour in Bengal Industries 1922-23, pp. 94-98.

\(^\text{17}\) Interview with Basanti Nunia, age-38, plantation workers in Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, on 15/9/2012.

\(^\text{18}\) Rana Pratap Behal, op. cit, p. 61.
Table 3.1 shows Estate-wise data of total workforce engaged in field work in the Tea Estates under study:

**TABLE 3.1: ESTATEWISE DISTRIBUTION OF WORKING POPULATION IN FIELD UP TO 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Total Working Population</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>Temporary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td></td>
<td>500</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td></td>
<td>512</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td></td>
<td>480</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td></td>
<td>510</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td></td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td></td>
<td>600</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>1120</td>
<td>473</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2902</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>4259</td>
<td>2333</td>
<td>1152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field study, concerned with Estate Authority, 14/09/2012

From the Table 3.1, it has been noticed that besides permanent labour women, temporary labour women were also engaged in large numbers in the surveyed Tea Estates of Sonitpur specially for plucking the tea leaves. Their employment revealed the fact that they were employed by the Managers directly or indirectly mainly to carry out the works in the Tea Estates for a limited period, and likely to be terminated within a limited period with or without prior notice. These temporary women workers are employed to cope with the increased demand of leaf harvested and other agricultural works related to tea plantations. They are economically insecure as they did not have security of employment and are deprived from availing other amenities available to permanent workers.

Thus, temporary women labourers were engaged in plucking tasks in large numbers and avail less benefit from the Management. Like other permanent labour women, they also performed labour-intensive tasks in the Tea Estates and are thus burdened with heavy workload. For them social welfare benefits under Plantation Labour Act (PLA) including maternity and medical benefits do not exist. It is believed that their names, on registration, are changed each time so that they cannot claim permanency and remain casual workers only.
Inspite of such commitment, it is regrettable that plucking has not been given the status of being a highly skilled task though the standard of plucking determined the final quality of the brew. Padma Munda, a worker, who became the active member of Mother Club of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, complained that, ‘inspite of the superb skill in plucking, these male prejudiced enterprises do not rate it as a skilled job’. So, women are aware that their job requires skill and yet not recognized as such and hence, they believed that they were being exploited. In case of women workers of Tea Estates under survey, their main activity was not only concentrated on plucking. At times they were also seen performing other kinds of work like pruning, manuring, cheeling, weeding, nursery work and planting etc.

Pruning was the first task to be taken after the bushes ceased to flush. Therefore, pruning was considered as an important task performed by both men and women in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur District. The pluckers were usually deployed in pruning which was done with pruning knives. Since the pluckers were women, so they were also engaged in pruning. Pruning requires close inspection and regular practice is necessary to learn the skill. There are three or four types of pruning, namely, skiffing which means just light trimming at the top, secondly, there is light pruning which means only pruning at the top, thirdly, there is medium pruning which means going down further towards the main branches, then there is deep or collar pruning which means that the bush is trimmed just above from where it funnels or spreads into shape. Most of the women workers were quite proficient at pruning and within a short time they complete their tasks.

There were other agricultural operations performed by women in Tea Estates during different times of the year. Applying manure as well as cleaning and clearing of the drains in the tea sections were performed by women. Such tasks were usually assigned to them on piece rate basis. They were given work in tea nurseries and also

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19 Interview with Padma Munda, age-40, one of Mother Club members in Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, on 15/9/2012.
20 Navinder K. Singh, op.cit, pp. 80-81.
deployed for transplanting tea samplings in the tea sections. Moreover, women were equally worked with men to prepare the land before new planting begins.

Women also performed miscellaneous jobs which include light cultivation work in Tea Estates. In Tea Estates, it is necessary to clear the weeds which grow very fast in the tea sections. Hoeing and cheeling helps to clear the weeds. Fork is used to do deep hoeing while light hoeing is usually done by hand. Moreover tipping of early shoots of tea leaves on the bushes is usually undertaken in February or early March so that plucking rounds can be set for the on-coming season. Women were therefore, entrusted to handle such kind of work which is agricultural in nature in the Sample Tea Estates.

Women were even employed in tea factories for sorting and packaging the tea. Moreover, they served as nurse, midwives, and helpers on Estate hospitals. Interview has been conducted to know the different tasks performed by women in the Sample Tea Estates which is shown in Table 3.2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Number of women workers and their different tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Plucking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td>70(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>69(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>66(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td>59(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td>15(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>71(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>350(100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey, 16/09/2012 N.B. Figures within Brackets Indicate Percentage.

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21 Ibid.
Thus, it is evident from Table 3.2 and Bar Diagram, Figure No.3.1 that women’s labour is visible through their active participation in different tasks in Tea Estates which proves that Tea Estates became largely a female dominated space as most of the plucking, pruning and maintenance tasks were performed by women. It is generally stated that a country’s economic growth mainly depends on the rate of industrialization which may not be achieved in the absence of any one of the factors viz, land, labour, capital and organizations. Though all the four factors of production are equally important, still, it is mainly on the productive efficiency of the labour force upon which the progress of the industry depends. That’s why labour should be considered as the most important factor for the growth of the industry. The works referred in the above Table 3.2, especially the skill of plucking tea leaves performed by women, is considered as a primary task on which Company’s profit and loss depends. The economic contribution of women of the surveyed Tea Estates through their labour as tea pluckers is contributing to the tea and export production of
Sonitpur. The significance of women’s productive role in Tea Estates is shown in Table 3.3, in Appendix – 14.

Asha Munda, a female worker of Shakomato Tea Estate, who worked since 1983, expressed that she got engaged in Tea Estates as a main plucker as it ensures a livelihood for her children and future generation inspite of her job being dull and frustrating. She knew that her work was tedious in nature due with little or no scope left for women on upward mobility in job. As such and hence, they are being exploited by the Management. Thus, individual liberty of women labourers in Tea Estates were neglected though economically they are independent.

While talking with Dulal Pasi, a male Sardar of Dhullie Tea Estate, stated: ‘Men can do the plucking job, it’s not like they can’t. Usually they are not so patient and pull out the leaves and thus spoiling the bushes. But women do that since they are more patient’. In Dulal’s perception this idea of patience is the defining point for women’s suitability for the job. Thus, the idea of women being naturally suited for plucking was widely held among the workers and even the Management.

On the other hand, when asking questions like why women did the job of plucking to Luli Sawara of same Tea Estates, she pointed out thus : ‘Look at our fingers they are softer so they do not damage the bushes. We have seen our mothers do this from birth and learnt. Training and Practices are important’. Regarding plucking, Luli referred to a process of training and practice as well. Women’s skill in plucking tasks in course of time gets essentialized as women’s work. Thus, by highlighting the characteristics of patience, the process of training was made invisible.

Inspite of having long scheduled tasks, which the women workers performed since the inception of tea plantations in the Sample Tea Estates, they have adjusted well to the working pattern and system of the tea plantation industry. The work, besides the

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22 Interview with Asha Munda, age-35, women worker of Shakomato Tea Estate, Biswanath Chariali, on 17/9/2012.
23 Interview with Dulal Pasi, age-41, on 19/9/2012.
24 Interview with Luli Sawara, age-36, on 19/9/2012.
regular domestic chores, that performed by the women labourers were of a monotonous nature and their dull routine did not propose any scope of change in their work pattern. Regarding their household role in Tea Estates, a detailed discussion is presented in the next chapter. Their work did not get due recognition and therefore they continue to be neglected. Lots of experienced and efficient pluckers were there in Tea Estates but their promotion to the rank of *Sardarin* is still negligible.

The plantation women are committed workers and their output is considered higher than men’s. Moreover, ‘they are more disciplined and respectful towards their superiors. Their commitment is lifelong and is ‘valued more than their efficiency’. From the past experience shared by respondent women it is clear that women labourers were generally absent from their work due to some severe reasons which were beyond their control such as illness, care of a sick child or in-laws and due to household works. But, it has been seen that sometime male workers were absent from their work on the small pretext as an excuse for enjoying themselves. Male workers were especially absent from their garden work on the day following pay day due to heavy drinking. Since most of the wives worked within and outside home and it became quite common that male workers were deliberately away from work at least once or twice a week. Premananda Gohain, office personnel of Nya Gogra Tea Estate admitted that male workers are not conscientious towards their duty and other work responsibilities.26

The European Planters were succeeded in establishing, ‘one of the strictest industrial and social hierarchies imaginable,’ in tea plantations of North East India, the legacy of which continues.27 In the Sample Tea Estates, there are hierarchies of overseers and supervisors who were all men and still at present a multi-tier control has been

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26 Interview with Premananda Gohain, age-47, Staff of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, on 14/11/2012.
seen over the activities of women workers. Over the past 20 years or so, women all over the world have increased their participation in the labour market, but they continue to work in less prestigious jobs, are paid less and have fewer opportunities for advancement.\textsuperscript{28} In the Tea Estates the hierarchies like Planter-Manager-\textit{Babu} stands tall. Women's subordination was a feature of every mode of production. Their subordination was found in almost all sectors of work and the plantation system of Tea Estates has also its belief on the subordination of women workers. There was a patron system which was patriarchal in nature as the Planter-Manager-\textit{Babu} symbolizes the father figure.\textsuperscript{29} Such patron system is still prevalent in the Sample Tea Estates. Women have to perform their work through Manager’s \textit{hukum} or order. Tea plucking is a labour-intensive activity in which different strategies were employed to control the female pluckers. For one thing, ‘giving of orders was mainly a male prerogative.’\textsuperscript{30} So, social and economic structures reflect the invisible power of public patriarchy.

The ideologies underlying their different experiences of gender and kinship relations are manifest in folk tales, and stories, part of the popular culture of the plantation:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Sardar bole “Kam Kam”}
\textit{Babu bole “dhari aan”}
\textit{Sahib bole “Libo pither sam”}
\textit{Hai! Nisthur Shyam, Phankhi diye aanili Assam}\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

English translation: Work! Work! Says the \textit{Sardar} (labour gang leader)

Get them here! Says the \textit{Babu} (Overseer)

‘I will take the skin off your backs’, says the \textit{sahib} (Planter)

Hai! Cruel \textit{Shyam} (Lord), you lied and brought us to Assam.

The *Jhumurgeet* cited above performed to this day on the Sample Tea Estates recalls physical violence which occurred during the Colonial period and it shows female labourers on the Tea Estates appear to have faced the full force of power unleashed by the hierarchical structure of authority. The *Jhumurgeet* evokes hierarchy which was determined by the position occupied in the plantation structure and as well as by class, caste, race, ethnicity and gender.

The Manager is the supreme authority within Tea Estates and practically assumes all power of a dictator. He might be exploitative but ultimately unchallenged. Below the Manager, there are Assistant Managers who looks after the smooth functioning of gardens and factories. The *Bagaan Babu* (Garden-Babu) who works under Manager or Assistant Manager of a Tea Estate is the head of the pluckers’ supervisory structure. He is responsible for the specific garden functions like which section needs to be plucked, what work needs to be done and how many workers are required for it. *Munshis* (Overseer) or *Boidars* worked under the *Bagaan Babus*. His work is much the same as *Bagaan Babu*. Below *Munshis* there are *Kamdaris* or *Chaprasis* (Assistant to Overseer) who supervise the work of *Sardars*. *Sardars* are the direct in-charge of their group of pluckers or pruning squads etc. Women who work under the supervision of these *Sardars* therefore, occupy the lowest status in Estate hierarchy, which is generally ignored.

Again in the factory of Sample Tea Estates, under Assistant Manager, there is the Factory *Babu* who is responsible for the smooth functioning of the factory management. Under him was the factory *Sardars* who looks after each factory room and works in different shifts. There are the office personnel that look after the ration, payment and other clerical work of the Tea Estates. Thus, at the bottom there are the workers and among the workers women labour occupies a very low status in Estate hierarchy. This clearly shows the power relations amongst the tea garden labourers of the Sample Tea Estates which still exists in the Tea Estates. This hierarchy can be
visualized as illustrated below where the daily-rated workers including women are at the base:

![Hierarchy Diagram]

In the Sample Tea Estates, the following Table 3.4 shows the gender division of plantation work:

**TABLE 3.4: GENDER DIVISION OF PLANTATION WORK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operations in field</th>
<th>Periods in month</th>
<th>Sex of the workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Filling of vacances of tea bushes</td>
<td>January-May</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transplanting</td>
<td>January-March</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Manuring</td>
<td>February-May</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Tipping</td>
<td>March-April</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Plucking</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Spraying Pesticides</td>
<td>April-September</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Pruning</td>
<td>October-January</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Weeding</td>
<td>Throughout the year</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Hoeing</td>
<td>Throughout the year</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operations in factory</th>
<th>Periods in month</th>
<th>Sex of the workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Machine operating</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Withering</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rolling</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fermenting</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Drying</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sorting</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Packing</td>
<td>March-December</td>
<td>Men, Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, 7/02/2013
Thus, while women dominate all field work of the tea industry, the factory is largely a male-dominated area. Factory works show the gendered nature of labour where it was perceived that men were suited to handle machinery, while women are supposed to be distancing from technology. Thus, the division of labour in the Tea Estates is gendered and some tasks had come to be defined as men’s work and others as women’s work. For Sylvia Walby, patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Her theory of patriarchy also allow for change over historical time. According to Walby, in Britain during the twentieth century, patriarchy changed from the ‘private’ form to the ‘public’ form.\(^{32}\) Private patriarchy is based around the family and the household and involves individual men exploiting the labour of individual women. Women are largely confined to the household sphere and have limited participation in public life. According to Sylvia Walby ‘in public patriarchy women are allowed access to paid employment but are subordinated within the public area that is, they are segregated from men and given lower status and paid less’.\(^{33}\) Walby advances the view that the move from ‘private’ to ‘public patriarchy’ has arisen ‘as a result of a capitalist interest in employing women who supply a flexible pool of labour and work at a cheaper rate’.\(^ {34}\)

In case of women labour of Sample Tea Estates, they are subjected to oppression and repression by both private and public patriarchy. Public patriarchy is apparent when women face inequality and discrimination, for example, in paid work as it is evident from Table 3.4 that in paid work women workers along with their male counterpart equally performed their duty in the workplace. The Table 3.4 shows that spraying pesticides was the only garden work exclusively done by men. Women are not enrolled in the factory to operate machines, drive tractors or handle Estate vehicles. Gender differentiation is clearly visible since they were not engaged to

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
\(^{34}\) Ibid.
work as *Boidars*, *Munshis* and *Chaprasis*. Power in this economic structure has been given to them only as *Sardarin* whose number is negligible as shown in Table 3.5:

**TABLE 3.5: NUMBER OF RESPONDENT WOMEN SARDARIN EMPLOYED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Respondent Women Labour</th>
<th>Women Sardarin</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>350</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.71</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, 07/02/2013

From their narratives presented in Table 3.5, it is found that out of total 350 respondent women who worked in the Sample Tea Estates, only 6 women found to be assigned as *Sardarin*. There were two female *Sardarin* in Nahorani, two in Nya Gogra, one in Sessa and one in Dhullie Tea Estates. It is interesting to note here that in Shakomato and Nirmala, no women labour found to be assigned as *Sardarin*. The Table 3.5 revealed the fact that Tea Estates were not giving preference to increase the number of women *Sardarin*. By sketching the past experiences of the respondents, the above table shows the gender bias against female labour. Men dominated the supervisory staff in both factories and gardens. Chatterjee (2003) provides an insight into how the plantations’ hierarchy was shaped on gender and class basis with the planter at the head of the pyramid:

*Simultaneously fetishized and pragmatically devalued, women’s tea plucking creates the outer perimeter of the plantation’s field. The planter’s management of work sustains this as the outer perimeter through a hierarchy of overseers and supervisors who are all men. Work disciplines through the manager’s*
hukum (command) trickle through layers of surveillance that re-enact his will in decidedly gendered terms

Their roles as Sardarin were below expectation and if the concept of female Sardarin is implemented properly, it will boost the morale of the female work force to a great extent. In an interview with Lakhimani Nagbansi, a female Sardarin of Nahorani who works in the Tea Estates since 1983, expressed that,

If a few female supervisory staff were employed on tea plantations, it could be easy for them to communicate their problems with the management. In future too, such steps help in empowering labour women.

Women are not spared from hard work even if they face physical problems. Minali Korwa is a permanent worker of Nirmala Tea Estate who belongs to the Munda tribe shared an experience of her life: some years ago, she suffered from physical disability and was not able to carry on heavy work especially the task of carrying plucked leaves to the factory. As per the advice of hospital doctor, the Management gave relieved her of the plucking task but allotted her the job of planting seeds in the nursery. Thus, she adds that workload is high in tea plantation and no matter what they have to render services to the Management.

The wage agreements largely reflect the domination and power of the tea industry Associations. Labourers in Tea Estates are known as daily wage workers and termed as ‘unskilled’ as no skill training avenues are open to them. There is no question of computing Dearness Allowance (DA) or variable DA according to the scale of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). They do not receive wages on Sunday, which for them is an unpaid holiday. The arrears due after every wage agreement are seldom paid. The historical backdrop of wage payment presented in the previous chapter clearly showed that women were paid less than their male counterpart in tea plantations of

35 Pia Chatterjee, op.cit, p. 53.
36 Interview with Lakhimani Nagbansi, age-36, female Sardarin in Nahorani Tea Estate, Tezpur, on 15/5/2013.
37 Interview with Minali Karwa, age-37, a permanent worker in Nirmala Tea Estate, Gohpur on 20/5/2013.
Assam. It has been noticed that the tea employers have not conceded any major demand of the Trade Unions for wage increase in the last ten years. An agreement was signed on 30 November, 2005 between the ACMS and five Tea Management groups, including the Indian Tea Association (ITA), Tea Association of India (TAI), Bharatiya Cha Parisad (BCP), Assam Tea Planters Association (ATPA) and North-Eastern Tea Association (NETA). Under this agreement, a total of ten rupees was to be increased in the workers’ wages for each day for the next 50 months in three phases. The wages were increased at Rs. 2.60 per day from 1 December, 2005 to 30 April, 2007; Rs. 3.70 from 1 May, 2007 to 31 August, 2007 and again Rs. 3.70 from 1 September, 2008 to 31 December, 2009.

In the Sample Tea Estates, wage payment was basically based on piece rate and time rate. Hazira or daily wage was paid to a particular worker on completion of allotted task of the day. On the other hand ticca was paid for extra task or for overtime work. In Assam, as on 1998, the average daily basic wage of a daily rated worker was Rs. 31.60 which was implemented even in the Sample Tea Estates of Sonitpur District. Table 3.6 attached as an Appendix – 15 highlight the rate of daily wages for tea plantations workers in the Assam Valley including the Tea Estates of Sonitpur. Thus, Table 3.6 shows that up to 2003, the daily basic wage of daily rated workers both male and female who works in the Sample Tea Estates of Sonitpur was Rs. 48.50. Moreover, 21 kilogram plucking per day is considered as the statutory task of the individual and those who plucked more than 21 kilogram were paid extra Rs. 2 for per kilogram. The wages were disbursed by the Clerical Staff with the help of Assistant Manager. Here, it is interesting to note down that it is the women workers who are engaged in the plucking of extra tea leaf as they are proficient in plucking tasks. This shows how by providing low wages the Management uses their labour only to accumulate profit and to sustain the Tea Estates. Thus, women labourers are the easy victims to the inner dynamics of ‘public patriarchy’.
After independence, the 50th Indian Labour Conference in 1957 put forth the concept of need-based minimum wage. The Conference set up guidelines according to which, need-based minimum wage must take into account the minimum needs of food, clothing, fuel and housing of three units of consumption. Subsequently, in 1958 the Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry was formed to decide on the need-based minimum wage for tea plantation workers. The Employers’ Representatives on the Wage Board strongly objected to the formula accepted by the Indian Labour Conference. They argued that since employment in the plantations was family-based, three units of consumption were too high as every family had at least two workers. Hence, they suggested that only 1.5 units of consumption should be taken for determining the need-based minimum wage. Earlier in 1930 the Royal Commission on Labour in India had also put forth a similar argument against the low wages paid by the Planters. Finally, the Wage Board had to grant their view as a result of which tea plantation workers are the lowest paid in the organized sector. The fact remains that the Planters have used the existence of the high employment of women workers to keep wages low.

Thus, even after Independence, Planters’ attitude has not changed. Workers do not sell their products to capitalists rather sell their labour for wage for a certain amount of time. Thus, workers produce goods to a value which is greater than the value of their wages. The majority of respondent women workers who are interviewed showed dissatisfaction with the wages that they got. Thus, capitalism is confined in the accumulation of capital, which occurs through the taking out of surplus value from wage labourers. Beula Sabor, one of the workers of Nirmala Tea Estate who worked since 1983 felt that they were underpaid for the workload and heavy tasks they performed and she further expressed that they were paid wages which were far

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from satisfaction. Now, increase in costs of living is causing a great deal of hardship and as such their low wages does not meet their day to day needs.\textsuperscript{41} Beula Sabor knows that by working in Tea Estates, it is not possible to improve their economic standard. Her experiences clearly exposed the injustice that was perpetuated on workers in general and women labourers in particular.

Moreover \textit{Sardar} or \textit{Sardarin} got higher wage than permanent and \textit{faltu} (temporary) workers. This type of wage differentiation is still prevalent in the Sample Tea Estates which greatly harm the interest of female workers who inspite of their hard labour are paid less than a \textit{Sardar} or \textit{Sardarin} and thus were neglected from the constitutional right of equal pay for equal work.

The Assam Human Development Report, 2003, pointed out that most women workers in the organized sector were employed in the tea gardens of state. This accounts for the predominance of women workers in large-scale private sector establishments. But, the Field Works Performance Report (FWPR) of women in the tea industry has not empowered women. Although the overall FWPR in Assam is high, a majority of women workers were either unpaid or poorly paid and belong to the category of unskilled labour.\textsuperscript{42}

Drawing out from the historical section and from the contemporary situation of wage payment, a general opinion has been taken from the respondent women on the improvement possibilities of economic condition. Opinion on improvement possibilities of economic conditions have been divided under four heads such as, Possible To Improve, Highly Possible To Improve, Impossible To Improve and Highly Impossible To Improve. The opinions have been presented in Table 3.7

\textsuperscript{41} Interview with Beula Sabor, age-44, woman worker of Nirmala Tea Estate, on 26/8/2013.

\textsuperscript{42} Women in the plantation industry are involved in plucking, which is a highly skilled job. But since this work is not recognized as being in the skill category, women workers involved in plucking in the tea gardens are considered as unskilled workers.
which has been added as an annexure in Appendix – 16 and the Bar Diagram, Figure 3.2 is shown below:

Figure No. 3.2: OPINION OF RESPONDENT WOMEN ON THE IMPROVEMENT POSSIBILITIES OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN ALL SAMPLE TEA ESTATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Possible to improve</th>
<th>Highly possible to improve</th>
<th>Impossible to improve</th>
<th>Highly impossible to improve</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahorini</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirma</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, 29/08/2013

The Table 3.7 and Bar Diagram, Figure No 3.2 clearly shows that majority of the respondent women are of the opinion that it is not possible to improve the living standard in their present employment. They argued that the low wage that they got since the inception of tea industry is still not improved which is in turn insufficient to improve economic condition. Inspite of such low wage most of women labours of Sample Tea Estates spent whatever they earned to fulfill their basic family needs.

Women’s labour in Tea Estates showed their gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves. Tea-producing through intensive labour remained very important occupation for the women of the surveyed Tea Estates. From the narratives of respondents, it is apparent that occupational mobility was less among the women workers and such deprivation is still exists in the Tea Estates. Women workers were
born and brought up in the Tea Estates. Therefore, there was no opportunity for them to engage in any outside work other than plantation work. Due to occupational immobility they have to depend largely on the employers, as such and hence, being largely exploited in paid work. Thus, after having analyzed respondent women’s labour and different productive role through their narratives and historical perspectives, there is a need to examine sexual division of work in the household and outside in the Tea Estates under survey.