CHAPTER - 4
INNER DYNAMICS OF PRIVATE
AND PUBLIC PATRIARCHY

After analyzing women’s productive role in the Tea Estates from a historical perspective, this chapter on Inner Dynamics of Private and Public Patriarchy seeks to examine the gender relations and division of labour in the household as well within the Management system. Plantations are not just places for production of tea and resultant profits, but are also sites for production of discourses, meanings and practices. Labour women perform extensive household activities and receive only minimal help from their spouses. Therefore, there is a need to measure their unpaid work which helps to estimate sexual division of labour over time. Through the narratives of respondents the chapter highlights women’s work within the household and the attitude of Tea Estate Authorities who seem least interested and reluctant to improve the lives of women. Labour women are thus subject to both ‘private’ as well as ‘public patriarchy’. So, the study highlights the gendered labour relations and its impact on the workload of women in the Tea Estates. It also discusses gender relations in society with a focus on the various rituals and gender division of labour related to rituals. The narratives of respondents substantiate the social reality with their life experiences.

Since Colonial times and even after independence, the culture of the plantation communities has been sustained by a system of capitalist agricultural production based on a captive labour force living in an ethnic enclave, enclosed and in isolation from the rest of the population. The majority of the families on Tea Estates go back three or four generations: many of the parents, and even grandparents, of today’s young workers were born in the Estates. According to Michel Foucault, work and
home life, production and reproduction all take place under regimented conditions.¹ This is particularly true, largely as a Colonial legacy, of the tea labour women in Sonitpur. The large scale immigration in Tea Estates of Sonitpur led to the creation of a distinct social group which is known as ‘Tea Garden Labour Community’. There was a tendency for the subsequent generations to follow the same occupation of their forefathers, as there were hardly any alternatives open to them.

If production for subsistence and reproduction are the two determining factors of history, then women, who play a significant role in the first and a major role in the second, should be in control of the power relations in a social system². However, this has never been so for in any society, men enjoy more power than women. In India in particular, women are treated much like children in need of paternal control and guidance, which came from male supervisors at work as discussed in the previous chapter, and male kin at home. Therefore, the feminist theorizing required compensatory as well as critical aspects. We need to write the histories of women and their activities, we need to know how these activities are affected and how they compensate for the consequences of men’s activities.³ Women’s work has been underestimated in contemporary society for after all domestic labour is of major importance in economic and social relationships.

Need of analyzing their household role is important. Such analysis helps to know both past and contemporary situations of women labours of Tea Estates. Study on the Sample Tea Estates acts as a window to understand the social relations of production and dual role of women labour. To understand women’s unpaid work and their role in household, it is important to know the term ‘work’ since their labour has been unacknowledged in written official records and documents. It is due to the

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misrepresentation in the Census Reports formulated by the male officials. Despite the fact that attempts at amendment of certain gaps relating to the inclusion of women as workers in the Census of 1891 was made in 1901.4

Work involves not only actual work but also includes effective supervision and direction of works. It also includes part-time help or unpaid work. According to Kathi Weeks, ‘work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects.’5 Sarah Fenstemaker Berk argued that unwaged domestic work too should be recognized for producing not just goods and services, but gender as well.6 Therefore, women have to be perceived, not merely in terms of labour but there is also need to perceive in terms of their relationship to men, children and also other women, both within and outside the family.7

The social status of women in a given society is indeed a barometer by which the level of progress of that society can be measured. Though the women workers of Sample Tea Estates enjoyed some measure of economic independence as wage earners still their economic independence does not indicate that they have achieved social emancipation. The social location of women’s labour can be understood in better way if it can be viewed in the context of family. Sociologists understand families to be social institutions that perform vital functions for their members and societies: they produce, nurture, and socialize children; care for frail and elderly family members; provide the labourers needed for the economy; and meet the emotional needs of family members. According to Sociologists, describing families as social entities recognizes the fact that they are socially created and defined and vary across cultures; on the other hand to refer to them as institutions means that they represent a set of inter-related roles and responsibilities.

4 Meeta Deka, op.cit, p. 81.
7 Meeta Deka, op.cit, p. 77.
Family is the basic unit of society. Family is a bio-social group which is characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. The meaning of the family and its boundaries are differed widely from one society to another. Family is not an association only it is an institutional complex or system of institutions which bears primary importance in the socialization of the young. Thus, it consists of a man and a woman, permanently united, with one or more children. About the union of a man and a woman, Herskovits observes that in all societies family is distinguished by stability or firmness that arises out of the fact that it is based on marriage. Lowie on the other hand states that family is an association that corresponds to the institution of marriage, the socially approved form of sex relations.

The household role of respondent women can be understood in a better way if it can be viewed in the context of family. The labour force is migrant labour. This migration is not seasonal or temporary; rather it is historical. The migrant labour was recruited at the inception of the plantation system. This uprooted population stayed on in the plantation for generations and as a result usually lost connections with its erstwhile native place. The Tea Estates and the plantation society confined to the so-called ‘coolie-lines’ became thus, their only geographical and social space respectively. The most important uniqueness of the plantation system was its social and production relations. It is important to note that labour women in Tea Estates like men were the primary income earners in their families but the family ideology ensured that domestic work remains the preserve of women.

At the time of investigation, questions were asked on the family composition of the respondent women labour of the Tea Estates. Their narratives helped to form an idea about family composition and assess their domestic role. It enabled one to realize

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how such composition increased women’s responsibility in a household. It was found that although there were a few joint families in the Sample Tea Estates, nuclear families were predominant. Nuclear family denotes a family which is composed of the parents and their unmarried children. Extended or joint family includes the extension of elementary families which has taken place by marriage where more than one brother lives together with their respective families. In the joint family system married sons and daughters live with their parents.

From Table 4.1 in Appendix – 17 and Pie Diagram, Figure 4.1 shown below, we can draw a picture regarding type and composition of family that existed and still prevails. Here, a distribution of all respondent women according to type and composition has also been made:

Figure No. 4.1: DISTRIBUTION OF ALL RESPONDENT WOMEN
ACCORDING TO TYPE AND COMPOSITION

Source: Field Survey, 06/09/2013

With regard to composition, it has been apparent that majority of respondents belonging to the nuclear families consist of parents and the unmarried children as the residents. On the basis of the available data, it may be said that the people in Tea Estates were adhering more to a nuclear family than to an extended one. It was due to the fact that the plantation’s recruitment policies gave preference to nuclear
households. It considers nuclear family as a basic unit to receive work facilities and other useful benefits. In an interview, Padum Chetry who joined as a staff of Nahorani Tea Estate since 1988 revealed that the Planters considered nuclear family as a basic unit to receive working facilities and other benefits. He further stated that certain facilities such as free quarters, free fire wood, rations at subsidized rates were given to each family and this naturally encouraged the workers to form such families.11

However, such a policy could be traced to colonial legacy of divide and rule for besides apparent benefits in case of nuclear families, there could be other reasons like regarding nuclear families as an obstacle to unified protests against the Management. Such formation was made only to supplement the profit of the employers as Planters supplied the amenities only to the working labourers.

Besides nuclear families, a total of 100 respondents belonged to the ‘extended family’. On sharing their experiences in such family composition, Joymati Parjah12 narrated that after marriage she went to stay with her in-laws in her husband’s natal home. She had her father-in-law, mother-in-law and 4 unmarried sisters-in-law in the family. Gradually she experienced ill-treatment from all her in-laws especially from her father-in-law. She could not tolerate such ill-treatment for long and ultimately, along with her husband, left the house and stayed with her parents for some time and later moved on to an individual household. Thus, such experiences have an important bearing on the position of women in the family. In the extended family with all elderly kin, the newly married woman’s liberty is often reduced to a great extent. She is expected to remain submissive and to abide by the command of the elders.

11 Interview with Padum Chetry, Staff of Nahorani Tea Estate, Tezpur, age-47, on 7/9/2013.
12 Interview with Joymati Parjah, age-43, permanent worker of Dhullie Tea Estate, Biswanath Chariali, on 10/9/2013.
What is important to note here is that the family continued to be perceived as a production unit in tea plantation enterprise. The Planters’ preferences to form nuclear family eventually imposed more responsibilities on women’s shoulder since they have to engage in child bearing and rearing practices where they received minimal help from their male counterpart. The formation of nuclear family did not change the monotonous nature of their work and did not even minimize women’s both productive and domestic workload.

In Tea Garden labour society, division of labour is visible in the household activities inspite of the predominant economic role played by women at the workplace. From the establishment of Tea Estates and even till today, the domestic responsibilities of women labourers has neither been changed nor recognized. It clearly signifies the invisibility of labour of working women. The labouring class from the very beginning included women, and they in turn participated in labour process. But, there is little evidence of the fact that they were disassociated from domestic work. It is because of the widely prevalent perspective which considered domestic work as with no market-value and that’s why it is also not considered economically significant, but nevertheless, a woman’s domain.13

Women labour in the Tea Estates, besides confining to productive work, is also confined to domesticity i.e. they have been totally burdened with reproduction, child bearing, rearing, and household work. In child caring work, women received help from their elder female child. Women labour of Tea Estates under survey knew that without a female child, the working mothers’ work-load will be doubled as the boys provided hardly any help in the household chores. Rita Tanti14 of Nya Gogra Tea Estate who belongs to the Tanti community opined that without a girl child it was difficult for them to run a family. She maintained that the girl child is very helpful

14 Interview with Rita Tanti, one of the permanent workers of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-32, on 25/10/2013.
for her mother, especially for a working mother. Further, Nirmala Bhumij\textsuperscript{15}, a female worker of Nahorani Tea Estate who belongs to the Parjah community expressed that the girl child looks after her younger siblings, takes care of the house and moreover, does all the household chores when mother is at work. Dipali Karmakar\textsuperscript{16}, labour women of Nirmala Tea Estate favoured a girl child because of the prospects of better domestic assistance and emotional attachment even after the girl is given in marriage. She stated that a boy is preferred to continue the father’s lineage in the next generation. These preferences signify the kind of workload that the labour women of Tea Estates have to perform in both workplace and home for the ultimate benefit of the planters only.

Lolita Kurmi of Nya Gogra Tea Estate opined that ‘they fully invest their earnings for the welfare of the family.’\textsuperscript{17} Still, in some cases both the husband and wife played an important role. On being asked on the role of women and men, wife and husband, Swagmoni Nayak, a female worker of Dhullie opined that it is mostly on issues related to marriage that both of them decide what to do or not do and arrived at decision after consultation.\textsuperscript{18} Playing an important role in any decision-making process did not mean any change in the status of women in the household or family. Moreover, though both husband and wife decided family matters, division of labour in household was visible. The primary responsibilities of women are the management and performance of all household chores including cleaning, laundry, cooking, as well as shopping, and caring for children.\textsuperscript{19} The domestic or household division of labour refers to the distribution of those responsibilities between family

\textsuperscript{15} Interview with Nirmala Bhumij, one of the permanent workers of Nahorani Tea Estate, Tezpur, age-34, on 26/10/2013.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with Dipali Karmakar, one of the permanent workers of Nirmala Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-32, on 25/10/2013.
\textsuperscript{17} Interview with Lolita Kurmi, one of the permanent workers of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-36, on 25/10/2013.
\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Swagmoni Nayak, one of the permanent workers of Dhullie Tea Estate, Biswanath Chariali, age-39, on 3/11/2013.
\textsuperscript{19} Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, \textit{Fifty key concepts in Gender Studies}, Sage publication, New Delhi, 2004, p. 31.
members which are necessary for the ongoing maintenance of a domestic home and of the people who live in it. This domestic work undertaken by labour women is unpaid, mostly performed within the home. This is necessary for the day-to-day maintenance of the household and its members. Juliet Mitchell\textsuperscript{20} drew attention to this by focusing on the family unit and household labour. She analyzed the biological differentiation of sexes and the division of labour. She recognized the importance of sexual division of labour in the paid labour force which has close relations with production and reproduction. According to Paul Smith, women’s household labour can lower the value of labour power by producing use values which contribute to the reproduction of labour in the home.\textsuperscript{21}

Households in all societies differentiate various activities and responsibilities by gender. For labour women, production and reproduction are two interlinked activities, and much of the work women do, although productive, is unpaid. Men always played a minor role in domestic work. Women face a number of disadvantages in the labour market. As well as coping with sexist prejudice, they must reconcile the twin roles of homemaker and money-earner. This often affects their work status, the length and structure of their workday and their salary level. In addition, the employment sector offered less scope and potential for women than for men. By using Marxist theories, feminists argued that though women’s work within the home is unpaid, still it is a form of productive activity like men’s waged labour. A range of feminist theories developed to explain the traditional domestic division of labour. For example, Della Costa suggested that the domestic division of labour benefits capitalism. Unpaid housework and rearing work refill labour power on a daily and generational basis and in this way contribute to the production of surplus value that sustains the capitalist dynamics.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} For details see Juliet Mitchell, \textit{Women: The Longest Revolutions New Left Review}, 1966
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
Women’s child bearing functions justify the division of labour between men and women. Marx in his first volume of *Das Capital* had discussed the reproduction of labour power. According to him, capitalism requires a stable supply of labour therefore, it is necessary to keep the labour fit to work each day and thus food, cloth and shelter must be provided to them. Again, for the survival of individuals and species, reproductive labour is necessary. Reproduction of children and rearing of children who become the next generation of workers are included in the reproductive labour. That’s why reproduction of labour power is a condition of production for it replaces the labour power necessary for production.

According to Claude Meillassouxs, ‘reproduction includes reproduction of the productive process, reproduction of the means of production, including labour power and reproduction of social ties or structures i.e. the relations of production.’ In case of the tea garden women labour, their role did not only confine to production. From procreation or reproduction to performing household activities like cooking, cleaning house, cloth and utensils, marketing and shopping, looking after the children and their education, women workers played an influential role. Their household activities did not get due recognition since the male workers did not help in their day to day activities or those who rendered help are less in number. All these are the unending work and even today the labour women of Sample Tea Estates are bound to perform such work.

Moreover, their household labour was termed as unproductive labour as the capitalist is only concerned with the production of commodities for which the labourers were provided with wage. Women workers in Tea Estates worked equally with their male counterparts. They are highly committed workers and spend long working hours in the field. In the Sample Tea Estates, labour women were asked

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about the extent of help provided by their husbands, grown up children and relatives in their household chores. Their response has been presented in the following Table 4.2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Number of Women Workers</th>
<th>Work performed only by Women</th>
<th>Received help from</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Cleaning house, cloth and utensils</td>
<td>Marketing and shopping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td>70(100.00)</td>
<td>70(100.00)</td>
<td>25(35.71)</td>
<td>15(21.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>69(100.00)</td>
<td>69(100.00)</td>
<td>22(31.89)</td>
<td>10(14.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>66(100.00)</td>
<td>66(100.00)</td>
<td>20(30.30)</td>
<td>12(18.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td>59(100.00)</td>
<td>59(100.00)</td>
<td>21(35.60)</td>
<td>14(23.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td>15(100.00)</td>
<td>15(100.00)</td>
<td>10(66.67)</td>
<td>5(33.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>71(100.00)</td>
<td>71(100.00)</td>
<td>35(49.03)</td>
<td>20(28.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>350(100.00)</td>
<td>350(100.00)</td>
<td>133(38.00)</td>
<td>76(21.71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field survey, 09/12/2013

It is interesting to note from Table 4.2 that in all the six Tea Estates, all of respondent women performed the domestic chores like cooking, cleaning house, cloth and utensils. The extent of help extended to the respondent women by their husbands, grown up children and relatives etc is also presented in the Table 4.2, which shows that only 21.71 per cent husbands, 45.71 per cent grown-up children and 9.43 per cent relatives of respondent women, helped them in carrying out various household chores. Thus, women have to perform all household chores.
For instance, when asked, Lohita Oriya\textsuperscript{24} narrated her daily routine as being the same as that of any other women in Tea Estates. She worked in Sessa Tea Estate as a permanent worker since 1983. She is married and has three children who are aged five, three and two years. Her husband is also a permanent labour in the same Estate. In an interview, she elaborates her experience and said she woke up at 4.30 a.m. mainly to do household activities of preparing food and cleaning the house, etc. At around 8 a.m. she leaves the house for plantation work. During the break she again rushes back home to feed her young children. After returning from the work in the evening around 4.30 p.m. she again continues her household work. She has no time to take care of herself. After preparing food she waits for her husband to return home. After taking food she retires to bed at around 9.30 p.m. In Lohita’s life, these activities are routinized every day. She hardly gets leisure time on Sundays and other holidays. Lohita’s narrative shows that the traditional role of women as a home maker has still remained unaltered despite their role as an earner. Their sacrifices are rarely acknowledged as the women’s role in the household is taken for granted. Moreover, they remain invisible both officially and literally, because for their household work, they are often termed as helpers though they were the earners. Inspite of their major domestic role, great injustice has been done by not recognizing such work which on the other hand is helping to sustain such a lucrative industry. Interestingly, Raghav Bawri, Sardar of the same Tea Estate, commented that ‘in the workplace of Tea Estates women lack initiative and responsibility.’\textsuperscript{25} This sweeping statement raises several questions and points out the male perspective of work. This is the perception of one important informant which comes across the period of Field Study. To some extent it reflects the kind of male dominance in social relations and tends to devalue women’s responsibility. It reveals that men in general, intentionally or unintentionally, do not want to recognize the work of women in society and work.

\textsuperscript{24} Interview with Lohita Oriya, age-45, permanent worker of Sessa Tea estates, on 15/01/2014.
\textsuperscript{25} Interview with Raghav Bawri, Sardar of Sessa Tea Estate, Tezpur, aged-40, on 15/1/2014.
The interviews with the respondents reveal that the problem of upbringing of children continue till date especially when the working women resumes her garden work after child-birth. Such problems were also seen in the Sample Tea Estates where women found it difficult in the upbringing of children. The problems differ from women to women depending on the persons available in the family mainly to look after the babies and children. The respondent women admitted that they faced problems of various natures in different aspects of child rearing when they were out for work. Their viewpoint presented in Table 4.3 has been annexed in Appendix - 18 and Bar Diagram, Figure No 4.2 is shown below:

Figure No 4.2: PARTICULARS OF RESPONDENT WOMEN FACING PROBLEMS IN CHILD REARING PRACTICES

![Bar Diagram](image)

Source: Field survey, 19/1/2014

It has been apparent from the above Table 4.3 and Bar Diagram, Figure No 4.2 that the respondent women workers faced various types of problem in case of child-rearing practices. Majority of women were facing problem in feeding (41.71%) and moreover many working mothers faced difficulty in respect of nourishment (33.71%). They even faced problem in educating and disciplining practice since they
remain away from their children for most of the time. Most of the respondents admitted that in such situations the whole responsibility of child care directly fell upon the shoulders of the elder daughter and their work are accorded only a peripheral status. Ironically though a daughter’s labour is vital in the economic sustenance of the household, their work on the other hand, was viewed only as extension of housework. Subsequently, in the Census assessments, their work does not form an economic category.

Thus, the labour pattern in the Tea Estates clearly shows that women have mastered the technique of combining household labour and productive labour. They were involved in collecting firewood from forests and even carried water for the household. In this way it is difficult to analyze their labour in terms of ‘necessary’ labour. According to Lise Vogel, the three aspects of necessary labour is the maintenance of direct producers, maintenance of non-labouring members of the subordinate class and generational replacement processes.26 According to Selma James and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, women’s oppression is based on the material character of unpaid household labour and argued that the housewife was producing a commodity for capital via her men and her children.27 Thus, women labour of the Sample Tea Estates may be seen as direct producers on one hand, as well as having played a crucial role in generational replacement of labour, on the other. Their major role in household activities and minimal help from their husband proved the presence of division of labour in the household, which more often than not affect women in negative ways.

Although several attempts had been made for recognizing women’s rights at the international level, women in Third World countries barely experience the impact of such legislation, let alone regions like northeast India, or Districts like Sonitpur.

Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, made significant progress in recognizing the rights of women and the girl child as an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. This principle was taken up again by the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994. Discussion focused on gender issues, stressing the empowerment of women for equitable development: ‘...the objective is to promote gender equality in all spheres of life, including family and community life, and to encourage and enable men to take responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behaviour and their social and family roles.’ The World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995, took gender equity as the core strategy for social and economic development and environmental protection. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, reiterated the importance of these new options, drawing up an agenda to strengthen the status of women and adopting a declaration and platform for action aimed at overcoming the barriers to gender equity and guaranteeing women’s active participation in all spheres of life.

Such discourses and legislation hardly have a bearing on women tea labour of remote regions like Sonitpur because the Management showed least interest to adopt labour welfare measures. It is important therefore, to analyze welfare measures and its repercussion on the lives of labour women. Because, all these measures have a close link with the women’s productive, reproductive and household activities as ‘work - safe, productive and environmentally sound- is regarded as the key to economic and social progress everywhere’.28

Labour welfare is an important aspect in the functioning of tea industry. Employment conditions determined by labour market affect the quality of life of workers. All the labourers who worked in the Tea Estates were migrants, so the Estate Management was obliged in early times to provide accommodation to the huge labour force. Therefore, the labourers had to be housed by the Planters. These

accommodations were known as, ‘coolie lines’ which suggests the type of military barracks on lines of that Foucault describes as ‘regimented’ lives. They were nothing but monotonous, barrack-like tiny one-room tenements with kitchen attached, often smoke-filled, with a common tap and a common trench lavatory though Official Reports show that by and large the planters have stinted on the expenditure on statutory house-building activity.\textsuperscript{29}

According to Elizabeth Kolsky though Colonial law was described by officials as a guarantor of liberty and agent of civilizational progress, in letter and in practice the law of the tea plantations was designed to secure capitalist control over labour.\textsuperscript{30} Therefore, during pre-independence period, welfare measures for workers were quite negligible. For instance, earliest legislation, i.e., The Workmen’s Compensation Act, 1923, which applied to Estates growing cinchona, coffee, rubber or tea did not confer any substantial benefit on plantation labour as accident in plantations were few. The Tea District Emigrate Labour Act, 1932, which applied only to Assam, regulated merely the conditions for recruitment of labour for employment in the tea gardens of Assam. The other Act like Payment of Wages Act, 1936 which only concerned with the mode of payment of wages only, Industrial Employment (Standing Orders) Act, 1946 and Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, benefited plantation labour only to a very limited extent. In its Report the Labour Investigation Committee (Rege Committee) observed:

As the conditions of the life and employment on plantations were different from those in other industries it would be very difficult to fit plantation labour in the general framework of the Industrial Labour Legislation without creating serious anomalies. It therefore, recommended Plantation Labour Code covering all plantation areas.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{29} Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, Part VII - A, p.25. Also listed number of defects in the new constructions and the consequences of such defects.


\textsuperscript{31} Report of Labour Investigation Committee, (Rege Committee), 1945-46, New Delhi.
Even though after Independence, the Government enacted laws and sought to improve workers’ living standard still these welfare measures do not benefit women labourers of Tea Estates. Various legislative measures like the Minimum Wage Act, 1948, the Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund Scheme Act, 1995, the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 etc. have been enacted but the ground reality remained, to a great extent, unaffected. It is not in the interest of the Government to improve the lives of labours but it is rather, political pressure that is increasingly mounted on the Government to pass laws for the welfare of the workers. Moreover, the growth of Trade Union Movement made the workers conscious of their rights and raise demands which were not definitely concerned with or in favour of women labour. Accordingly in 1951 the Central Government passed the Plantation Labour Act (PLA). Details of its provisions have been added in Annexure – VI.

Though the PLA was passed in 1951, it came into effect only five years later, in 1956. This was due to the period of depression in 1952-53; the Planters argued that they were not in a position to meet the added financial burden of the Act. This Act made it compulsory for the employers to provide welfare measures for the workers in general with no specific rights for women. In fact, the Plantation Enquiry Commission of 1956 had noted that labour’s productivity would be increased if attention was paid to the improvement of their working conditions and PLA’s welfare provisions would alter the working conditions.\(^\text{32}\) Unfortunately, the optimism in this Report was a bit premature because the ground realities were different since the Planters of the surveyed Tea Estates hardly made any attempt to improve the condition of the workers, particularly the women. Its provisions are yet to be fully implemented by the Planters.

Housing, sanitation, food and drink and medical facilities have a strong bearing on the general health of the women workers of Tea Estates. In the preamble of the Charter for Health and Development signed by India on 15 February, 1980, it has

been stated that a nation’s greatest asset is its people, who are endowed with good health which promotes creativeness, dynamism and determination. Section 16 of the Assam Plantation Labour Rules, 1956 along with the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 as amended by Act No. 58 of 1981 prescribes the provision for housing facilities in the gardens. Rule, 58 of Section 16 stipulates that every employer shall provide for a worker and his family residing in a plantation, housing accommodation as near as possible to the place of work. Rule, 60 provides sites for housing accommodation. According to Rule, 64 no rent shall be charged by any employer for the housing accommodation provided to the workers and their families within the plantation. In the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, it has been clearly mentioned that every Tea Estate will have to provide proper concrete houses with kitchen, bathroom and latrine to the workers. Free housing is now a statutory obligation. In plantation vocabulary, the cluster of houses where workers live is even today referred to as a ‘coolie line’.33

Houses in the Tea Estates were not provided with bathrooms. They were overcrowded with an average of ten persons to a residence. The workers constantly complain of overcrowding, but the Management has a different version. The Management claims that the older workers plead that their adult sons should not be allotted separate houses as it divides their income and reduces their future security. With regard to the maintenance and repairing of the houses, it has been noticed that Rule. 63 of the PLA have, by and large, been violated by the Management. Most of the houses of the Sample Tea Estates were in a very deplorable condition. There is often heavy leakage from the rusted roof of the houses during rainy season. Lime-washing, painting and varnishing according to the provisions of the rule were also not done. The Plantation Management has provided bathing enclosures which were made of bricks and cement plastered walls and floors. During the time of

investigation, most of the enclosures showed broken floors with moss here and there. These make the floor very slippery and unhygienic. Therefore, all this required cleaning and washing. Since cleaning and washing are the household work, therefore labour women of Tea Estates have to engage in such work.

Plantation Labour Act made housing amenities and benefits compulsory for Tea Garden labours. But, during the time of discussion with respondents it was found that maximum numbers of women workers were not satisfied with the Management. They argued that the amenities provided were not adequate which on the other hand shows that Managements enrolled women especially to supplement free labour force and at the same time did not strictly implement the welfare provisions formulated by the Plantation Labour Act. Under such circumstances it has always been the women who adjusted themselves; bore the burden of heavy workload as well as the huge responsibility of their families. With respect to housing conditions, Piari Horo of Nirmala Tea Estate expressed that they prefer the fully *pucca* type as it offers more comfort with less maintenance instead of mud-plastering which the women had to do from time to time.\(^{34}\) From her narrative, it is clear that women workers wanted houses which require less maintenance to save labour but the Estate Authority often ignored these demands. The responsibility of its maintenance directly fell on women’s shoulders since such work has been always counted as women’s work. Piari Horo revealed that there were also a large number of women who wish that their living conditions should be improved. As they knew without having hygienic living conditions their health would not permit them to carry long-scheduled tasks both in the workplace and home. They feel that the Management’s main interest is to accumulate profit which they got through exploiting the labour power of workers in general and women in particular.

To know the level of satisfaction on the adequate supply of amenities provided from 1983 to 2008, the respondent women who worked since 1983 were interviewed.

\(^{34}\) Interview with Piari Horo, worker of Nirmala Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-38, on 16/4/2014.
Their satisfaction is judged on the basis of two heads such as ‘satisfactory’ and ‘not satisfactory.’ Their opinions have been articulated in Table 4.4 which has been added as an annexure in Appendix - 19 and Bar Diagram, Figure No.4.3 shown below:

Figure No. 4.3: DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENT WOMEN ACCORDING TO THEIR OPINIONS REGARDING THE ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF AMENITIES

![Bar Diagram]

Source: Field Survey, 17/4/2014

It is clear from the Table 4.4 and Bar Diagram, Figure No. 4.3 which is drawn on the basis of questionnaire that majority of women labourers were not satisfied with the authority on their supply of basic and adequate amenities to the workers. Though some women labour expressed satisfaction it was mainly due to their adjustment with the tea garden environment and acceptance of the situations in which they were living.

At the initial stage the facility of electricity to the labour houses were not provided though there had been a long standing demand for the same raised by Trade
Unions. Rita Mahato, one of the permanent workers of Dhullie Tea Estate opined that at the initial stage the facility of electricity to the labour houses were not provided. She narrated that women after finishing the field work would have to cook the evening meal in a hurry as there was no supply of electricity in their premises. She also stated that though electricity has been provided much later, there is still the problem of irregular power supply. She states that she is aware of her responsibilities in the household and has reconciled to the fact that her husband would not help in household activities. It is evident that like Rita, there were other women labourers too who were well aware of their responsibilities and were willing to carry them out.

Article, 46 of the Assam Plantation Rules of 1956, provides that in every plantation wherein 50 or more women workers were employed the employer should provide and maintain Creches at suitable site of workplace for the use of the children who are below 2 years of the age. During the present investigation, it has been found that there were creches in the Sample Tea Estates but did not have the Creche facilities as per the provisions of the Act. To quote Sukanya Nath, Nurse of Nirmala Tea Estate:

There existed a Creche structure which is still non-functional…the Creche ceased functioning probably because the Estate Authority failed to maintain a regular supply of milk and other facilities.

35 At the 47th session of the Assam State Standing Labour Committee held on 2 February, 1990 it was decided that electrification of labour houses should be undertaken forthwith and power was to be made available to tea estates under the Rural Electrification scheme and accordingly the Indian Tea association (ITA) advised its members in Assam to go ahead with the scheme cited in Annual Report ITA, 1990-91, PP. 31-32. After the implementation of this scheme electricity is provided to the labour house of Sample Tea Estates.
36 Interview with Rita Mahato, permanent worker of Dhullie Tea Estate, age-41, on 06/5/2014.
37 Interview with Sukanya Nath, Nurse of Nirmala Tea Estate, Golpur, age-28, on 16/5/2014.
She again holds the view that babies were not well looked after in the Creche and such negligence still prevails. Labour women leave them at home where an older child generally takes care of them. Thus, non-functioning of Creches at the workplace imply that the burden falls on the older daughter, who is deprived of attending school so as to take care of younger siblings in the household.

The Royal Commission on Labour had recommended that maternity benefit should be provided to women workers in plantations by legislation. Under the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, a woman worker is entitled to maternity benefit for a total period of twelve weeks’ wages- not exceeding six weeks wages’ prior to delivery and the balance after delivery. To be eligible for this benefit, a woman has to put in a qualifying service of eighty days of work in the preceding twelve months from the date of her expected delivery. The most important provision was the free medical services for the pregnant women but in the Tea Estates medical facilities were far from being satisfactory. Sukanya informed that in the hospitals and dispensaries, they neither had the stock of prescribed medicines nor do they have the stock of prescribed instruments. During the time of Survey, it has been noticed that in the Tea Estate dispensaries, male and female patients are kept together. There are no separate pre-natal and post-natal wards and the mothers or the prospective mothers are kept together with other patients.

With regard to the availability of health care services, the respondents had to give their opinion under two heads, viz ‘satisfactory’ and ‘not satisfactory services’. The opinions have been presented in Table 4.5 which has been added as an annexure Appendix – 20 and Bar Diagram, Figure No. 4.4 is shown below:
It is apparent from Table 4.5 and Bar Diagram Figure No. 4.4 that majority of the respondents were not satisfied with the medical services that were provided to them. Though, some women respondents of the Sample Tea Estates to some extent have expressed satisfaction, still this could be due to the lack of other alternatives. The Managements are silent in the proper implementation of the provisions of Plantation Labour Act, 1951 and Assam Plantations Labour Rules, 1956. In this way women were unprotected by their employers with regard to health and service conditions. Despite of all laws, women workers were busy with the low paid monotonous and ‘regimented’ work since their life was mortgaged to the Planters and Managerial staff. The Managerial personnel who behaved like cruel despots do not extend even a minimal humane consideration. In the Tea Estates, the Planters always tried to keep labourers under their control and do not make effort to educate them. In this way labour women are subject to ‘public patriarchy’ as well.
Importance of education can be discerned by the famous quote made by Mahatma Gandhi ‘you can educate a man, you educate an individual; educate a women, you educate a family.’\(^3\)\(^8\) Realizing the importance of women’s education, the University Education Commission, 1948-49 stated:

There cannot be educated people without educated women. If general education had to be limited either to men or to women, that opportunity should be given to women, for then, it would most surely be passed on to next generation\(^3\)\(^9\)

Indian Education Commission 1964-66, popularly known as Kothari Commission attaches much importance on development of physical and human resources. According to this Commission some important aspects for achieving the goal of national development are self-sufficiency in food, economic growth and full employment, social and national integration, and political development. All these can be achieved by means of education. Kothari Commission in its report attributes education as the main instrument of change.\(^4\)\(^0\) Education not only helps in building up individual’s personality, character and intelligence but also one’s productive capacity and ability to perform one’s share of work more efficiently.

Since Independence, the Government of India has been implementing various policies in Assam including Sonitpur, for accelerating the women’s overall education, literacy rate as well as to reduce the school drop-out rates. Some of such educational policies include *Mahila Samakhy* (1989), District Primary Education Programme (1994), Mid-Day Meal Scheme (1995), *Sarba Siksha Abhijan* (2000), National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (2003-04) and various schemes under the Department of Women and Child Development.


\(^3\)\(^9\) Navaneeta Rath, in Ibid, p. 33.

Inspite of such policies, the study conducted by Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, New Delhi (1980) showed the pathetic condition of educational scenario in tea plantation areas. The following Table 4.6 shows the number of schools that existed in the Sample Tea Estates:

**TABLE 4.6: TOTAL NUMBER OF SCHOOLS IN SAMPLE TEA ESTATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Lower Primary School</th>
<th>Middle or Upper Primary School</th>
<th>High school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhullie</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, concerned with Estates Authority, 22/05/2014

The existence of primary schools in all the Tea Estates was also due to the fact that the Plantation Labour Act made it mandatory for all tea plantations to provide for primary education to the children of the workers. The attitude of the Planters is clearly reflected in their educational policy as it was seen that there were only primary schools opened for the workers’ children. From the above Table 4.6, it can be assumed that a Tea Estate, by and large, has provision only for a Lower Primary school within its jurisdiction. It proved that their main concern was commercial gain which showed that they were less concerned in the human development programme.

In order to have an idea about women’s attitude and interest towards female education the respondent women were interviewed on the basis of using three point scales: ‘very interested’, ‘interested’ and ‘not interested’. Table 4.7 has recorded

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41 The issue of schooling and literacy is discussed in greater detail in S K Bhowmik, V Xaxa and M Kalam, *Tea Plantation Labour in India*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, New Delhi, 1996.
their responses and the same has been added as an annexure in Appendix - 21 and Bar Diagram Figure No. 4.5 shown below:

![Bar Diagram](image_url)

**Figure No. 4.5: DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO THEIR LEVEL OF INTEREST IN EDUCATION**

From the Table 4.7 and Bar Diagram, Figure No. 4.5, it is interesting to note that except for one response, all of them showed their interest in receiving education. Most of them maintain that the Authority has not provided proper opportunities for education as they are women. While conducting group discussion with the respondent women on the issue, a good number of them stated that the Management hardly provided even the minimum facilities for education. This was also due to the fact that labourers have no other alternative but to depend upon their employers and in return from the employers they got minimum means of subsistence. For instance, they got Creche facilities which existed in the form of structure only and due to its irregularities in functioning, girls withdraw from schools because they have to take care of younger siblings.
Women tea labourers that constitute major labour force play only passive roles in Trade Union.\(^{42}\) Employers’ general apathy to provide proper education to the labour women limited their involvement in Trade Union activities. Tea plantation labour in Assam especially after the First World War was ‘simultaneously drawn into partial struggle from time to time.’\(^{43}\) After the launching of the Non Co-operation Movement, it became more profound when the political activists and volunteers arrived in tea Districts. The famous Chargolla (Cachar) incident was inspired by this movement directly or indirectly where thousands of workers quit work and left the Estates. This movement was spearheaded by women who had struck work and demanded higher wages. Hence, the growth of the Trade Union Movement in Assam can be traced to the year 1921, when the movement spread to all parts of the country.\(^{44}\) But, Trade Union Movement did not make much headway till 1938 because, the entry of the labour organizers and volunteers into Estates were completely banned by the Management. The Government of India Act of 1935 allowed representation of labour in the State Legislature for the first time in 1937 and this ultimately drew Tea Garden labour into politics. After that, Union activities were ushered into the life of the tea community.

After independence, Trade Union Movement was considered as an important part in the tea industry of Assam. After the formation of Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), there evolved various trade unions which fought for the tea workers such as Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Union, Bharatiya Cha Parishad, Cachar District Cha Mazdoor Samity, Assam Cha Mazdoor Union, and Assam Tea Workers’ Union etc. Of them, Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) which was formed in 1958 at Dibrugarh could manage to have a stronghold particularly in the tea gardens of Assam and generally in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur. It is affiliated to


INTUC. All the workers put in their effort towards its consolidation against the Plantation Managers.

The ILO’s committee on plantations underlined the rights of workers thus: ‘to be informed and trained to assemble, to express their views, to negotiate within and outside the undertaking, both collectively and individually through their trade unions, should be recognized’.\textsuperscript{45} According to Saswati Ghosh in developing countries women’s lives are characterized by little choice, oppression because of caste, class, and race and male domination.\textsuperscript{46} Trade Unionism especially among the working class women in the developing countries is still at the very early stage.

Interviews have been conducted as regards their membership to the Trade Union. Accordingly the following numbers of women were found to have the membership:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tea Estates</th>
<th>Women with Membership</th>
<th>Women without Membership</th>
<th>Total Respondent Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahorani</td>
<td>20 (28.58)</td>
<td>50 (71.42)</td>
<td>70 (100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessa</td>
<td>19 (27.53)</td>
<td>50 (72.47)</td>
<td>69(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakomato</td>
<td>16 (24.24)</td>
<td>50 (75.76)</td>
<td>66(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhillie</td>
<td>19 (32.20)</td>
<td>40 (67.80)</td>
<td>59(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirmala</td>
<td>5 (33.33)</td>
<td>10 (66.67)</td>
<td>15(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nya Gogra</td>
<td>25 (35.21)</td>
<td>46 (64.79)</td>
<td>71(100.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>104(29.71)</td>
<td>246(70.29)</td>
<td>350(100.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field Survey, 7/06/2014

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{International Labour Organization}, Sixth Session of the Committee on Plantations held on 20 September, 1971 to 1 October, 1971.

\textsuperscript{46} Saswati Ghosh, \textit{No Path is smooth for the Gentle Sex: Women in Panchayats}, The Telegraph, Calcutta, 22\textsuperscript{nd} July, 1999, p. 11.
The following Pie Diagram, Figure No. 4.6 clearly shows the responses:

**Figure No. 4.6: RESPONDENT WOMEN’S MEMBERSHIP TO TRADE UNIONS**

Source: Field Survey, 07/06/2014

It has been noticed from Table 4.8 and Pie Diagram, Figure No. 4.6, that less number of women had membership in Unions. Total 29.71% respondent women have membership in the entire Sample Tea Estates. On asking the reasons for their joining the Union, noticed interesting point came to light. Sonamati Ghatowal, a married female worker of Sessa Tea Estate replied that she joined Union because her husband was the member of that Union.\(^{47}\) Hence, it is evident that husband’s enrolment in a particular Union determines that of the woman’s. Similarly, unmarried women were influenced by their fathers’ decision on the choice of the Union. So, patriarchal influence extends to the public domain.

Sagar Kurmi\(^{48}\), one of the leaders of *Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha* (ACMS) of Biswanath Chariali, while commenting on women’s passive participation in Union activities, argued that women were given only ‘membership’ in the Union but not encouraged to participate in its activities. He questioned the fact that if they participate in Trade Union activities then who would do the household chores. His

\(^{47}\) Interview with Sonamati Ghatowal, female worker, Sessa Tea Estate, age-42, 7/6/2014.

\(^{48}\) Interview with Sagar Kurmi, one of the leaders of ACMS, age-52, 8/6/2014.
statement proved that male dominated Unions have always ignored women out of an, ‘underlying conviction that women were of a lower order of being.’

When asked about positive contribution of Trade Unions and their activities on the lives of women, Asha Mahara, female worker of Nahorani Tea Estate narrated that Trade Union activities were meant for the male workers who had no other concerns and household worries, and she even went on to say that the leaders were, by and large, self-seekers and so she did not have any confidence on them. Even though the direction given by ACMS that women should be given adequate membership and representation at central, circle and primary levels, women workers have remained marginalized in the Trade Union activities.

There were several reasons for their passive participation in Union activities. While they were given less opportunity to avail education, their productive role did not get recognition; Also, their double burden of work both paid and unpaid increased their work load and finally, they were rarely promoted to the sub-staff. All such obstacles restricted women’s participation in Union activities, which were mainly manipulated by the employers, as well as the men from their community, who always tried to use women’s labour by means of exploitation and low wage. Employers’ manipulative strategy failed to recognize the major reproductive role of women, who on the other hand sustained the industry by providing stabilized labour force. Thus, women’s reproductive role is interlinked with the productive role which together benefited only the Planters.

The protests of the Union against the Management were generally on issues related to workers’ rights in general, especially wages, but are not at all sensitive to the countless needs that are specific to women, due to their position in the gender

50 Interview with Asha Mahara, female worker, Nahorani Tea Estate, age-44, 9/6/2014.
division of labour. Proper housing facilities, medical services, education, provision for Creches, adequate supply of amenities etc are women’s concerns, but neither the Trade Union leadership nor the surveyed Estates’ Management have taken any worthwhile initiative towards addressing them.

Apart from major reproductive role and general apathy shown by the Planters, women face ill-treatment especially from their male counterpart in the tea labour society. The peace and tranquility of the family was affected by their continuous intake of haria (liquor). It often leads to quarrels between husband and wife and even physical abuse. Alcoholism of male members is generally accepted by women as a norm of plantation life. In the present investigation, interviews have been conducted to know women’s experiences and some extreme cases were found where the husband’s entire income was spent on haria; and the wife has to manage the family expenditure from her own wage. Basanti, Mongia and Phulboti shared their bitter past experiences, for example:

Basanti Sona\(^5^1\) worked as a permanent worker of Naya Gogra Tea Estate since 1983. Her husband, who also worked as a permanent worker in the same Tea Estate drinks heavily and regularly. He never makes any financial contribution towards the maintenance of the family. Husband’s continuous demand for money for haria forced her to hide wage generally in the kitchen, inside rice containers for that is the woman’s space of control. Thus, with her small income, somehow Basanti could manage only the minimum requirements for the sustenance of the family.

Mongia Johla\(^5^2\) is another permanent worker of Nirmala Tea Estate where her husband too works as a permanent labour. She belongs to the Munda Community. Her husband always returned home intoxicated and would fight with his wife and children. He uses abusive words. As a result Mongia and her children asked him to

\(^{51}\) Interview with Basanti Sona, one of the permanent workers of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-42, on 17/6/2014.

\(^{52}\) Interview with Mongia Johla, one of the permanent workers of Nirmala Tea Estate, Gohpur, age-43, on 17/6/2014.
go away from the house since the quarter belonged to the wife. They even took out all his belongings. She adds that such episodes were recurrent features in Mongia’s family. This case shows how gender relations could also mean female dominance over male; this was possible only because the quarter was allotted in her name.

Phulboti Mirdha\textsuperscript{53} was a permanent worker of Shakomato Tea Estate who started her work since 1983. Her husband is strongly addicted to alcohol and hence is frequently absent from work. The Management also warned him of his absence. When he does not have enough money to buy liquor, he demands the same from his wife. When she refuses to oblige him, it leads to violence including physical assault. Thus, she knows that her husband would demand money to drink haria. Due to such fear, she sometimes hides her wage by keeping the money with her elder daughter. Moreover, according to Phulboti the daily expenditure on alcohol is Rs. 20-30, a sizeable sum considering the daily wage of Rs. 89 upto 2008. She added that too much addiction to alcohol was draining their family income.

Alcoholic husbands are women’s concern, but the Management and Union leaders showed least concern to address this issue. From the above life stories and narratives it can be assumed that constant intake of haria degraded women’s position in family. Moreover, addiction to alcohol on the other hand hampered their day to day maintenance of the household since they were the daily rated workers and their livelihood depends on daily wage. In such cases, when the husband frequently absents himself from garden work due to the intake of haria, then the whole burden of family maintenance automatically fell on the women. Under such situations women’s both paid and unpaid role matters a lot and such type of labour relations subsequently increased the double-burden role of women. Such dual role affected their health because husbands’ absence from work compelled them to pluck additional leaf. Plucking additional leaf gave them extra wage which is

\textsuperscript{53} Interview with Phulboti Mirdha, one of the permanent workers of Shakomato Tea Estate, Biswanath Chariali, age-41, on 19/6/2014.
necessary for their family needs. Thus, all these incidents showed the relation of their productive role with household role, and the relation of their paid role with unpaid role.

Labourers of Tea Estates used to practice their own native religion and workers generally perform traditional form of nature worship like trees, mountains, thunder and also certain animals. This suggests that they have retained their traditional form of worship. They worshipped for the prosperity of their family and through worship paid respect to their ancestors. Their religious festivals require chanting of mantras and this is carried out under the guidance of Bhagat (ritual master) which was their native priest, generally always a man. The Bhagat performs all religious ceremonies and rituals connected with birth, death and marriage along with all other religious rites related to rituals and festivals. But, female Bhagat are non-existent. It has been noticed that since all the native rituals were initiated for the well being and prosperity of family therefore, women’s involvement became necessary in these rituals. From their constant participation in rituals, it can be easy to assess their domestic role which showed that their unpaid role is also as much significant as their productive and paid role. To recognize their household activities it is important to know their role in different rituals. Detailed examples have been presented below:

**Ghar puja** or house worship was performed each year for the prosperity of the household and family members. Before performing the puja, women do the cleaning of house and plaster the floor with mud and cow dung paste. This puja is usually carried out with the help of a Bhagat and the eldest son generally assists the Bhagat. This reflects that men of the household, though subordinate to the Bhagat in the ritual, are still an important ritual player even in simple house rituals. He makes a small sacred circle with white rice powder. On asked questions regarding women’s participation in such rituals, Joymati Manki of Sessa Tea Estate stated that ‘in most significant moments of the ritual, women are not permitted to assist.’

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54 Interview with Joymati Manki, female worker, Sessa Tea Estate, age-36, 16/7/2014.
marked with *sindoor* (vermilion) on its forehead is usually offered as sacrifice, and the same is then cooked by women. Women’s role in this ritual is only confined to cooking and cleaning the house before the commencement of *Ghar Puja*. In an interview with Sita Gorait of Nahorani, she maintained that men do a separate ritual, in which women are not allowed to take any of the meat. ‘In the evening when we sit, we will eat separately. This is what our community is like.’ This shows how space within a household is also gendered.

Home rituals encompassed the family and there are other rituals like *Gaon puja* or village worship that go beyond family borders and create pan-community solidarities. It is performed by each caste or tribe at any time of the year for the well being and prosperity of the village. In an interview with Maloti Dandasi of Shakomato Tea Estate, she stated that ‘a month before the ritual, every household will collect a donation of approximately thirty rupees.’ On the day of ritual the members of the household would gather under an old peepal tree of the plantation Estate. In this ritual though cooking oil, onion, salt, and chilies will be given to them, each family will bring their own vegetables. It is important to note that in this ritual though women will donate to the general coffer but will cook and eat separately from the men.

*Karam puja or jitia puja* was basically performed to honour the forests and other natural flora. This *puja* starts early in the morning where the male members proceed to the forests and bring back the branches of the *Karam* tree and then would plant it in the compound of the houses with due veneration. The *Bhagat* usually performed the *puja* at an open spot during the day time where large numbers of people assemble and a pigeon or a fowl or a goat is sacrificed. The bird or animal that has been sacrificed was cooked by the women of a labour family and at sunset, the branches of the tree would have to be carried out by women and girls to the rivers or

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55 Interview with Sita Gorait, female worker, Nahorani Tea Estate, age-37, 17/7/2014.  
56 Interview with Maloti Dandasi, female worker, Shakomato Tea Estate, age-39, 18/7/2014.
streams, for immersion. So one may note here that cooking is unquestionably a woman’s task and all hard work such as the disposal of the branches of the tree were left to the women. The women on their part have internalized these male values and hence accomplish the tough job in merriment. While carrying the branches, they usually dress in colourful clothes with flowers in their hair. At this time they perform *Jhumur dance*.

The tea garden labourers also celebrated different festivals like *Tusu parab, Garia parab and Monsa puja* etc. In *Tusu puja*, which is performed in honour of Goddess ‘Tusu’, women weave a wreath of flowers to make bonds of friendship with other women. Moreover, other festivals like *Garia puja* was performed to venerate the cow or other domesticated animals and *Monsa puja*, which is carried out to worship the Goddess, *Monsa Devi* was mainly performed and possible only with the active participation of women. The offerings to the deity like cooked rice and fish curry are prepared by women.

The gendered division of labour related to rituals, suggests several things. On one hand the *Bhagat* and the older labour, who are all men, carry out certain orthodox rituals such as the sacrifice, and chants at the base of an old tree. While on the other hand, women’s role in the rituals is only to take care of all the required needs of the ritual master’s work through their domestic labour.

From the above, it is wrong to assume that their workload and household role is decreasing. Means for development of social and political consciousness of women workers must be generated from within the plantation system. Plantation Labour Act lays down that plantations must have primary schools, Creches, water supply in the labour lines and recreational facilities for the workers. Unfortunately, most of these provisions were not enforced and women workers were deprived of whatever little scope they have of improving their conditions since they have to devote their available time to work and household activities. Due to the utter negligence of the male members, women’s productive, reproductive, paid and unpaid role does not get
due recognition in even within the community. Such negligence is apparent in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur District. So, women labours in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur are exploited at three levels: exploitation by the Management, by the male members of the community to which they belong at the workplace, and also by their spouses in the household. This reveals how the women are easy victims to the inner dynamics of both ‘private’ and ‘public’ patriarchy.