CHAPTER - 5

CONCLUSION

A historical perspective of women labour of Sonitpur District in Assam has thrown insight into complex power relations in the system of recruitment, workplace, family composition, increased workload, women’s lives and labour in the household, economy and gender division of labour related to rituals through the narrative of respondents. The work has shown how women labour has sustained the capitalist system and world tea market throughout the Colonial period and has carried on its legacy in post-independence era, through reproduction and relations of production that characterized gender, race and class discrimination. It reflected well that women labour faced oppression, repression and suppression not merely under ‘private patriarchy’ of the household, but was also subjected to that of ‘public patriarchy’ outside home, in the workplace as also in male-dominated Union politics, and the general apathy and negligence of the Management to improve the lives of labour women through recognition of their rights and living conditions.

Chapter 1, Introduction, discusses review of existing secondary data for the conceptual clarity on gender, work, women’s role in production and reproduction. It highlights the area of study and methodology undertaken for this work. The conceptual framework rest on the argument that production and reproduction, unequal paid labour, unpaid labour and gender division of labour essentially linked and organized by power relations. Though women migrants as reproducers of labour constituted a crucial factor, still they remain in a disadvantaged position which eventually leads to devalue women’s labour in Tea Estates. The major findings of the study: Tea-Garden Women Labour of Sonitpur, Assam (1983-2008), which focused on the position of women in the power-structure of the workplace and women’s labour and lives in the household and within the Management system are briefly recapitulated here:
While acknowledging the contribution of various trends of feminism, the study has adopted a Socialist Feminist framework as it best represents an ideology which can help in the development of analysis of women’s work, waged and unwaged, in relation to men, social and economic organization of work in capitalist system, on the relations between paid and unpaid labour, interconnection between production and reproduction and the private and the public in order to develop a historical materialist account of the social construction of sex and gender. ‘An important socialist feminist belief is that since women’s world view and their life experiences are likely to be different from the men’s, it is important to understand the daily experiences of women to represent the view point of the women from her own perspective rather than adding her in as an afterthought.’¹ With this basic Socialist Feminist insight, field data has been collected from respondent women labour and also from some of the male workers who hold important positions in the power-structure of the surveyed Tea Estates.

The methodological approach of Socialist Feminist makes it clear that they reject the view of biological determinism and thereby view gender as a social construct. They claim that our inner lives, our bodies and behaviours are structured by gender and such gender structuring is not innate rather it is socially imposed. For them gender structuring of our inner lives occurs when we are very young and it is reinforced throughout our lives in a variety of different spheres.² Socialist Feminists examines the role of household which support the entire capitalist system by an act of reproducing gender, race, sexual and class relations. Margaret Benston³ showed domestic labour as a crucial form of women’s work which is unpaid, undervalued and even invisible within the home.

Another area of concern is the relations of women as wage earners to mode of production and household activities. Women labour in Tea Estates, inspite of their major productive labour has not in any way been liberated from their reproductive and household labour. Moreover, cultural definitions of feminity are closely linked to definitions of good mothering as labour women are mostly engaged in ‘caring and rearing of children’. In terms of the role of women labour in Tea Estates as wage earners, job segregation has been noticed. Women’s work is less prestigious, lower paid and defined as less skilled than men’s within the contemporary labour force. Moreover, the role of labour women as wives and mothers attribute a secondary status to their role as paid labourers.

Thus, as viewed by Socialist Feminists, the sexual division of labour is not just a division between procreation and production but it is also a division within procreation and within production. Therefore, the main goal of Socialist Feminist to abolish social relations (elimination of sexual division of labour in every segment of life) that constitute humans not only as workers and capitalists but also as women and men will require several more generations to see the light of day. For them the major condition for the adequacy of feminist theory is that it should represent the world from the standpoint of women which provides a basis for the comprehensive representation of reality than the standpoint of men. For example, it is only through the standpoint of labour women that their household labour becomes visible as work rather than as a labour of love. Thus, they recognize that women’s perceptions of reality are distorted by the male dominated ideology and male dominated structure of everyday life. However, there is a danger of another kind of bias if taken from the woman’s standpoint, and one needs to be aware of such bias in writing history. The concept of women’s standpoint is complex and is still being developed.

---

Chapter 2, Tea plantation and Women’s Recruitment: Historical Background discusses briefly the history of origin of tea in Assam and Sonitpur. It also presents the table-wise tea statistics of different periods. The main focus of this chapter is migration and recruitment of women in tea industry and factors responsible for their engagement in tea plantations.

From the second chapter it is found that women’s recruitment and labour showed a gradual increase because of their gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves in particular and for maintaining a steady reproduction of labour. There is no evidence, general and particular, to say that the number of women’s recruitment in the tea plantations decreased at any point of time. Therefore, from a feminist standpoint, it is important to understand that despite some unfavourable treatment, tea-producing through intensive labour remained very important occupation for the tea garden women.

Tea workers’ society in Assam valley and Sonitpur was the product of Colonial plantation which exploited the migrant workers. In this system it were women who faced exploitation at several levels: First, in being a woman with the sole responsibility of stabilizing the labour force; second, by being employed as supplementary workers and also, their contribution in production process did not get due recognition. Till today job segregation and gender division of work exist in the Tea Estates. So, it may be reiterated here that the pressure for the increase and stability of the labour force ultimately fell on the women’s reproductive power and once again they have become victims of exploitation, economically and biologically.

It is seen that migrant tea garden workers in the Districts of Assam, and so in Sonitpur, represent a legacy of the Colonial plantation enterprise, and constitute what Beckford calls a ‘transplanted community’ in the context of tropical plantations, who remain alienated from their native places as well as from the host society in their newly settled areas. Heterogeneity of ethnic groups are found in the
Tea Estates of Sonitpur. The Tea Tribes in Assam, earlier known as tea garden coolies, in reality, constitute diverse castes and groups of different religion, custom and dialect.\textsuperscript{6} They hailed from different parts of the country but shared a common past for generation after generation. This shared history as victims of exploitation and regimented lives, transformed the heterogeneous group which eventually came to be known as the ‘Tea Garden Labour Community’.

Chapter 3, An Exploitative Labour Regime: Women Labour in Tea Gardens which is largely based on Field Survey focuses on multifarious tasks performed by the women in the Tea Estates. It gives information on gender division of work in the field and Estate factory, power relations in workplace and the system of wage payment.

Merle Thornton opines that a major labour function is socially assigned to women: from the point of view of the extra domestic sectors of the economy this function might be seen as the reproduction and maintenance of labour power.\textsuperscript{7} During the long history of tea production in Sonitpur, it was not unusual to find both men and women engaged in the workplace of the surveyed Tea Estates. Tea Estates in the District is the largest employer of labour among other industries where female work participation is high. About half of the labour force constitutes women in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur. Labour is one of the important factors of production and in that sense women’s labour is considered as an important part for the development of tea industry in the surveyed Tea Estates. In fact women’s labour is quite visible in the Tea Estates.

R.D. Lambert said that working labour forces are ‘over-committed’\textsuperscript{8} and in that sense woman labourers of the surveyed Tea Estates are also ‘overcommitted’ as


\textsuperscript{7} Merle Thornton, Women’s Labour, Labour History, No. 29, Women at Work, 1975, p. 96.

women played an important **occupational role** in the Tea Estates. The high work participation immensely contributes to the economic development of Assam and as well as Sonitpur as the development of tea industry depends on the quality of plucking tea leaves where women’s dominance prevailed. Table 3.2 presented in the third chapter itself reflects the kind of tasks that labour women performed in the Tea Estates. From the beginning of the tea industry to the present times, women labourers are considered as expert in the task of plucking. But, through the present study, it has been seen that **besides plucking women are engaged in the works like pruning, sorting, sweeping and cleaning factory floors which require a lot of physical labour.** Though they work equally with their male counterpart their labour does not get due recognition and thus occupy a lower position in the Estate hierarchy. The economic contributions of respondent women through their earnings as teapluckers are contributing to the tea and export production of Sonitpur. Accordingly, Table 3.3 cited in Appendix – 14, gives various data on the tea plantation of Sonitpur which highlights women’s productive role in Tea Estates.

It has also been observed that in the Tea Estates, large numbers of temporary women labours engaged in the plucking tasks **without having security of employment and failed to avail the social welfare benefits exists under PL.A.** Like permanent labour women they are also ‘over-committed’ to their duties and burdened with heavy workload and thus their labour is invisible.

It has been seen that capitalization of production has significant implication for female labourers as higher status jobs such as Sardars etc. are dominated by male workers while the **women are concentrated in the labour-intensive and time consuming tasks.** In the Tea Estates the hierarchy of Planter-Manager-Babu stands tall. This reflects a kind of patron system which is patriarchal in nature. The **Jhumurgeet,** cited in third chapter, clearly evokes this hierarchy. This hierarchy constitutes the daily-rated workers **at the base.** Women’s position even in this category of daily-rated workers, is thus at the lowest of the low in the
hierarchical structure. Thus, women experience the plantation hierarchy and household patriarchy in their multiple positions and roles, as workers, mothers, wives, widows, daughters, sisters, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law.

From the study, it is known that the factory is largely a male-dominated area, particularly because of technology and machines associated with it, which are always considered outside the reach of women. Factory works itself shows the gendered nature of labour. As it is perceived that men are suited to handle machinery which shows the division of labour in the Tea Estates is gendered and certain tasks are defined as men’s work and others as women’s work. Gender roles on Tea Estates are very clearly defined.

Job segregation has been apparent; they are not enrolled in the factory to operate machines, drive tractors or handle Estate vehicle. They are not even engaged to work as Boidars, Munshis and Chaprasis. Table 3.5 shows that power has been given to them to act only as Sardarin whose number is negligible. They have to perform their duties through the Manager’s hukum (orders). Men dominated the Supervisory Staff in both factories and gardens. This shows the gender bias against female labourers in the Tea Estates. The life story of Minali Korwa who is a permanent worker of Nirmala Tea Estate itself signifies the kind of workload that women labourers have to undertake in the Tea Estates even under extreme situations.

The system of wage payment also reflects the power and domination of the Estates Authority. After independence, the 50th Indian Labour Conference in 1957 had put forth the concept of a need-based minimum wage but the employers’ representatives on the Wage Board strongly objected to the formula accepted by the Indian Labour Conference. This shows that the capitalist enterprise does not prioritize the improvement of the lives of labour women, since women in the Tea Estates are also engaged in overtime work. Working for ticca (paid for extra tasks) clearly signifies the heavy workload undertaken by labour women. On inquiry into the possibilities of improvement of the economic conditions, it has been found from the study that
majority of them are of the opinion that it is not possible to improve the living standard in their present employment. They pointed out that their wage is still very low.

**Inner Dynamics of Private and Public Patriarchy** which forms Chapter 4, while exploring women’s household responsibilities and division of labour in the Tea Estates also highlights the general apathy of the Planters to improve the lives of women labour. The chapter brings out the ground realities related to their membership in Trade Unions, family composition that lowered their position in the household but at the same time, increased their responsibilities such as child bearing and rearing practices and discussed the gender division of labour related to rituals as well.

The study shows the division of labour in the Tea Estates in which labour women play an important productive and reproductive role. The study pointed out that labour woman in Tea Estates are the most important income earners in their families though the patriarchal family ideology ensured that domestic work remains the preserve of women. The study shows that the Management gives primary attention to create nuclear families in the Tea Estates through incentives whereas such strategy may have been to prevent the workers from unified protests against the Management of the Tea Estates. The formation of nuclear families, on the other hand, has increased women’s productive and domestic workload.

According to Margaret Mead ‘in every known human society, the male’s need for achievement can be recognized. Men may cook or weave or dress dolls or hunt humming-birds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When the same occupations are performed by women, they are regarded as less important’. Mead’s notion of men’s need to underwrite their maleness is the presumption that

---

housewifery is a natural function of women, requiring no explanation or discussion, requiring no recognition as a significant part of the economy. ‘A demonstration of the way housewifery is bypassed by the economist is the practice of omitting the fruits of household labour in national accounting’.\textsuperscript{10} Swedish figures quoted by Juliet Mitchell show women as spending nearly twice as many hours on housework as are spent altogether by women in industry (2,340 million hours as opposed to 1,290 million hours).\textsuperscript{11} Averaging the weekly hours of house work estimated in eleven studies quoted by Ann Oakley from Britain, the United States and France, some urban studies and some rural, we obtain a figure of 75.6 hours. Oakley herself arrives at a figure of between 3,000 and 4,000 hours a year by averaging five studies (in Britain and France).\textsuperscript{12} There can be no doubt that women perform an enormous amount of economically and socially useful labour in the performance of domestic duties and that the cost of replacing this contribution by paid labour, if computed for national accounting figures, would be massive.\textsuperscript{13} From the point of view of collection data, the reason for not including any figure for the value of the labour of housewives in the Gross National product (GNP) is simply that this labour is not registered through the money system.\textsuperscript{14}

**Labour women in Tea Estates performed extensive household activities** and only sometimes received a minimal help from their male counterpart. Table 4.2, in the fourth chapter, clearly shows that majority of the women performed all household chores. Lohita Oriya a permanent worker of Sessa Tea Estates, whose narratives presented in the chapter clearly show that despite women’s role as an earner, their traditional role as home maker remains unaltered. Moreover, it has been found that labour women are facing a lot of problems in child rearing practices which is reflected in Table 4.3 (Appendix – 18), as a result of which the burden

\textsuperscript{10} Merle Thornton, op. cit, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{13} Merle Thornton, op. cit, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
ultimately falls on their older female child. This is proved through the statement of Rita Tanti, worker of Nya Gogra Tea Estate, who expresses that a girl child is very helpful for a working mother. The interviews reveal that labour women in Tea Estates have mastered the technique of combining household and productive labour although some men like Raghav Bawri, Sardar of Sessa Tea Estate, for instance, clearly tend to devalue women’s responsibilities. The women on the Tea Estates carry a huge burden of work on their shoulders, including wage work, housework, and ritual or religious work. The bulk of the domestic work, cooking, cleaning, caring for the children and the elderly, collecting firewood and water, are performed by women in addition to their long day in the tea fields from seven o’clock in the morning to half-past four in the afternoon. Poor water supplies and sanitary conditions lack in some Estates, add to the already tight schedule of women.

Labour welfare measures have a decisive role to play since all these measures have a close link with women’s productive, reproductive and household activities. Even during the colonial period, as stated by Elizabeth Kolsky, laws of the tea plantations were designed to secure capitalist control over labour. After Post-independence period different laws were formulated but it has been seen from the study that houses, sanitation, food and drink and medical facilities are not adequately provided which consequently have a strong bearing on the health of the labour women who look towards living in such houses which need less maintenance mainly to save their labour. Moreover, lack of proper Creech and medical facilities greatly harm the living conditions of women labourers in Tea Estates. The women workers expressed serious dissatisfaction with the Management in regards to the supply of amenities, while it remains clear that the Management paid no interest to reduce the grievances of women labour through the provision of adequate welfare measures; their interest lies mainly in the accumulation of profit only.

Inspite of various educational policies it has been seen that there exists only lower primary schools in the Tea Estates. After passing from the lower primary schools of the Estates, they are forced to join the tea labour workforce as unskilled workers.
with no educational and alternative employment opportunity. Generation after generation, they remain tied to the Estates. They are born in the gardens and die in the gardens and thus become an unfree labour. Moreover, due to the irregular functioning of Creches, girls withdraw from the schools because they have to take care of the younger siblings. From this one can estimate that the main concern of the Management is commercial gain and have no interest in human development programmes. Thus, Management’s general apathy to improve the lives of labour women increased both their paid and unpaid workload. While on the other hand, they are victims of not mere male dominance but also physical assault. Under such circumstances, it has always been the labour women who having internalized the male values adjusted themselves to such social milieu.

The Unions fights with the Management on workers’ rights in general, especially wages, but are not at all sensitive to the numerous needs that are specific to women, due to their position in the gender division of labour. Day-care facilities, sanitation, education for their daughters, alcoholic husbands etc., are women's concerns, but neither the Trade Union leadership nor the Estate Management has taken any worthwhile initiative towards addressing these concerns.

There are several reasons for their passive participation in Trade Union activities. Given less opportunity to avail education and the Managers’ lack of concern towards female education, the women can barely think of active participation or even being top members of the Trade Union. Their productive role does not get recognition as skilled labour and they have no standing within the community. Moreover, women’s extensive occupational tasks, both paid and unpaid, leave very little time for themselves as well as Trade Union activities. Lastly, they are rarely promoted to the sub-staff and so their voices will never be heard. So, occupational immobility plays important role for their passive participation in Union activities. All such obstacles restricted women’s participation in Trade Union activities, which are 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 present investigation shows that high consumption of alcohol by male members led to the physical harassment of women. It is clear that alcoholic husbands are a serious concern for the woman, and the Management and union leaders showed least interest to address such issues. The study shows that husbands’ frequent absence from garden work due to the intake of haria increased the burden on women. Such double burden workload is closely linked to their roles in the mode of production and the household. Moreover, in so far as the gender division of labour related to ritual is concerned, it has been revealed that women’s role is only to supplement the ritual master’s work through their domestic labour and how space within household is also gendered. The family is also the space in which the cycle of gender inequality is perpetuated through socializing young girls and women to accept inequality as the norm, through rituals and practices. Hence, transforming gender relations on the plantations requires organizations to support women in challenging inequality in culturally sensitive areas of life, such as family and household.

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 roles, do not get due recognition even within the community. Such negligence is apparent in the Tea Estates of Sonitpur District. Women labours in Tea Estates 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 within the household. This reveals how the women are easy victims to the inner dynamics of both ‘private’ and ‘public’ patriarchy.

From the study, it is clear that the economic contributions of women to their households and families through their earnings as tea pluckers, and their role as workers contributing to the country’s tea and export production, have clearly not translated into a higher status or autonomy for women. Since the beginning of plantation agriculture in Tea Estates, women have borne the brunt of the work of tea production and looking after families on the plantation. Yet, women have had no forum or opportunity to articulate their separate needs and interests. According to Duncan Ironmonger ‘the reality of the huge unpaid contribution of women in the households to economic value needs to be accepted; adopted as a benchmark fact, it would change nearly all of our deliberations about economic and social policy’.15 In this way the study, on *Tea-Garden Women Labour of Sonitpur, Assam (1983-2008)* by emphasizing on the lived experiences of labour women of Tea Estates, in both workplace and household, sought to impress upon the need for a feminization of the concept of labour itself, so that women do not remain the invisible workers.

---