

# Women Workers in a South Asian Plantation System

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## 1. Introduction

The plantation system is conceptualised as a rigid form of social stratification. Its economic arrangements and controls maintain a continuous process of producing staple crops for a market. The factors of production form the economic side of the system while the social arrangements for carrying on the essential production give substance to the plantation as a social system.

In a plantation setting, the economic side of the system determines the nature of social arrangements. To the extent cultural and other factors that aid the process of production and capital accumulation are retained and perpetuated; they reinforce certain values and norms and

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thus create the special style of life, so typically associated with the plantations all over the world.

My arguments are that (i) certain features of the labouring community in the plantation are retained because they help in the process of capital accumulation while those posing obstruction in its way are systematically made to become subservient or sometimes even obsolete and (ii) a pattern of gender-roles with egalitarian norms among the workers helps them to cope with and adjust to plantation authoritarianism.

These arguments are elaborated in terms of gender-roles in the labouring community on a tea plantation in Assam, India. I particularly refer to the existence of relative sexual equality among the tea garden workers in Assam. Generally, in most plantation communities, female labour is found to be doubly exploited and oppressed because the economic system uses it as a source of cheap labour and social relations between the sexes at all levels are characterised by male domination. However, somewhat different patterns are not so hard to find.<sup>1)</sup>

The presentation is divided into four parts, namely, (i) historical background of the tea garden workforce in Assam,<sup>2)</sup> (ii) social stratification on a typical tea garden, (iii) nature of gender-roles in the labouring community and (iv) conclusion, which shows that the present distribution of rewards within the plantation system reflects the con-

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1) For example, Sutton and Makiesky Barrow(1977) discuss the 'absence of marked sexual inequalities' in the Afro-Caribbean plantation situation.

2) In northern India, the tea plantations are called 'gardens' and in Sri Lanka and Kenya 'estates'. Here, the terms, garden, estate and plantation are used interchangeably to demote an agro-industrial unit, producing and manufacturing tea as a saleable commodity, specially for world and home markets.

tributing aspect of gender-roles to effect the workers' survival in an exploitative capitalist system.

## 2. Historical Background of the Tea Garden Workforce in Assam

Tea was first cultivated in India at the initiative of the British who opened tea gardens in Assam and West Bengal. Around the 1850s tea became a booming business. Through a system of contract labour, the planters recruited women, men and children from poverty-stricken areas of mainly Bihar, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. They paid the recruits wages and provided housing and medical care. The contracts indentured the migrants for a period of 3 to 5 years in the first instance.

The migration stopped in 1960. For over a hundred years, from 1840 to 1960, the planters endeavoured in the tea gardens of Assam to develop the economy on the basis of a 'new system of slavery' (Tinker, 1974). Consequently, there emerged a stable workforce. In the absence of a better alternative it was fully entrapped in the plantation economy. The planters succeeded in achieving their ideal of a cheap and subservient workforce with little desire of better life. Living in an extremely heterogeneous community and away from respective traditional social structures, the migrants were, theoretically, exposed to influences from the host society. The plantation social system did not, however, allow the process of assimilation of the migrant workers with the local population. Planters held that the Assamese peasants were unwilling to work on the gardens and the migrant workers were to be kept separated from their undesirable influence.

Most tea garden workers have over the decades forgotten their native dialects. They understand and speak the Assamese language after a fashion and for their day-to-day communication they have developed a tea garden lingo, known as *Baqan Bat*. The peculiar historical and economic conditions of the region has developed a standardised way of life, which has steamrollered the bewildering diversity of tribal and caste segments, migrating to tea gardens from different parts of India. In this sense, there is a markedly specialised adaptation on the part of the workers to the plantation setting and to the local economy, politics and society. As a result, after over a hundred years the labouring community of 'transplanted people' (Beckford, 1972: 73) has now come to occupy a distinct identity and place in Assam. Due to the particular type of living on the tea gardens, the workers remain culturally and racially a recognisable category distinct from the local population.

### 3. Social Stratification on a Typical Tea Garden

The official bureaucracy of a tea garden forms the basis of class positions in the system. Differences in economic roles ascribed to each class position define the nature of status and power in the community and hence a total picture of its social stratification.

I describe the official bureaucracy of a fairly representative tea garden, known as Behula Tea Estate. It is one of the oldest tea gardens in Assam, with a stable labour force of long standing. Situated on both sides of a government road, it was opened in the late 1860s by an English joint stock company, registered in London. In the 1970s it was in the process of being Indianised with majority of its shares transferred

to Indian hands. Its head office is located in Calcutta, West Bengal. Until the late 1960s all its managers and until 1960 even all assistant managers were non-Indian. By the late 1970s, the Behula bureaucracy at all levels was of Indian origin.

Based on an organisational chart, drawn by the estate manager to explain the 'line of order' in the estate, I show, in diagram 1, the various positions in the official bureaucracy. This diagram does not include the large mass of unskilled manual labourers.

### 1) Higher Participants

The position at the apex is occupied by the general manager. He and his staff are accorded a standing of superordination vis-a-vis the labourers who are at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy on Behula.

The positions marked 1, 2, 3 and 4 belong to the upper class of the plantation community. Recruited from the public school educated upper class of Indian society, they are classified in the tea garden lingo as 'sahib' category of the community. Positions 5 to 12 represent the 'babu' category, recruited from the middle class with pre-university education and technical knowledge where necessary. They comprise the supervisory and technical staff of Behula. The 'sahib' class together with the 'babu' are designated as the higher participants in the estate social system.

### 2) Lower participants

Positions 15 to 18 and the large mass of ordinary female and male labourers form the bottom layer of social stratification in Behula. They

are mostly uneducated and unskilled and belong to the lower class of Indian society. The foremen (Sardar), watchmen, drivers and peons (positions 15 to 18 in the diagram) are recruited from among the labourers and are paid at the same rate as manual workers. It is of no special significance that they have a notional entry into the organisational chart of Behula bureaucracy. They simply belong to the labouring community which constitutes the category of 'labour' or lower participants in plantation social system.

### 3) Class Mobility

Between the higher and lower participants are organised the various processes of production which are divided in four functional branches, the field, the factory, the office and the medical. Under the headship of the general manager, all work is clearly planned and laid out in advance in consultation with the head of each branch. It is then meticulously followed according to a neat process of passing down of instruction from the manager to the labourer through a series of orders. The class and status positions in the 'line of order' are rigid and closed. Venues of the mobility from lower to upper class positions are therefore non-existent. In the entire history of Behula Tea Estate, there has never been a single case of movement from one class to other.

### 4) Management and Labour Relations

In the early phases of the tea industry in India, before the World War, it had become almost an ideal for the manager and his subordinates to practice paternalistic authoritarianism in relation to the labour-

ers. During the 1920s and 1930s, because of the World War I, the price of rice, cloth and salt had risen unprecedentedly and the tea industry had failed to provide increased wages during the profit years of the war period. The labourers had reasons to show their anger, through several outbursts of violence, over the prevailing conditions of imbalance between the wages and cost of living on the tea gardens. The erosion of established pattern of relations of paternalistic benevolence was the obvious outcome of this situation. A slump in the world tea markets after the World War I made the planters economies on every front. The first casualty of this policy were the relations between the management and the labourers. On July 30, 1940, about two hundred working women went on a strike for higher wages in a tea garden in Cachar Lower Assam. This was a clear indication that the labour had now rejected the age-old image of the planter as their mai-baap (parents).

##### 5) Trade Union: a New Element

The unrest among the labourers attracted the trade unionists and nationalists / politicians to the gardens and thus entered a new element in the system of social stratification on the tea gardens. The planters decided to strongly oppose initial attempts of the labourers to unionise, in the name of fighting the 'communists'. Later, they allowed the labour movement to grow under their guardianship. In Assam, trade unionism among the tea garden workers was thus not only a later movement but also initiated, in 1947, in a manner which implied a degree of understanding between the employers and the labour leaders. This left the labourers in a condition of limbo. The installation of a mild reformist trade union in Behula in 1959 created a marginal position for itself in the

system of social stratification on the estate.

#### 6) Current Situation

In the 1970s and 1990s, the authoritarianism of the plantation economic system was all too visible despite the social legislation passed by the government of independent India. Due to their isolated location, the tea gardens manage to disregard the legal requirements for improved working and living conditions among the labourers. In order to examine how the labourers cope with and adjust to plantation authoritarianism, we now turn to the next section. It shows how the reciprocal relations among the workers, particularly those associated with gender-roles, enable them to make their survival possible.

### 4. Nature of Gender-Roles in the Labouring Community

The framework of social stratification in the tea garden is characterised by vertical inequality. We find that vis-a-vis the corporate structures of the plantation, the labourers manifest a pattern of horizontal equality among themselves. In opposition to the higher participants, the propertyless and wage-dependent female and male workers share an identical economic and social status in the plantation social system. Their low economic status almost forces them to cooperate to survive and reproduce.

Their survival and ability to reproduce the workforce from within are two most essential factors for the efficient running of the tea garden.



This makes it imperative for the higher participants to ensure that the workers survive and reproduce. For survival the workers are given by their employers just enough cash wages and for reproduction just bare minimum conditions of living in the labour 'lines'. Beyond this, the workers are left to devise ways and means of continuing the social relations of production. Insofar as the workers assist in the process of capital accumulation, the plantation system accepts their strategies.

The wage-level of the workers is determined by the estate on a family basis. This leaves the workers no choice of an alternate social formation with women not entering the labour market. In order to survive both female and male adults in a family have to take the estate work. To discuss the egalitarian nature of gender-roles and contribution of working women to the survival of the labouring community on Behula Tea Estate, I take up the main features of the Nimari labouring community. Nimari is one of the three production divisions of Behula Tea Estate. It is also known as Nimari division, which has a land area of 274.72 hectares. Of this area nearly 87 per cent is under mature tea. This heavy utilisation of land under tea and the labour-intensive nature of tea production cause the estate to hire a large number of labourers.

### 1) The Nimari Labouring Community

Nimari division employs 860 female and male workers on a permanent basis, besides a varying number of temporary hands. Both permanent and temporary workers are rated as unskilled manual labour. They are paid by day or piece-rate, with the exception of 41 salaried workers who are paid monthly but on the same rates as other workers.

All permanent workers live in the houses provided by the estate,

known as 'labour lines'. Nimari has four labour lines. All female workers, if not living with either parents or spouses, get the houses allotted in their names and occupy them in their own right.<sup>3)</sup>

All workers are divided in three gangs of female, male and minor labourers. Anyone about the age of 12 can start work on a tea garden and there is no specific age of retirement. On Nimari, in the category of wage-earning adult labourers, 48.35 per cent are female, 47.25 per cent are male and in the category of minor workers 2.8 per cent are female and 1.07 per cent are male. Together the two categories make 95.23 per cent of the workforce. To them are added 41 salaried workers who are all male. Notice that in the organisational chart of the tea garden bureaucracy, the female component is totally absent, while in the two categories(not mentionable in the chart) it outweighs the male component.

In a tea garden, labour is most required in the field branch and nominally in the factory, the office and the medical branches. The field branch is exclusively concerned with tea cultivation and harvesting while the factory takes care of its manufacturing. Most adult female and minor female workers engage in the task of plucking tea leaves while most adult male workers engage in field work. The task of plucking is the single most costly operation on the garden and women perform this task. Their employment is a matter of necessity for the planters. The labourers work for eight hours per day for six days of the week. Their work begins

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3) On the rubber plantations in Malaysia, if a female worker become a widow or a divorcee or a separated person, she is expected to return to her natal home which is often in another estate. The estate does not allocate a house in the name of its female workers(see Jain, R.K., 1970: 85-86).

at 7:00 a. m. in summer and at 8:00 a. m. in winter.<sup>4)</sup> In 1981, the Nimari management paid its female and male labourers at an equal rate of Rs. 6.64. for eight hours of work per day.<sup>5)</sup> In addition, they receive various fringe benefits which are considered by the management to compensate for the low-level of cash wages.

Opportunities for occupational mobility within the estate are almost non-existent for the workers. Recruitment at the level of supervisory and technical staff has little scope of expansion and in the wake of 'Assam for Assamese' movement, the management gives preference to the persons of Assamese origin in recruiting supervisory and technical staff. This is in contrast to the earlier practice of recruiting middle-class Bengalis for these positions. The chances for paid work outside the gardens are scarce and the workers are left with no choice, except to somehow devise strategies for survival within the economic system of the tea garden.

## 2) Sexual Equality in Production

The landless labouring class, which migrated to the tea gardens, had a tradition of pooling family labour. Women in this class always com-

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4) In Assam, people living on the tea gardens and those connected with them keep two clocks, one following the usual Indian Standard Time (IST) while the other one shows the Garden Time, which is an hour earlier than IST. For the workers the Garden Time is the usual time and the garden management keeps all garden clocks and watches set according to Garden Time.

5) During 1978 to 1981, twelve Indian rupees were, approximately, equal to one U. S. dollar. Now in 1992, thirty one rupees are, approximately, equal to one U. S. dollar.

bined the roles of mother and worker as a normal practice. Continuing the same practice, the women on Nimari tea garden share with their spouses the economic responsibility of providing sustenance to their families. Their direct participation in the process of production excludes any prospect of their confinement in 'private domain'. Further, direct access to cash wages reduces the possibility of male dependency syndrome in their case. It must however be remembered that the notion of equality is severely limited in this context because women here have practically nil chances of occupational mobility.

It is a fact that on tea gardens, women carry home larger pay packets each week than the men do. But in the eyes of the workers and the management, over a year their earnings work out to be more or less equal because women work for a slightly lower average of days in the year than the men. More important for the workers is how the total income of a household can be made to match its total expenditure. It is in this context that we examine how women achieve this marvel through their efficient budget management, which is based on joint responsibility of the woman and the man.

### 3) Role of Women in Expenditure and Savings

In theory, with mutual understanding of the household's weekly expenditure, both women and men spend their entire earnings of the week on meeting the expenses on food and other necessities. In practice, based on joint efforts, women plan and execute the pattern of expenditure in the household.

About the control of purse in the family, there is no hard and fast rule. Depending on the size, stage and composition of the household,

it may be in the hands of either the woman or the man or both. Also, all the working children seem to spend a fair share of their wages by themselves after about 10 to 15 per cent of their earnings in the common pool to be spent on food items. This contribution is, of course, extra to the allowance of subsidised ration of food that each worker is entitled to.

There are next to no saving mechanisms operation in the labour 'lines'. In most cases, both the woman and the man have to somehow strike a balance between their income and expenditure. In the cases of illness and subsequent unemployment, there are serious difficulties faced by the family in meeting its regular expenses. Again, for extra expenses during life cycle rituals, the workers incur debts. Since their ability to raise credit is extremely limited, they have simplified many of their social customs. When it comes to the question of sheer survival, they resort to the most common method of securing small loans by asking the estate office for an 'advance' against one's earnings. This age-old method of tying a labourer to the employer is commonly practiced by the tea gardens.

#### 4) Gender-Roles and Mechanisms of Reproduction on Nimari

The pattern of mating and reproduction on Nimari is a simple and effective means of getting the future labour force. Nimari women not only reproduce the labour force but also create the ideological base for maintenance of the system by providing the socialisation and day-to-day servicing of the family members.

The two types of marriage prevalent on Nimari recognise the traditional practice of the right of freedom the tribal women enjoy in choosing

their spouses. Neolocal residence is formed on the basis of the occupational status of the woman/man. Further, the increasing number of inter-caste, inter-tribal and inter-ethnic marriages show the gradual weakening of traditional norm of patrilocal residence and tribal/caste endogamy, respectively. These trends as well as the elements of fluidity in mating careers of Nimari women can be related to the particular historical and current socio-economic conditions on the tea gardens. The first type of marriage in Nimari is either arranged by the parents or by the marriage partners themselves, involving traditional rituals and ceremonies of bride-price, milk money and community feast. The second type of marriage is a common law marital union and is contracted on the basis of one's free will and pleasure. The incidence of the second type is fairly common and is accepted by both the higher and lower participants of the plantation system.<sup>6)</sup>

There is no child marriage on Nimari. The two types of marital unions in the labour 'lines' require economic arrangements which imply that both woman and man work before they can set up a household.

The residential group in the labour 'lines' develops from a conjugal union of the woman and man into a domestic group which normally comprises the married couple and their children. The domestic groups on Nimari can be viewed both as families and as households. In majority of the cases a household is also a family unit.

Emergence of either extended unilineal descent groups or socially

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6) This situation is quite different from the Jamaican case in the Caribbean, reported by Clarke (1979: 73-89). Based on the West Indian Creole folk traditions, she has shown how legal marriage and common law union are sharply separated conditions and stages in mating careers.

mobile joint family units is conspicuously absent in the 'lines'. An increase in the number of common-law marital unions has, on the other hand, taken away the focus of authority and power from the head of the extended family to the conjugal pair. By creating a homogeneous occupational status group of female and male labourers, the plantation system of Nimari seems to be playing down the power of a father-figure in family relationships. And we come across a relative absence of family patriarchy in the labour 'lines'.

Set in the overall context of a plantation mode of production, the mainly economic content of household relationships appears to have overtaken whatever norms of family relationships the labouring community might have had. Setting up of a household by a couple takes place at a mature age when both the wife and husband are expected to be the earning members of the community. With the births of children and formation of a complete nuclear family, the element of reliance on the part of the new household leads the couple to organise a pattern of division of labour in the family.

Bringing up children is the joint responsibility of the couple. When they are young and both parents work, the mothers take them to the tea-fields and leave them in a basket by the path-side. Slightly older children, aged five and more, are left at home in the care of an older sibling, aged eight or more. The estates do provide crèches but mothers have little faith in them. They prefer to leave infants at home in the care of an older child. At an early age the children of both sexes are introduced to the task of child-minding. All female children are very young, the woman receives considerable help from her husband in cooking meals and washing clothes. If there are only boys in the family, one of them is taught how to light fire and cook rice. A boy is generally

expected to be an assistant to his father in the kitchen-garden, cattle rearing and paddy cultivation. A girl is encouraged to first learn the art of plucking tea leaves by helping her mother in the fields. It is relatively easier for a girl to get employment in the garden than it is for a boy. A boy has to pass a medical test of fitness in order to get a permanent job on the estate. The female child is certainly more useful and therefore valuable in both the home and work spheres. Enhanced economic value of the females does not, however, assign them a position of superiority in the community. Our data simply point towards a pattern of relative equality in the division of labour in the household organisation.

The responsibility of indoor tasks is exclusively female activities. Yet the female roles are not confined to indoor tasks. For them, just as it is for men, life is a perpetual cycle of work and weekly pay. Their horizons do not go beyond the act of making survival possible. Early socialisation of female and male children in their respective roles. In addition, role-crossing performed by adults and both observed and emulated by junior members prepares them for a large degree of cooperation by sharing each other's tasks in the household.

## 5. Conclusion

Insomuch as the ideology of sexual equality is perceivable among the workers, we can say that the present distribution of rewards within the plantation system reflects the contributing aspect of gender-roles to the workers' survival in a system, which is primarily geared to accrue maximum benefits to the capitalist entrepreneurs. Sexual equality among the workers is therefore only an aspect of mechanisms employed by the



workers to effect their survival.

I feel that there is a case to be made for highlighting this aspect of gender-roles among the workers. It has implications for our growing concern with working women's need to act collectively. My argument is that collective action, on the part of such working women as enjoy a degree of socio-economic independence and decision-making ability, can act as a catalyst to remove the inequities. Here I refer to inequities perpetrated by the relatively strong and patriarchal society in India. By and large, Indian society has almost privatised women's roles and constrained their collective action. Today, we have schemes of tree plantations around the world, specially in the Third World, with its interlocking problems of ecological imbalance and unemployment. In this light, there is a strong need to focus on specific roles and relations women have in the systems of production. Female labour has a potential role to play in economic growth and so also the nature of gender-roles has a special role to play in determining the social relations at all levels in a society.

In some studies of the plantation communities, horizontal equality has been perceived in the midst of extreme type of vertical inequality (Jayawardena, 1963; Mintz, 1956). In the case of my study of working on the tea gardens of Assam, this inversion of social relations has put forward an example of relative equality in the area of gender-roles. In no way is this a justification of the plantation system. It is only an exposition of its multi-dimensional reality.

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