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Nurturing Resistance: Agency and Activism of Women Tea Plantation Workers in a Gendered Space

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis is my own work unless indicated otherwise. The work has not been published either in part or in full.

Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of labour relations and social space in the tea gardens of north-east India. Existing literature provides us with an understanding of how the plantations operate as economic spaces, but in so doing they treat workers as undifferentiated economic beings defined only by their class identity. Space, however, has to be animated to be meaningful. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews I explore the plantations as actual lived spaces where people are bound by and resist constraints. Multiple intersecting identities play out within these social spaces making them ethnic, religious, and caste spaces in addition to being gendered. Focusing on these intersectional identities, I demonstrate how region, ethnicity, party affiliation, caste, religion are played out and how they are invoked at certain points by the women workers. The articulations of identity not only determine a sense of belonging or non-belonging to a space but also how one belongs. Within the physical sites of the plantation, I examine how the women perceive these spaces and how, in moving between ideas of home/world, public/private, these very binaries are negated. The strict sexual division of labour primarily in the workplace but also in the household and villages inscribe the physical sites with certain gendered meanings and performances. The women negotiate these in their everyday lives and shape these spaces even as they are shaped by them. Conditioned by gender norms and the resultant hierarchy their narratives can be read as stories of deprivation and misery, but looking deeper their agency can also be uncovered. The lives of my research participants show how the social spaces within which they operate are not static; in spite of spatial

controls there are the many minute acts of resistance through which the women work the existing restraints to their least disadvantage. Focussing on the minute acts of insubordination, deceit and even confrontation I elucidate how the women made use of the relations of subordination to pave spaces of resistance and sometimes even of autonomy. Furthermore, not all acts of agency are minute or unspectacular. I map instances of highly visible, volatile and aggressive protests apparently challenging the accepted social codes within which they function. In expressing themselves, the women use the available political repertoires of protest in forms of strikes, blockades, street plays, etc. Through these instances of activism they appropriate and become visible in the public realm and challenge the accepted ways in which social spaces and norms play out. Despite their articulate nature, these protests usually seek to address immediate demands and do not escalate into social movements. Also while volatile in action, the protests seek legitimacy within the accepted gender codes that operate in their everyday life in the plantation.

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Glossary

<i>Adivasi</i>	Tribal. The tribal spoken of here are migrants from Central Indian regions of Jharkhand and Bihar.
<i>Adhiar</i>	Tenant
<i>Alag</i>	Different
<i>aurat jaat</i>	Women folk
<i>auto rickshaw</i>	A three wheeled cabin cycle which forms one of the main modes of public transport in many parts of India.
<i>Badnaam</i>	Defamation
<i>Bagaan</i>	Literally means garden here referred interchangeably between plantation and the garden areas of the plantation.
<i>Basti</i>	Settlement. Here it refers to the nearby villages outside the plantations.
<i>Beijjoti</i>	Insult
<i>Bigha</i>	Temporary. A typical plantation terminology referring to temporary workers.
<i>Bhaati</i>	A place where cheap alcohol is produced.
<i>Chalaki</i>	Cunning or slyness. Used in a negative way here.
<i>Chaprasi</i>	A plantation sub-staff in the supervision team senior to the supervisor and below the <i>munshi</i> .
<i>Chowpatti</i>	Crossroads. Here it is also used as the town or the village square.
<i>Dera</i>	A place frequented by someone. Usually comes with a negative connotation.
<i>Dharamsala</i>	Guest house with cheap rates of rent usually run by religious

	institutions.
<i>Dikus</i>	Term used for moneylenders in seventeenth-eighteenth century colonial Central India.
<i>Doubli</i>	Overtime. The money that the pluckers of the tea plantation make over and above their daily wages for plucking extra quantities of leaves.
<i>ghar-jamai</i>	Resident son-in-law
<i>gherao</i>	Literally translated as encirclement. It is a Hindi word typically used in India to refer to a definite form of protest where a place or a person is surrounded by the protesting group till their demands are met.
<i>Haat</i>	Weekly market
<i>hazira</i>	Daily wage of a plantation worker.
<i>jholi</i>	Big bags used for carrying the plucked leaves. The women usually carry them on their heads or back.
<i>Jotedar</i>	Feudal lords.
<i>Jhorni</i>	One of the maintenance tasks in the plantations consisting of cutting off the lower branches and buds of the tea bushes with a sickle so that the nutrients reach the top of the bushes.
<i>Jnar</i>	Rice beer. A type of local liquor made from rice popular in West Bengal. It is also called <i>hariya</i> .
<i>Khichuri</i>	A type of Indian dish with the rice and the lentils cooked together.
<i>Kholni</i>	A maintenance task in the plantation consisting of digging the soil around the roots of the tea bushes to loosen it so that it can soak enough moisture.
<i>Khukri</i>	A type of Nepalese knife with an

	inwardly carved edge used both as a tool and a weapon.
<i>lataburi/buro</i>	Plantation terminology for old, infirm or weak workers. This is usually treated as a separate category of workers and they are given lighter work.
Line	Short form of labour lines or labour villages within the plantations.
<i>mai baap</i>	Literally meaning father and mother or parents. In this context meaning ultimate guardian and authority.
<i>Maryada</i>	Self-respect.
<i>Melas</i>	A typical plantation terminology for horizontal lines of tea bushes in each plantation section. Usually each worker in the plucking section has to finish a certain number of <i>melas</i> . The choice of which <i>melas</i> to pluck rests with the workers.
<i>Momo</i>	A Tibetan form of dumpling.
<i>munshi</i>	Senior-most of the sub-staff supervisor in each planting section.
<i>Panchayat</i>	Literally means assembly of five wise men, i.e. village council. The lowest tier in the local self government system in India. It consists of the elected representatives of the constituent villages.
<i>Paniwallah</i>	Water supplier in the planting sections.
<i>Paratha</i>	An Indian bread
<i>Payash</i>	Rice pudding
<i>Pradhan</i>	The head of the village <i>panchayat</i> .
<i>Puja</i>	Prayers. Usually a Hindu form of worship. Associated with

	festivities as well.
<i>Sahib</i>	Lord. Here refers to the plantation manager.
<i>sardar</i>	Supervisor who is responsible for overseeing the workers.
<i>Sindoor</i>	Vermillion applied to the head. A sign of a Hindu married women.
<i>time pass</i>	Whiling away time without doing anything specific. A typical plantation terminology.
<i>Thika</i>	Task. Each worker was expected to meet this task to receive their daily wage.
<i>Zilla parishad</i>	The top tier of the three tier local self government or <i>panchayati</i> system. It consists of the members elected by the Block <i>panchayat</i> (the middle tier) from amongst themselves.

Acronyms

ABAVP	Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Bikash Parishad (All India Committee for Development of Adivasis). A political party active in West Bengal fighting for the rights of the Adivasis in the state.
AAW	Antyodaya Anna Yojana (Destitute Welfare Food Scheme). A Government of India welfare scheme aimed at providing food ration to the population identified below the poverty line at a subsidised rate.
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party). It is a national level political party. It is a right wing Hindu national party.

BPL	Below Poverty Line. It is an economic benchmark and poverty threshold used by the Government of India to indicate economic disadvantage and to identify individuals and households in need of government assistance and aid.
BDO	Block Development Office/Officer. The block consisting of urban units such as census towns and rural units called <i>gram panchayats</i> is administered by a Block Development Officer, who is appointed by the Government of West Bengal.
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India is a left wing Marxist political party. It leads the Left Front coalition of leftist parties and is strongest in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. In West Bengal the Left Front was in the government from 1967-2011.
CPI (ML)	Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) is an extreme left wing party.
GJMM	Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (A Platform for the Independence of the Gorkhas) is a political party campaigning for the creation of separate state of Gorkhaland within India, out of the districts in north of West Bengal.

Indian National Congress	Commonly known as Congress, is one of the major national parties in India. The party's modern liberal platform is largely considered centre-left wing in the Indian political spectrum. In 2009 emerging as the single largest party in the general elections, it now heads the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) to form the central government.
ITA	Indian Tea Association is the oldest organisation of the tea producers of India.
LS	Low Skip is a form of pruning of the bushes. Usually this type of pruning is done by the women workers.
NREGA	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act is a Government of India welfare scheme to provide for enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work.
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party is a Marxist-Leninist political party which forms a part of the Left Front coalition. It has a strong presence in the tea plantation areas of North Bengal.
TMC	All India Trinamool Congress (Grassroots Congress). It is a state level party currently forming the government in West Bengal. It is currently the sixth largest party in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament with 19 seats.

Maps

Map 1

LOCATION OF DOOARS IN INDIA



Source: Google images

Map 2

NORTH-EAST INDIA



Total area: 274947 square kilometres

Source: Googleimages. http://india.gov.in/knowindia/state_uts.php. Accessed on 01-08.2010.

Map 3

DOOARS



Total Area: 8800 square kilometres

Source: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/172688/Duars>. Accessed on 01-08-2010.

Google

Chapter 1

Introduction

'When survival is a struggle, you learn'

The women were plucking the tea leaves in the sweltering heat, occasionally stopping to wipe away the sweat or have a drink of water. There was no shade in this part of the garden and many of them put a cloth on their head to protect themselves from the scorching sun. Suddenly, without warning, the sky turned grey. Almost immediately torrential rain accompanied by thunderstorms struck and soon turned into a hailstorm. The women put their bags on their heads and ran to the shade of the trees. My responses, in contrast, had frozen and they dragged me to this place of relative safety. As we sat down under the shade trees, I commented on their fast reflexes. Rupal said with a smile, 'When survival is a struggle, you learn. There is no respite, if it is too hot it becomes impossible to move; in the rain, especially if there are hailstorms like this, it is too dangerous to work. In the winter months, to work in the extreme cold and mist in the morning is not easy. But you learn to survive and make your way through it'. Ramila adds, 'And we often manage to do that with a smile even. The troubles are many, but you have to keep struggling and above all smiling'.

Soon the hailstorm subsided but the rain continued unrelentingly. The women as well as the supervisors continued to wait for it to subside slightly. The sight of the manager's car arriving in the distance seemed to worry them. I remarked that in this heavy rain, surely the manager would not expect them to be working. Shalini says, 'His expectations have nothing to do with our convenience. If he decides that we need to pluck in

this rain, then we will have to pluck. He is all-in-all'. Sure enough, the manager's car stopped in the section and he shouted at the women and the supervisors, calling them lazy and deceitful for taking the slightest pretext of not working. The supervisors quickly absolved themselves of the blame by pointing out that the women refused to listen to them. A few of the women objected to this accusation and tried to reason with the manager about the difficulty of working in such torrential downpour. But these timid protests were quickly shot down by him with threats of dismissing the workers or suspending them from work. Once he made sure that the women had gone back to plucking, he got back into his car and made his way to the next section.

The women continued plucking. They mimicked the manager, poking fun at him alternating it with abusing him for his lack of concern. The manager's tirade rather than shaking them seemed to have amused them as they kept imitating him and breaking into peals of laughter. Concerned that they were getting drenched I ask them what would happen if they got sick. Pankhuri laughed and said, 'We will not come then tomorrow. We are allowed to take sick leave and he cannot say anything about that. In fact, some of the women will make use of this and just call in sick using the day for other work they have. You mark my words'. Bandini remarked, 'It is actually silly if you ask me. There is just half an hour left, how much can we pluck in this rain? But he is the authority; we can trick him but not oppose him. As you grow older, you will also realise this'. Pankhuri continued, 'This is very true. There is always authority at home, at work, everywhere and you have to listen to them. That is the way life is. When you get married and go to someone else's house, you will understand this. It happens here, it also happens in your cities. The forms might be different but it operates everywhere especially for us women (aurat jaat). You have to learn to deal with it but you cannot disobey them'. (Daahlia, field-notes)

This extract is put together from two days' field-notes from Daahlia giving glimpses of the power hierarchy and the way exchanges are

structured around it in the tea plantations. My thesis is a narrative of people placed within constraints and how they negotiate with and within them. I focus on women workers in two tea plantations of Dooars in North-east India—Kaalka and Daahlia. Their struggle for survival is neither simple nor uni-directional but has to be understood as a complex, often contradictory and multi-layered process. Further, the struggle has to be placed within its social context which again is complicated and has to be explored in depth to really provide any meaning to the different forms of agency evinced. It has to be woven into the understandings of agency—how agency is played out has to be understood in the context of gendered spaces framed by multiple other identities. This provides a reality-check enabling one to place agency within its context rather than romanticising it.

WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Any piece of research arises from an intellectual curiosity fuelled by a personal rationale. This research also emerged from personal interest and my conviction of its importance. Tea drinking forms a core part of the culture of Bengali middle-class families from which I come. From an early age the image of the women plucking tea leaves adorning the cover of the tea packages and commercials had become familiar. These happy, smiling women plucking tea leaves surrounded by the beauty of lush green, close to nature, in fact formed one of those lasting images with which I associated tea. But as I grew up these uni-dimensional images began to trouble me. What did they mean? What were they trying to construct? At a later stage with my interest in feminist theories, I decided to explore further into the process through which these plucking, smiling women were essentialised. Did their fingers, their smiling faces construct tea plantation labour in certain specific ways? Even a cursory reading through tea plantation literature showed that reality was at odds with this image of the women pluckers. But this also illustrated the complex

processes through which constructions were embedded within the way the plantation labour was shaped and lay in the heart of any understanding of the tea plantation. The implications might be different, but the constructions were not. While there is no dearth of literature on tea plantations, I felt the need to undertake work which could capture the voices of the people themselves and understand how they embed, resist, manipulate and contradict these constructions.

While this would have remained no more than an area of keen intellectual interest, certain other events pushed me towards giving shape to this research in a more concrete way. First and most crucial was the continuance of a crisis in the tea plantations of North Bengal resulting in quite a few of them closing down. The crisis signified a prolonged period of turmoil which was the backdrop in which the plantations operated. Alongside this, there was a demand for articulation of distinct ethnicity among the different sections of the workers, namely the Adivasis¹ and the Nepalis. The frequent clashes and strikes which arose as a part of this ethnic struggle indicated further chaos. Thus, it was a point where the tea plantations in North Bengal were in a threshold of transformations in the backdrop of crisis, conflict and turbulence. The workers remained invisible in this tumultuous backdrop. The newspapers and fact finding committee reports painted a broad-brush generalised and standardised depiction of the people's own narratives. In face of these circumstances and my long term interest in the tea plantation labour especially the women workers I decided upon the focus of my PhD research.

SITUATING THE RESEARCH

My thesis addresses two main gaps in the plantation literature, especially in South Asia, but goes on to address wider issues about agency and activism of the dominated in a gendered space context. The main

¹Literally translated as original inhabitants, the term here refers to tribal from Central India. See glossary.

question that this study explores is how can agency of the dominated be understood in a specific social context?

Much of the plantation literature, in South Asia in particular, has focussed on plantations as economic sites of production. Beckford (1972), Graham and Floering (1984), Daniel, Bernstein and Brass (1992), DasGupta (1994), Raman (2010), have detailed the development of the plantation system as an economic system of production, with its history of development as industry, its labour management and labour practices and finally the labour force. Being top down studies, however, the labour force remains locked in a class analysis, a nameless, faceless passive mass that form the backbone of the plantation system yet remain deprived of their personhood. Given the distinctive nature of the plantation system, i.e. a space where the workers, management and staff are not only employed and work but also live, this gap makes the analysis incomplete. Plantations are not just spaces for production of tea and resultant profits but also sites for production of discourses, meanings and practices. They are social spaces where the residents live their lives, make sense of it, form relationships.

Given the specific nature of plantation labour the social aspect of the plantation space becomes all the more central. 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 plantation society was thus, their only social space. With the growth in the labour force there was spill over into the nearby townships but rarely beyond (in terms of kinship networks), as was seen in the case of Dooars, my field-site. This closed social network thus, meant that the tea plantations in general, but also specifically in case of Dooars, could only be understood by locating them not only within their economic but also their social context. The two shape and were shaped by each other. The economic practices within the plantation such as

labour practices, norms of work, managerial behaviour were all constructed and naturalised through perceptions of certain social codes arising from within the plantation society and embedded through processes of shared understandings. The construction of the labour hierarchy and practices was also not independent of the domestic relations within the plantations. The plantations of Dooars like much of rest of India had made use of family recruitment. Thus, from its very inception it developed on the logic of the interconnected economic and social space. While the specific connotations that these interconnections took changed over time according to economic necessities or social change, it still remained very much interlinked. For example, the crisis in tea plantations in North Bengal between 1999 and 2009 saw an exodus of people from the plantations in search of work to the nearby townships but more commonly to the far-off cities such as Delhi, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, etc. This was not only an economic phenomenon but had its ramifications in the social sphere as well. There was a re-interrogation of social norms, as new aspirations and alternative discourses sprang up.

Another section of plantation literature (e.g. Bhadra, 1992; Kaniampady, 2003), in fleshing out the women as individuals in a constrained social space, also denies them agency. They are portrayed as hapless victims passive in the face of exploitation unable to exercise any decision making power whether be it at work or home. While the difficulties the women operated within cannot be discounted, their agency within this space also needs to be addressed. '*Learning to live through struggle, with a smile*' was not a capitulation to destiny and the lot handed to them; it was an expression of agency albeit within constraints. This agential behaviour can only be understood within its context where it derives its meaning and attains its significance. The focus of my thesis is to uncover this behaviour in its various manifestations—be it invisible and non-confrontational or violent, spectacular and visible

and to place it within its context of intersectional gendered space where the women were constituted by multiple subordinate identities.

STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis is data led and the structure is thematic with the chapters building on each other to provide a narrative. Each analysis chapter emerged in response to issues raised by the respondents and thus, deals with a specific literature before analysing the theme raised.

This introductory chapter is followed by a review of the history of the plantations system in general before focussing on the specific history of India and then Dooars. The history illustrates the methods of labour recruitment and conditions of labour force. Whether in the phase of slavery or indentured labour or neo-liberal globalisation, the condition of the workers remained almost unchanged in their levels of poverty and the conditions of work. With greater physical mobility, changing aspirations and priorities the plantations, from being an enclave, gradually became more embedded in and influenced by the larger socio-economic political space. The review provides a broad historical background, which forms the backdrop in which to understand and explore the research questions.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used to conduct the study. To map the perception of the research participants I placed myself in their lives to understand the meanings, practices and perceptions which arose from their everyday life. Participant observation enabled me to spend time with my research participants and gain some sort of shared understanding of meanings and praxis. Within participant observation, other methods such as transect walks and informal group discussions were used. The transect walks, both formal and informal, animated the physical spaces, imbued them with meanings and specific connotations. The group discussions were interesting in the way they opened up spaces for debates thus, illustrating that on most occasions, meanings, norms or even perceptions were not universal but contested and it was through

complex processes of negotiation that people made sense of their everyday life and its various aspects. I also conducted semi-structured interviews and gathered oral histories to explore more specific questions and for clarification on processes I had observed. These developed as a process of mutual exchange and learning rather than me asking questions and the women answering them. The methodology of the research was thus, not only instrumental in the way the narrative spanned out but it also opened ways in which I developed a relation of mutual respect, concern and interest with the participants.

Chapter 4 is descriptive, setting the scene for the ethnography and its analysis. Here I draw a visual description of how the tea plantations were spaced within their geographical location and also as sites within themselves. The chapter also provides some contextual details about hierarchy within the plantation and the tasks performed. This provides a backdrop in which to understand how the main themes unfold as a narrative. The scene setting also brings out the distinctiveness of the plantations as socio-economic spaces.

Chapter 5 begins from the premise of inadequacy of pure class analysis. The women workers in the tea plantations, who were the main participants of the research, cannot be categorised only as workers or as women. They are also constituted by distinct ethnic, religious and regional identities. All these aspects of their identities collated, clashed and constituted to construct the women workers both as individuals and as collectives. These constituent identities were mostly subordinate—tribal in a non-tribal society, women in a patriarchal society, residing in a region historically ignored by the state government and finally exploited as cheap and docile labour. By recognising how other identities frame gender and its specific performance, I also explore whether there is a commonality of interest or shared meanings (rather than identity) through which the plantation could be understood as gendered space framed by intersectional identities.

Chapter 6 maps the plantations themselves as gendered spaces. By exploring the way the women (and also the men) negotiate the key sites outside the plantations, i.e. the market and the townships, some sense can be made of how boundaries operate. The different ways Kaalka and Daahlia were spaced, signified certain differences in the understandings of spaces and operation of boundaries. But there are some broader similarities as well. Can these be traced back to the differential understandings of gender norms and appropriate gender role performances through which the men and women negotiate these spaces differently? I also examine whether the daily negotiation with these spaces place the plantation as an enclave or negate this or is it possible to trace some concepts of intermediate zones existing beyond the inside and the outside.

Chapter 7 turns the lens inwards to the plantations themselves to understand whether and how they operate as gendered spaces. This is explored both at the domestic level, i.e. the household and the village and also at the workplace, i.e. the gardens and factories. Research (e.g. Spain, 1992) has shown that social practices which construct and mark these spaces and determine their nature, performance and operation are neither random nor accidental but are constructed through a conscious process directed to keep the existing hierarchical arrangement intact. The chapter explores whether the micro-sites of the plantation shape and are shaped by gender discourses and how these might naturalise the activities taking place within them and the actors performing them.

Do the dominated stay passive within these apparently well etched gendered norms and spaces legitimising the dominant status-quo? Chapter 8 explores the understanding and operation of agency among the women. I map agency through the notions of choices and decision making on one hand and resistance on the other. Very rarely did the women engage in confrontations or critiques of their subordinate roles, it was rather through strategies, deception, bargaining, manipulations and negotiations that they worked the system to their least disadvantage.

Through these they carved out the spaces of agency within the dominant spaces and discourses. It is these 'hidden transcripts' (Scott, 1990) of agency which this chapter uncovers. Situated within this context, it is not useful to view agency as a binary to victimhood or resistance to subversion. These have to be understood in a continuum in which every action or inaction could be understood through a variety of lenses.

While these acts of agency do not necessarily act as precursors to more visible confrontational protests, there are instances when they do burst forth in spectacular acts of activism. Chapter 9 deals with the everyday forms of activism, which usually do not go on to constitute a social movement but are one-off protests arising from immediate grievances and working towards small victories. The focus of this chapter is not on professional activists but rather on women's protests to redress grievances in their everyday life. The activism was not only directed towards material benefits but also was a clamour for dignity, respect and the right to be treated as human beings and as political citizens. Through four illustrations, I explore how the protests manipulated or less commonly challenged these gendered practices, norms and spaces. Through these two chapters, I demonstrate the connection between the daily forms of agential behaviour and the more visible forms of protests without necessarily placing them in a continuum.

CONCLUSION

The tea plantations as social spaces are defined by the patriarchal norms and roles which pervade the workers' everyday domestic and work lives. The women, being situated at the lower end of the hierarchy, are usually disadvantaged. Their other identity indicators—e.g. caste, ethnicity—are also subordinate, placing them at the receiving end of multiple hierarchies and, thus, contesting the homogenous category of 'women'. However, even within this constrained social space and its intersectional identities, is there scope to understand these women individually and

collectively as agential beings? What this thesis does is to use the notions of gendered space, agency and activism within the site of the participants' everyday life to break open the notion of women workers in general and in the tea plantations in particular as passive victims. The three themes of everyday, space and agency tie the narrative of the thesis.

In the conclusion, I will reflect on the policy implications of my thesis, for the government and NGOs working at the grassroots. In this thesis I do not boast to have done everything that this research area could have covered. I will wrap up by reflecting on the gaps in my research. Finally, through these gaps I make suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature *'It was the British who brought us here'*

Whilst there has been some debate about what a plantation is, I shall follow DasGupta's (1992a: 173–74) definition of plantations as a particular type of agro-industrial capitalist enterprise with an international market orientation, employing a sizeable number of producers and labourers who are not necessarily wage workers, engaged in manual labour often under primitive conditions, using a migrant or immigrant labour system. Through the course of history, plantation systems have in many ways shaped labour relations, social histories, populations and cultural composition. Allowing for specific differences within the plantations, this is a useful starting point from which to provide a background to the research.

Plantations for different crops such as tea, coffee, cocoa, rubber, sugarcane, share many common features. Though, like all other plantation sectors, the tea plantation was launched and maintained on the basis of wage labour, its particular conditions of production necessitated distinctive labour discourses which will unfold in the empirical chapters. Baak (1997) points out that tea required large investment. DasGupta (1992a: 180) says that 'the abundant supply of cheap, docile and highly malleable workers capable of hard labour under severe and difficult conditions' meant there had to be a particular method of recruitment, control and surveillance over tea estate labourers. In this chapter I will trace the history of plantations. Through this, the common features of the tea plantation can be identified. I will then identify gaps in the literature

and briefly look at the literatures I use to address the gaps in the existing research on plantations.

GENERAL HISTORY OF THE PLANTATION SYSTEM

Labour, even more than land or capital, was a central focus in the development and flourishing of the plantations (Sharma and Das 2009; Thompson, 1935). The recruitment of labour in all plantations generally took the form of import through various coercive means—slavery, indentured labour, unfree bonded labour (Thompson, 1935). The history of these plantations in many ways is a history of its labour. It is from this trajectory that, in this chapter, I trace the history of the plantations.

Though there were specific differences in the development of the plantations in different parts of the world or for different crops, the history can be traced through broadly three stages. I make use of Beckford's (1972) chronological classification of plantations into three phases. A similar chronology has been offered by other researchers in this field (e.g. Mintz, 1959; Sudama, 1979). I will examine a more recent fourth phase in relation to India.

In stage one, plantations began mostly as colonial enterprises of the European powers in subtropical and tropical regions, growing world market staples and accruing profit from the same. In the first phase, plantations developed along the coast of Brazil into the Guineas along the Caribbean and into the south of United States. While the large tracts of uncultivated land and rich natural resources made these areas a ready source for profit-making, the sparsely populated region necessitated import of a large population who could be forced to work to make these resources available for the European market. In the first half of the 1600s, African and European indentured labour was employed in the plantations of southern USA. But with the easy availability of land there developed a dearth of labour. The forcible capture and import of African slaves took place to serve this purpose. Though slavery as a labour form is ancient, as

Mintz (in Jain and Reddock, 1998) points out, here it became industrial in nature by its highly disciplined and commercialised character and its large scale. The recruitment was of all kinds: family and individual (e.g. Genovese, 1974; Owens, 1976). In spite of their brutal working and living conditions, the slaves preserved many of the customs and beliefs from their homeland including music, dance, stories and also preserved kinship networks even when the families were separated (Genovese, 1974).

Stage two emerged by the middle of nineteenth century. Due to powerful pressures, trade in slave labour stopped in many of the leading slave powers, first among which were Britain and France. This necessitated alternative labour arrangements (Beckford, 1972). This period, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first two decades of the twentieth, witnessed two significant developments in plantation history. First, it saw the flourishing of the plantations in tropical Asia, islands of Indian Ocean and Pacific and parts of Africa. Secondly slavery was replaced by contract labour or indentured labour. In her study of Java sugar plantations, Elson (1986: 139–74) argues that the rapidity with which this new indentured system was put into operation seemed to indicate that it continued many of the features that were in force before the plantation owners had to dispense with forced labour. Though formally freed from slavery, the indentured labourers were recruited under a contract by which they were to work for a period of time in a particular plantation under a set of conditions. The mode of recruitment indicated the forced nature of indentured labour (DasGupta, 1992b). As their only concern was the number of people they could round up, the jobbers² employed deceit, coercion, violence and even abduction to secure their purpose (DasGupta, 1992b: 181–83). Both DasGupta (1992b) and Daniel et al. (1992) point out that it was not the nature of their entry to wage labour that defined the coercion or the unfree

²Jobbers were the agents or contractors who were responsible for recruiting labour for the plantations.

condition of the labourers. Rather, it was their inability to terminate the contract once it had been established. Often the potential migrants were given a loan by the jobbers to pay off their existing debts and thus, even before taking up the contract work actively, they were already in debt (DasGupta, 1992b). The movement of contracted labour—or ‘coolies’—mostly from southern and eastern India to the Indian Ocean sugar plantations (Kale, 1998: 12–38) and the movement of Chinese, Indians, Africans, Canary Islanders, Javanese to the plantation zones of South America (Jain and Reddock, 1998) characterised the period of indentured labour. Thus, the ex-slaves were still bound by the contracts and the compulsions of living their lives in the plantations. Carter (1996) identifies the emphasis on single male migrants as opposed to families as a feature of indentured labour. The number of male migrants far exceeded the women and children in the indentures. The application of harsh physical and judicial means of disciplining labour meant that indentured labour had fewer means of achieving family and kin-based settlement (Carter, 1996: 2).

Mintz (1959) observes that in the first and somewhat in the second stage, labour was the primary focus since land was in plenty and machinery was relatively simple and less in quantity. In the third stage, however, capital shifted towards machines and land (Mintz, 1959). This phase, beginning roughly from the 1930s, witnessed a slight change in the labour system and reached its full realization with the independence of the colonies around 1945 (Beckford, 1972). With the indigenisation of the plantation industries there was a hope for better conditions of life and wages for the labourers. The newly independent states introduced legislation which ensured majority or minority indigenous share holding as evidenced in Nigeria and Zaire, or complete nationalisation as in Guyana and Tanzania (Graham and Floering, 1984: 45–50). In addition, the initial policies of the World Bank or Commonwealth Development Corporation also required major participation by indigenous capital, public or private, in order to gain foreign aid (Graham and Floering,

1984). This could have paved the way for the disappearance or modification of expatriate ownership. Beckford's (1972: 114–15) study shows that this hope of indigenisation, however, was not fulfilled for at least three decades after independence. While in sub-economies of Brazil and United States and state owned plantations in Cuba there were some degree of indigenisation, in most of the plantation economies foreign corporations ultimately controlled the bulk of the plantation.

Raman (2010) adds to this a more recent fourth stage (in terms of India) which maybe called the neo-liberal globalisation period. As the history of plantation labour in general has been marked by some broad similarities, this phase, described in the next section, possibly has parallels at the global level. Raman (2010: 163) notes that the 'history of tea plantations in the Indian south reads much like the history of plantation regimes in North Bengal and Assam within colonial India, and other European overseas colonies'. Whether it is the slaves of southern USA, the indentured labour in South-east Asia or in India, the plantation labour force was poor and usually consisted of migrants. Within this broad framework of development of plantations, we can now situate the history of development of the tea plantations in India and the features of the tea plantation labour of Dooars.

TEA PLANTATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

India cannot be classified as a typical plantation economy. Plantations constitute a small portion of the foreign trade revenue, 0.61 per cent in 2011 and 0.56 per cent in 2012.³ Large portions of the produce are consumed in the domestic market. Moreover, in terms of acreage, land given to the plantations is much less than the agricultural lands.

³Indian Ministry of Commerce figures. <http://commerce.nic.in/ftpa/comgrp.asp> (accessed on 08.09.12)

India has two primary tea growing belts—in the south and in the north-east. The north-east tea belt consists of Assam, Darjeeling, Dooars and Terai and the south includes the Nilgiris, Anamallai and various parts of Kerala and Karnataka. Tea plantations in India began as a colonial enterprise. Vast tracts of forest lands were transferred to the planters as free grants or were given away at nominal prices. Besides accruing the benefits from suitable land policies, the planters were also favoured by the fiscal policies in the form of tax and duty concessions (Raman, 2010: 45). These discriminatory policies of the colonial government caused the paddy based peasant economy to suffer from insufficient infrastructure and enhanced land revenue among other things (Raman, 2010). In India, the labour force hailed not only from the economically lower strata but also socially they were mostly dalits⁴ or tribal.

Griffiths (1967) traces the steady growth of the tea plantations in eastern India till 1861. This success resulted in tea plantations and companies springing up without any consideration to the suitability of land or availability of labour which then caused many of them to crash thus, leading to a crisis (Griffiths, 1967: 96–108). Some of the companies were successful in overriding the crisis and they maintained a steady growth till 1899. During this period, tea plantations also started developing in South India. Griffiths (1967) identifies some aspects in which the development of the tea industry in South India differed from its north-eastern counterpart. First, the industry in the south was entirely located on the hills unlike the north-east where a bulk was grown in the plains. Moreover, while in Assam and Bengal tea was the only plantation crop, in the south it grew as a subsidiary crop to coffee and only began to be cultivated seriously after the coffee industry declined (Griffiths, 1967: 156).

By the close of the nineteenth century monopolistically controlled global capital dominated the plantation sector with European coastal-

⁴Low caste.

trading companies becoming involved in the plantation economy as managing agent, banker, shipper, broker and distributor (Raman, 2010: 64–65). This was coupled with their growing influence within the various legislative councils and assemblies. The growth of local capital, on the other hand, was inhibited by lack of land resources, shortage of foreign exchange and inadequate shipping facilities. But the period of Depression followed by the Second World War in the 1930s and 40s provided local capital a transient phase of expansion (Raman, 2010).

In the post-colonial phase up until the 1970s, local capital was sidelined by multinationals. There was no immediate transfer of ownership. Rather it was a gradual process of joint ownerships and flourishing indigenous owners. It was post-1970s that they were replaced by pan-Indian capital (Raman, 2010: 164). In the recent years of neo-liberal globalisation, tea plantations in India have been confronted with major challenges, divergent though interconnected to the larger world capitalist economy. Some of the important features of this are the imposition of global and regional trade agreements, reconstitution of capital, the continuing mis-governance of the estates and transfer of the ensuing crisis in the tea economy onto the local labour as a strategy to tide over the crisis (Raman, 2010: 165).

The process of labour recruitment and development of a labour force in the plantations in India followed much of the trajectory of the general plantation system and has been described in detail in the next section on Dooars. The recruitment through force and ensuring the labour force remained tied to the plantation was supported and helped by the colonial state through acts like Breach of Contract Act (1859) and the Madras Planter's Labour Act (1903) (Raman, 2010). Their condition of work and life were difficult, characterised by poverty, exploitation, ill-treatment and rampant outbreak of diseases (Bhowmik, 1981).

In spite of the fact that the plantation industry provided employment to more than a million workers, even in the post-independence period, there

was no comprehensive legislation regulating the conditions of labour in the industry. The Tea District Emigrant Labour Act, 1932, applying only to Assam, regulated merely the conditions of recruitment of labour for employment in the tea gardens of Assam. 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 there were few accidents in plantations (Raman, 2010). The other Labour Acts, like the Payment of Wages Act, 1936, the Industrial Employment Standing Orders Act, 1946 and the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, benefitted plantation labour only to a very limited extent.

It was finally in 1951 that new legislation in the form of The Plantation Labour Act was passed. This became a landmark for the plantation workers as it signified the first major attempt to regulate their working and living conditions. The Act was an all-India measure to regulate the conditions of plantation labour. It applied in the first instance to tea, coffee, rubber and cinchona plantations, but the state governments may apply it to any other plantations. The Act made it mandatory for the employers to provide certain welfare measures and imposed restrictions on working hours (Bhowmik, 1992). It provided for educational facilities for children and crèches for toddlers, hospital facilities for plantations engaging more than thousand workers, recreational facilities and prescribed drinking water and sanitation in the workers' houses. The enforcement of these provisions of the Act had the potential to better the conditions of work for the plantation labourers. It will be seen, however, that some of the basic features especially relating to labour management and its resulting conditions remained practically unchanged.

HISTORY OF DOOARS TEA PLANTATIONS

In 1865 a strip of land known as Dooars, situated at the foot of the Himalayas and to the east of river Tista was annexed from Bhutan and included within the Jalpaiguri district of Bengal (Griffith, 1967). In spite

of frequent floods and jungle terrain, this area was climatically very suitable for the growth of tea. The Jalpaiguri economy was marked by its multiple forms of surplus extraction and dependency through consolidation of European owned and controlled plantations as well as the *jotedar-adhiar* (feudal lord-tenant) relations characterising the agrarian structure (Dasgupta, 1992a). Dooars was the Non-Regulation Tract administered by the Scheduled Districts Act of 1874 which made it immune to legislative acts passed in the other parts. Moreover the Revenue Department demarcated large tracts of land in Dooars for tea cultivation which were called the Tea Grant Land from which lesser revenue was extracted than the agricultural lands (Chatterjee 2003).

But the difficult conditions of work, low wages in the plantations as well as alternative cultivation opportunities for the indigenous peasants made them refuse to work in the tea plantations posing a labour supply problem (Chatterjee 2003). The plantation owners' demand for a cheaper and more docile labour force further resulted in the exclusion of the local population (Griffiths 1967). By the 1860s an organised system of labour recruitment, combining private contracting and the government run system, brought two-thirds of total plantation labour from Chotanagpur Plateau. The tribal society⁵ here was in turmoil with growing hinduisation, expropriation of tribal lands by the *dikus* or moneylenders, increased impoverishment and drought which threatened them with imminent destruction (Bhowmik, 1981). Deprived of their livelihood they formed a pool of unemployed, a catchment area from which the plantations could draw their labour supply.

The planters and colonial administrators encouraged family recruitment as it was felt that apart from providing more labourers it will

⁵There were multiple tribes in the Chotanagpur region who were recruited as labourers to the plantations. Once in the plantations they came to be known as a homogenous group the *Adivasis*, a term which is used even today by them as well as by the other sections of the population to identify them and also differentiate themselves from the Nepali workers.

also provide a stable labour force (Chatterjee, 2003: 63–81; Bhowmik, 1981). This family recruitment policy formed a powerful factor in the migration of women to North-East India. The women participated in the labour process almost from its inception (Bhowmik, 1981). The early entry of women in the labour process of the plantations illustrates that labour practices and discourses regulating their work has been in existence for long. This provides some clues to understanding their durability.

After Independence, there was an increase in the real wages of the plantation workers in keeping with the Minimum Wages Act. But while in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Assam the minimum wages were in place, the West Bengal Government made no statutory declaration of minimum wages for the tea industry since 1956–57 (Nandy, 2005). The tea plantations of West Bengal similarly lagged behind in the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act.

Bhowmik (1992) in his study on the tea plantations in Assam and North Bengal demonstrates that at least till the late 1980s there was no significant implementation of the provisions of the Act thus, diluting much of the optimism generated by it. The Act lays down that each year 8 per cent of the labourers' houses would be converted to permanent structures, a process which should have been completed by 1969 but only 78 per cent of which was accomplished by 1988 in North Bengal (Bhowmik, 1992). Without remodelling and repair this figure dropped over the years. The educational facilities provided were inadequate with ill-maintained schools, unqualified teachers, lack of proper infrastructure. In the absence of proper maintenance, medical facilities also declined. With six assistant labour commissions to cover over three hundred plantations in West Bengal, the labour department of the state government lacked the necessary machinery to ensure the implementation of the Act. Bhowmik (1992) states that plantation owners had appealed to the state governments to relieve them of these duties especially medical ones. Hence, a combination of dearth of resources and

lack of will on both fronts resulted in the continuity of colonial labour conditions within the plantations.

After a peak in production and profit in 1998 the period from the 1999–2000s saw a crisis in the plantations which reached its nadir around 2003–04 in the entire country though Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling were the worst sufferers (Dasgupta 2009). Raman (2010) observes how the different tea plantations responded differently to this according to the ownership structure. The better managed gardens with the help of prudent practices could cope with the crisis (*Economic Review*, 2007–08). Rather than an outright closure, the big plantations run by corporate global capital or pan-Indian capital resorted to increased intensification of labour which the workers had no alternative but to accept (Raman, 2010: 155). In their continued functioning, they completely ignored the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act (including ration, firewood and even wages on time). The management of the affected plantations remained unmoved on the position that the workers too should share the burden of the recession (Misra, 2003). In addition, the Indian Tea Association demanded that the wages be linked to productivity, with deduction of wages if the workers failed to pluck the mandatory task (Misra, 2003). Companies like Hindustan Lever and Tata Tea, thus, continued to profit (*Tehelka*, 7 July 2007).

The smaller companies with limited control over the critical nodes in the production chain mostly became non-viable and had to often end up closing down the estates (Raman, 2010: 155) or at best use labour displacing measures which included labour retrenchment, lockouts and resistance to negotiations (Dasgupta 2009). The absence of any buffering mediation by the state in the period when the crisis seemed imminent further exacerbated it. Scholars, policy makers and practitioners have blamed various factors from low prices to rise of competition, ageing plantations, flourishing of small growers, off season costs and absence of tax relief for this plight (Chakraborty, 2013; Raman, 2010; Dasgupta, 2009).

In Dooars, 16 of its total 158 plantations closed down, causing around 10,000 workers and their families to lose their jobs (Dasgupta 2009: 5–6). While wages have traditionally been low in this sector, with unemployment the labourers' buying capacity declined further. Sustained deficits translated into a corrosion of the basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, and essential household goods. While they could still keep their labour quarters, the collapse of their buying power meant they were not able to repair these quarters and many of them fell below minimum living standards. Unemployment as a result of the plantation closing down affected all their other statutory rights such as weekly rations, the semblance of medical facilities, fire-wood and wages (Chakraborty, 2013). There were resultant starvation-deaths. In spite of a lack of unanimity in the exact figures, newspaper reports of the period (e.g. *Tehelka*, 7 July 2007; *Anandabazaar Patrika*, 20 November 2002) showed the number was substantial. A report from *Tehelka* (7 July 2007) shows the government's indifference in times of crisis: 'For the first time since reports of starvation deaths began surfacing in 2004, the West Bengal Government acknowledged, in early June 2007, that 571 people had died in 15 months; but it does not accept the starvation factor'. A report on *Uttar Banga Sambad* (North Bengal News, 05.12.03) described how in one plantation—Kathalguri—69 people had died so far since its closure on 21 August that year. A report by the Advisor to the Supreme Court in Writ Petition 196/2001 also demonstrates through case studies the connections between the chronic malnutrition, hunger and death in the plantation.⁶

Human rights organisations like Dooars Jagoran and human rights activists like Anuradha Talwar⁷ undertook humanitarian work to assist the workers in this crisis. In 2004, the Right to Food Bench of the

⁶www.righttofoodindia.org/data/teagardenreport.doc Accessed on 30.05.2013.

⁷Anuradha Talwar is a social activist who was in forefront in pressurising the West Bengal government for relief measures for the crisis ridden tea plantation workers. She was also active in the anti-acquisition protests in Singur.

Supreme Court passed certain orders to the state government for the closed plantations which included declaring all closed plantations to be Below Poverty Line, supplying the workers with cheap food grains under the Antyodaya Anna Yojna (AAY),⁸ sending in a medical team at least twice weekly to the plantations, ensuring each worker gets at least 15 days of work each month under the Sampoorna Grameen Rojgar Yojna (SGRY)⁹ with the workers in closed plantations getting an unemployment allowance of Rs. 500 (Dasgupta 2009). In the face of media outcry the West Bengal Government, in spite of its denial, came up with certain additional measures. The workers in the abandoned plantations were brought under various relief measures including supplementary nutrition programme like reinvigorating the Public Distribution System, mobile health centres under State Health Development Project, drinking water under Public Health Engineering Department, rural water supply under the *zilla parishad*,¹⁰ cooked midday meal scheme under the State Education Department and wage employment schemes (Dasgupta 2009). While the measures were in place on paper, there were discrepancies in planning, implementation and

⁸Antyodaya Anna Yojna (Destitute Welfare Food Scheme) was launched in 2000 by the Government of India to ensure food security for all and create a hunger free India. It contemplates identification of one crore families out of the number of BPL families who would be provided food grains at the rate of 35 Kg per family per month. The food grains will be issued by the Government of India @ Rs.2/- per Kg (GBP 0.019) for wheat and Rs. 3/- per Kg (GBP 0.029) for rice. The Government of India suggests that in view of abject poverty of this group of beneficiaries, the state government may ensure that the end retail price is retained at Rs.2/-per Kg for wheat and Rs.3/- per Kg. for rice.

http://www.karmayog.org/publicdistributionsystem/publicdistributionsystem_2619.htm. Accessed on 14-07-2010.

⁹The Sampoorna Grameen Rozgar Yojna (Integrated Rural Development Scheme) was launched in 2001. The total budget is Rs.10, 000 million (GBP 98,890,307.12). Under the Scheme, 500000 tonnes of food grains amounting to Rs.5,000 millions (GBP 49,445,153.56) (at economic cost) will be provided every year free of cost to the state governments and union territory administrations. The remaining funds will be utilized to meet the cash component of wages and the material cost. The expenditure of the scheme will be shared by Central and States in the ratio of 87.5: 12.5. Under the Scheme, about 100 million man days of wage-employment is envisaged to be generated every year.

<http://rural.nic.in/book01-02/ch-2.pdf>. Accessed on 14-07-2010.

¹⁰ The *zilla parishad* is a local government body at the top of the three tier *panchayat* system that India follows. It looks after the administration of the rural area of the district and its office is located at the district headquarters.

regulation which severely curtailed the effectiveness of these measures (Chakraborty, 2013; Dasgupta, 2009).

BBC reports suggested that the tea industry in South India was on the road to recovery from the crisis with rise in world market prices and also domestic consumption in 2010.¹¹ The Assam tea estates were also making efforts towards diversification by looking towards manufacture of organic tea which would on the one hand boost market prices and open new niche markets and on the other tide over high production price caused by rising wages and chemical fertilizers.¹² By 2010 the crisis was less severe in West Bengal and by the beginning of 2011 all the closed plantations had reopened though their productivity was still quite low.

FEATURES OF PLANTATION LABOUR

Through examination of the literature on the general and specific history of the plantation system, we can identify a few common features of labour in the plantations. The plantations system was characterised by commercial agriculture as the focus of the enterprise specialising in mono-crop production and a capitalist system where the value of labour, land and equipment required large investment of money (Mintz, 1959). Others (e.g. Daniel et al., 1992; Raman 2010) have also pointed out the coincidence of the flourishing of the tea plantations with the development of some features of global capitalism. The formation of a world market accelerated the demand on an international scale for sugar, tea, tobacco, etc. (Daniel et al., 1992: 4). The movement of these commodities was made possible through opening of new transport routes and other technical changes (Daniel et al., 1992: 4).

¹¹BBC News, 16.04.2010, "India's tea plantations enjoy boom".
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/puffbox/hyperpuff/audiobvideo/business_sub_sections/you_r_money_wide_av_hyper/8625662.stm. Accessed on 26-06-2010.

¹²BBC News, 01.05.2010, "Assam tea estate goes organic".
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/8640016.stm. Accessed on 26-06-10.

In spite of the distinctiveness of each phase there is a basic continuity in the labour process. Beckford (1972) identifies, among others, a rigid social hierarchy and a high degree of centralisation as chief features of this. The sharply distinguished roles of the labouring and employing classes are distinctive. The hierarchisation is inherent in every stage of the plantation right from the recruitment process. The plantation hierarchy is divided into four categories: manager, staff, sub-staff and workers. Movement between the ranks was extremely difficult in the first three rungs and impossible in case of the managerial position. Moreover in case of North Bengal there was an ethnic division involved as will be seen in chapter 4. The tribal and Nepali workers could rise to the level of sub-staff but rarely beyond (Bhowmik, 1981). This ethnic hierarchisation was ideal typical, however, and in my fieldwork I noticed cases where these divisions did not hold true.

Such instances revealed that the generalisations inherent in the plantation literature often result into a stereotypical portrayal. Though useful in many ways, these broad brushed portrayals also point to the gaps in that literature.

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Thompson (1935) rightly claimed that the plantation system needs to be located and understood in reference to a world frame. Later scholars (e.g. Beckford, 1972; Graham and Floering, 1984), have classified the plantations as enclaves circumscribed by a life and society of their own, cut off from the outside world. With a geographically isolated area, imported labour and the provision of housing, school, etc., within its confines there seemed no necessity to venture out of its boundaries. Despite numerous changes, Thompson's misgiving about viewing the plantation system as essentially an enclave has probably become even more relevant now. A plantation is not an economically, historically and geographically isolated phenomenon; it needs to be located within a

world community of which it might be a differentiated part (Thompson, 1935: 315-16). With the presence of mass media, crises in the plantation economy, collapse of welfare measures and increased ease of mobility this outside world has made further inroads within the plantation. Even where they remain sharply differentiated from the surrounding towns and villages, the concept of the plantation as an enclave can be challenged, as the later chapters will demonstrate.

Murray (1992: 43) argues that taking an either capitalist or pre-capitalist approach to the plantation history can be problematic given the presence of extra-economic coercion. Raman (2010) likewise observes that the regulation of the workforce, hierarchy and disciplining, deskilling, casualisation are central features of the plantations. To achieve this, 'gendered roles and ethnic identities of the pools of cheap and docile labourers' are used (Raman, 2010: 3). Being a labour intensive enterprise, cheap labour is especially important to keep the production costs low and their docility is ensured through naturalising the performance of the various tasks through the use of various identity categories as the later chapters will show. Raman criticises some of the research done on plantations in North-East India for being focussed on plantation economy and not being able to capture the dynamism of the multiple relations that characterise the plantations (Raman, 2010: 14). But in his critique of Bhowmik, he falls into the same trap of Marxist structural determinism by viewing the workers as only economic beings (Raman, 2010: 14). While he emphasises a need for an intersectional approach to the study of plantation labour by speaking of 'critical sub-identities' of the working class in terms of gender, caste, ethnicity, there is little sustained analysis of how these identities frame and re-interrogate the worker identity (Raman, 2010: 128-129). He further touches upon ideas of resistance among the workers. But this analysis remains locked in the binary of resilience and capitulation (169-172). Raman's work, in spite of its many important contributions, remains a top-down analysis. As his focus is on

the relation between capital and labour, he does not really capture workers' voices.

In the context of the contemporary situation in Southern India, Raman's work touches upon some of the key issues I wish to address. In this regard, rather than being in opposition to Raman's approach, my thesis complements his work, using the economic scenario he provides as a backdrop to explore the complexities within it. His arguments, most importantly, highlight the inadequacy of a pure class analysis.

While class analysis is undoubtedly important in understanding the history of tea plantations, the plantation workers, much like the management, staff etc. do not just have a class position; they also have ethnic, religious, caste and gender identities. The interplay of these identities shapes their class position and influences how it plays out. As has been seen above and will be seen in the later chapters, taking advantage of the multiple identities, the division of labour is naturalised and legitimised. Thus, even a sophisticated class analysis is not possible without exploring the complex layers of identity subsumed within it. Moreover it is through the clash and collapse of these multiplicities of identity that the plantation can be understood not as just as an economic but also as a social space.

Inadequacy of class analysis: an intersectional approach

Beneria and Sen (1982) argue that gender inequalities are related to women's roles in production and reproduction. But Jain (1998: 118-19) observes that gender relations are bound to differ between the predominantly tribal labour of Assam tea gardens and the non-tribal labour in most of South India and Sri Lanka. The social spaces that the women workers inhabit in these two regions have been shaped by features of their tribal and/or caste identity which influence the sexual inequalities and their role in decision making. Philips (2005), in her work on Sri Lankan plantations, points out how the hierarchy from the planter downwards is racialised. Kinship and gender patterns also play specific

roles in subjugating the women in the already subjugated class of estate workers (Philips, 2005). Rao (2010: 356), in her work on land rights and struggle among the Santals, shows how collaborations are forged on the basis of various factors such as marriage, kinship structures, ethnicity and education rather than an assumption of commonality on the basis of only gender identity.

The women workers of tea plantations similarly cannot be studied in isolation from the interlocking systems of class, gender, race, etc. that define their positions in society. Fernandez (1997) claims that the boundaries between class, gender and community are the products of processes unfolding through everyday social and cultural practices. Increasing recognition of the multiplicity of, often cross-cutting, identities that exist within any given subject has given rise to intersectional analysis. Intersectionality basically posits that different social identities (such as race and class) interact in producing the context within which people live their lives (Crenshaw, 1991). It is through an intersectional analysis, identifying the multiple identities framing, in this case, the gender identity of women and class identity of workers that an in-depth analysis is possible.

As well as fragmenting a common gender identity, intersectional identities also denote multiple subordinations. This is probably brought out most strongly in the works on the antebellum South of the USA (Fox-Genovese, 1988; White, 1985). Sojourner Truth (1851) in “Ain’t I a woman?” (taken up by hooks in 1981) had put forward questions which struck at the roots of the essentialist construction of any category, in this case gender, an issue which has been taken up more than a century later by the intersectional theorists. Through her powerful speech she demonstrated how racism, sexism and class intersected in the lives of black women to define their lived experiences. In similar ways several other markers of identity such as caste, religion, language, sexuality, etc. shape people’s lives in most social locations.

Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans' (White, 1985:14-15).

In this thesis, I use intersectionality as an analytical tool through two interrelated planes of identity and belonging. People are not just different categories of social location but have positionalities along the axis of power that are higher or lower than others (Yuval Davis, 2011). Identities thus, indicate hierarchies both within and outside a space. Different class, gender, race, caste and other locations along the social and economic axes are marked by differential power positioning.

Identity is the currency through which belonging is determined (Yuval Davis, 2006). Exploring how people belong or do not belong to a space, and what aspects of their identities influence these boundaries, provides an insight into how intersectional identities are played out in spaces. People's social identities are constructed in reference to some spaces of belonging and their ability to belong is reliant on the recognition of their identities by others (Anthias, 2006). Identities are interpreted as how people perceive themselves and each other. Belonging, thus, is not always given, but is produced both discursively through narratives and corporeally through bodies. In both, the performance of identity remains central. Since the multiple identities constituting the women workers are not additive but constitutive, studying the women workers without exploring how these identities frame their gender identity is inadequate. While there has been a mention of tribal identities among the workers of North Bengal and Assam (Bhadra, 1992; Chatterjee: 2003; DasGupta, 1998; Jain, 1998) there has been little sustained analysis of the intersections of these identities in determining the position and condition of the women workers and of how they play out in, and are mapped onto, gendered spaces. While focussing on gender, I explore how the multiplicity of identities frame, and on occasion, even re-interrogate gender identities. Intersectionality is an analytical tool for my thesis, and I use it to map the clashing, collapsing and collating of multiple identities

of the women workers without fragmenting them to such an extent that their personhood is negated. A fuller discussion of the theoretical framework of intersectionality and how it plays out in my research is given in chapter 5. Whilst recognizing intersectionality is important, the focus of my analysis seeks to explore whether there is any commonality beyond these fragmented identities which causes the plantations to function as gendered spaces.

Gender relations:

Much like any other marker of subordinate identity, it is not an easy task to conceptualise gendered identities and relations without running the risk of essentialising them (Kandiyoti, 2000). BRIDGE report 55 defines gender relations as “hierarchical relations of power between men and women that tend to disadvantage women” (Reeves and Baden, 2000: 2). In such relations of domination, the dominant and dominated tend to share the very systems of classification and the concepts of relations (Kelkar, Nathan and Jahan, 2004: 25). As a result of the practices of an ordered, hierarchical society, the ways of thinking about the relations and the norms are themselves a product of this domination (Kelkar, Nathan and Jahan, 2004: 25). The task of a gendered analysis is to unearth how social hierarchy in its various forms is gendered even beyond institutionalised inequalities. Power does not merely manifest itself in and through gender relations but gender is constitutive of power itself (Kandiyoti, 2000:148). Gender relations cannot be conceptualised as simply struggles or collaboration over resources and labour but also more importantly over socially constructed meanings, norms and roles which are multiple, fluid, contradictory and contested. In my thesis, I use the two inter-related arenas of the household and garden to analyse gender relations. While a fuller discussion of these themes is provided in Chapter 6, an overview of key issues is offered here.

Gender relation of labour:

The labour market is permeated by an implicit gender ideology activated through the practices of management, unions, male workers, and women themselves (Cockburn 1985; Game and Pringle, 1984). Women and men participate in paid labour on different bases which almost always coincide with limited employment opportunities for women and lower earnings (Redclift and Sinclair, 1991: 2). Acker (1988) points out the dangers of analysing gender and class as two autonomous and exclusive categories, as this posits men as the “general human being and woman as the particular category, gender specified and other than the general” (Acker, 1988: 474-76). Building on Acker’s work, three inter-related gendering processes are evident in working life: the sexual division of labour, the devaluation of women’s work and the construction of gender on the job (in Ranatalaiho et al. 1997: 9).

Acker (1990) emphasises the need for a systematic analysis of gender and work to understand these three issues. The gender segregation of work, including the binary between paid and unpaid work, skilled and unskilled work, is partly created through organisational practices or more widely labour practices. Since the resultant inequality of status and income between men and women is also created by these practices, there is a need to explore them in depth to understand gender inequality (Acker, 1990: 140). Work practices and the sexual division of labour make use of the existing social and cultural norms and reproduce them at some points while inventing or even contradicting them at others. Divisions are constructed along the lines of gender through division of labour, norms of conduct, location in physical space, and power “including the institutionalised means of maintaining the divisions in the structures of labour markets, family and state” (Acker, 1990: 146). Corollary to that is the construction of symbols and images that explain, naturalise, embed and only sometimes oppose these divisions (Acker, 1990: 146). Thus, through the processes of sexual division of

labour and occupational stereotyping, the women generally find themselves in disadvantaged positions within the hierarchy, as will be seen in Chapters 6 and 7.

Research on industrial settings (e.g. Sen, 1999) as well as some work on the plantations (e.g. Bhadra, 1992; Kaniampady 2003; Reddock and Jain, 1998) has also shown that class analysis alone is not sufficient to adequately understand the diverse sections within the labour force. Sen (1999) begins from the premise that for the women workers in the jute mills the experience of being working class was distinct from that of their male counterparts.

The specific interests of women workers are either subsumed within the collectivity of the working class or they are ignored altogether. The difficulties of understanding women's specific situations from within this orthodox 'class' perspective constitutes the most compelling justification for its reassessment (Sen, 1999: 11).

The exclusion of gender analysis makes it difficult to adequately understand different questions about the material and social reproduction of the working class if treated within the rigid framework of 'mutually antagonistic but internally cohesive classes' (Sen, 1999: 6). The sexual division which is the bedrock of plantation labour illustrates that class analysis within the tea plantations has to be qualified.

The question then is how is gender (and gender norms) used to construct labour hierarchies and the dual role of men and women within work and household? Again, Sen's (1999) work is useful for an insight into how gender constructs labour and labour hierarchies. She traces three ways in which women's labour has historically been specifically used to the owner's advantage—the low wages of the women offset the higher costs of recruiting them (e.g. cotton textile in China and Japan), stabilising and ensuring a continuity of the labour force through the women's reproductive functions (e.g. tea plantations) and finally ensuring the flexibility of the workforce by using the notion of the women as secondary and supplementary wage earners (Sen, 1999: 22). Drawing on

widely shared gender perceptions, the jute mill owners re-inscribed gender hierarchies and kept women in low paid jobs by constructing a hierarchy of different skills and pressing forward the idea of the female workforce as supplementary (Sen, 1999).

That gender was an important axis along which class relations developed in plantations can also be understood by considering the dual role of the women workers. Stolcke (1988) in her work on coffee plantations argues that the generic category of worker cannot be usefully used to understand the class position of the women who, like the men, were part of family relations and responsibilities which directly shaped their position as workers. In the *colonato* system she studies, she unearths the exploitation of the women within family labour. The women's entry into wage work there had not altered the domestic division of labour nor altered the labelling of their work as subsidiary (Stolcke, 1988: 146). Sen (1999: 6) illustrates how the deployment of the familial ideology naturalised the hierarchical organisation of work according to gender and age which in turn had important consequences in the process of household decision-making, distribution of labour and its rewards.

Economic accounts of plantation (e.g. Dasgupta 1992; Graham 1984) have treated housework as a supplement to the economic activities in the plantations as it is outside the realm of market-oriented production activities. A glance at the above literature, however, shows the crosscutting nature of the household and workspace. It is only by an exploration of both these spaces and appreciation of the collapse, clash and collaboration between these, that the processes through which plantation labour is constructed can be understood. Illo (1992: 189) suggests that conceptualizing productive work not exclusively on the lines of market but also including within it home goods and services would lead to a more inclusive picture of household work. Further, household labour does not simply imply the division of task and time between the members of the household; the perception, experience and

definition of housework are important in understanding the dynamics that they bring about within the household (Shaw 1988). Kandiyoti argues (2000: 140) that understanding gender relations should involve a reconceptualisation of the household in relational terms with a focus on the gendered micro politics of negotiation, cooperation and contestation in the different but intersecting arenas.

These cannot, however, simply be determined by economic factors. Gender beliefs are not merely cultural beliefs and attitudes which form appendages to economic and political processes, they are actually constitutive of them (Moore, 1994). As numerous studies (e.g. Mies, 1982) have shown, these perceived gender roles and norms have an actual material existence.

West and Zimmerman (1991) argue that the domestic division of labour supports two production processes— household goods and services and gender. What results from this is not merely the artefact and activity of domestic life but also the appropriate gender roles of the men and women within the space. This performance of gender roles within the household embeds this institutional arrangement as normal and natural social practice. Erickson (2005) demonstrates how the women engage in emotional work in addition to the other forms of housework like cooking, cleaning, child care, etc. Comforting, encouraging, loving and facilitating interaction have hardly been perceived as housework, yet they can be considered to be the function of the cultural construction of gender whereby such activities are organically associated with women's 'natural' feminine tendencies. Thus, the concept of emotion work which is concerned with the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and with the provisions of emotional support might not be the spontaneous expression of love but the performance of a culturally perceived gender appropriate role (Erickson 2005: 337–38).

Papanek (1979:775) holds that women as members of families and households produce certain goods and services that maintain and enhance

the family's social standing. This work might not be exclusively performed by women, but they are primarily responsible for this family status production. Though she claims that this work is relevant only in the case of families with certain social standing, namely the middle class, Sharma's work in Shimla shows such status production is also engaged in by economically lower classes. This may range from public observation of religious rituals to other kinds of occupational support to training children (Sharma 1986: 8–9). This is generally performed in addition to conventional forms of housework and often subsumed within it (Sharma 1986).

In maintaining, challenging or embedding the existing gender relations and hierarchy, the role of bodies is central. Norms, roles and perceptions of gender have an embodied existence. The body, at the same time, has immense capacity to resist the extant roles, norms and perceptions (Thapan, 1995). It is to the literature on embodiment that we now turn.

Embodiment:

Bodies are not merely biological realities; they are embedded in everyday lived experiences. Body and society intersect in many ways. Through the body, more specifically the women's bodies, the social roles ascribed to women and their resultant gender positions are further entrenched.

Gender, according to Butler (1993), is not a given. She holds that a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid and regulatory frame solidify over time to give it a sense of being natural (Butler, 1993: 91). In the performance of gender, thus, bodies become the medium. While the mundane, everyday ways in which bodily gestures, postures and styles constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self, occasional discontinuities and ruptures reveal the temporal and constructed nature not only of gender role performances but of gender itself (Butler, 1993).

Both Foucault and Bourdieu note that human bodies are constituted through power relations (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2010: 614). Bourdieu

(1995) holds that resistance is an unreflexive and unconscious aberration within the *habitus*¹³ which naturalises the hierarchies and norms within which bodies are located. Thus, agency only becomes conscious in moments of rupture and not in the everyday lived experiences of the people. At this point, Foucault's understanding of the interplay of power and resistance arising from processes of individual formation becomes relevant. The 'docile bodies' do not lack agency but are rather constituted through an ongoing process of power relationships operating through them. Bodies to him are conscious agents (Foucault, 1979). Though continuous power mechanisms dictate their practices and being, unlike what Bourdieu claims, this is not an unconscious given. It emerges from the interactive collective where the bodies are conscious of being manipulated, excluded, organised, categorised, etc. (Gorringe and Rafanell, 2010). Social practices and power relations shape bodies into becoming agents whether of subjugation or of resistance. The physiological potentiality is realised through a variety of shared body practices within which the individual is trained, disciplined and socialised (Mauss in Turner, 1996: 25).

Davis (1997) points out that the conditions of embodiment are organised by systematic patterns of domination and subordination and hence without taking power into account individual body practices, regimes and discourses cannot be grasped. The body, thus, becomes an organised set of practices which sustains a social order complete with its power equations. At the same time, the body has immense potential to resist domination and serve as a site for countering these practices (Freund, 1988: 853-54), often through manipulation of precisely these bodily practices, norms and spaces.

¹³ "Systems of durable, transposable dispositions predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu, 1995: 53).

Thus, coexisting with the systematic features of domination enacted on and by the female body are the varied ways in which they engage in subversion of these very practices, in and through their bodies. It is my contention that the gendered body in its resistance, reconfigures, even if just for that moment, not only gender roles and spaces but the very style of gender performance. While instances foregrounding the body are peppered throughout the thesis, the embodied idiom is fully discussed in Chapter 9. Gendered relations, thus, through bodies and spaces, fluctuate through the life cycle and present changing possibilities of power and its diagnostics even for the relatively disadvantaged (Kaniampady, 2000: 146). This makes the study of agency important.

Agency

Most work on women workers in tea plantations in general and in South Asia in particular focuses on the miseries of their daily existence and fails to consider them as agential beings (e.g. Bhadra, 1992; Kaniampady, 2003; Hollup, 1994;). Bhadra (1992) observes how women integrate their work and family in an accommodating manner, something which she traces to their low levels of aspiration and education which help them adjust better to this dual role. While this literature on women workers in tea plantations is important in understanding the difficult conditions of life and work of the women within this setting, it suffers from one major gap. The women workers are constructed as victims who are helpless to negotiate with the difficulties of their lives, thus, negating their agency.

An illustration in point is that in an entire edited collection on women workers by Jain and Reddock (1998) there are only a couple of articles (e.g. Jain, 1998) which look at the agential behaviour of the women within the prevailing power framework. While the difficult life and work conditions of the women workers must be recognized, negating their agency within this framework leaves the analysis incomplete. Stolcke (1988: 149) warns against this tendency, arguing that women's position cannot be ascribed to a generic submissiveness as that conceals the subtle

but persistent forms of resistance that they practice. Though she goes on to locate their agency within multiple oppressions, she highlights the oppressions rather than the agency.

It is again the work on the plantations in the American South which needs to be considered here to understand the inadequacy of the trope of victimhood. Instead of portraying them as just submissive or subordinate, these works (e.g. White: 1985, Fox-Genovese: 1988) unearthed their role in slave struggles for freedom at a macro level and also more minutely their resistance and agency in the face of the oppressions in their everyday life as slaves, as women and as workers. Through attempts to run away, fight against sexual exploitation, poisoning owners or even by trying to retain the favour of the master, they showed evidence of agency in their everyday life (White, 1985). The slave women in sugar plantations of Jamaica practised measures like abortion, depressing their fertility in order to frustrate the management's intentions towards forming a self-sustaining labour system (Jain and Reddock, 1998).

Looking at women's exclusion from decision-making renders invisible the strategies through which they influence that process, tracing their acceptance of their condition to low aspirations similarly negates the complexity of their agency within constraints. It is only through a nuanced study of the difficulties and the playing out of agency within it, that a study of plantations as social spaces can be visible.

While dominant power relations, social norms and constructions are played out in social spaces, social space is not static. Besides being characterised by the agency of the dominant groups through which they exercise their dominance, it also witnesses the agency of the dominated. To escape the trope of victimhood and passivity within which the latter often gets portrayed and gain a nuanced understanding of their negotiation with their life situations and its constraints, it is important to understand the agency of the dominated. Therefore understanding the agency of the apparently powerless is a focus of my thesis. They

ordinarily do not dare to contest the terms of their subordination openly within the prevailing social arrangements and norms. At the same time, they invoke minute acts of agency, acts which even when expressed openly are disguised. Along with these minor acts, hidden discourses, jokes, whispers and rumours constitute the backstage critiques of power, which Scott (1990) calls 'hidden transcripts'. Beneath and within the stereotypical cast of the public transcripts—the everyday and public interactions between oppressor and oppressed - lie arrays of strategies through which the subordinated exercise their resistance (Scott, 1990). Agency and victimhood are, however, not binaries; they co-exist and coincide as a part of a continuum i.e. one can have agency and still be a victim or the reverse. The women in the tea plantations, thus, had more or less agency and in turn were more or less victimised. By positing victims vis-à-vis agents, the grey area that exists in the slippage between suffering and agency gets hidden (Walker, 2010). While there is death, poverty and suffering, the negotiation and strategies to work through what is available are woven through conversations, dreams, aspirations and hope—tools through which people endure.

It is once again in the site of the everyday that these rigidly drawn binaries can be problematised. It is the site where meanings and norms emerge and are performed and embedded in people's lives (De Certeau, 2002). It is also the site where these are manipulated, challenged and sometimes even changed (Massey, 1994). Walker (2010:148-49) shows not only how within everyday conflict people suffer and survive, but through re-conceiving the everyday outside these bounded categories it is possible to recognise its vitality, which allows people to live around, through and beyond pain. Through suffering, surviving, resisting and simply living people show the 'endurance of the everyday' (Walker, 2010: 5).

The effort of the women workers to carve out their own space within fields of power has to be explored from this perspective. Women in the

plantation enjoy certain freedoms. Dyson and Moore (1983: 45) identify some features of female autonomy such as freedom of movement and association, post-marital residence pattern, some independent control of sexuality. These, however, are relative concepts and not essentially related to societal attitudes towards women (Dyson and Moore, 1983: 46). Even in the plantations this relative autonomy cannot smoothly map onto women as agential beings. Within this structure, they were subordinated in social, spatial and economic hierarchies (as will be seen in chapters 5 and 6) and thus, to understand them as agential beings, the contexts within which they operate must be considered. A holistic understanding of agency is possible through a focus on the structures within which they exist and which seem to completely control them, combined with an exploration of the hidden ways in which women act even while being a part of a repressive normative order (Kumar, 1994: 4). Thus, in chapter 8, I capture the whole spectrum of action and inaction which creates resistance and transformation as well as compliance and reproduction.

Studying agency among the apparently powerless is a complex process. There lies the danger of identifying agency in everything and hence romanticising all forms of action as agency (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Molyneux, 1985). Women's resistance is not only limited by power structures but also by the very understanding that they operate within these largely unalterable structures (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996). Resistance alone does not define agency, rather the women handle and perceive their situation in different ways and agency is accordingly played out in diverse manners, some of which uphold the status quo (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996: 16–19). Thus, the women cannot be viewed as helpless victims within oppressive structures but neither can their agency be romanticised (e.g. Kandiyotti, 1988). Chapter 6 offers a fuller theoretical discussion of agency through the two inter-related planes of autonomy and resistance.

THEMES TYING THE RESEARCH TOGETHER

Implicit in the above section is the notion that the plantation has to be understood as a social space in addition to being an economic space. The plantations and the various sites within it are not just physical but also social sites which necessitate and normalise certain norms, roles and performances. This in turn naturalises the extant hierarchy. Thus, to understand the workers within the plantation, it has to be viewed as a gendered social space in addition to an economic classed space.

It is these everyday social spaces of the tea plantation which provide the clues to understanding the key themes that the thesis raises. Social space and everyday are thus, the tools which tie the themes together in an intelligible narrative.

Social space

Social space as opposed to physical space not only refers to the materiality of the space but is constructed out of the praxis and discourses which occur within that space. A social space is constituted by and in turn constitutes the social relations within it (e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; Massey 1994). Spatiality is socially produced and exists in concrete forms within sets of relations between individuals and groups (Soja, 1985: 93). Both physical space of material nature and mental space of cognition are essential in the social construction of space, it cannot be completely dissociated from them but they cannot be treated as its equivalent (Soja, 1985: 93). Thus, to understand the construction of spaces we need to look at its material, cognitive, social aspects and their interconnections. Social relations take place in space and have a spatial form and context within which dominant class relations, gender inequalities and all other aspects of social stratification play out (Massey, 1994; Soja, 1985). The specifics of a place, the identity of the people are formed by the interaction and interrelation of the particular set of social interactions taking place within that spatial setting. The spatial and the social are Thus, mutually constitutive.

Spatiality has to be understood in terms of the relations within and without. Spaces are interconnected, reflecting hierarchies of power and struggle over access to resources (Donner and Neve, 2006: 4). In the tea plantations, different occupants have differential access to resources. Social space has power relations at its heart which are expressed in the realm of action through everyday practices that embed and naturalise relations underlying these praxis and discourse within the space (Pred, 1985: 39). Social space, thus, legitimises or denies a group's domination (e.g. Low, 2003; Massey, 1994). This in turn relates to the idea of boundaries.

The physical features of settlement pattern, the housing type, household norms, and such other elements in the all-encompassing structure of the plantation shape (and are shaped by) gender relations within them (Hollup, 1994). The nuances of social relations sustain (and are sustained by) and influence (and are influenced by) the economic relations which uphold the plantations as economic sites of production.

The social spaces that I explore in this thesis are not exceptional sites, but rather everyday social spaces almost unremarkable in their banality to those inhabiting it.

Mapping the everyday

The plantation literature on India is dominated by interview based statistical work (e.g. Bhowmik, 1981) which is concerned with uncovering broad patterns. While these are important as an indication to trends, they fail to uncover what is happening at the micro-level, how these trends can be understood and how they are constructed. Generalising, leaving out the particulars with their own specific histories and experiences, these broad-based studies provide standardised attributes to the actors often resulting in a narrative which fails to capture the perceptions, motivations and meanings of the concerned actors (Jenkins, 1994: 438). Studies looking to explore the everyday life of the workers (e.g. Chatterjee, 2003) often provide a deeper understanding of

the narratives subsumed under the broader statistics which then contextualises these figures.

Many sociologists (e.g. Lefebvre, 1971) have pointed out that the everyday practices are not merely an obscure background of social activity. de Certeau (2002: xi) emphasises the need for a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories and perspectives for penetrating this obscurity and articulating them. Research on the everyday has arisen in sociology as a critique of macro sociology. It challenges the determinist portrayal of the individual as overly passive and constrained (Adler et al., 1987).

What then is everyday life? Weigert (1981: 36) provides some features which form the core of my understanding of everyday life.

1. It is the taken for granted reality which provides a background for meaning for each person's life.
2. It is a plausible social context and believable personal world within which a person derives a sense of self as living in real biography.
3. It is both the fundamental empirical starting point and the final subject matter for understanding human life and society as natural realities.
4. Therefore everyday life cannot be known merely passively or objectively, but must also be criticised and interpreted actively and subjectively in order to be understood adequately.

Douglas (1970: x) holds that a sociological understanding of human existence should base itself in the understanding of 'systematic and objective study of common-sense meanings and actions of everyday life'. Social structure, institutions and norms do not exist outside the people that interact with them but are rather constructed and constituted by (and construct) the people who interact with and through them (e.g. Adler et al. 1987). The continuous interaction of the society and self is a key process in the construction of everyday life and it is through this dialectic that different types of societies emerge (Weigert, 1981: 18).

Walker (2010: 149) warns about the possible disjuncture between the concept of the everyday as has been shaped through social analysis as abstract, fixed concept and the way it unfolds in the ethnographic context as unsettled, fluid and a practice. The everyday is rendered invisible in

the meta-narrative of society, but it is in a close study of the everyday of ordinary men and women that we can get a sense of phenomena which seem to otherwise burst from nowhere (Lefebvre, 1971). While the everyday is implicit in ethnography almost as a default category, there is a need to draw it out, make it explicitly the site of exploration rather than just use it to frame one's research. The everyday is constructed as synonymous with ordinary, mundane, familiar and intimate, placing it as a binary with the extraordinary or 'critical events' (Das, 1995) which lie outside these limits of ordinariness (Walker, 2010: 150). But to view it as such a binary is not very useful, especially when such ideas of ordinary and extraordinary collate, coincide and also contest each other in the lives of many.

Studying the everyday life of the powerless demonstrates a paradox. On the one hand in its monotony, hardships, poverty, unfulfilled desires, suppressed aspirations lies what Lefebvre (1971: 35) terms the 'misery of everyday life'. On the other, there is also the 'power of everyday life' which he identifies in its continuity, its power to adapt not only the bodies and spaces but also desires, in their existence beyond the 'object' of history and society as its subject and foundation (Lefebvre, 1971: 35–36). My analysis also looks to uncover the potential hidden in the banality of everyday life—the significance of the ordinariness. The everyday, ordinary lives of people, the ways these intersect and move away compose multiple narratives which seem to have neither a definite author nor spectator, being shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces (de Certeau, 2002:93). The everyday offers an understanding of the operation of social spaces and meanings which frame my research questions. To really explore the everyday it has to be placed in the context of and from the perception of those who inhabit that everyday space rather than through rigid categories or external perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This review of the literature on plantation systems (and other similar forms of labour arrangement) in general and specifically tea plantations provides a contextual background against which I examine my data. It also reveals several important gaps which my thesis seeks to address. My data extends beyond the narrow analysis of plantations as economic spaces. I have, therefore, followed the data away from the literature specific to plantations into other fields.

In each analysis chapter I will situate my data within the larger debates on the emergent themes arising from the above gaps in the existing plantation literature in South Asia. Social space, everyday and agency form the broad theoretical and methodological background on which the narrative is drawn. Within it, three sets of literature (described above) have been used to connect the analysis to a wider sociological debate. In this way, I hope to take forward some of the themes identified in the works describing the antebellum South of the USA and analyse them within a more contemporary framework in South Asia where these themes have largely remained unexplored.

Chapter 3

Methodology

'How do you want to tell our story?'

I don't understand why you want to sit with us in this heat. What kind of studies you do is beyond me—coming from far London to study our lives!
(Aloki, Daahlia field-notes, 10.12.10)

As we have seen in the previous chapters, tea plantation women workers are among the most marginalised labourers in North Bengal. The manner in which Aloki dismisses the importance of studying their lives underlies how their stories remain marginalised not only within sociological research but for them as well. Thus, the way in which research is conducted to access their lives and stories is as important as the accounts themselves. This chapter sets out my central research questions and outlines the process of conducting fieldwork followed by how the data was managed and analysed.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Pre-decided research questions enable fieldwork to follow a definite pattern. They can, however, also foreclose the possibility of letting the field itself direct the course of enquiry. I took a middle approach. While I had a clear sense of what aspects of tea plantation labour I was interested to study, the specific questions forming the framework of my thesis emerged in the field after I had a sense of what were considered significant by my research participants. Thus, events that unfolded during the period of fieldwork guided and framed my research questions.

The main questions that my research addresses is how do agency and activism play out within a gendered space? What constrains and/or empowers the women within it? In order to answer this question, certain other issues also needed to be addressed.

1. How do the multiple identities of the plantation dwellers intersect and affect each other and the space as a whole?
2. Do the plantations function as gendered spaces? If so, how?
3. How the women workers are bound up within social norms that the various strands of identity, e.g. gender, ethnicity, etc., imply? Do they passively submit to these forms of dominance or do they express agency in negotiating within the dominant spaces?
4. How is the agency (if any) of the women workers understood and played out and what implications does it have in their lives?

FIELD SITE

No single tea growing region in India is representative of another. Thus, research conducted in any specific region cannot any way be generalised across the regions. Dooars' proximity to Kolkata made it convenient access to the main archives and tea plantation offices located there. Moreover, I already had established contacts in this area. The economic crisis that Dooars had been going through added an extra dimension to the fieldwork. Thus, keeping in mind issues of safety, access, personal contingencies and significance, Dooars seemed an appropriate site to conduct my fieldwork.

The next step was choosing the exact tea plantations in which I was to be based. I spent the first two months of fieldwork in Kolkata gathering contextual information such as the names, location, and the ownership of all the 158 gardens in Dooars from Indian Tea Board's library. In order to bring greater depth to my data through comparison I planned to do my fieldwork in two plantations. Bechhofer and Patterson (2000: 3) hold comparison to be a fundamental aspect of cognition on which our

knowledge of social sciences is built. My intention was to explore whether conclusions reached under one context were applicable in a different but related context and in case of variations examine the possible reasons for such disparity.

I had originally planned to make my choice based on the differences in productivity, ideally taking two plantations from the two ends of the spectrum. I wanted to examine whether there was a relationship between productivity and labour welfare and resultantly whether this would be related to the way agency and more specifically activism plays out in the plantations of different productivity levels. I intended to start with a hypothesis that more productive a plantation the greater resources it has to ensure care and concern for its workers and therefore it might be expected that the way the workers negotiate their work and life situation in such a plantation would be different from one of low productivity with lack of implementation of labour welfare policies.

Following this rationale I approached the three organizations/unions of the owners of the different plantations—Indian Tea Association (ITA), Indian Tea Planters Association (ITPA) and Tea Association of India (TAI). However I ran into unexpected difficulties in this regard. The Indian Tea Association was the only body which had its database updated, the other two bodies had information on some plantations and not on most and even these were outdated by 4-5 years. My fieldwork was taking place at a crucial time for the plantations of North Bengal as some of them had just re-opened after a prolonged crisis period and others were still in the process of opening. Given this it was of utmost importance to have the current production figures, if my selection was to be based on that criterion. I came against a dead end. It was then that one of the senior officers of ITA pointed out to me a major fallacy of using this as a basis of my selection. He told me that there was quite a significant variation in size among the tea plantations of Dooars. Keeping the difference in sizes in mind, the production figures could not be held to be reliable indicators of how productive a garden really was, which was

what I wanted to know. A plantation showing a low production figure might in reality be a profit making one as it might be small in size and producing more for its capacity. I decided thus, to base my selection on access while keeping an eye on different features in terms of size, productivity, ownership, etc., and possible contrast between the two plantations on these grounds.

I had established some useful contacts in the region mainly through Prof. S. Chakraborty of University of Calcutta who had worked in that region during his thesis and through a family friend who knew some of the labour union leaders. They put me in touch with other contacts in North Bengal. Given the practical issues of connectivity, safety and access I decided to limit my search to the plantations in and around the towns. Many of the plantations were concentrated around the towns of Matlahaat, Birpur and Kaalka. Having established contacts with people there, in my pilot, I visited three plantations around each town, one very close to the town, one at some distance and one quite far. In each of these nine gardens I spent a day speaking to the workers, trying to get a sense of the place and also trying to work out the logistics.

The first plantation, Daahlia was an obvious choice. Being distant from the town it provided me a chance to test the concept of the enclave society. Daahlia had three sections, two of them consisting of Nepali and one of Adivasi workers. In my fieldwork I concentrated on two sections, one of the Nepalis and the other of the Adivasis. The second proved to be a more difficult choice. Though all the other plantations had some features to make them interesting sites to study, logistics, especially finding a place to stay proved to be difficult till I found a workable solution to the dilemma, elaborated later in the chapter. Serendipitously, the second plantation, Kaalka, proved to have some contrasting features from Daahlia in terms of profits, ownership and location elaborated in the next chapter.

Daahlia belongs to one of the bigger companies owning many tea plantations in the North Bengal belt. The plantation is above average, a little above 1040 hectares¹⁴ (according to the Tea Board report). The total area of Kaalka, though bigger at over 1150 hectares (as reported in the Tea Board report), has large tracts of uncultivated land. As a way of comparison, the largest plantation in Dooars is 1851.37 hectares (Chengmari) and the smallest is 137.04 hectares (Malnady). This gives a sense of the relative location of the two plantations in terms of size, among the plantations in Dooars. Moreover, Daahlia was a prosperous plantation having remained open and producing even through the period of crisis in the plantation while Kaalka remained closed for over ten years. Further contextual details have been provided in Chapter 4. These contrasting features added nuances to my analysis. In sum, the method of choosing the field-sites was a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. I used a similar strategy of combining purpose with convenience for negotiating access and choosing respondents too.

NEGOTIATING ACCESS

Given the kind of data I was looking for, staying with the workers would have been most suitable. But there were some practical difficulties with this. Most of the workers were extremely poor and having me in their house would be a constant burden on them. Since they considered me a guest they would not have accepted money from me. Moreover, staying in a particular person's house always had the risk of limiting my respondents to their social circle. Finally, as I needed to work on my notes I needed some personal space where I could write down my field-notes, listen to interviews and prepare the next day's schedule without much interference. Given that the labour quarters had one to two rooms in which the whole family managed, such space was unavailable.

¹⁴To protect the anonymity, the exact figure has not been provided for both the plantations.

In Daahlia I stayed with Deeptendu, a Nepali garden staff and his family. There was an extra room to accommodate me in their staff quarter. Located very close to the labour villages, I could interact with the workers in their home often staying back till quite late into the night there. Deeptendu was from a family of workers and two of his sisters still worked in the garden as pluckers. The workers thus, perceived him as one of them. Again, since he was a member of staff, the management perceived him to be a part of the hierarchy, though in its lower echelons, and did not interfere much with my work. On my pilot visit his behaviour and opinion made me feel that he was sympathetic to the workers. I decided to take a calculated risk, which paid dividends in the long run.

In Kaalka, in contrast, the separation of the workers and the staff was very distinct. Therefore, staying with the staff was not practical. The township of Kaalka did not have any proper hotels to stay in and was not considered safe. I stayed in the nearby township of Henryganj which was at a distance of about 10-15 minutes by *auto-rickshaws* and well connected to Kaalka by public transport. Also being a bigger township it had better internet facilities and greater options of places to stay. I stayed as paying guest with a Bengali family there. The inability to stay in the plantation in contrast to Daahlia meant that I could not participate in some of the activities of village life. Though I used to stay till late evening with them, often even having dinner, there was always the worry of getting back to Henryganj on time which prevented me from staying till too late. But once people got to know me better, I often got a ride back on someone's motorbike thus, providing greater flexibility of timing.

To conduct an in-depth and uninterrupted stint in the field-site I had to obtain support from both the management and also (more importantly) acceptance from the workers. In Daahlia I obtained permission from company headquarters in Kolkata to work there. With this permission I approached the manager and he was willing to let me work there for as long as I needed. Through the course of the fieldwork I faced no

interference from him. He extended his cooperation by giving me permission to visit the factory and also giving me an interview.

In Kaalka my point of access was an NGO named Svatantra which worked with the plantation workers in Dooars. I obtained permission from the management after that. Though the management did not interfere with my work, neither did they extend their cooperation. I was unable to obtain an interview with the manager or the assistant manager in spite of my repeated efforts. But I formed an alliance with the staff that was primarily Bengali. I received a lot of useful information from them and also was assisted by them to visit the factory when the manager failed to respond to my request on time.

The process of acceptance amongst the workers took longer in both the plantations. How would the workers, especially the women workers, perceive a Bengali middle-class girl from Kolkata studying abroad who had come to research on their lives for her degree and possible furtherance of her career? In Daahlia, Deeptendu had introduced me to the supervisors and the workers with whom he shared a close rapport. Between the two of us we explained to them what my fieldwork was about. In the first couple of fieldtrips I concentrated on the Nepali section. I went to the sections where work was being done and sat there striking up conversations with the women. Taking advantage of their curiosity about me I told them about myself and my research. After their initial misgivings, they accepted me as a guest; gradually, they began to treat me as a friend with whom they could share the joys and sorrows of their lives. Though the beginnings of the process were similar in the Adivasi section, it took them a greater time to accept me as initially they perceived me to be closer to the Nepalis (they had no problems with me being a Bengali) since I stayed in Deeptendu's house. But patience and perseverance were aided by my camera. I went to their work-section in the morning and took pictures of them working, talking, etc. Some women even requested me to come to their homes and take pictures of their family. This gradually opened a door for communication and

eventually friendship. Slowly the women accepted me into their groups and their lives.

The negotiation of access in Kaalka was somewhat different. My access point being Svatantra, one of its volunteers Shiva, was my primary gatekeeper. In the initial stages, he took me to the garden and introduced me to the women. Even in the later stages he was a constant source of information besides providing logistical support such as dropping me for interviews and picking me up if they were scheduled late and far. This had its advantages and disadvantages. Shiva being the son of one of the workers was known by most in the garden. Having him introducing me to people and also having his mother and her group around, gave me easy access to people who were friendly or sympathetic to either Shiva personally or to the cause of Svatantra. They were willing to talk to me, take me to their homes and also give me interviews. But it closed access to other groups of workers—women who did not like or know him or those who were indifferent or more importantly antagonistic to Svatantra. These people had little to do with me in the initial period. I marked out these groups. At the second stint of my fieldwork here, I specifically targeted these groups of women, talking to them, establishing the fact that Shiva was only a chance contact and not an acquaintance for long and going uninvited to their houses, something which was perceived to be a sign of warmth. My overeager behaviour finally made them accept me and soon I became acknowledged in the garden by most women as an independent entity, though some remained distrustful till the end and avoided interaction with me.

Having been closed for a long time, Kaalka had received much media attention and the workers were quite used to people interviewing them about their living conditions. Initially thinking that was what I wanted to hear, that is what most of them talked about all the time. The challenge for me was to establish a difference between myself and the many reporters who had already questioned them about their lives. I opened myself up as much as I could telling them about myself, showing photos

of my family, my life in Edinburgh, so that I became a real person rather than an interview questionnaire. In these conversations they often revealed things about themselves, their families and lives. After a few weeks of conscious effort I was slowly able to make the women and often even the men see me as being different from the journalists. They became more relaxed in my presence giving me priceless glimpses into the way they perceived and lived their lives.

As regards the factories in both plantations, my access remained limited to a few visits I made there in all of which I was accompanied by a factory *sardar*. The different sections of the tea processing in the factory employed majority of male workers. I did not receive permission to roam around the factory on my own on grounds of health and safety. Thus, I did not get a chance to interact with the workers or to observe them. But I spoke to them later in their homes and also mapped the perspectives of my other respondents about their work.

In both the plantations, the process was not always smooth; I faced mistrust as some feared that I might be a spy for the management while for others it was their distrust of the Bengalis or some other part of my identity which came up. By hanging around them, showing interest in their lives, sharing their food, taking their photos, trying to help them through different means I was able to establish a relation of trust with most of them and with some an even deeper relation of empathy and friendship.

TIME

Fieldwork is not a moment in the research but a process. Incidents of instant revelation are rare and understanding is often a slow process after immersion in the field (Shore, 1999). I had spent the first two months of my fieldwork (October and November 2010) establishing contacts and trying to gather as much preliminary information on the plantations as I could. After that, the months from December to May were spent

primarily in Daahlia. I was in the site for a period of 15-20 days in which I did round the clock data collection and then went back to Kolkata for a week or ten days in order to update the field-notes, do some library work and re-energise myself for the next stint of fieldwork. These moments of stepping away and sifting through the data gave me a semblance of distance from the data as well as a chance to read through it to see what preliminary themes emerged. From the month of May to October most of my fieldwork was in Kaalka though I went back to Daahlia at regular intervals to keep myself updated with what was happening there. At the end of November I made a final trip to both the plantations.

Time, moreover, in itself was an actor, in the process of fieldwork. Time did not only hover in the background as a reference point for different events but it played a role in how these events came to be shaped. Most of the closed plantations had just reopened (as in the case of Kaalka) or were in the process of opening. This was thus, a crucial time in the history of North Bengal tea plantations. Keeping this time factor in mind was essential in drawing up my analysis. Two important events occurred towards the completion of the fieldwork in late 2011. The workers and the trade unions had long been demanding a wage hike. This demand finally met with success and there was a consequent wage hike. Secondly, the two primary ethnic parties in this area, the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (A Platform for the Independence of the Gorkhas, GJMM hereafter) and the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Bikash Parishad (All India Committee for Development of Adivasis, ABAVP hereafter) who were generally at loggerheads with each other made an alliance at the beginning of November 2011.¹⁵ This led to a range of reactions among the two sections of the population. Therefore, the period of my fieldwork

¹⁵“State's refusal led to conciliation with GJMM'...A day after alliance ABAVPfears backlash.”(2011). Retrieved 22.02.12, from <http://kalimpongnews.net/newz/2011/11/01/%E2%80%98state%E2%80%99s-refusal-led-to-conciliation-with-gjmm%E2%80%99/>.

was crucial in the timeframe of tea plantations in North Bengal—a period where it was recovering from a crisis on one hand, on the other hand coming to terms with political changes as well as getting ready to face the success of their wage agitation. These events cannot be just considered background; rather they were crucial in moulding or reaffirming people's beliefs, conventions and actions.

RESEARCH METHODS

As the mapping of everyday required a nuanced understanding of the lives and perceptions of the persons within the tea plantations, qualitative methods were a natural choice. In contrast to the many statistical works (e.g. Das and Banerjee, 1964; Bhowmik, 1981), Chatterjee's (2003) ethnographic research adds an extra layer of insights into the lived experiences of the tea plantation workers. Besides, ethnography was also in keeping with my primary motivation of doing research—bringing out the women's voices.

McDowell (1992: 404) claims that the long exclusion of women from the focus of social science enquiry could be traced back to a sexist bias in research and a distinct lack of suitable feminist methodologies. While there might not still be a distinct feminist method, the broad agreement is that any method to be feminist, has to be in consonance with certain values. It should be a collaborative method challenging the power relation between the researchers and researched, reject claims of being value free and seek to establish commonality of experience (e.g. McDowell, 1992; Oakley, 1988). Qualitative research methods combining participant observation and semi structured interviews through small scale detailed case studies are held to be suitable for this (e.g. McDowell, 1992). Through the processes of listening, empathising and validating shared experiences, interconnections are formed between the researcher and the research subjects. Challenging the traditional hierarchies of social research it is reciprocity, rather than objectivity

which characterised my research. As my research was influenced by feminist methodology I deployed these methods of research.

Before venturing into the field, background research was necessary. The ethnography of a tea plantation in Dooars, though located in specific time and space, becomes more relevant when situated within the broader plantation literature and sociology of gender in India. To contextualise the research I looked into archival material from various sources. The Tea Board of India, Indian Tea Association (ITA), Dooars Indian Tea Association (DBITA), Indian Tea Traders Association and West Bengal State Government Bureau of Statistics were the primary sites from which I got contextual information. These data included the size of the tea plantations, the annual prices of the tea, the number of workers employed and the production figures for the region. Moreover the records sometimes contained statistics from previous micro studies conducted in the region which were useful in providing a comparison across time and a contextual background of the field site. The information gave me a sense of where to locate the two plantations I was studying. I looked into articles in state and local newspapers to trace the economic crisis in the Dooars (in the period preceding my fieldwork) and later towards the end of my fieldwork to follow the developments with the wage negotiation.

I used a combination of methods with participant observation as the backbone of my research. Apart from the participatory research methods (discussed later in the section) none of the methods were used for one definite research question. Instead, using a combination of methods I tried to get a holistic perspective on the different questions.

Given my research questions, the everyday life of participants became the central site of exploration and provided material through which to transcend the official account and look at the transactions, negotiations, etc., in the participants' lives (Jenkins, 1994: 436). Jenkins (1994:438) criticises ethnographies which concentrate on exceptional moments in people's lives as leading to stereotypical portrayals. Even these

extraordinary moments do not occur in a vacuum. To gain a fuller understanding of them they have to be studied within the context of the everyday—what brought changes, how fundamental are they, how much do they re-interrogate or re-embed the everyday?

Moving beyond the standardised accounts of people's lives, my fieldwork focussed on the nuances in their daily lives, how they performed, perceived and challenged these? This act of understanding had to be a two way process in which I opened myself up to the participants and absorbed their lives just as much as they absorbed and made sense of mine (Ardener, 1989). I plucked tea leaves with them on some occasions and regularly helped out by fetching water for the women while they were working, recording the weight of tea leaves, etc. The everyday thus emerges only through a long process of fieldwork and developing a sense of shared understanding. Relatively long term multi-dimensional relations that the participant-observer forms in the field usually leads to a better understanding of the social scene (May, 1993). Through this, the ethnographer not only becomes an instrument for data collection, but also a part of the social world where the individuals are producing and interpreting new meanings.

Through observation, participation and casual conversation I mapped how the workers perceived and rationalised their lives within the tea plantations. The data obtained from participant observation was the mainstay in understanding how agency was perceived and played out by the women in different spaces and circumstances. The insights gained also provided rich data on how the social spaces were shaped by gender and other identities.

In both the plantations I went with the women to their work in the garden and stayed with them through their workday. I asked them about various things to draw out their thoughts. Often I just listened and participated in their conversations. Occasionally, I opened up a debate and observed how they defended their viewpoints and negotiated

counterarguments. At the women's houses in the evenings I sat around and chatted with them, often moving those conversations to a direction which I was interested in. These casual chats and opinions yielded valuable insights on their perspectives and lives. While these forms of informal group discussions were common in both the plantations, in Kaalka I also participated in more formal group discussions. I often sat in the meetings held by the workers (usually organized by Svatantra volunteers) and listened to their conversations. Making use of the forum I often asked the women a few questions after their meeting enabling me to conduct a short group discussion (lasting for about 15-20 minutes). The focus of my participant observation was the women workers. But I also got a chance to interact with the supervisory staff who were male, some of the men workers and male kin of the women.

As I became a regular part of the women's lives, my participation expanded from the routine to also include the special occasions. I accompanied the women to the market, watching them haggling and joining in the process, carrying the stuff they bought back with them. I became a regular part in the fairs and festivals. I usually accompanied the younger group of women, roaming around with them through the fair, sharing food with them in the stalls, buying jewellery and sharing a laugh. These fairs provided rich insights into their perceptions of men, dressing, and fun. Having escaped the drudgery of their lives even for a while, they often reflected on the life they led and shared their desires and aspirations with me. Some of the festivals were accompanied by cultural programmes and in the later stages, I became involved in helping out with these programmes in the rehearsals, collection of money or other support. Apart from being sources of rich data these breaks from the routine life and my participation in them strengthened my bond with them. My role was more of an observer as participant as I did not merely observe the events occurring around me but actively took part in them. I engaged with the workers as much as they engaged with me and became keenly involved in their lives from walking with them to work, to helping

them with cooking, watching television with them, trying to get the manager to arrange for a giant screen for us to watch the World Cup finals or a school bus for their children.

Doing ethnography was not without its problems, some expected and some unexpected. The first was a language barrier. The women conversed either in Nepali or Sadri. Though they used Hindi while speaking to me, in their own conversations they naturally reverted back to their vernaculars. Their languages had enough similarity with Hindi for me to be able to make sense of the broad issues discussed, but the nuances of the conversation were lost in the initial phase. It was only through staying with them for a long period of time that I was able to understand the language well enough to pick up their conversations though my own conversation skills remained quite limited.

Note-taking was another problem. Though I made notes whenever I got the opportunity, most details had to be committed to memory only to be written down in the breaks and at the end of the day. I tried to be as attentive as possible but there must have been those inevitable slips when I forgot bits of data. The life of the people in the plantation, like in any social space is a kaleidoscope of emotions—of sorrow, of happiness, of struggle, acceptance. These myriad emotions find expression in their work, their domestic life and in special events. But my field-notes often fail to capture these shades of existence. There must have also been the biases of the memory. In trying to remember and record the happenings of the day, I probably ended up forgetting more than I remembered and thus, the data may be unbalanced in places. To guard against this I tried to be as descriptive as possible when writing my notes. Often, during crucial conversations, I used a recorder so that I had that as a backup with my notes. The most important thing for me was to be careful, attentive and sensitive to all the events happening around.

In addition to the casual conversations which were a core of the participant observation I also conducted interviews. This was done in

three ways: through semi-structured interviews, oral histories and group discussions. The interviews were conducted with the workers, mostly women and some men, the manager and some of the staff. Though the number of interviews I conducted with the men was small, I had interacted with them quite a bit as a part of my participant observation and was able to gain at least a basic insight into their perspectives and understandings. Additionally, I did interviews with one *panchayat* member in both the plantations. I also spoke to political party workers/trade union activists. In Daahlia two of the party activists I spoke to [one from Communist Party of India Marxist, (CPI (M) henceforth) and the other from GJMM] were male and the leader of ABAVP was a woman. In Kaalka, I spoke to three political activists (all male): one from Congress, one from CPI (M) and the other from Communist Party of India Marxist Leninist [CPI (ML) henceforth]. I also spoke to three NGO activists in Kaalka. Besides, I interviewed the chairman of ITA, DBITA to get a representation, albeit, a brief one of their views. These interviews, though not cited in the thesis, gave me important information and insight in which to contextualise my fieldwork. I also interviewed two local experts in the region to share their insights and knowledge. The interviews are tabulated here.

Table 3.1

TOTAL NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS				
	Daahlia		Kaalka	
	Interviews	Oral Histories	Interviews	Oral Histories
Women	36	7	22	3
Men	10	-	7	-
Manager + staff	6	-	3	-
Others	4	-	7	-

Source: fieldwork data

To get an even spread on the data obtained from the women, I interviewed women of different religions and ethnicities. Since my focus was on their everyday life and various aspects of it, rather than on culture, there was no significant pattern of difference between the women workers I interviewed in the plantations on the basis of their ethnicity and religion (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2
ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Plantation	Ethnicity		Religion			
	Nepali	Adivasi	Hindu	Christian	Buddhist	Muslim
Kaalka						
Interviews	9	13	10	7	-	5
Oral Histories	1	2	1	1	1	-
Daahlia						
Interviews	19	17	23	7	6	-
Oral Histories	5	2	4	1	2	-

Source: fieldwork data

As one of the main objectives of the research was to map the perception and understandings of the plantation workers, the interviews were meant to generate data in terms of people's own accounts, understanding of discourses, meanings. The data that the interviews generated were focal in answering questions about the participants' perceptions of gendered roles and spaces, other identity criteria and how they perceived these. Contrasting and combining them with the participant observation was to form the basis of rounded and nuanced data to answer the main research questions.

The interview topics were initially based on the readings that I had done and the issues I was interested in finding out. But as they were conducted towards the latter half of my fieldwork I was able to use the insights from the participant observation to fine-tune these guidelines to make them more relevant for the respondents. I asked a mix of descriptive and opinion questions. Rather than focussing on a fixed checklist, the aim of the interviews was to explore the life of the women and bring out their perceptions. The questions were, thus, meant to guide the narrative if it faltered at any stage. All the successful interviews conducted had a life history element. Though most of the questions that I asked them were similar, as I wanted to analyse the range of perceptions around similar issues, there was always room to accommodate the specific differences among the respondents and their narratives. The interviews with the management, trade union and *panchayat* members, activists were structured with specific factual questions as well as questions to get their viewpoints on issues like out-migration, condition of the workers, future of the plantation, the plantation owner's responsibility. Interview guides for the different types of interviews have been added as an annexure (Appendix 1).

Stock responses or standard replies are a problem of interviews (Ochberg, 1992), resulting in a narrow and uni-dimensional narrative. In the initial stages and sometimes even later I got very similar answers from the women to certain questions. On their views on outmigration,

these standard narratives contradicted with other things that they said such as dreams and aspirations for the children. These pre-rehearsed narratives can be disrupted through a daily engagement with the respondents which allows a trust relation to develop on the basis of which searching questions can be asked (Gorringe, 2005). Through participant observation I developed a relationship where deeper probing was possible. In my interaction with the women I tried to be as open as possible. Slowly as they became more acquainted with me they often gave fuller accounts which tallied more closely with what I observed. Moreover, even looking at the disjuncture between the two accounts was in itself an interesting aspect of the data.

I had planned to conduct one to one interviews. But for many of the interviews other people also came in to listen. I worried that having other people there might affect the responses, but I often found that having people around made the interviewees feel less intimidated and able to speak more freely. Though they did not usually interfere, there were instances when the others voiced their own opinions or disagreed with the person interviewed. On these occasions the individual interviews took the form of group interviews. Though group interviews can have the problem of being staged performances, they can also assume an internal dynamic of their own that reveals differing positions (e.g. Gorringe, 2005: Omevdt, 1979). Many of these group-discussions were quite productive and the exchange of views and debates created an atmosphere where it was possible to probe more and have discussions on multiple subjects.

In the initial stages of conducting interviews, I used interpreters. The two women, Madeeha and Shalini, who usually helped me with the interviews, were not my research assistants. They were both workers in Daahlia, the former was Nepali and the latter Adivasi. As we were nearly the same age we struck an affinity and they offered to help me out with arranging the interviews and acting as interpreters for interviews with both men and women.

By the time I was in Kaalka, I had acquired enough proficiency in the languages to be able to conduct the interviews on my own and did not need an interpreter. Also most of the participants in Kaalka had a working knowledge of Hindi. This difference in the style of conducting interviews had mixed implications. Conducting the interviews on my own in Kaalka meant there was a greater sense of confidentiality often enabling the women to open up more. Also there was no possibility of the interpreter influencing the responses. Finally, having one less person to coordinate time with made it slightly easier to run the interviews closer to the schedule. But there was also a flipside to this. In Daahlia having interpreters with whom I shared a good understanding made the interviewees more comfortable. Their presence encouraged the women to speak in their vernacular often making the interviews flow more easily. Therefore, both the presence and absence of interpreters had some positive and some negative effects, working in some ways to hamper the richness of the data while in other ways facilitating the same. I used participant observation to try and ensure that these potential differences in tone and content did not affect the conclusions. Through spending time with them and listening to group discussions I ensured I had a context within which to place these interviews. It also made the women in both the plantations familiar with me and minimised the disparities the presence or absence of interpreters and other such differences might have caused.

The interviews with the *panchayat* member and the trade union members were done on a one to one basis and in their homes. The interviews conducted with the manager, the activists and the experts were much more formal interviews and were done in their offices mostly in English or Bengali.

To get a richer understanding of how the women understood and perceived gender roles and spaces, I conducted oral histories. Though less in number, they were rich in details and gave a good insight into the lives and society of the concerned persons. They were conducted in the

houses of the women either with them alone or in the presence of one other person who she was comfortable with and who acted as an interpreter for both the parties.

Some of the oral histories were narratives where the women traced their life story from their earliest memories to the present times. In two cases I used the oral histories to map generational differences in the way of life and perceptions and aspirations. For this, oral histories were collected across generations within the same family. To elicit detailed accounts of their lives it was important for the women to be comfortable and at ease. Thus, I collected the oral histories in the last two months of my fieldwork. Most of the oral histories were completed within the day lasting an average of three to three and a half hours. They were conducted mostly in the vernaculars and then transcribed with the help of people who were fluent in the language as well as English or Hindi. The women often broke down at points of the narrative. I was worried about the implications of making them relive painful memories and considered not conducting any more such interviews. But when I confided my fear to some of the women I had already interviewed, they told me that they actually felt much better after the interview. The effect of being able to express themselves was often cathartic. Some of these interviews, however, proved too intense for me and I made sure that I kept sufficient gaps between the interviews in order to prepare myself for these demanding sessions.

As space is a core concept in my research, it was crucial to gain an insight into how the participants understood these spaces. Foregrounding space was the most difficult part of data collection. I realised that alongside having specific methods of researching space, the way the respondents behaved in different physical sites, spoke of and perceived these spaces could also be observed through the interviews and participant observation. Through mapping these, I was able to understand and capture how spatiality was central in how the tea plantations played out as a social space, gendered or otherwise.

Additionally I used transect walks to complement these methods (Chambers, 1994: 960). The data generated is mostly fed into the two gendered space chapters 6 and 7. I walked through different areas with the women, sometimes in groups and sometimes individually, letting them talk me through the area and observing their behaviour patterns as we toured the different sites within the plantation. Sometimes they took me to the different places within the plantation to familiarise me with these areas like the temple, the river bank, etc. Other walks were more of a personal nature visiting favourite places or some places which had emotional significance. Alongside noting the spaces that were talked about, observed and put forward, I also noted the spaces which were invisible, the ones that the women were hesitant to speak about or take me to. The data from transect walks was more detailed towards the beginning of the fieldwork but even in the later months it continued to provide me with insights into how the plantation was perceived as a lived space, how these perceptions change at times and what causes such changes.

Patton (1990: 169) argues that qualitative enquiry typically focuses in depth on smaller samples, even a single case study selected purposively. In the early part of fieldwork, I explored, gathered data and followed the emerging patterns. The initial stage of data collection was based on general sociological perspectives rather than a preconceived theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978: 45). As data collection consolidated, this exploratory stage slowly gave way to confirmatory fieldwork in which ideas were tested, the importance and meanings of possible patterns were considered and their viability checked with new data (Patton, 1990: 178). I mainly used purposive sampling but as themes emerged from data and guided the later part of data collection, it also had elements of theoretical sampling. By following the data in the direction of emerging themes I ensured that I got a full picture. I stopped once the theme seemed to reach saturation with the data gathered being replicated or redundant (Bowen, 2008: 140). Strauss and Corbin (1994) describe theoretical saturation as a

point at which no new insights are obtained; no new themes emerge at which the data categories are well established and validated.

Using a combination of methods enabled me to triangulate the findings. This allowed crosschecking the data constantly. Research design, according to Janesick (2001: 50–51), usually begins with some fixed moments, some planned interviews, scheduled observation, document reviews and, at the same time within the parameters of these events the researcher needs to improvise to capture the critical events or moments in the lives of the participants. My study also progressed along these lines. I reached the field with extensive plans about the course to be pursued. Some of these plans met with success and some with failure. I needed to think on my feet and be sensitive to the events and people around me, to improvise the methods that I had learnt to suit the current situation and draw out the richest details causing minimal obstruction to the respondents. Though I ran into difficulties at points, some of which persisted through the course of my fieldwork, I was ultimately able to gather sufficient data to answer my research questions fully.

CHALLENGES

The challenges that I faced with specific methods of data collection have been described above. There were also more general and overarching tests which I faced during my fieldwork.

Doing interpersonal research

The contextual and interpersonal nature of my research methods, influenced by feminist methods, made it possible for me to situate my research in the everyday reality of constraints and agency. This was, however, not unproblematic. While this paved the way for greater equality and respect for research subjects, Stacey (1988: 22) argues that this could mask a deeper and more dangerous form of exploitation. As this research process was dependent on greater human engagement and attachment, it had the potential to put both the researcher and research

subjects at a much greater risk of manipulation and betrayal. Having been privy to illicit activities and affairs the researcher is often placed in a situation of inevitable betrayal of the research subjects (Stacey, 1988: 26). In spite of the closeness of the relationship the researcher's presence is an intrusion into the everyday lives of the research participants and the former can more easily leave the field. Much like the ethnographic process, this danger was also true of the final product—the life, love and loss that the participants share with the researcher are ultimately data. In spite of all its claim of being collaborative research, the dangers of establishing inequality and betrayal often makes this method counter-productive.

Jacobs (2004: 226) has pointed out the dangers of 'double vision' within feminist research. In her study of gender and genocide in the Holocaust, Jacobs (2004) questions the moral culpability of the researcher who witnesses the atrocities and injustices in the field. The duality between being a secondary witness to atrocities (extreme poverty and misery caused by denial and injustice) and a researcher in search of data put me into a morally tricky position vis-à-vis the research participants.

Did these limitations inherent in the method of conducting interpersonal research invalidate my entire fieldwork? Rather than submitting to these lacunae I decided to address and recognise them within my research. Being aware and acknowledging these dangers can go some way towards mitigating the potential harm (Stacey, 1988). I remained reflexive and self critical throughout the process in order to ensure that I was not unduly taking advantage of the vulnerability of any of my participants. Also while accepting the collaborative aspect of my research I took the responsibility and to some extent, the ownership of the final product. While grounding my research in the context of the women's everyday life through recording their experience, language and voice, in the final product I give a greater space to my authorial voice. This is not to downgrade the contributions of the participants'. Rather it is to take the

responsibility of the limitations of my work on myself and establish it as my interpretive account of the participant's lives. In the later parts of the chapter, I will detail how I did this.

Finally, feminist ethnography, which influenced my research methods, cannot be usefully evaluated by conceptualising and studying women in opposition to men (Rao, 2005a: 370). Though focussing on the women participants of the research, they could not be isolated from the other actors who share, shape or are shaped by their lives. Instead of essentialising gender relations by conceptualising women as opposed to men, it is more useful to explore how such differences themselves are created as a result of gender relations (Visweswaran, 1997). To combat an uncritical application of feminist methodology, I contextualised my study and understood it through intersectional lenses studying other identity criteria which shaped and were shaped by the social space.

Positionality

Hailing from West Bengal I had assumed that my role would be precariously balanced between that of an insider and outsider. But acknowledging self and the insider status critically (Waghmore, 2011: 66), I found that in effect my position was much more that of an outsider than an insider. The world of the tea plantations was a very separate world from the city world of Kolkata I hailed from and in spite of physical proximity they were culturally quite distinct.

As a non-tribal woman coming from an urban middle class family there were certain in-built biases and limitations in me and also in my research subjects' perception of me. These might have worked both ways in shaping their responses towards me as well as shaping my interpretation of their behaviour and perception. Added to this was the need to constantly guard against a potential power relation that might result from my position as a privileged, educated and urban woman researching poor, mostly illiterate, women. Some researchers (e.g.

Caulfield, 1979) have pointed out the dehumanisation inherent in the process of ‘observing’ rather than being involved with participants.

We must realize that the aspirations, the motives and the objectives implicit in the meaningful thematic are human aspirations, motives and objectives. They do not exist out there somewhere, as static entities: they are occurring. (Stavenhagen, 1971: 78)

Initially, this difference manifested in my focus on their poverty-stricken condition. Though my readings had prepared me for their difficult living condition, the reality of it unfolding in front of my eyes for an initial period led me to focus on it subscribing completely to a victimhood narrative. But carrying out fieldwork for a significant period of time offset these problems of positionality and reactivity. I could perceive the strong narrative of struggle within it. To capture this, I needed to change my focus and some of the data collected in the initial period showed this gap. As my experiences in the fieldwork modified the preconceived ideas I went with, I tried to remain reflexive to address and accommodate these changes within the process of data collection.

Spending quality time in the field with my respondents, asking them to elaborate on their responses, keeping a research diary and going back to check the data with them were methods I used to address the bias in the research. As I continued to stay on in the field for lengths of time and the participants got more used to my presence accepting me as a part of their daily lives these issues became less important and my presence became more natural. My fieldwork thus, was a process of mutual learning. Instead of a researcher-researched relation, I made every effort to form a co-researcher relation—a relation based on a sense of mutual respect and empathy.

There is a danger that a prolonged period of fieldwork might lead to a blunting of the observation skills whereby something worth noting might be ignored either because it appeared routine or because it reflected negatively on the group. Having two sites for my fieldwork helped me combat this possibility. After the initial period of settling into each site

and carrying out in-depth observation there, I rotated between the two sites. Every time I revisited a site after staying for a long time in the other, the observation tended to be sharper. There were also times when I stayed in Kolkata for a longer period doing archival work and speaking to people there so that my return to the plantations offered a refreshed perspective. I was careful that these gaps were optimal—neither too big as to cause problems of respondents' reactivity, etc., nor too small to blunt my own observations.

Validity

Accounts of ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews and group discussions are, to a great extent, interpretive. This makes them open to criticisms of bias, raising questions about their validity. The researcher brings her bias into her observation, her questioning and even transcription. Interpretations are by nature provisional and subject to endless elaboration and partial negation besides being limited in space and time (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 279). Ethnography is also implanted within its social context, which is not fixed but has an active bearing on the performance of social life. Holstein and Gubrium (1994: 299) hold that this should be treated as an interpretive resource rather than a deterministic condition, as circumstances for social construction and as social construction itself.

In order to adequately understand the local meanings not only of words but also actions and events in terms of what they signify, I had to guard against putting my interpretation into their words and actions. This became especially significant in case of studying ideas of agency and resistance discussed in later chapters. On the one hand, I had to ensure that the limitations within which the research participants lived did not translate into an all encompassing victimhood discourse negating all acts of agency within it. On the other, I had to guard against tendencies to see resistance and agency in everything. To strike a balance, I remained aware of the context of any action or conversation and read agency and

resistance through the eyes of the agents themselves. Rather than branding different actions as belonging to one category or the other, I remained as far as possible sensitive to the participants' understanding of these actions and the meanings attached.

To ensure that my interpretations were valid within the context I was studying, I often discussed my preliminary impressions with some of the women. Also, I drew out the ideas and interpretations of the activists and the NGO workers who had worked in this area and evaluated my understandings and interpretations in light of theirs. I was aware that coming from different compulsions there were bound to be differences in our perceptions. But checking my interpretations against their experience proved valuable. In spite of many specific differences, we shared broad similarities in our understandings of the conditions of the workers, strategies of management, exploitation and some forms of resistance of the workers. I discussed my ideas and the preliminary conclusions with academics and researchers who had previously done extensive work in the area. Finally, I sent field reports to my supervisors to cross check with them that the observations I was making were logically and theoretically tenable. But the account inevitably remains an interpretive one. By maintaining a balanced perspective of events and accounts I sought to place the data within a broader framework.

Generalisability

What implications do field oriented research spell for generalisability of the observations made or conclusions drawn to either women workers in plantations in general or in India? Flyvberg (2006) makes a strong case for how generalisations can be made from data gathered by a single case study. Through illustrations he points out how the 'strategic choice of the cases' is central to the questions of generalisability. A critical case can be of strategic importance in establishing generalised findings (Flyvberg, 2006: 12). Being at two ends of the spectrum in terms of productivity, profitability, continuity, size, and political organisation, Daahlia and

Kaalka were both critical cases. In spite of these contrasts some of the findings, as will be seen in the next chapters, hold true for both of the plantations. Thus, analyses drawn from these two cases are likely to be applicable to intermediate cases as well. Popper (in Flyvberg 2006: 11) used falsification cases for generalising whereby if just one case does not fit with the proposition, it is then considered not generally valid and needing revision. In challenging the universalistic victimhood discourse that tea plantation workers are ascribed, Kaalka or Daahlia acted as powerful falsification cases. The accounts of agency evidenced in both the plantations could break the standardisation of tea plantation workers solely as victims.

Is generalisation, however, all that useful? Again Flyvberg (2006) makes a powerful critique of viewing generalisability as the only desirable outcome. Context dependant knowledge from a single detailed case study can form an important part in developing a corpus of knowledge. Finally, painting the data with broad brushes of generalisation actually results in the loss of the voices of the women whose story it seeks to tell. The personal experiences, aspirations and understandings need to be accommodated. My analysis, thus, strikes a balance between the generalisations made and the personal experiences gathered. By drawing out maximum variation the data generated could apply to the whole range of plantations lying between these two extremes. At the same time, the specific differences between and within the plantations were accommodated.

Reciprocal relationships

Caulfield (1979:315) holds that taking sides is inevitable and even necessary in social research as neutrality could mean partiality to an existing status quo. Mies (2004) holds that neutral and objective research has to be replaced by a kind of conscious partiality. With reflexivity and self-evaluation, these biases could be invaluable guides to data collection and the creation of the account emerging from it. My research subjects

were poor, exploited women, struggling against their lot and trying to eke out survival not only for themselves but for their families. Rather than trying to disguise my empathy towards them, I recognised my biases. My relation with my research participants was of compassion and respect. I tried to assist them in small ways elaborated in the ethics section. This did not contradict my research aims and ideas as it did not make them dependant on me. I wrote down an auto-critique to carry on a constant self-evaluation. I also kept my field-notes both descriptive and reflexive and asked a friend or a colleague to read through them. Getting feedback from someone not connected with the research helped maintain a certain amount of reflexivity and also a semblance of detachment. Speaking to people about the biases in my viewpoint helped me to critically analyse these empathies from the standpoint of others.

Additionally, I had to strike a balance so as not to become the mouthpiece of a particular group. Hammersley (2000) warns that one's role as a sympathetic researcher must be clearly distinguishable from being a member of the group. I captured as many different shades of opinion as I could. I spoke to women from different sections of the plantation, spoke to the men, the management, trade union workers and *panchayat* members to get different standpoints. Mapping these different realities, I am confident of having obtained data to fully explain the key questions.

Disillusionment

Fleeting moments of doubt and fading romanticism are perhaps an inevitable part of the journey of a PhD. Coupled with it was the sense of powerlessness. Through close interaction and by sharing a part of their lives, the women in particular and sometimes the men I worked with did not remain merely research subjects from whom data was to be extracted. I formed genuine relationships with them. It was humbling to see the human suffering that the workers had to go through as a part of their daily existence. I was often overcome with a sense of despair at the knowledge

that I could not do much to improve their lot especially when most of them, aware of this fact, had willingly let me make their lives a study for my qualifications. There was also the tiredness, more mental than physical, caused by listening to the frequent narratives of pain and observing it for myself.

Though the poverty hit me, people struggle on and survive. They were in most cases active agents of their lives and in their own specific ways tried to negotiate their adversities to the best of their abilities. These narratives of agency and activism were important. Recounting these without romanticising them gave my research a purpose and rescued both me and my research from perceiving the women merely as victims.

Practical challenges

Apart from these ideological issues I was also faced with some practical challenges. In the course of my fieldwork, I was taken ill twice, once with chicken pox (23 January–15 February 2011) and the second time with appendicitis which required surgery (June 2011). I lost quite a bit of valuable time meaning that I spent less time in Kaalka than I would have liked. Moreover, the West Bengal state elections occurred during April–May of the year. I was able to stay in the field during the elections, but in the post election phase—between the counting and announcement of results—there were considerable threats of violence in the area. Fearing for my safety, my hosts insisted that I return to Kolkata. Not wanting to impose on them, and in response to credible fears, I had to stay in Kolkata from 28 April–13 May. I made use of this time in taking interviews in ITA and DBITA, transcribing some of the interviews, updating my field-notes and doing archival work.

ETHICS

Ethics was a central concern from the outset, but doing ethical research is not about checking boxes or applying what is asked in the ethical form, it

requires a further stage of reflexivity. While conducting some of the ethical checks was quite easy, some were not so straightforward.

Consent

The first task was to ensure that the research participants did not feel coerced to take part. Participation was to be freely given. At the very outset, I clarified to people that they were free not to participate in the research. Getting informed consent for participation was trickier than I imagined. While I had a broad framework in mind when embarking on fieldwork, the specific questions and issues that I wanted to look at were still in their formative stages and changing. It was thus, difficult to explain the specifics of the research. The people I was working with, however, did not seem too concerned with the exact topic of my research and were happy with the broader framework. What concerned people more was to what use the data would be put. On this, I had adequate information.

Next were the multiple levels of consent. In the hierarchical social culture of the plantation society, the reasons for giving consent for an interview were many—deference to the request of the *sardar*(supervisor), *munshi*(senior supervisor) or a village elder who recommended her for interviews, or feeling obligated to me as a guest there. Realising this problem, I waited to resume the interviews only after a period of participant observation and spending time with the women so that they could indicate to me more freely whether they were in fact willing to give interviews.

Indicating constantly when I was collecting data and when I was not was another problem. I informed people from the outset that since I was interested in their lives, every bit of it could potentially be a part of my data. If there was any specific thing that a person said which I wanted to quote or use in my field-notes, I took their permission. In most cases the people were willing to let me make use of it. A few times not wanting to break the natural flow of the conversation, I recorded them covertly. After

it had finished, however, I informed them that I had recorded their conversation as I found it interesting and asked them if I could keep it. Given the covert nature of the initial recording I asked for their permission multiple times and also made it clear to them that they could let me know any time they changed their mind about my using it. In all such occasions, however, I met with no objection to keeping this data.

As most of my respondents were illiterate and averse to signing documents, I took their consent through recording it verbally. I took quite a few photographs during my fieldwork. Anticipating that I might want to use some of those photos at a later stage in my research, I took the permission of those whose photos were taken for their reproduction in the thesis.

Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality within the research setting was quite difficult. This was especially in case of maintaining anonymity of the interviewees during fieldwork.

Ramila: Did you interview anyone else from my village?

I: Yes, I did.

Shalini: Just now she interviewed Bimla and after this we will go to Pranjana's house. (Daahlia, field-notes, 03.12.10)

The tea plantations were closed spaces and most people knew each other. In that kind of social network, maintaining anonymity of the participants became tricky as the information on who had been interviewed was openly circulated. Though the way people released this information was problematic for me, the participants themselves, in most occasions, did not feel this was a breach of their confidentiality. The ideas of what was considered private information did not always work as expected, as will be seen in the following chapters.

But keeping the content of the interviews confidential became quite crucial. As I interacted with different segments of the plantation, e.g.

management/workers, husband/wife, being aware of the power dynamics was important. Often the respondents confided in me about things which, if publicised, could cause disruption in their lives. I was careful with the storage of this kind of data. In trying to protect their interests, I took care not to report confidential material or information damaging to the individuals. When respondents asked me to keep something confidential I respected their decision and kept those conversations or events outside the purview of my research. In case of interviews where Madeeha or Shalini were present, I always checked with the respondents if they were more comfortable without the women present. All the data was stored in my personal computer which was password secured and could be unlocked only by me.

Anonymisation

All the names of persons used in the thesis as well as the names of the plantations, towns and the NGO have been anonymised by me. I had asked people to choose names that they wanted me to use as their pseudonyms. While some people did so most left it to my discretion. While the field-notes retained their original name from the time of writing the thesis the names of the places and people were anonymised before being circulated to anyone for reading.

Managing expectations

Managing expectations of potential benefit was another of my concerns during the fieldwork. This ranged between the two positions given below.

“...you will go home; tomorrow you will get married also. Nothing will happen. You will go somewhere; your papers will reach elsewhere” (Daahlia field-notes, 15.01.11).

“Go to the Parliament, go to the government and discuss the issue there. How can anybody manage in Rs. 66 daily wage, there is so much expense to bear” (Kaalka, field-notes, 17.04.11).

At the outset, I told the participants that my research was for my doctoral thesis so as not to raise hopes of a benefit which might be met

with disappointment later. Though I repeatedly emphasised the fact that I was a student and powerless to change their lot, my privileged position seemed to invest me with the power to intervene on their behalf. There were repeated requests to take this up with the concerned government bodies or media. To offset their expectations, I had to take help of the more perceptive research subjects who then explained to the others the limitations of my position.

There was another group of people who feared that the information that I drew out from them would be distorted and used in a way disadvantageous to them. The efforts of my more sympathetic respondents, once again, eased the situation as they tried to motivate the others to help me out in my research. Additionally, my perseverance also paid off and, apart from a few, even the initially distrustful people became willing participants. Most of them became willing to let me collect data on their lives even when they realised that this might not provide any benefit to them.

Addressing this issue of potential benefit brought me face-to-face with the issue of the responsibility of the social researcher. Was this to be only a means of building up a personal career? Caulfield (1979: 314) speaks of how the tendency to exploit people for a personal career benefit remains so ingrained in the profession that it often becomes difficult for the researcher to maintain her commitment to respond to the needs and problems of the community as defined by the community themselves. I strove to maintain an honest account of what I saw and understood. In listening to the stories and reproducing them honestly but within a framework of critical debates in sociology, I planned for my fieldwork to strike a balance between a personal goal and the wider social implications of research.

Reciprocity

As my research was carried out over a length of time, I was aware of the implications of taking up people's time and energy. While the women

were at work in the garden, I did not disturb them, only conversing with them when they wanted to. But the interviews and oral histories along with the transect walk took up a considerable part of their time. In case of all these three, the time was always pre-arranged and set according to the convenience of the participants so that they could adjust their other work from before. I also tried to do small things for the participants. When embarking on the research, I had planned to help out in the crèche, but this was not always possible as the nursing mothers and their babies were often in a separate section of the field and being with them all the time would mean not getting a chance to talk to the other women workers. But I tried to help out as much as I could there. I also read up on the laws and procedures on *panchayat* schemes and explained to them at length how to make the application and what were their rights regarding certain government schemes discussed in later chapters. I took photographs of the people when they requested me to and brought them copies of those photos. In the few cases that they had to write deputations to the manager in English, I wrote the letters for them. I checked their payment slips and read out the information to them so that they could check and see whether they were receiving the correct payment. These were not efforts to compensate for the time that they gave me but rather small gestures of gratitude for their cooperation.

The ethical guidelines that I started off with served as pointers rather than an instruction manual. Throughout the research, I remained sensitive to my respondents and careful that I did not cause them any harm or distress. To ensure an ethical research I kept an ongoing dialogue with the participants, with myself and in many instances with other researchers who had worked in similar social settings. By ensuring a relation of mutual respect, non-coercion and non-manipulation, I balanced my research interests with those of the researched.

RECORDING DATA

Recording data is a crucial element of fieldwork. During the long hours of participant observation I carried a small notepad with me at all times in which I jotted down the events and conversations. I also recorded conversations on a recorder where appropriate.

I was conscious of separating out the strands within the field-notes. On one hand were the events occurring, the conversations taking place, and on the other were the undertones and dynamics between individuals or groups, where the assumptions, viewpoints and judgements were not pronounced but lay beyond the surface and had to be picked up from there. Finally, my assumptions, judgments, relationships with people, the numerous other phenomena which not only shape the field experience but the personality and perspective of the ethnographer also had to be accommodated. Most researchers find it difficult to demarcate the knowledge gathered from talking to people and that which they absorbed through taking part (Beatty, 1999). I maintained a constant awareness of separating the articulated and unarticulated parts of the fieldwork and not merging observation and analysis. Though this was not always possible while writing down the day's field-notes, reading and re-reading it a few times critically made it possible to identify the elements which had merged and then to separate them.

Again in the case of the transect walk, I mainly took notes. Though there were some parts of the walk which could be recorded, being only an audio medium it was not very useful. I drew rough maps of the places we walked through and marked the areas with descriptions as given by participants. These formed the core of chapters 6 and 7.

In the case of interviews and oral histories, recording was the mainstay. Recording enabled me to capture the whole interview, including nuances and silences. In addition, I always took notes as a backup in case anything went wrong with the recording or there was too much background noise. It also helped to communicate my interest to the

interviewee. Most of my respondents allowed me to tape the interview but there were some who preferred me to take notes.

TRANSCRIBING AND ANALYSIS

The field-notes and transect walks were transcribed and written down on the days itself. Most of the interviews and oral histories were, however, transcribed only after the completion of the fieldwork. Most of the interviews were conducted in Hindi and some were in Nepali, Sadri or Bengali. Having gained a working knowledge of Nepali and Sadri, and an adequate proficiency in Hindi and Bengali, I transcribed and translated the interviews myself. Almost all the interviews were directly translated to save time. Unlike the oral histories, which were transcribed in full, in case of the interviews, transcription of the parts which seemed necessary for analysis was done. The oral histories which were conducted in the local languages were transcribed and translated into English by speakers of the respective vernaculars.

Once all the transcripts were completed, the next task was to code the data. Systematic coding procedures consolidate the process of theory building. Theoretical categories are refined or created from ‘constant comparative method linked with sensitive theoretical sampling and are constantly fitted into data’ (Glaser in Bowen, 2008: 139). The emergent categories form patterns and interrelations from which the core category of the emergent theory develops (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Rather than thematic or topic based coding, I drew my codes out from more analytical themes built around the central research questions. The coding was on two levels. Using the broad themes emerging from my interviews and field-notes I made four substantive labels—gender and gendering, resisting victimhood, protests and activism, intersectionality. Within these, more specific coding was done. For example under gendering came codes such as ‘physical spaces’, ‘housework’, ‘alcoholism’, ‘customs and traditions’, etc. I used Atlas ti to code and manage data.

Analysis consisted of exploring how the emergent themes formed a narrative answering the main research question. The data was scrutinised and compared with the codes to organise the ideas and tease out the concepts that clustered together. Through this process, a general pattern could be discerned, some codes became redundant and some new ones emerged. Finally came, what Strauss and Corbin (1990:116) call, selective coding where the core categories were selected, systematically related to the other categories and these relations were validated by further refinement. Besides this coding and analysing process I also kept memos to record my ideas and keep track of them (Bowen, 2008: 145). Through this process of coding, analysing and recoding four clear though not disconnected ideas emerged as central—gendered space, intersectionality, agency and activism. The data was used to explore these four concepts and weave them together into a coherent narrative using the threads of everyday, space and agency. I used existing theoretical models which were relevant in explaining and exploring the data to place it in a broader framework of sociological debate. While the preliminary ideas were derived from the literature, checking the data against the pre-existing conceptions not only grounds the research in social reality but also contributes to the generation of sociological knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Conducting fieldwork is a learning experience. I am fairly confident of having made the best use of available resources and opportunities to answer my areas of enquiry, but there remain some gaps in my fieldwork. I have reflected on these gaps and their implications in the conclusion.

A research project plays a part in the broader scheme of knowledge transfer. My research, through providing rich ethnographic data with certain sociological conclusions, aims to provide a deeper insight into the lives of the tea garden workers. In order to achieve this, I have used a combination of methods most suitable to answer the research questions I

set myself. I met the challenges in designing and executing the research design with reflexivity. At all times, I maintained my commitment to remain honest to my participants and the research itself. Following Jacobs (2004), I recognised that not all moral dilemmas can be resolved and while wrestling with these I made the best available choices in those situations. It might have been possible to have a smoother and better process of data collection but I did the best I could do with the available resources.

Chapter 4

Setting the Scene and Context

'This is where we live and work'

As the train wound its way through the uneven, slightly hilly terrain, the tea gardens slowly came into view. First there was one, then as the train turned the curve with a burst of green the tea gardens of Dooars came into view. (Pilot trip, field-notes)

Being a space where people work as well as stay, the understanding of how a tea plantation functions is important for any analysis of gender relations, construction of spaces, the intersections of identities or understanding of agency. This chapter will provide a snapshot of the important features of the two tea plantations I studied. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the political economy of West Bengal and Dooars. It then moves on to the specifics of the plantation such as the physical configuration and provides information regarding the worker composition followed by the work patterns and types. This is meant to serve as a context following from which the next chapters will explore how these social spaces are animated and become lived spaces.

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF WEST BENGAL AND DOOARS

The political economy of West Bengal had been characterised by two almost paradoxical trends. With the Left Front regime ruling the state for over three decades from 1977 to 2011, the state had seen remarkable political stability. At the same time, going by the standard indicators of economic development such as state per capita income, literacy, industrialisation, poverty, industry, etc. West Bengal was at best a middle

ranking state (Sarkar, 2006: 341) going down from the richest state (in terms of per capita State Domestic Product) in 1960 to number 9 in 2008 (Khasnabis, 2009: 103). While West Bengal is above the national average in terms of human development indicators like literacy, infant mortality, life expectancy at birth and availability of drinking water, it lags behind on per capita consumption, housing, electrification, etc. (Khasnabis, 2009; Sarkar, 2006). In other words, the CPM had overseen a degree of redistribution and a shift in emphasis from unfettered growth to a model of development that gave greater significance to human capacities.

In the 1980s there was a spectacular growth in agricultural production due to the adoption of the *boro*¹⁶ cultivation of rice which benefitted the medium and small farmers. Along with this, there were radical land reforms and a decentralisation of power and control in the villages through the *Panchayati Raj* system (Sarkar, 2006). But the agricultural growth rate has declined in the state since the mid 1990s though the small and middle farmers in West Bengal actually enjoy a better living in comparison to an average Indian farmer (Khasnabis, 2009: 112). Since the 1990s, West Bengal has also been characterised by an increasing informalisation of the economy. It has a much higher number of workers in the unorganised manufacturing sector than in its organised counterpart accounting for 15.82% of the total Indian workforce that earns a livelihood from the unorganised manufacturing units as compared to 14.57% in Uttar Pradesh, the next highest employer (Khashnabis, 2009: 346). Sarkar (2006) argues that the long political success of the erstwhile ruling regime was largely due to the political organisation of the coalition coupled with the increasing informalisation of the economy which made

¹⁶ The term 'boro' refers to cultivation from November to May under irrigated conditions. Shallow water level and water logging low land which remains fallow in winter due to excessive moisture and late maturing rice, can be utilized by using boro rice cultivation. Boro rice matures before onset of monsoon and get sufficient time for harvesting unlike spring rice.
www.narc.org.np/rice_knowledge_bank/factsheet/boro.pdf. Accessed on 23.03.14.

the workers in this sector dependant on the support of the political party in absence of formal legal and protective machinery. While West Bengal has been doing well in unorganised sector, the relative position of the state in regard to industries and organised sector has been worsening (Khashnabis, 2009: 110). With agriculture becoming unremunerative the livelihood pattern in rural West Bengal is changing. The small enterprises could hardly absorb the surplus labour even with depressed wages (Khasnabis, 2009: Sarkar, 2006). The economy was thus facing a crisis which the then ruling Left Front government tried to address by encouraging investment from national and international corporate capital around the middle of 2000s. This was followed by a policy of giving agricultural lands to industry, a measure which proved to be unpopular to a significant section of the population and was among the reasons for the government's rapidly eroding popularity and the resultant loss. In other words, we see a gradual shift away from socialist policies towards a more market oriented approach. At the time of fieldwork in May 2011 – in part because of the issues discussed here - the ruling Left Front government had just lost the State Assembly elections to its main opposition the Trinamool Congress Party. Given that this was still a very new phenomenon the effect of this change on the political economy of the state remained to be seen.

Dooars forms the tea belt of the North Bengal region of West Bengal. While the mainstay of the economy of this region naturally has been the tea trade, there is also a thriving timber trade in the region. As has been seen in Chapter 2, the region witnessed two different types of economic activity—cultivation engaged in by the local population and the growth of the tea plantations. The difficult conditions of work, low wages as well as cultivation opportunities for the indigenous peasants made them refuse to work in the tea plantations (Chatterjee, 2003) which posed the labour supply problem. By the 1860s an organized system of labour recruitment, combining private contracting and the government run system, brought two-thirds of total plantation labour from Chotanagpur Plateau which

was nearly a 1000 km away. The tribal society here was in turmoil with growing Hinduisation, expropriation of tribal lands by the *dikus* or moneylenders, increased impoverishment as well as natural causes like drought which threatened them with imminent destruction (Bhowmik, 1981). Deprived of their livelihood they formed a pool of unemployed; a catchment area from which the plantations could draw their labour supply. This community commonly known as the *Adivasis* has, thus, been settled in the region, generationally working as tea garden workers. The tea plantations also employ a significant number of Nepali workers. Though there might have been a constant flow of Nepali workers for a long time, it was in 1950 with the signing of the India Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty that the recruitment of Nepali workers picked up (Meena and Bhattacharjee, 2008: 16).

The development of tea plantations as enclosures created the growth of enclave economies which had long-term implications for the growth of the wider local economy (Mishra et al. 2011). The self-sufficiency of the tea plantations led to a lack of their integration in the local economy resulting in a disjuncture between the advanced, export-oriented capitalist economy of the plantations and the subsistence agriculture of the local economy. The labour in the area remained segmented in this respect with the labour from outside the plantations hardly competing with the garden labourers for employment within the plantations and a very slow flow of labour from the garden to outside employment (Mishra et al. 2011). With the outbreak of the crisis in the plantations and closure of many plantations, described in Chapter 2, however, this flow gained momentum.

The districts of North Bengal have lagged behind with regard to a number of development dimensions such as agricultural productivity, and absorption capacity of labour in the manufacturing sector, for over two decades (Report, 2002). The crisis in the tea industry with the fall in tea auction prices, decline in exports, closure and abandonment of tea plantations further exacerbated the economic degradation of the region

(Mishra et al. 2011). The localised and complex nature of development, however, is seen in Siliguri where policies relating to the liberalisation of the economy have seen the town develop from a transit town for tourists to one of the fastest growing cities in the country, an economic destination for people from all over the country (Meena and Bhattacharjee, 2008). West Bengal during my fieldwork, in short, was witnessing a shift from state managed development to a more neoliberal economy.

THE TWO PLANTATIONS

Productivity and size

Daahlia is among the more prosperous plantations, having remained relatively unaffected by the previously mentioned crisis. This, however, does not mean that it remained unscathed by the slump in world demand for tea. According to the manager of the plantation:

There was crisis in these gardens too, we also faced great loss. However production continued and the garden continued to sell its produce. (Manager, Daahlia, 25.04.11)

Table 4.1

COMPARISON OF TEA SALE QUANTITY AND FIGURES IN DOOARS AND DAAHLIA

	Average in Dooars		Average in Daahlia ¹⁷	
	Average price per kg (CTC) in INR	Quantity in kg	Average price per kg (CTC) in INR	Quantity in kg
Kolkata	110.70	14346988.2	117	101421
Siliguri	110.96	42214366.3	114	716166

Source: Kolkata and Siliguri Tea Auction Sale Average 2009 figures (Consultative Committee of Planters' Association)

¹⁷To protect anonymity, the exact figures have been rounded off to the nearest whole numbers.

Table 4.1 gives the price that Daahlia fetched in relation to the average price in 2009. The auction sales figures of 2009, which was within the crisis period, show that the price fetched by Daahlia tea (both CTC and dust) was better than many other plantations of similar size.

Kaalka is on the other end of the production spectrum, being among the plantations worst affected by the crisis of production. Initially, Kaalka along with three other plantations in that area were owned by a thriving business. Their fortunes suffered a slump and while two of the plantations were sold off, the other two—Kaalka and Raagini—closed down. Kaalka closed down as a fully functioning garden in 2000 (though most of the workers and staff I spoke to told me that it was already crisis ridden for quite a few years before that) only to reopen 10 years later in August 2010 when it was bought by another company. In 2003, it had briefly opened under a financier, by the name of T.N. Dutta and later in 2008 under the Operation Management Committee (OMC). Under the financier it did not revive itself and there were allegations that he fled, leaving the workers' dues unpaid.

I put my stake in his company. He owes me a lot of money. He actually owes money to most of us...He has stolen our money. (Phoolchand, Kaalka, 17.10.11)

I found nothing in the course of my fieldwork to substantiate or invalidate these allegations.

The OMC was a worker-run committee which sold the raw leaves to the market and divided the proceeds among the workers. It was led by workers with some sort of affiliation to the major political parties of the region. The OMC functioned for about a year and a half and then problems cropped up following which it became dysfunctional. Due to the closure of the plantation, the Tea Board or the other associations did not have any production figures for Kaalka although the workers consistently plucked raw leaves and sold them in the market. Towards the later years of the crisis (2007–08), the state government stepped in to

offer aid packages to most of the closed down plantations. This consisted of the AAY ration to the workers providing them with rice, wheat and lentils for the family and a monthly allowance of Rs. 1500 (GBP 14.83). Most of the workers alleged that they hardly ever got the money on time and the backlog in payment made it extremely difficult for them to manage their monthly expenses. This money and the ration were to be continued for one year from the time the plantation reopened, though the irregularities in payment of the cash continued. In August 2011, with the completion of one year after the reopening of the plantation, the scheme was withdrawn.

Physical configuration

With its self sustaining character with markets, schools and hospitals the plantations were designed as enclaves where the workers, staff and management work and live. Earlier research on plantation points towards a rigid separation between the tea plantations and the proximate townships. This perceived enclave nature of the plantation seemed to be much less in operation during my fieldwork as will be seen in this and the following chapters.

Daahlia

This plantation, at least at first glance, seemed to possess all the elements of a typical nameless tea plantation that the literature describes. Isolated, self sustaining in some ways, it looked every bit the enclave that tea plantations are portrayed to be. The misty hills of Bhutan rising at a distance where the lush green ended, added an enchanting quality to the mix. (Field-notes, pilot study, 11.10.10)

Daahlia is located around 40 minutes' drive from the nearest townships of Birpur on one side and Manikpur on the other. It is situated within a cluster of five gardens called Tejpur, Hamidpur, Lakshmanpur, Gagana, Makur. With the exception of Makur, the five other plantations belong to the same company. The nearest market to the garden is in

Raghavpur which is at a distance of 15 minutes by car. The rough sketch below gives an idea of Daahlia’s somewhat isolated location.

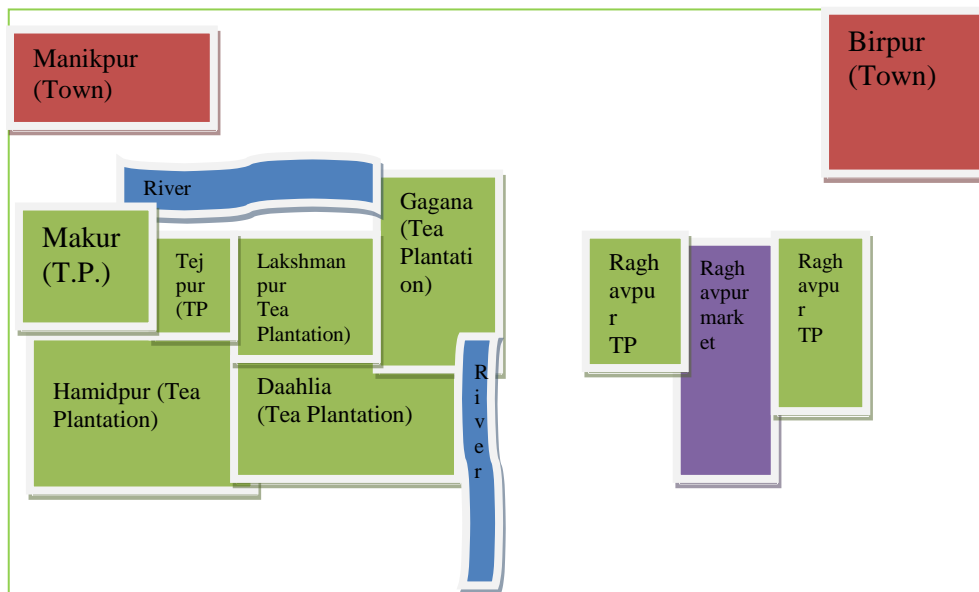


Figure 4.1
A rough map of the area around Daahlia garden

Legend

	tea plantations
	Towns
	Raghavpur market
	Rivulets
P	Tea Plantation

Daahlia has three divisions of the garden section, a factory and an office. In addition, it has a hospital with female and male wards to treat patients afflicted with high fever, diarrhoea or minor injuries. It is also equipped for simple deliveries and basic injections. For anything more complicated the doctor refers the patient to the hospitals in Birpur (or even Siliguri or Jalpaiguri depending on the seriousness of the ailment). There is an ambulance to take such patients (if they were workers) to the hospital. Though the hospital can be availed by all the residents of the garden, only the worker and his/her dependants are entitled to free treatment. There are three primary schools in the plantation where minimal fees have to be paid. The plantation also has places of worship

for Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. A plan of the tea plantation has been given in Appendix 2.

Kaalka

Kaalka is almost a study in contrast. The whistle of train as it made its way past or the honking of the long distance buses in the town bus stop float in making it impossible to forget that there is an outside world. In fact, the town and its realities have become part of the everyday reality of the people here, just as much the other plantations are for Daahlia. (field-notes, pilot, 14.10.10)

Kaalka tea plantation is right at the borders of the small township of the same name. It is also very close to another bigger township, Henryganj. Kaalka, the township, is surrounded by a few plantations on either side and Kaalka (the plantation) is one of them. Some of the other plantations are Raagini, Disha, Chakshupur, etc. The plantation is separated from the rest of the township by the train tracks. It only has one division. Unlike Daahlia which is situated entirely within a boundary, in case of Kaalka, the garden sections in themselves are together, while the labour villages are scattered. Some are located in close proximity to the garden or the factory while the other villages are spread across the township, often extending almost to Henryganj. In the rough sketch below we get a sense of the distance of Kaalka with the townships and the various landmarks around which the villages were located.

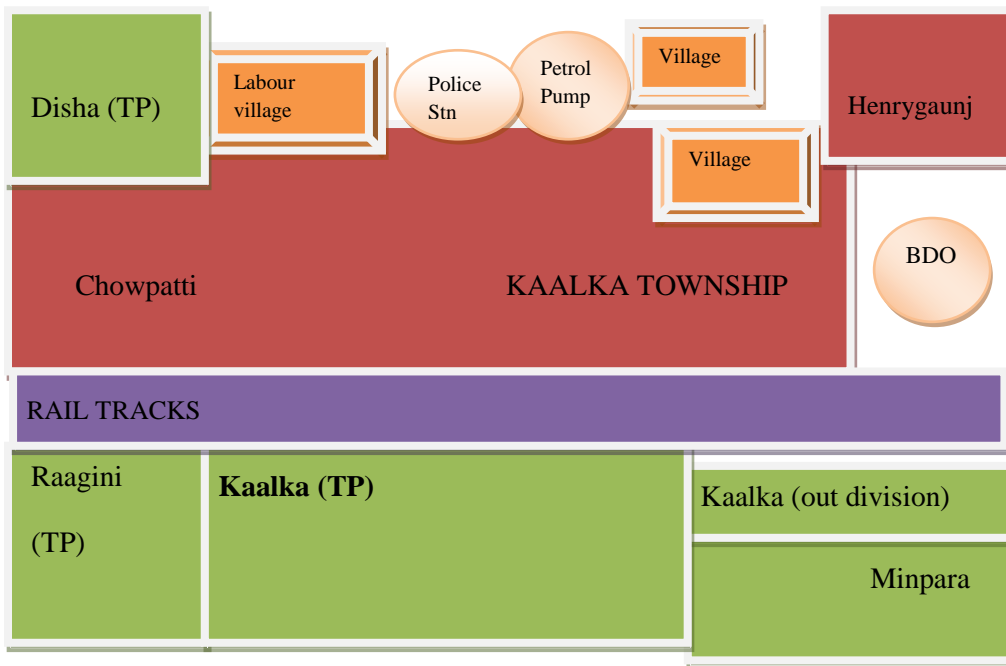


Figure 4.2
A rough map of the area around Kaalka plantation

Legend

	tea plantations
	Towns
	Rail tracks
	Kaalka Labour villages
TP	Tea Plantation
BDO	Block Development office

In the main area of the plantation there is the office and factory. There is a hospital which had just started to function in a limited way. One part of the hospital has been leased to a NGO while the other half of the hospital premises is the plantation hospital. There is an Outdoor section where the compounder prescribes medicine to the patients according to his diagnosis. There is also an operation theatre where injections and stitches for simple injuries are given. For any serious ailment the patients are referred to the government hospital in Henryganj or to the district headquarters in Alipurduar. Most of the villages have a shop, and places of worship. There are no primary schools in the plantation and for most

things they availed the local services available in the two townships. A plan of the tea plantation has been provided in Appendix 3.

Following this description of the physical configuration of the plantation, I now move onto a snapshot view of the other actors who while seemingly located outside the workers' day-to-day life nevertheless play a crucial role in their interaction with the outside space.

Outside actors who were not quite outside

The plantations being a part of larger socio-political and economic space have interaction with other actors within that space. It is outside the scope of the thesis to examine in great detail the role of these actors in the plantation space, but their presence has to be acknowledged in order to contextualise the following chapters.

Trade unions: After 1950s the trade union movement spread rapidly in the region with the result that almost all the national trade union federations had their unions in the Dooars' plantations such as the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), United Trade Union Congress (UTUC), Hindustan Mazdoor Sangh (HMS), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) as well the newly formed trade unions of GJMM and ABVP. There is a high degree of unionisation with most of the workers in the plantations being unionised, sometimes being affiliated to more than one union (Sarkar, 1996). Almost all local committee leaders are workers except in rare cases (Sarkar, 1996). In spite of high unionisation, the proportion of women in leadership positions is abysmally low (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998; Sarkar, 1996). In those very few cases where women are leaders, it is due to the absence of suitable male leaders (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998). Sarkar and Bhowmik (1998) argue that the high percentage of women workers' membership in the trade unions does not necessarily point to their active involvement. Rather, it is usually influenced by the husband, father, son or any other male kin's decision or membership in the union. Similarly, in case of negotiations with the management, etc.

the women hardly take part in such proceedings. This does not, however, mean that they are completely passive. There have been several instances of women being in the forefront of aggressive protests against the management due to the latter's rude behaviour, lack of redressal of grievances etc. (Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998, and Chapter 9)

With the Bonus Movement¹⁸ (1955) to demand the workers' pending bonus, movements for increase of wage through 1966, filling up vacancies and increasing employment (1969) the trade union movement in North Bengal region was a force to reckon with. But the long absence of any large scale movement since then has caused the trade union movement to enter a phase of stagnation (Sarkar, 1996). In recent times, the trade unions have declined in force and in legitimacy in the eyes of the workers. Presently, the activities of the trade unions are restricted to sporadic protests in individual plantations relating to bonuses, minimum wages, repair of quarters, supply of firewood etc. (Sarkar, 1996). But these are one-off, short term and without any long term effect. Additionally, to take any major decision the local leaders have to consult the central leaders. The latter sometimes prefer to maintain the status quo rather than causing a major upheaval while at other times they express their inability to pressurise the management or the government (Sarkar, 1996: 527).¹⁹

Panchayat: From 1993 the plantations have been included within the jurisdiction of the *Panchayati Raj*. Thus, the government schemes like

¹⁸ The bonus is a sum of money paid by the company to its workers annually on the basis of profits and productivity of the company. In the tea plantations this is usually paid during the festival time of Diwali. The workers in the majority of the tea plantations in West Bengal had not received their bonuses for over two years while the companies continued to make handsome profit. The movement was directed against this non-payment. Under the direction of the trade unions, the workers threatened to (and in some cases did) strike work till the dues were paid. Finally the state government intervened and most of the plantation owners claimed to have paid up.

¹⁹ In chapter 9, illustrations of this restricted role of the trade unions have been given through ethnographic data.

National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA),²⁰ widow's pension,²¹ Indira Awaas Yojana²² were applicable to the plantations placing them within the larger political space of the district and the state. This inclusion into the larger political narrative was further consolidated in the last 10 years of the plantation history with the outbreak of the economic crisis when the state government had to step in and introduce relief measures. When Kaalka was closed, NREGA provided one of the main sources of income for the workers. The most common forms of work were road building, making banks, etc., inside the plantation (as the road, rivers flowing through the plantation are the property of the government) though on some occasions the work is also done outside the plantation area. Through these forms of interaction the plantations became less and less bounded. In both the plantations, as in most other places, the applicants received much less than 100 working days. The payment was also irregular often being as late as 8 months.

The labour villages in Daahlia fell under two separate *panchayats*²³ both under RSP-CPIM. While in one of the *panchayats*, both the representatives from Daahlia were male, in the other the lone

²⁰Through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, the Government of India aims to provide for enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult member volunteer to do unskilled manual work.<http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>. Accessed 21.10.12.

²¹Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS), implemented by Government of India, is the pension given to widows aged between 45 and 64. The applicant should be of a household below the Poverty Line. The pension amount is Rs. 200 (GBP 1.97) per month per beneficiary and the concerned state government is also urged to provide the equal amount to the person. <http://purbamedinipur.gov.in/DPRDO/Schemes/IGNWPS.pdf>. Accessed 20.10.12.

²²Indira Awaas Yojna (IAY) was launched during 1985-86 as a sub-scheme of the Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme (RLEGP) and continued as a sub-scheme of Jawahar Rozgar Yojna (JRY which is a poverty alleviation scheme for creation of supplementary employment opportunity) since its launching from April 1989. It has been delinked from the JRY and has been made an independent scheme with effect from 1 January 1996. The objective of IAY is primarily to provide grants for construction of houses to members of Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes, freed bonded labourers and also to non-SC/ST rural poor below the poverty line. <http://zpraichur.kar.nic.in/iay.htm>. Accessed 20.10.12.

²³The names of the gram *panchayat* blocks cannot be given to protect anonymity of the plantations.

representative was a Nepali woman. Kaalka came under a single *panchayat* which was Congress-led. Of the five members, one was a Nepali woman. In both the cases, the women's husbands were party members and had been members of the *panchayat* during previous terms. In an interview I took of the *panchayat* member from Daahlia (where she insisted her husband remain present), she told me that her husband '*guides her work as he has better understanding and experience of panchayat work*' (Daahlia, 20.11.11). In case of the *panchayat* member from Kaalka there were allegations that her work was actually done by her husband who was an important party member in the region. The workers alleged that she does not even bother to go to the *panchayat* office and he goes there instead. Since I was not able to access the said *panchayat* member or her husband I could not explore these claims further, but even in themselves they do provide some insight into how the *panchayat* much like the trade unions remained primarily male institutions.

NGOs: There was no presence of NGOs in Daahlia. Due to the prolonged crisis period, Kaalka had come to the many NGOs' and social activists' notice. Once the plantation reopened and slowly started getting back to its feet, the army of the NGOs and activists left. At the time that I went to Kaalka, three months after it reopened, there was only one NGO, Svatantra, which was still actively working in this region with a long term interest. Svatantra was attached to the CPI (ML) which was an extreme left group. Though having its branch in most parts of Dooars, it was most active in the Kaalka region. The leadership of Svatantra was composed of Bengali intellectuals who had some experience of political activism. Under them in each region there was a committee consisting of the workers of the tea plantations of that area; the ordinary members were mainly from among the workers. Some of the workers of Kaalka were quite active members of Svatantra, carrying out the local level organisation and membership formalities, though the leadership had the final say in the overall organisation of protests, etc.

The organisation works towards empowering the workers by making them aware of the laws and their rights. It aims to instil (political) consciousness among the workers and instruct them on the correct procedures through which to make demands. They have been instrumental in organising movements with the workers of various plantations in that area demanding a range of labour welfare measures both with the management of the plantation and the local administrative authorities which will be dealt with in chapter 9.

In order to understand the plantation as a social space, some sense of the workers themselves is required. With this broader setting in mind, the next section deals with the background information of the plantation workers.

PLANTATION WORKERS

Ethnic composition

The primary workforce of both the plantations is mixed ethnic population consisting of Adivasis, the tribal population hailing from Jharkhand, and Nepalis, who had migrated to India many decades ago. The estimates made here are from the fieldwork data and conversation with people as there is no official record of the numbers on the basis of ethnicity. In Daahlia, the proportion was 60 per cent Nepalis and 40 per cent Adivasis. The clerical staff consists of Bengalis, Nepalis and Adivasis with the former in the majority. The managerial staff is more diverse coming from different parts of the country. In Kaalka, the Adivasi and Nepali population are roughly equal among the workers. The staff is almost completely Bengali and of the two assistant managers, one is Bengali and the other Nepali.

Both the Adivasi and the Nepali population are mostly members of the lower castes (many of them falling within the government's classification

of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes²⁴), though there were some Brahmins among the Nepalis. Among the Adivasis the common caste/tribal groups are Munda, Oraon, Kujur. Among the Nepalis some of the common ones were Rai, Gurung and Lama.

Religious composition

The religious composition of the workers did not vary much in the two plantations. The majority of the Nepali workers are Hindus though there is a good proportion of Buddhists. Among the Adivasi workers also the majority are Hindus though there is a substantial proportion of Christians. In Daahlia, all the Christians are Catholics while in Kaalka there is a small number of Protestants too. In Daahlia there are almost no Muslims present while in Kaalka there is a small group of Muslims consisting of about half the population of one village. The table below provides a rough estimate of the proportions.

Table 4.2

RELIGIOUS DIVISION OF THE WORKERS

Religion	Daahlia		Kaalka	
Hindu	Adv Npl	70% 65%	Adv Npl	60% 60%
Buddhist	Adv Npl	- 35%	Adv Npl	- 35%
Roman Catholic	Adv Npl	30% -	Adv Npl	35% 4%
Protestant	Adv Npl	- -	Adv Npl	- 1%
Muslim	Adv Npl	- -	Adv Npl	5% -

Based on rough estimates from fieldwork data.
 Adv:Adivasi
 Npl:Nepali

²⁴Though originally tribes, these groups have applied and attained a Scheduled Caste status. This, they claimed, gave them access to more opportunities. Some, however, remained Scheduled Tribes.

Political Configuration

While the region has seen the long domination of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and had been a Left bastion for over two decades, the political scene in recent years has been deeply influenced by the politics of identity and difference. After the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) replaced the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) around 2008 and once again raised an aggressive demand for a separate state, North Bengal has been in throes of ethnic unrest. The GJMM arose primarily in Darjeeling with a demand for separate statehood within the Indian Union for the Darjeeling area but the demand later extended to also include Dooars and Terai. The GJMM enjoyed the support of a sizeable section of the Nepali workers though not enough to make it a very big player in electoral politics. The Adivasis of the Dooars and Terai region have been largely opposed to this demand as they felt they would then be dominated by the Gorkhas (Bhowmik, 2011). The lead for this opposition was given by the Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad (ABAVP). They make demands for the recognition of the cultural specificity and identity of the Adivasis as people hailing from Jharkhand. Multiple hunger strikes as well as clashes with state officials and with each other have been the mode in which this conflict has played out in the region, thus adding to its economic turmoil (Meena and Bhattacharjee, 2008).

Numerically, the ABAVP is even less significant than the GJMM, but both these parties have a presence in the area. This is not because of their electoral capacity but due to the frequent strikes and events that they organise in which they enjoyed some kind of support from their respective ethnic groups. In fact, their ability to cause disruptions successfully has also made them more visible in West Bengal politics than their numerical strength alone would have. Apart from, these parties there are the Congress and the TMC. Both the parties have a sizeable

presence, especially in Kaalka where the *panchayat* is under the Congress. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a small player in the region, much of its success coming from its alliance with the GJMM.

The implications of the communities with different identities, caste wise, ethnically or religion wise, with different party affiliation living and working together will be analysed in the next chapter. In order to appreciate how these identities are played out within the context of the plantation as a social space, some information on the way the plantation is ordered as a workplace and the different types of work going on in the plantation is necessary.

HIERARCHY

The tea plantations have a strict employment hierarchy which is fundamental to their way of functioning.

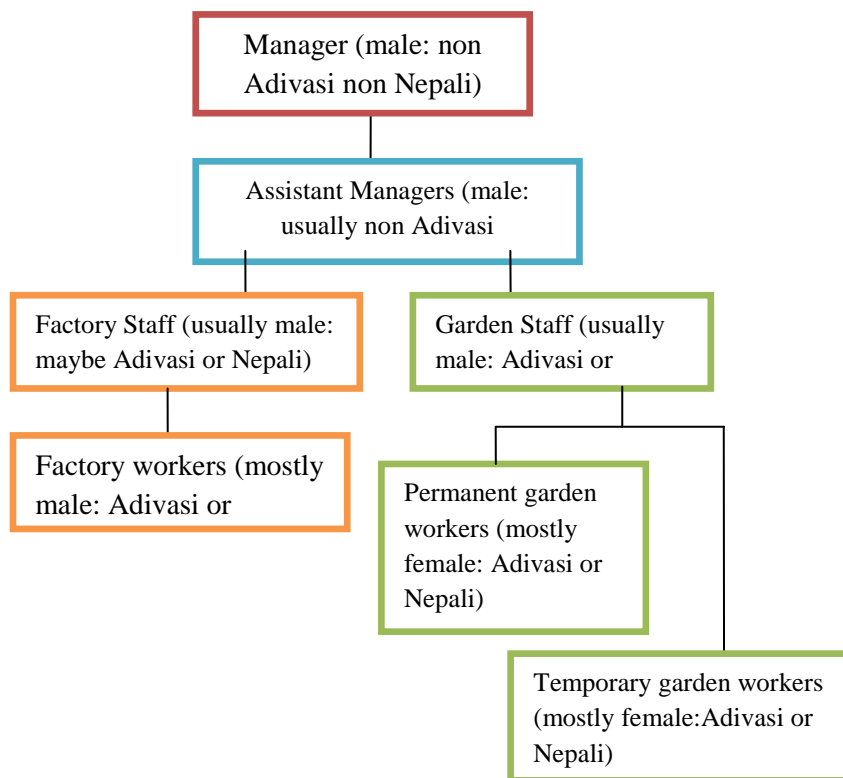


Figure 4.3Hierarchy of Tea Plantation Staff

As fig. 4.3 shows, the manager is the supreme authority within the plantation. As seen in chapter 2, he is portrayed as the father figure, the *mai-baap* (parent) who might be exploitative and dictatorial but ultimately unchallenged. His authority extends to include household issues, village disputes, etc. He is feared but there was an innate sense of trust vested in him. This perception of the manager is somewhat reproduced in Daahlia. The manager is ruthless in getting his work done and the workers and the staff fear him. In spite of all the insinuations, stories and nicknames that the workers employ against him, he is the final recourse for them also.

When my husband died and I needed wood I went to the manager. He is the final word and if he agrees who can say anything. Once he says okay the others will have to give it to me grumbling or otherwise. (Anasua, Daahlia, 04.12.10)

Quite like Anasua many other workers requested the manager for such things which are not directly in the domain of work. Though he did not always heed their requests, his position as the final authority and a guardian figure did not alter with the outcome of these requests.

In Kaalka, however, there was a departure from this paternalistic image of the manager as he was not very visible in the everyday workings of the plantation. He spent most of the time in the office and hardly ever visited the field or interacted with the workers. Towards the later part of my fieldwork the manager resigned and Raagini's manager doubled up as manager for both the plantations. On asking them whether this made a significant difference in their lives, one of the women said:

It does not matter to us who the manager or the assistant manager is; as long as there is a signature to release our payment, it has nothing to do with us. (Field-notes, Kaalka, 20.05.11)

The identification of the manager as primarily a signatory was a striking contrast from the omnipresent authority figure of Daahlia. It was the senior assistant manager who used to do the rounds and almost took

on the role of the manager of the garden. For the workers, this, however, did not establish him as the supreme authority. He was feared by the workers for his fierce temper but not perceived as the paternalistic figure. The fear and resentment that they felt remain limited to their work life; in their everyday household life, neither the manager nor the assistant manager played any role.

Below the manager are the assistant managers. In Daahlia, there are five assistant managers. In Kaalka, there are two. All the assistant managers are men. They are responsible for making sure the gardens or the factories (depending on their area of responsibility) are working smoothly. Though next only to the manager they do not evoke the same kind of authority among the workers. Below the assistant managers in both the gardens there is a *bagaanbabu* (garden-*babu*). He is responsible for the specific garden functions such as which section needs to be plucked, what work needs to be done and where, how many workers to employ for it. Under him, is the *munshi* (overseer). Each *munshi* is responsible for his division. His work is much the same as the garden-*babu* though restricted to only the division. In consultation with the garden *babu* and the supervisory staff under him he decides which sections in his division need work to be done and how many workers to employ. Since Daahlia has three divisions, there were three *munshis*. In Kaalka, there is only one division and hence one *munshi*. The *chaprasi* (assistant to overseer) is under the *munshi* and works as his assistant. In Kaalka there is no *chaprasi* while in Daahlia there is one for every division. Below them is the *sardar* (supervisor). The *sardar* is responsible for his team of workers and has to ensure that they complete the task set to them in a proper manner. He also has to check the work done and weigh the plucked leaves. Once he receives a command from the *munshi* or *chaprasi*, he would let the workers know where the next day's task was going to be. Though there was no rule regarding the supervisory staff, in both the plantations as well as other plantations I visited, all the *munshis*, *chaprasis* and *sardars* were men.

There is a crèche house for nursing mothers to keep their children. There are crèche mothers who are responsible for these children during the working hours of the mothers. In Daahlia, the Adivasi division has two crèche mothers while in the Nepali division all the babies were combined in one crèche with a single crèche mother. In Kaalka there is a single crèche house and there are three crèche mothers working in different shifts from 7:30 am to 3 pm. The other actor in the gardens is the *paniwallah* (water-supplier). He is responsible for providing water to the workers at work.

In the factory, the assistant manager is followed by the factory *babu* who is responsible for overseeing the smooth functioning on the factory floor. Under him are the factory *sardars* who are each responsible for the working of one room in the factory. They work in different shifts. There is the office staff that look after the ration, payment as well as other clerical work of the plantation. In Daahlia there is 10-15 staff, mostly Bengali though there were some Nepalis and very few Adivasis.²⁵ At the time of the research, there was only one Nepali woman and all the rest were men. In Kaalka all the five staff members were Bengali men. The office staff and the garden *babu* are staff, the *munshis* and *chaprasis* sub-staff, and the *sardars*, *paniwallahs* and crèche-mothers are service-staff. Accordingly their wages are also graded with the *paniwallah* getting the lowest wages in this category.

Below the staff categories are the workers, both men and women. At the time of the study in Daahlia there were approximately 1850 permanent workers while in Kaalka the number was 1303. The workers in the garden are mostly though not exclusively women. In the various types of work, which are explained later, the women are the main workforce. Spraying pesticides is the only primary garden work exclusively done by men. While all the other work in the plantation has

²⁵Exact numbers cannot be given as they kept changing quite frequently and the numbers thus, varied even during the period of fieldwork.

equal pay, Rs. 66.68/day (GBP0.66), which is the lowest pay in the garden, the spraying work is better paid at Rs. 80/day (GBP 0.79). In both the plantations the factory work is mostly done by the men. The factory daily wages are Rs. 70/day (GBP 0.69).

Apart from the permanent workers there are the temporary or *bigha* workers. They are of two categories: *bagaan bigha* (temporary workers from the plantation) and *bastibigha* (workers from the villages). The *bagaanbigha* are generally non-workers from the worker's family. For the *bastibigha* contractors supply the required number of workers. In Daahlia in 2010–11, the *bagaan bigha* was approximately 900 and *basti bigha* 200. In Kaalka, there was no *bastibigha* and, as the plantation has just started functioning and hardly needs extra workers apart from on an ad-hoc basis, thus, there was also no fixed number of *bagaan bigha*. The *bigha* workers are employed for plucking as well as some other work such as sickling, weeding, etc. They get the same wages as the permanent workers but do not get the other benefits that the permanent workers are entitled to such as the Provident Fund, gratuity, living-quarters, ration, bonus, etc. They are employed for about 8 months in the year.

TYPES OF WORK

The hierarchy illustrated above points to a clear gendered division in the work which will be analysed in chapter 7. Here I will provide an overview of the types of work.

Plucking is the single most important work in any plantation, the backbone on which the industry is based. This consists of picking the tea leaves from the bushes and storing them in bags. Once weighed, the leaves are taken to the factory for processing. Plucking proceeds along *melas* which are lines of tea bushes. It continues for almost the whole year though the entire period is not season. At the season time (April–September), the workers have a task or *thika* that they have to pluck to get their daily wage. The task is fixed according to the quantity of leaves

available and varies from 10–25kgs. Leaves plucked by the workers in excess of the set task are called *doubli* or extra. For *doubli* a worker gets 50 paisa (GBP 0.004) for every extra kg up to 5 kgs and Re 1 thereafter (GBP 0.009). Generally the workers are able to meet the task and pluck quite a bit of *doubli* in the peak season. If the leaves are less, however, meeting the task becomes difficult. In spite of being one of the most important tasks in the plantation plucking remains among the lowest paid jobs in the hierarchy. Each plucking team²⁶ usually has two *sardars* and one *paniwallah*. In Kaalka, there is one set of supervisory staff for the first half and another for the second half of the day.

A standard workday for the pluckers is eight hours. In Daahlia, they have to report to work by 7:30 am. The first weighing is at 9:30 am and then another at 11:30 am following which the workers have one and a half hours off for lunch. They come back to work at 1 pm. The next weighing is at 2:30 pm followed by the last one at 4 pm with which the work day comes to an end. During the off season period (roughly from November to January), the work is for half-day till 1 pm. There is no *thika* at that time. In Kaalka, the timings are the same for half-day work in the off season. But the work day in the season is structured a little differently. The work starts at 7:30 am and the first weighing is at 10 am. The next weighing is at 12 noon after which the workers have an hour off. They have to, however, stay in the garden eating and relaxing there and are not allowed to go home as in Daahlia. Work resumes at 1 pm and the final weighing is at 3 pm after which their day's work is over.

There were two types of plucking—*foot* and *jungli*. The *foot* workers have to pluck, usually from the young plants, according to a measure. The *jungli* workers do not have to pluck according to any measure. They are assigned the older bushes which have grown to quite a height hence forming the jungle (from which the name *jungli* came). *Foot* plucking is

²⁶There is no fixed number of workers per plucking team within a division. The number is determined according to the size of the garden sections to be plucked. It can vary from 50–200 workers.

held to be a more skilled job and usually one has to start in the *jungli* before graduating to it. In spite of it being a more skilled job the wages for both the jobs are the same though in *foot* section the opportunity for *doubli* is greater.

Pruning is a seasonal task, done in the winter months from November-end to January. It consists of trimming the bushes to a size and shape which will enable it to draw the maximum nutrients and grow well in the next season. There are three types of pruning—Light Skip, Medium Skip and Deep Skip. The differences relate to the type of trimming and the types of knives used for it. While Light Skip is done by the women the other two are done by men. Pruning is done only by the *foot*-pluckers. From the end of November they no longer pluck and are sent to prune the bushes. Pruning is half-day work as it is physically draining and once it is past noon with the sun glaring, it is impossible to carry on. It is task based work and once the task is finished the worker can go home. There is no system of overtime or *doubli* in this. There are one or two *sardars* to supervise the work and a *paniwallah* to provide them with water. There is no system of mixed pruning, the men and women work separately.

In the last couple of years, there has been an effort in Daahlia to mechanise the Light Skip pruning. Even considering the costs of investment in the machine, running and maintenance costs, machine pruning seemed to be more profitable for the company. One worker wielding a machine could do work equivalent to four workers for the pay of one. The workers, however, alleged that the machine does not do the work as perfectly as the hand does. The bushes are cut unevenly and often they are cut far too deep to allow any growth. These bushes then dry up and die. Thus, in the final sense it does not seem that profitable as these pruned bushes would not yield good tea leaves. When I asked the manager the same question he confirmed their fears saying that it was not as good as hand pruning though he dismissed the claim that the bushes dry up. He explained to me that even if the initial costs are higher

eventually machine pruning will turn out to be more profitable. Given the growing labour shortage, they have to make these provisions for the coming years when this crisis will escalate.

Apart from these, the other tasks performed by the workers in the garden come under maintenance work and are mostly done in the off season (November to February). Those done by the women are sickling or *jhorni* (cutting off the lower branches and buds of the bushes with a sickle so that the nutrients of the bush do not get used up in the lower branches but reach the top), *kholni* (digging the ground and root of the bush, thus, loosening the soil to ensure that it soaks in enough moisture), weeding (tearing off undergrowth with a sickle so that the weed does not deprive the bushes of nutrients). Men were employed in digging ditches to ensure that the water does not stand and cause the bushes to rot.

The other important work which is done all the year round is in the nursery. There are two ways to do replanting: by cutting branches from older bushes and grafting them to form new saplings and through seeds. Both the plantations use the former method as it yields faster. In Daahlia, there is a nursery where the new saplings are grown. It is an elaborate process with its own set of trained and untrained workers, *sardars*, etc. The growing of the new saplings is done by a group of eight to ten trained men as it is held to be specialised work. This includes cutting the buds from the mother plants and planting them in the tubes to sprout out as new plants. Other work in the nursery like building the sheds is also done by men, and filling soils and other such tertiary work is done by women. The nursery work is permanent half-day work. This makes it a coveted task. The second part of the nursery work is replanting. Once the saplings are ready, they are taken by trucks to the relevant sections of the nursery and replanted there.

Earlier Kaalka also had its own nursery but once replanting was over (many years ago) it was shut down with the plan of opening it as required. When the fortunes of the company fell, the nursery was never

reopened. Now the saplings are bought from outside and then planted in the new plantation-section. While in Daahlia this is done by the plantations workers, in Kaalka this work is often outsourced by the company and given to contractors who then use the labour of the non-workers. The contractors employ non-workers from the labour villages to do the work. The preparation of the new sections by planting shade trees and looking after the saplings once they are planted and digging ditches is done by the garden workers in both plantations. The work in the new sections is in two shifts for the garden workers—some work in the first shift and some in the second.

Spraying the bushes with pesticides and insecticide is central to the survival of the plantations. The spraying team consists of men. There is a mixer who makes the solution and the team of sprayers who also have a *sardar* to oversee them. The work is half-day work and in the second shift there could be a fresh team. But usually those who do the first shift also do the second shift as overtime thus, enabling them to earn double *hazira* (daily wage). The conditions in which the spraying takes place are even less healthy than the other tasks performed in the garden. The men are not given any protective gear in terms of masks, eye protectors, gloves or boots. They use makeshift masks by tying a cloth around their mouths to prevent direct inhaling of poisonous fumes. These are naturally not enough and accounts of sprayers developing cancers or tuberculosis were common.

Factories: Processing work is carried out in the factory. This consists of drying, roasting, filtering, grading and finally packaging the tea leaves. Each of these tasks is performed in different rooms with their own *sardars*. In both the plantations factory-work is mostly mechanised. While in Daahlia most of the tea processing units have been mechanised long back, in Kaalka it is only after reopening that the factory was renovated and reopened with new equipment. All the functions are performed by the machines, the task of the workers is to load and unload the tea in its various stages from the machines. There is also packaging

work which is often done by women. It is usually the only work that the women perform inside the factory.

OUTMIGRATION

The period when I did my research was the beginning of what could be a transition period in the plantation society. The low wages and the lack of other facilities made it difficult for the workers to make ends meet. Coupled with the increasing living cost were rising aspirations. The earnings of a family working in the plantation were not enough to meet its demands. Most of the workers having realised the necessity of education try to send their children to school and some aspire to put them in English medium schools. All of this means added expense. To satisfy these aspirations and often to meet the bare minimum cost of running a household, the workers or their family members have to look for jobs elsewhere. While some found work in the nearby towns others moved in search of jobs further away to Siliguri, Kolkata, Delhi, Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai and sometimes even as far away as Dubai and Kuwait.

Though it was difficult to arrive at an exact figure in either of the plantations, it was mostly the men who migrated. They were either the non workers whose female kin have garden jobs or if they were workers they transferred their job to the woman in the family or even a younger male kin. In some cases, some continued to hold on to the job in the plantation while going away for a few months to earn extra money.

I was working in a hotel. I am returning there now with friends. The garden wages on its own is not enough to sustain our livelihood. If I work for all the 26 days of the month here, I will get a salary of Rs. 850. My son is growing up now and it is necessary to give him a good education. In order to be able to afford this I have to go out and earn money. (Rajiv, Daahlia, 19.01.11)

Though men have migrated more, women also migrate sometimes with the men and sometimes on their own. In Kaalka with the closure of the garden for over ten years, outmigration picked up. Even in Daahlia it was a constant phenomenon and at least one person from each extended family was found to be working outside. With the increasing labour migration, labour shortage in future becomes a distinct possibility, something which Carovan, one of the *sardars*, points out in the quote below.

He points to the women working around him and says that many of their husbands send around Rs. 7000–8000 to them every month. Just imagine if they can send this amount how much they will be earning. Why will they want to stay here then where they have to work so hard to maintain a hand to mouth existence? In a year or so they will start taking their families to settle with them to those places where they work. The plantation will then face a real labour crisis. Already there are so few men here. (Daahlia, 23.04.11)

CONCLUSION

Daahlia and Kaalka have a few obvious differences which held some ramifications for my research. Daahlia is a more prosperous plantation while Kaalka had been crisis ridden for over a decade. Additionally, it has changed ownership several times typically always having been owned by smaller companies. These basic differences have their implications in other ways too. In spite of these divergences there are notions of gendered spaces, sexual division of labour, etc., which operate much the same way in both showing that some of these discourses have a more universal nature. Using the context provided here I will now explore and analyse what implications the features described above have in offering a better understanding of the plantations as intersectional spaces.

Chapter 5

Identity and Belonging through the Lens of Intersectionality

'We are still junglis to them'

The culture of Bengal is not only the culture of Kolkata, other cultures like our culture, our dance, etc., form an essential part of this culture. We are denied this space of recognition or acceptance. From here ill feelings and finally a feeling of alienation are born. It is by ignoring North Bengal for so long that separatism has emerged here. Many a time I have been hurt at how the artists from South Bengal get all the prizes, recognition and publicity while we are given nothing. The fault lies with the government and other politicians in the way they term people living here as foreigners. In their speech and action they breed the feeling and give a sense that the people here do not belong to this country but are actually foreigners. (Kajiman Goley, Kaalka, 21.10.12)

The words of Kajiman Goley, a worker and also a grassroots trade union leader, convey an understanding of identity and its recognition. Having long been involved in a struggle for the cultural recognition of the population living and working in the tea plantations (including both the Nepalis and Adivasis), Goley's sense of injustice points towards the larger problems of intersectional identities.

People's identities are not homogenous but are multiple and intersecting. Just as the plantations are gendered spaces, they also are other spaces. Intersectional identities are naturally not exclusive to the women workers but evidenced among the male workers, the staff, the management, etc. By exploring the multiple dimensions (such as caste,

race, ethnicity, education, etc.) in the analysis of a single category—in this case women workers—I will illustrate not only the complexities but also how they are managed (McCall, 2005). After a theoretical discussion I have pulled out some of these individual categories which were significant in the lives of the women and explored how these frame them. I have then used the workgroup as an analytical plane to explore how these multiple identities intersect with each other.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Theoretical framework

Crenshaw (1991:139) defines intersectionality as the multi dimensionality of marginalised subjects' 'lived experiences'. Challenging the concept of universal sisterhood intersectionality unearths the complex, varied and often contradictory effects which ensue 'when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). For analytical convenience I approach intersectionality through the notions of identity and belonging.

Identity:

To understand how the social world is constructed, there is a need to account for the multiplicity of identities. Identities tend to become naturalised. These naturalised discourses on identity homogenise social categories. All who belong to a particular social category are deemed to have the particular natural attribute, specific to the category, in equal proportions (Yuval Davis, 2006a: 199). Through the use of categorical attributes the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion are then drawn, through which behaviour is regulated and evaluated, resources are distributed, etc. Thus, the interlinking grids of different positionalities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, stage in the life cycle, etc., create hierarchies of differential access to a variety of economic, political and cultural spaces and resources (Yuval Davis, 2006a: 199). These

hierarchies are not static but are fluid and contested (Yuval Davis, 2011: 12–13).

The multiple strands of one's identity are not additives, they are mutually constitutive. Leaving aside contextual specificities, the varied social identities through which social relations are organised and understood are mutually constitutive as well as reinforcing and naturalising the other (Shields, 2008). No person is a passive recipient of their identities but rather practices and actively engages in each aspect of it, which in turn is informed by the other identities possessed. Not being a set of discrete identities, they are relationally defined, understood and performed. In the concrete experiences of oppression, however, the social identities are always intermeshed with other social identities (Yuval Davis, 2011) such that a woman worker's gender identity interacts with her identity as working class, tribal, etc., to determine her social position and lived reality. But any attempt to essentialise her 'tribal origin' or her 'womanhood' or 'class' as a specific form of concrete oppression results into a fragmentation. While not all identities play the same central role everywhere, labelling which identities are central and which are otherwise is not a useful way of understanding intersectionality.

Belonging:

In spite of being distinct concepts belonging is constructed through narratives of identity (Yuval Davis et al. 2006). People experience belonging or non-belonging to a space on the grounds of varying intersectional identities. Thus, belonging within a space becomes part of naturalised everyday practice which becomes articulated, politicised, and significant only when threatened in some way (Yuval Davis, 2006b, 2011). Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are often spatial—conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed on the globe (Rowe in Yuval Davis, 2011: 10). But space of belonging, does not only refer to physical material places. The process by which individuals endow a space—physical or conceptual—with meanings and feelings gives them

a sense of place (Rose, 1995). This subjective attachment to the space is related to people's identities. Moreover, belonging can be experienced in regard to multiple spaces simultaneously (Yuval Davis et al. 2006). All people belonging to a space do not belong to it in the same way. Correspondingly non-belonging or exclusion can also be performed and experienced in multiple ways within the same space or a range of spaces. Belonging is often achieved through struggles and negotiations. Even when individuals belong to a certain group or space, this does not preclude conflicts and struggles within it. Thus, hierarchies as well as social relations are spatially expressed and experienced (Cresswell, 1996). Sibley (1995:72) points out that, spaces are both the medium and outcome of practices that they organise.

Identities become most prominent or easy to identify at the time of difference or crisis, such as the closure of Kaalka for 10 years. These moments provide a glimpse of the understandings of the various identities and also the way in which they are negotiated. Using an intersectional framework thus, makes it possible to explore aspects of non-belonging in a space which is perceived as 'home' and draw out the internal exclusions and marginalisation which problematises one's belonging in that space (Crenshaw, 1991).

Now returning to the opening quote by Goley, we can already begin to trace the multiplicity of identities which regulate the feelings of belonging and non-belonging among the workers in the tea plantations. Intersectionality research has debated the position of individuals or groups with multiple subordinate group identities. Not fitting into the prevailing androcentrism or ethnocentrism—the women workers of the tea plantations, belonging to a tribal origin and lower caste, possess multiple subordinate identities that might not correspond to the stereotype of their respective subordinate groups (Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach, 2008). This leads to what Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach (2008: 383) call intersectional invisibility. Challenges of misrepresentation, marginalisation and disempowerment tend to be the prominent features

of the experience of people with multiple intersectional subordinate group identities. The intersections within the margin might not always be in relation to the centre but to other marginalities (Rao, 2005a: 362). Thus, the context within which the women workers are studied relates to their relative positioning within a hierarchy of marginalities. Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach (2008) identify this process of invisibility to proceed along three channels: of historical invisibility through misrepresentation or de-emphasis in the mainstream historical narrative; cultural invisibility through the failure of cultural representations to capture the distinctive experiences of these subordinate groups by organising themselves around the dominant prototypes; and finally political invisibility by neglect of issues of their concern by advocacy groups. Through these subtle practices the women workers' experiences, perspectives and needs fallout with the prevailing social representations and discourses and their multiple intersectional identities are rendered invisible.

Approach used in chapter

While acknowledging linkages among social identities is quite obvious, explaining those linkages, or the processes through which these intersecting identities shape and define each other, is not an easy task. McCall (2005) outlines methods which could be used to understand and analyse these issues. The first approach, called 'anticategorical complexity', deconstructs analytical categories. It holds that there is too much fluidity and overflow to usefully understand social life through fixed categories. In contrast, the 'intercategorical approach' advocates that the categories can be used strategically to understand relationships among social groups and trace their change over multiple and often conflicting dimensions. In my analysis, I adopt the third approach that she speaks of, the intracategorical approach. While questioning the boundaries and the processes through which these categories are made up, I accept the analytical utility of the categories in question. The unidimensional portrayal of the women workers, thus, can be problematised by deconstructing it through the categories of ethnicity,

caste, religion and location. Instead of then accepting these as sacrosanct, however, I have tried to explore how these categories themselves are further broken down by aspects of identity which are often too specific to be classified as a category. By focussing on the neglected points of intersection between people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups (Dill, 2002: 5) this approach permits an unearthing of the complexity of lived experiences within this group. Thus, without denying the importance of categories, I explore the processes by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced and resisted in the everyday life of the tea plantation women.

INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN THE TEA PLANTATIONS

Not all workers do their work properly. While some work hard there are others who do not work at all. Otherwise the garden would not be in such a bad condition. There is different attitude here towards the 'black people' and the 'fair people'. While the former work hard, the latter gets away with everything. If they ask for half days or off, they easily get it. On the other hand when we, the black people, make such requests we are turned down. (Medha, Kaalka, Adivasi, Married, Hindu, 24.06.11)

Scott (1986) spoke of the necessity to introduce gender as an analytical category, feminism as a theoretical perspective, and male dominance as a major social institution to counter the neglect and misrepresentation of women's experiences. Rao's (2005a) work on Santal women's struggle for land rights, however, shows how the commonality of gender identity or assumption of unified gender interest is not sufficient on two counts. Firstly, cross-cutting identities of kinship relations, marital status, ethnicity, educational status lead women to oppose other women (and men) in staking their land claims (Rao, 2005a: 356). Gender relations cannot thus, always be essentialised as oppositional. Men and women often collaborate to guard their common interests just as women often conflict with other women to protect their interests (e.g. Rao, 2005a; Kandiyoti, 1988). Secondly, the

interpenetration of gender with other identities often renders invisible the gender component in its distribution of resources or establishing a hierarchy. Rao (2005b: 728) shows how ethnic identities often become default masculine identities in determining access to land resources. As a corollary to this, the women themselves often do not identify their gender identity as their primary identity vis-à-vis ethnic, caste or other identities (e.g. Bowleg, 2008; Rao, 2005b). The account given by Medha, reiterates some of these points. As a woman worker, she does not identify the cause of their misery with the exploitative managerial class or even patriarchal structure. Rather it is ethnic differences which form the core of her understanding. She claims that she and the other Adivasi workers, referred here as 'dark people' are disadvantaged in comparison to the Nepali workers, the 'fair people'. In her analysis (seconded by others) the categories of gender and the idea of male dominance are insufficient. Rather, ethnicity and other aspects of identity involve many complex processes subsumed under these which give specific shape and form to the women's sense of belonging and lived experience.

Gender is socially constructed and it encompasses a wide range of different and often contradictory experiences, identities and social locations which cannot neatly fit into a master category (McCall, 2005). The actual social location of the women workers identified initially through the class category of workers and gender category of female will be explored along an axis of difference.

They are not only workers and women being two marginalised categories; they are women workers in the north of Bengal, an area ignored by the different governments. On top of that they are tribal and lower caste. So you can imagine what their plight is. (Bhavani Nandy, 17.11.11)

Nandy, a social activist and party organiser, argues that the plantation workers are marginalised not just as workers or women. There are several other subcategories which constitute them and their lived experiences. The academics working in this area, the social activists and the grassroots

party workers of both the governing and opposition parties accuse the state governments of indifference towards the tea growing belt of North Bengal. Chatterjee (2008) writes about two parallel crises in North and South Bengal in 2007. While there were widespread uprisings in protest of the then CPI(M) government's emerging support of neo-liberal capitalist development and its effects, at the same period a market crisis in the tea plantations in the North led to closure of plantations, starvation deaths and the like. The news of the latter reached the mainstream newspapers but did not elicit the same kind of outraged outburst as Singur-Nandigram.²⁷ This silence, it has been argued by scholars and activists alike, is typical to the fate of North Bengal. This opinion is echoed often by the others too.

Make some effort to see that this work detailing the condition of the people living here reaches the upper echelons of the government. There is much concern about the other 'jungle' (referring to Jangalmahal²⁸) but people here are also struggling to carry out their daily lives. The payment is so low and the plantation was closed for 10 long years, it was and still is so difficult to survive. The government should also direct its attention towards us. (Bikash, Kaalka, Adivasi, Hindu, Unmarried 31.05.11)

Bikash's view was supported by the women who were working there who also reiterated how the government has turned a blind eye to their miserable conditions. These extracts illustrate the different ways in which the sites within and around the tea plantations are shaped as spaces of belonging and non-belonging. Breaking up along various lines of identity, the women workers in the plantation often do not perceive themselves as a unified category. At a primary level the intersectional

²⁷The Singur-Nandigram crisis formed a very significant protest against the then Left Front Government's new economic policy of giving agricultural land to the industrial powers for building new industries. The policy and its accompanying violence resulted into a mass outburst of protest against the government.

²⁸Jangalmahal or the house of jungles is an area in West Bengal which has come to the attention of the government for the proliferation of Maoist insurgency in the area. In order to offset this, the government is providing welfare packages and looking to concentrate on the development of this underdeveloped and long neglected area.

identities seem to be ethnicity, caste, less prominently religion and also locational factors. I will now examine how each of these is perceived and lived by the women.

Intersectionality is a powerful analytical tool for unearthing how identities overlap. Their intersection has an impact on understanding positionality and belonging to a space. But there is a danger of fragmenting the women to a point where no kind of broader understanding is possible. I have focussed on certain key indicators of identity which emerged during fieldwork. Sometimes, the way one aspect of identity e.g. gender played out was cross-cut by the influence of other identities e.g. ethnicity. At other times, the variations in the cross-cutting categories did not manifest in significant differences. I have here identified the basic indicators of identity: a more extensive table can be found in Appendix 4.

Ethnicity

The towns in the tea belt in North Bengal are also inhabited by Bengalis and Marwaris who formed the economically powerful sections in the area. While the Bengalis are primarily the academic and professional classes, the Marwaris are the most prominent business community in the region with most of the bigger shops, petrol pumps, restaurants owned by them alongside their lucrative timber business. The Adivasis and the Nepalis hardly have ownership of any business. Apart from the plantations where they are workers, in the townships they are employed in service sector jobs. The economic domination formed along these ethnic lines crystallise their marginalised position even further.

If you look around all you will see are Bengali shops and also the Marwaris. They are the ones who own all the places here. All the money is with them, and we... we wash their dishes, sweep their floors and drive their cars, since we are tribal we are still junglis (wild) to them.(Pankhuri [Adivasi], Daahlia, Hindu, married 11.07.11)

Pankhuri's perception of Adivasis being subjugated because of ethnic identity echoes in the ideas of many of the women I spoke to. Their

economically weaker position, not only in the plantations but in the townships, seems to emerge from their perceived ethnically weaker position vis-à-vis the Bengalis and Marwaris, bringing to the fore an image of the docile body of the tribal under complete subjugation by the dominant ethnic groups. Casual conversation with Bengalis and Marwaris in the townships seemed to reflect similar sentiments.

They (Nepalis) are shouting Gorkhaland Gorkhaland! What will they do with Gorkhaland, will they be able to survive on their own? They are the real nasty ones, the Adivasis are better but drunkards...drinking has ruined both the communities. They are anyway foolish, they cannot survive without us. Show me one successful shop here owned by them. (Anonymous [Bengali], conversation in a tea shop, Birpur)

This extract is quite typical of the conversations I had with Bengali and Marwari residents of the townships. The contempt expressed here shows that at least a portion of the Bengalis and the Marwaris perceive the Adivasi and the Nepali communities as being economically non-viable largely because of their ethnic identities and resultant habits.

Evidence of difference along ethnic lines was also evident within the two communities. While there might have remained specific individual differences, within the indicator of ethnicity there did not seem to be broader variations in terms of religion, age, marital status, etc. The feeling of mutual distrust of the other ethnicities seemed to be a shared feature among the men and women of the plantations (though here I focus specifically on the women). The differences, as will be seen below, were evident in both plantations.

In Daahlia the two communities had separate divisions and villages in which they worked and lived. In their daily life, whether at work or in the neighbourhood, there was hardly scope for regular interaction as the villages were usually quite far apart. Their points of contact were the market, the office on the wage day, any fair which was held near the plantation, and occasionally on the roadside. They did not know each

other's language well enough to have a proper conversation and nor was there much scope of conversation, communion and inter-relation.

It seemed like I was in two plantations within the same space, there were similarities but there was distinctiveness too. The Mohanlal division (where the Adivasis worked) and the Babul division (where the Nepalis worked) could have been two separate gardens the boundaries between them were so sharply drawn. Each division had its own munshi, chaprasi, sardars, paniwallah and naturally workers. All of them almost without exception were ethnically of the single community. The villages too were similarly separate, though some located on two sides of the crossroad, accessed the same shops. While the demands of Gorkhaland plastered nearly every wall of the houses and shops in the Nepali villages not one such poster could be seen in the Adivasi section. It was an existence not so much of antagonism (though antagonism was often there) but of mutual exclusion. (Daahlia, field-notes, 25.11.10)

On being asked what the relation between the two communities were, the workers used to say, at least initially, that there was no antagonism. Only deeper probing revealed a mutual distrust and negative feelings.

You are mixing too much with those kala admis (black people-Adivasis). Do not go to their villages at night it is unsafe. (Madeeha, Nepali, Daahlia, Buddhist, unmarried 23.03.11)

It is not safe to roam around alone. The Nepali boys are always drunk and very dangerous, they always carry a khukri (knife) with them. That is why they get involved in fights and quarrels; they are very bad, totally spoilt. (Victoria, Adivasi, Daahlia, Christian, married 25.05.11)

The two quotes above give an idea of how the two communities perceive each other. The distrust translates into their warnings to me and to the young girls in the village, to be wary of the other community. In this case, it can be seen how age along with gender gives a distinct shape to how ethnicity plays out and is perceived. Once again it was the women's body and its perceived need to be protected against intrusion from an outsider that was used to verbalise the feelings of distrust between the two communities. For the younger women this lack of trustworthiness of the men of the other ethnic community took a special

dimension over and above the general dimensions of mutual distrust. Much work has been done on how the honour of the community, be it caste (e.g. Chakraverti, 1993, 1995), religion (e.g. Butalia, 1998) or nation (e.g. Yuval Davis, 1997) is mapped onto the body of the women. Chakraverti (1995: 2248) illustrates how the stringent control over the sexuality and even the physical body of the widows became the index for establishing and maintaining highest ranks in the caste system. Yuval Davis (1997: 23) have similarly spoken of the role of the women as symbolic border guards and embodiments of the collectivity, while at the same time being the cultural reproducers of the nation. The 'honour' of the woman, therefore needs to be safeguarded as it becomes a marker of community's honour and sanctity.

In Kaalka, by contrast, there were no separate work divisions with both the Nepalis and the Adivasis working together. The villages where they lived also reflected this inter-mixing. There were no pure Adivasi or Nepali villages in the plantation, though there could be more of one community than the other in a village. The structural arrangement of the plantation was conducive to intermixing. At a superficial level, the workers in Kaalka lived their lives on more inclusive terms. Most of the workers' groups were mixed ones having members from both the communities. They knew both the languages and could carry on conversations in either. This was, once again, a common feature irrespective of age, marital status, caste or religion.

I remark that the Adivasis and the Nepalis here do not seem to stay separately. They agree saying that there are no differences between the two communities. 'Some had tried to drive a wedge between us, mainly the political parties, but we did not let that happen. We are all working in the same place, facing the same difficulties then why should we be divided? Here there are no such divisions we all stay, work, eat, and laugh together'. (Field-notes, Kaalka, 28.05.11)

In the initial visits to Kaalka it was this lack of ethnic communal divide which I noticed. The two communities had neighbourly relations

within the village with intermixing, visiting each other's house in the evening. This also extended to the workspace.

Each group finds a shade to sit down and rest. Most of the groups had both Adivasi and Nepali members, eating, chatting and working together. Most of the women conversed in a mix of both languages... While we eat there is the sharing of the recipes. This was a mixed group like most others and it is obvious that both the communities have quite a good knowledge of the other's food and its names. (Kaalka, field-notes, 26-28.05.11)

As I became more familiar with the people and places I realised that under the apparent communion there were fissures. Unlike in Daahlia where the segregation was more everyday, in Kaalka the identities did not collide on an everyday level. It was usually at moments of interrogation (either by themselves or by me) or of crisis that the cracks were exposed. In effect the differences were really no less fundamental than that in Daahlia though these ethnic boundaries were set more subtly. Intermarriage between the two communities was not socially accepted in spite of the great deal of interaction on an everyday level. The cracks in the conviviality can be evidenced at these instances of crossing over. It was at this point that one's ethnicity (and other relevant identities as will be seen in the later sections) was most critically interrogated.

I ask them that given the close proximity in which the Nepalis and Adivasis live whether there have been incidents of inter-community marriage. They say that there have been many such incidents. But for this to be accepted in the society, the panchayat meets and the families have to pay a fine. Even after that, the bride or the groom from the other community cannot take part in any of the pujas and also cannot touch the dead body of the relatives from either community. They remain in some sense still ostracised by the society. (Kaalka, field-notes, 03.08.11)

Unless there were common festivals and ceremonies, they did not take part in each others' festivals.

Kakoli said, 'You should stay during bhai dooj. It is a very big festival of the Nepalis. The young boys and girls go from house to house

singing songs and dancing and take money from people for it. It is a lot of fun to see them.' I asked, 'Do they come to your homes also?' 'Yes', she says, *'they go everywhere in the neighbourhood. 'Why do your children not take part in it?'* 'It is a Nepali festival, how can our children take part?' (Kakoli, Kaalka, Adivasi, Hindu, married; field-notes, 22.10.11).

In spite of the fact that the performance and festivities are perceived by Kakoli and others as '*great fun*' the boundaries are drawn between the two communities at this point. The Adivasi children who play in the neighbourhood with these very Nepali children do not participate in their festival. In the perception of the Hindu members of both the communities, in spite of their shared religious identities and their apparent close relations, the festival in its performance remains exclusively Nepali. Viewed through the prism of age, the children's bodies remained undifferentiated at some level: they played together irrespective of their ethnic divisions. Certain spaces, however, necessitated constructing them as ethnic selves and hence creating boundaries (even though non-antagonistic) between them.

There are widely spread negative perceptions of the other which are not individual but commonly held community views. One of the consistent allegations that the Adivasi community make against the Nepali community is that they are lazy and use deception in their work.

'Yesterday we got into a quarrel with the sardar, we told him do not doubt our iman (honesty) we are not like the Nepalis.' Curious, I asked, *'What have the Nepalis done?'* 'They are cheats. They use deception all the time. At the time of weighing they put in their bottles, tarpaulin in the bag to increase the weight. Their bad practice is giving us all a bad name'. (Daahlia, fieldnotes, 15.03.11)

Much like Medha's claim in the last section, there is the perception of Nepalis getting preferential treatment from the *sardars* while the Adivasis have to continue to toil hard. This view of the alleged favouritism and negative feeling towards the Nepalis is expressed in other aspects also like getting holidays, etc.

This difference also extends to the standard of living of the two communities. Given that as workers, they have access to same wages and facilities, I noticed that the Nepalis were in most cases much better off than the Adivasis especially in Daahlia.

The contrasts between the two sides of the road were stark. On one side there were the pucca houses; though small in size, they were still built of cement with a fenced courtyard. The light shining from the windows and the sound of music blaring from the television showed that these houses had electricity. The other side of the road in contrast was almost submerged in darkness, the only light cast on it from the setting sun's last rays. The houses were dilapidated to say the least. Made of straw and earth these houses were clearly in the last stage of their life and it seemed to me that it will take only a strong storm to raze them to the grounds. Most of the houses did not also have electricity (Daahlia, field-notes, 11.1.11).

The more affluent village was inhabited by the Nepalis and the other by the Adivasis. Though this particular Adivasi village was an extreme example of the contrast, in general the Nepalis were better off than their Adivasi counterparts. This fact was acknowledged by both the communities. Again as an explanation certain accepted stereotypes were invoked such as the Adivasi's excessive drinking.

The factory sardar, at the end of the tour of the factory, asked me, 'you have been to both the communities, what do you think of their comparative condition?' 'I think the Nepalis are a little better off though I might be completely wrong. 'No you are correct; we try to live a better life. The Adivasis drink a lot; much of their earning is wasted in drinking, though it has lessened now. Among us there is drinking too but now people are educating their children so that they get better job, saving money to build proper houses unlike them only drinking and living in shambles'.(Daahlia, field-notes, 12.04.11)

The factory *sardar's* observation was the prevailing view. It was perceived that the Nepali community (once again irrespective of religion and caste) had woken up to the necessity of education and were channelling a considerable part of their resources on educating the children. A trend of high outmigration to other states has also been

evinced among the Nepalis. Those outstation members earn more than they would have earned in the plantations and sent remittances home enabling those at home to repair their house or do such other essential work. Though there was outmigration among the Adivasis as well, it was comparatively less and more recent. But this difference between the communities was explained by them usually through stereotypes rather than through a deeper exploration.

‘Though the Adivasis form 65 per cent of the population and the Nepalis 35 per cent, it is the latter that are ahead. In fact the Nepalis have even gone ahead of the Bengalis in terms of money, position and education. It is only we (the Adivasis) who remain at the place from where we started—backward and uneducated. Actually if a tree is bad, its fruits are bound to be bad. I work in the garden; when I retire my son will also work here and this system will continue. From an early age we develop the habit of drinking and the meagre money we earn is spent in catering to that habit rather than on development’. (Bahadur, Daahlia, Adivasi, Christian, married 15.03.11)

The core of the self-analysis expressed by *sardar* Bahadur was strongly supported by the women who were listening to the conversation. Pushpita, the nurse in the garden hospital in Daahlia expressed much the same opinion, citing as a proof the rising number of individuals from the families of the Nepali workers who had become staff over the past few years.

Though these are obviously quite broad generalisations, even looking at how the construction of these stereotypes come about and enjoy a certain amount of legitimacy gives an insight into the perception that the two ethnic communities have of one another and how that mediates their relation. As seen before, though other markers of identity sometimes combine to spell differences in these relations in most cases the way these relations play out between the two communities do not seem to differ significantly based on the other markers.

While the Nepalis and Adivasis are the two primary ethnic groups in the plantation, there are smaller sub-groups who tend to get subsumed

within the Adivasis. For these groups, upholding their ethnic identity vis-à-vis the Adivasis became extremely important.

Throughout the conversation they emphasise their Bihari origin. They explain to me that they are not Madesia (a local term for North Bengal Adivasi), rather they hail from Bihar. They have a distinct language which is quite separate from the language of the Madesia. The Kamar-line (their village) is entirely composed of Biharis...I ask them what their difference with the Madesia is. They explain that while the Madesia hail from Ranchi, Jharkhand, they come from the Munger district in Bihar. Hence their language and culture are quite distinct from that of the Madesia (Kaalka, field-notes, 27.05.11).

Though Kamar line (the village that they talk about) has both Adivasi and Nepali people living in it, the part that they occupy has been bounded by some markers of their distinct identity. Just before the first house in the area, there is a temple dedicated to their most popular deity. Also they frequently refer to the Adivasis as ‘the other’. Since there are some definite similarities between the Adivasis and this ethnic sub group of Biharis, their need to flag up the identity markers was central. They repeatedly emphasise that though they take part in *Karam* or *Jitiya* (the chief festivals for the Adivasis) their main festival is the *chhat* puja (which is the biggest festival in Bihar).

Thus, the differences between the communities are naturalised through stereotypes. The interactions, inter-relations and collisions between the different ethnic groups do not always take the same form even within the framework of these differences. The boundaries remain usually of exclusion though sometimes they take antagonistic and oppositional forms.

Caste

Unlike ethnic intersections, the role of caste identity was not very visible to me in the initial phase of my fieldwork in either of the plantations. As we saw in the previous chapter most of the workers belonged to low castes though there were also some upper castes such as Chetris and Goutams among the Nepalis. Given that I bore a high caste family name

which had the potential to create a caste hierarchy, I generally desisted from asking people their caste unless they volunteered the information themselves. I took this strategy based on lessons learnt through the pilot study and the initial weeks of fieldwork. My consistent enquiry about the caste of my participants made them assume that caste identity was important for me. Given that many of them were lower in the hierarchy, this made them uncomfortable. As my principal informants explained to me, this uneasiness was not so much because of our relative positionality within the hierarchy but rather from the assumption that caste was important in shaping my interaction with people. Not wanting to damage my relation with my research participants through harping on this I therefore did not enquire further about their caste in my future interactions. Therefore I observed intersections along the lines of caste more as a background phenomenon or when differences along caste lines were obvious, rather than exploring how the specific relations between different caste groups operated. Appendix 4, thus, also lacks details on caste groupings. Caste was a more prominent feature among the Hindus of both the ethnic communities but permeated to a lesser degree in the Christian, Muslim and Buddhist groups as well.

The caste groupings were not a prominent feature of the social life in the garden irrespective of religion, ethnicity or even age. At a superficial level different people within the same ethnic community had regular social interaction, visiting each other's houses, eating food served by the others making caste groupings seemingly marginal in the social space of the plantations.

We have all the castes in our group. That does not really matter.
(Budhni, Kaalka, Adivasi, Christian, unmarried 30.07.11)

It was only after passage of considerable time that I could spot intersections along caste lines. In their interaction with me I became aware of the caste intersections underlying the identities. Before beginning an interview and often during preliminary introductions many

of the women asked me what caste I belonged to. The consistency of this enquiry made me realise that though not immediately visible to the unpractised eyes, caste lines do operate in their lives. This became all the more prominent given the fact that I came from a high caste Brahmin family vis-à-vis their perceived lower rank in the caste hierarchy.

We were not sure whether you will have our food. You are a Brahmin after all. But now that we know, we will bring food for you tomorrow. (Kaalka, fieldnotes, 28.05.11)

It is good that you are staying at Deeptendu's place, he is Chetri, so he is Brahmin, will not be a problem for you to eat food cooked by them. (Daahlia, field-notes, 20.01.11)

These snippets of conversation revealed that in certain situations, the boundaries drawn along caste lines became visible. These lines did not seem to differ on the basis of marital status, ethnicity or any of the other indicators identified. The caste identities did not serve as lines of segregation on a day-to-day basis. There were boundaries beyond which, however, these collaborations could not extend. Perceptions about inter-caste marriages expressed this.

Nairita tells me Shiva's younger sister had married outside her caste. Hence the family had disowned her. She says that the person most proactive in this disowning had been Shiva himself. The sister lives with her husband in Henryganj. Shiva does not meet her in spite of going there nearly every day. In fact he does not allow any of his family members to meet her...It seems surprising to me that Shiva, who is one of the leaders of an organisation working for the worker's welfare, would be so adamant when it comes to his own family marrying outside their caste. (Field-notes, Kaalka, 15.09.11)

Inter-caste marriage was thus, a sensitive issue. In many cases, family's non-acceptance of marriage was on grounds of caste. One of the Nepali women in Daahlia recounted to me how her father never accepted her as she married a man from a caste lower than hers. Both these instances show that responses to inter-caste marriage were quite consistent among different generations.

Caste boundaries were also expressed on occasions like *pujas*. Different caste groups have different festivals which they emphasise as their primary *puja*. In explaining the varied *pujas* which existed in the Adivasi community in accordance to the different castes, Nabhitha laments that much of these are not practiced anymore and has been reduced to a couple of *pujas* for them like *jitiya* and *karam*.

Though Jitiya and Karam are big festivals, the Adivasis are not a singular category. For our caste the main festival is Sarul. Even Holi is a big festival. (Kaalka, 18.09.11)

During *pujas* while neighbours attended irrespective of the caste, it was only the people of allied caste groups who took part in the real preparation for the *pujas*.

Madeeha explains to me, 'in our everyday routine we do not use caste identities but on important occasions the caste rules will have to be followed. Kavidadidi is of a much lower caste than us, actually she is of the lowest caste. Though on a normal day we go to her place and can even have tea. But during pujas, it is not possible. In earlier days they used to have cooks from an upper caste specially to cook food for the upper caste invitees'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 24.03.11)

As the extract shows, the inter-relations of a 'normal day' were suspended on such special occasions and more rigid caste rules and boundaries operated.

Caste remained subsumed under other identities in the everyday life of the women workers and did not seem to play a pivotal role in their social interactions. But it represented a fairly consistent intersectional identity in specific moments asserting itself when people transcended boundaries or participated in festivals and other special occasions. While the way caste operated did not seem to differ significantly between the men and the women, as with other markers of identity, caste was more closely mapped on to the woman's body. As Chakraverti (1993: 579) argued sanctity of caste could not be ensured without guarding the women who formed the pivot of the entire structure and through whom the honour and

respectability of the men are ensured. Therefore the performance of caste rituals through *pujas*, etc. or maintaining the sanctity of caste identities through marriage seemed to rest more on the woman.

Religion

At a glance religion seemed even more insignificant in the social life of the plantations. As seen in chapter 4, both the plantations had presence of different religious groups. This did not in itself provide a volatile field with sharply etched religious boundaries. On the level of daily functioning, there was not much antagonism between the different groups within the neighbourhood as well as workspace. The differences, usually, manifested in their different festivals, certain food habits and rituals on special occasions. In these manifestations other indicators of identity such as caste or even marital status did not seem to play a visible role. But apart from the Hindus since the other religious groups also coincided with ethnic divisions (e.g. Christians were usually Adivasis, Buddhists were generally Nepalis and the few Muslims in Kaalka were Adivasis) ethnicity was also played out through performances of religious distinctiveness.

I noticed that many of the houses had flags on them. Knowing that such flags usually serve as markers for Buddhist houses I ask Madeeha whether that was so. She confirmed that Buddhist houses have these flags. They are typical of them...I notice the same coloured flags on the roofs of houses in Kaalka. I ask Janaki (Adivasi, Hindu, married) whether these are Buddhist flags. She says that they indeed are. (Daahlia and Kaalka, field-notes)

In a village where the Hindu inhabitants formed the majority, the flags served as markers of identity, distinctly marking the Buddhist houses as separate from the Hindu ones. Similarly some of the Christian houses had the Holy Cross on their roofs. These symbols did not really signify boundaries of exclusion by which the inhabitants of these houses sought to keep the others out but rather served to flag up their distinctiveness.

The festivals served a similar purpose. Every religion naturally had its biggest festival (which often differed from one ethnic group to the other, e.g. for the Nepali Hindus Diwali and Bhai Dooj were the biggest festivals while for the Adivasi Hindus it was Holi). The festivals, ceremonies surrounding them as well as the preparations for them provided the followers of each religion a space to live and perform their religious identities.

I asked what the biggest festival of the Adivasis is. Rupal says for the Hindus, it is Holi but for us it is Christmas. During Christmas you should come here once, it is very beautiful. The village is decorated with lights and there is singing and festivities. (Daahlia, Rupal, Christian, Adivasi, unmarried 31.03.11)

If you come during Ramazan we will give you vermicelli and payash (rice pudding). At that time it is customary to have that. We do half day work then and go back home to make the preparations. It is a busy but celebratory time for us. (Kaalka, Amina, 29.05.11)

The two quotes bring out how festivals shape people's self-identification. In the performance of the various ceremonies associated with the festival, such as cooking, decorating or preparing for rituals, I noticed that it was usually the married women within the religious-ethnic group who played the most prominent role, though the unmarried (usually younger) women also helped them out. Once again it showed how community markers were mapped onto the bodies of the women and through the various performances the women's bodies became symbols of the particular identity, in this case, religion.

In such instances despite being markers of difference and in some forms boundaries of exclusion, these intersectional identities are not always conflicting. They exist peacefully, usually in mutual exclusion. There are, however, instances of clash. These instances, much like ethnic identities, reveal deep seated distrust of other communities which does not express itself in the everyday life and interaction but is unveiled in moments of rupture. It is difficult to say whether the distrust is more fundamental than the everyday evidence of acceptance but at times when

the religious identities are interrogated; evidence of clash and suspicion can be observed.

One of the areas where the divide is most easily observed, again, is marriage.

Aradhana (Adivasi, Buddhist, unmarried) says even if inter-caste marriage is accepted, marriage to Muslims or Christians is a strict no-no. It is absolutely not accepted. This is because they are very different in terms of customs and taboos from the rest. (Kaalka, field-notes, 03.08.11)

Madeeha tells me that 'her (one of the women in the field) daughter ran away and married a Bengali. In the beginning they did not accept her but then they came and stayed here for a while. Finally they accepted.' In a soft voice she tells me 'we do not at all accept marriages to other religions, especially Muslims. In that case the relation completely breaks'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 12.01.11)

Thus, crossing over from one religion to the other was prohibited, and in most cases not even possible without bringing down severe sanctions like social ostracism on the couple's heads. From the evidence of my fieldwork the sanctions did not seem to differ significantly for men and women as they were both rejected by the communities. Neither was the response different in case of different caste groups. In the case of the women, however, this was accompanied by aspersions cast on her character and accusations of being immoral. The women's bodies were, thus, more strictly disciplined as markers of religion. While seemingly operating in a similar way religious identities and boundaries had different implications for the men and women which are sharply brought into focus in such events of crossing over.

Charges of favouritism and partiality towards other religious communities were also quite common among the minority groups. I observed this feeling of being persecuted and the resultant isolation among the Muslim workers in Kaalka. As has been seen before, there was already a prevailing opinion in the Adivasi community of being less favoured in comparison to the Nepalis. This was further heightened by

the Muslim communities' feeling of being a minority. Located in the Thana-Line (one of the villages) the Muslim houses were all in one area. The condition of most of these houses was quite dilapidated and they had no electricity. When I asked them about their poorer condition vis-à-vis the other parts of the village which looked to be a little better off, they hinted that they are the victims of communal differentiation.

We hear that we are going to get the Indira Awaas money, but we have not got it till now and it has been a year. The others have already got it. (Jahanara's mother, Kaalka, Adivasi, Muslim, married, 17.09.11)

This sense of being discriminated against also pervaded other spheres of their lives.

The conversation veers towards the leaves given by the plantation. The women say that they are given holiday during Independence Day, Republic Day, Christmas, Diwali, Holi and Dura puja. They complain that the company does not give any holiday during the three Eids. For 'their festivals' they have to take holiday from the company. (Kaalka, field-notes, 25.05.11)

Given the fact that Muslim women formed a very small percentage of the total plantation workers they often felt that their identity was lost and became subsumed within the bigger groups. The company recognised their specific festivals but these holidays were not plantation holidays but granted only to them, heightening their sense of isolation.

The instances of clash were also recounted by the Protestant Christian workers. This was the only religious group which did not neatly map onto an ethnicity. Protestant Christians were in both the Adivasi and Nepali communities.

The pastor says that they had selected a site for building the church and also obtained a No Objection Certificate from the company. However the people of the village belonging to other religions had obstructed this process and stopped them from building it. Hence they had no option left but to carry on their service in his house. (Kaalka, field-notes, 20.05.11)

The Protestant group's feeling of marginalisation was further heightened by the challenge to establish themselves as distinct from the more numerous Roman Catholics, who were identified by most people as 'the Christians'.

Panita (Nepali, Christian, married) and the pastor criticises the permissibility practised by the Roman Catholics. 'While we remain strict to our religious codes the Roman Catholics do not have such strict adherence hence they accept offerings (prasad) from other faiths, wear sindoor (vermillion), etc. None of these are allowed in Christianity and by doing things of this sort they are diluting their faith'. (Kaalka, field-notes, 20.05.11)

The 'dilution of faith' by the Roman Catholics to Panita justified the claim that they are the purer Christians and should be given recognition as such. This emphasis on purity was common in most of their dealings with other communities through refusal to be involved in inter-religious exchanges, etc. This seemed to be a part of their quest of being recognised as distinctive from their numerically dominant counterparts.

These exclusionary and sometimes even conflicting boundaries were drawn only when their religious identities came to be summoned or interrogated. It did not extend to social relations where they showed the same interrelation that was evidenced between the other communities. This again was not specific to the Protestant sect (though probably more visible among them). Much like caste identities, they show expressions of opposition and antagonism only when called into question. It was again the women's bodies who through performance of rituals, abiding by stereotypes were the ones who became the more prominent markers of religious identity.

Not everyone accessed the different spaces within the plantation in the same way and often the differences could be traced to differential understandings arising from different aspects of their identity. One such marker is age. Age or generational difference shaped the perspective of

the individuals differently and often brought them into opposition with each other.

Age/generation

The plantation workers span a wide age group with the youngest workers being sometimes as young as 18-19 and the elders 58 (which is the retirement age). Thus, workers in a work section span over a generation, inevitably causing inter-generational relationships. Interestingly these inter-generational relationships, while having distinct connotations within different ethnic and sometimes even caste and religious groupings, also show significant overlaps, sometimes cutting across these other indicators.

'We work hard and know the proper technique of working. The girls now do not work properly. Instead of preparing the bushes while plucking they grab randomly at the bushes to pluck the leaves and this totally spoils them. They do not know any of the techniques associated with plucking and other work in the garden'. (Caroline, Kaalka, Adivasi, Christian, widow, late 50s, 10.08.11)

Caroline's group was one of mixed ethnic and religious identities and the only common feature among the women was that they were among the older workers and the senior most members of the workers' team. Caroline's disapproval and lack of confidence in the younger workers is resonated by her group mates and other older women. There is a certain degree of pride in their more detailed knowledge of the garden work vis-à-vis the latter's lacklustre attitude to the same. Later conversations reveal that their perception of the younger women's work translates from the perceived shortcomings observed in the work to the characters themselves. Thus, they are criticised for being careless (not learning to pluck carefully), pretentious (feeling shy to walk in the township with their work baskets and work attire) as well as inefficient. There are also instances when the differences between the different generations are acknowledged in a light-hearted manner.

Subhadra (Adivasi, Hindu, widow, early 50s) asks Shalini (Adivasi, Hindu, divorced, late 20s) who had already reached the other side of the section, to pluck her mela while returning...Shalini explains to me that their group have finished their mela hence they were helping the others to finish theirs. 'There are times when we do not finish and the others help us. It is by this system of cooperation we together finish the whole section.' Subhadra says to me pointing at Shalini, 'they are young and we are old, they have to help us otherwise how will we finish?' Shalini replies, 'why? You are the real fertilizer (gobar mal) while we are the mixture (i.e. hybrid)'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 10.04.11)

Subhadra, the older woman, does not hesitate to ask Shalini, the younger woman for assistance using her advanced years as an excuse. In this case the generational difference though acknowledged, is not a source of animosity as Shalini light-heartedly throws back to the former their constant claim of having belonged to a purer time.

The generational differences also extend to cultural aspects. The two snippets of conversation given below will show how the older generation criticises the younger for not taking adequate care to internalise the markers of their tradition, and instead simplifying it, a dilution most prominently exposed in language.

The older women tell me that each caste has its distinctive language. 'But now the young people do not know this language well. They cannot themselves speak it or understand it very well'. Many of the younger Adivasi women had told me that even among themselves they cannot speak or understand their own dialect very well taking refuge in Sadri which has transformed from their adopted language for communication to their own and sometimes only language. (Kaalka, field-notes, 10.05.11)

This quote points to an interesting contradiction. Each of the castes has their own dialect and for the older generations this was not only their vernacular but one of the markers of their identity. The common *Sadri* was to be spoken only to those who did not understand the dialect. The importance of these dialects has reduced considerably for the younger generations. While this points to their greater interaction outside their caste, to the older generations' perception it remains synonymous with

loss of culture and identity. Similar incidents were also evidenced among the Nepalis.

There are three genders in Nepali. When we were young our father would scold us for not using these genders properly putting the wrong one at the wrong place. He said that was not proper Nepali. And look at the children now; they have no idea of these three genders at all. (Namrah, Daahlia, Nepali, Buddhist, widow, early 60s21.03.11)

In both these instances ethnic and caste identities coincide with generational identities as the older generation's ways of playing out their ethnic and caste identities in this instance clashed with the younger generation's performance of the same. The generational divide caused difference of opinion and perceptions within the social spaces of the plantation. Often the difference manifested itself in a contested hierarchy where members of the different generations laid claim to supremacy on the basis of experience (older generation), new ideas and understanding of technologies (younger generations) and other stereotypical attributes.

Intersections within the self?

Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)...such stories often relate, directly or indirectly, to self and/or others' perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious) might mean. The identity narratives can be individual or they can be collective, the latter often a resource for the former (Yuval-Davis, 2006a: 202)

The self is not a singular entity; it is constructed and reconstructed through the collapsing and forming of various identities. Not all these aspects of belonging remain constant or of equal importance to the individual. The way these identities play out might go beyond the established categories of ethnicity, caste, religion and age to form identity intersections among the women workers. The women comprise a collation of identities. In specific instances certain aspects of their identity assume dominant form while other aspects are downplayed. In that configuration, at that moment, the woman collaborates with some

and clashes with others. Some aspects of identity like gender, caste, religion or ethnicity are not usually challenged in the day-to-day life of the plantations and by challenging them in this specific context not much can be learned. There are other aspects like work group affiliation, marital status, generational perception which are interrogated on a more everyday level. Thus, while no part of an individual's identity is cast in stone, there are some which are more fluid than others.

The narratives of identity are not consistent and at instances can be even contradictory. My research subjects were tea garden workers, women with a distinct ethnic, caste, religious identity, residing in a definite area in North Bengal. At the same time they were mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, mothers-in-law, friends. The challenge is to conceptualise the woman as a constituent of these multiple identities which construct their selves or personhood. Instead of looking at these as a summation of discrete identities, Shields (2008) speaks of hybrid identities. In conceptualising this, the relational aspect is important which will be dealt with in chapters 6 and 7.

In order to get an insight into how these various aspects of identity play out I used the work group formation, its loyalties and dynamics as an analytical tool to map the shifting ideas of identity and belonging. Tracing intersectionality through the specific phenomena of group formation might lead to glossing over some categories observed in other spaces within the plantations. But given the numerous clashes and collation of identities that occur in the different spaces within the plantations it is impossible to be able to trace all of them in the finite time period of fieldwork. The group formation and its functioning provide rich insight into at least one aspect of intersectionality operating in the tea plantations and shows how different identities gain primacy at different instances within the work-groups.

WORK GROUPS

In the group as is usual the women work side by side, chat and gossip and share their food. (Daahlia field-notes, 12.01.11)

The women in both the plantations work in the field in groups. These consist of three to seven women. The groups generally work together and in the same segment in the work section, assisting group-mates to meet their task if they fall behind, covering for them in their absence, taking *melas* together and in general helping each other out. In addition the groups share a social relation, chatting and sharing problems, thoughts, food and forming a team.

I notice all the three women of Aradhana's group put their leaves in one bag. When I ask them why, she explains that if one of them has a deficit it will be met by the surplus of the other. That way none of them will get into trouble. (Kaalka, field-notes, 25.05.11)

Through this snippet, a glimpse of how groups function can be understood. There is no system of group yield in the garden; wages are based on individual yields. When there is no task to meet, the women of a group often weigh their leaves together with the logic that if anyone has plucked less within the group that cannot be individually identified by the *sardars*. Thus, the groups function in a way to promote the group members' self interest.

The groups are formed by the women themselves. What interested me was how these groups are formed. What prompts them to choose the other group members, what are the categories or points of identity that make them relate to each other? How do the boundaries operate between groups?

Boundaries

Another big group also comes and sits there. Though the groups were sitting close to each other and there were interactions and joking between the groups, they were distinctly separate groups. The most obvious indicator of this is the food sharing which is done commonly

within one group and does not spill over to the next. (Kaalka, field-notes, 08.05.11)

While the groups are formed quite loosely and there are interactions between groups, there are invisible boundaries marking the inside and outside of groups.

It was lunch time and the women rearranged themselves to form smaller circles. Many of the women from the other groups especially Barnamala's (Nepali, Hindu, married) and Nilima's (Nepali, Buddhist, divorced) asked me to join them for lunch. I notice the invitation was only for me and not for Madeeha's group with which I was sitting. This was not an expression of antagonism but a code of conduct, a seemingly unwritten law where the women sit to eat lunch only with their group mates. No one took offence at the lack of invitation. It all fitted into the invisible boundaries. (Daahlia, field-notes, 3.10.11)

My sister-in-law and her friends were my first group and they gave me guidelines. They said not all are nice in the garden. Don't talk to everyone with an open heart. You have come here to work, work and stay with us. (Sunrita, Daahlia, Nepali, Hindu, married 2.04.11)

Thus, as Sunrita indicates, not everybody can belong. It is clear that to protect one's interest boundaries have to be established. Commonality of a particular aspect of one's identity often forms the basis of group formation. Exploring the boundaries between groups some of these categories or micro categories can be identified.

Location

I ask them how they form these groups in which they work. At this they seem a bit surprised at first and then say that it is formed by people who like each other. It is on the basis of friendship. (Kaalka, field-notes, 23.03.11)

Most of the groups that I ask this question say friendship is the basis of the group formation; one forms a group with those she can relate to. In developing these relations, locational proximity seemed a common factor. In case of Daahlia the locational proximity mapped on to common ethnicity and sometimes even kinship.

Laughing and chatting we were making our way back to the village. The crowd thinned as slowly the women reached their homes and made their way in. I asked Madeeha whether their groups are always formed by people staying close by. She says, 'Not necessarily, Kavita didi stays closer to my house than Urvi but the former is not a part of our group whereas the latter is. But the group-members are usually from the same village. I will not form a group with Kajari and all as they are from 12 Number village (the name of the other village) and that will be of no use to either of us'.(Daahlia, field-notes, 24.11.10)

This acknowledgment of location as facilitating functioning of groups was also seen in Kaalka even at the management level. The workers' teams for a section were formed by women based in the adjacent villages. This naturally promoted locationally proximate group formation. Much like the labour villages in Kaalka, the groups in this case were not ethnically, religiously or even caste-wise homogenous.

In some cases being from the same village becomes such an important factor that the women manoeuvred to ensure none from their village are left alone in another team.

Ruma (Adivasi, Hindu, early 20s, married) has joined work not too long ago. I ask them how she could start off working in the foot section at the first instance given that most workers are expected to first work in the jungli section and then come to this one. Kaki (Adivasi, Christian, late 30s, widow) says that there was no one from her village or line in the jungli section. Hence they went and told the sardar to take her in the foot section. They told him it is necessary to train new workers to carry on after they retire. They would train her. She could then learn and carry on when they retire. When the sardar agreed she started coming to the foot section. (Kaalka, field-notes, 15.09.11)

The groups would start functioning before the workers reach the field. If someone faced a problem and could not go to work, she told her group members before they left for work, so that they could either excuse her to the *sardar* or in certain occasions cover up for her by plucking extra. Living in the same village made this cooperation easier as the women

were then already aware of the problems that their group mates were facing and thus, in a better position to function as a group.

P: We are in the same line (village) and we have to stay together. If friends are from far then it is difficult to say what will happen, getting their news is also difficult. Hence we move around with people from our own village. They teach us. We gradually learnt from them, now they have retired, our seniors, elder sisters. Now we have become the seniors.

I: Are your present group mates from the same village?

P: Yes same village. My house is here, her house is there. We go and come back together. We look after each other's convenience and inconvenience. When I have a problem I will tell the sardar and also my friends/group mates. If I need to take a holiday for illness, etc., they will look after me (my work). They will speak on my behalf. (Poonam, Kaalka, Adivasi, Hindu, late 30s, 19.09.11)

The mental compatibility and friendship that the women spoke of as being necessary for forming the group membership necessitated a certain degree of commonality which could arise from being in the same neighbourhood where interactions outside work also occurs. In many cases caste groups or religious groups in the same area or within the same village had social intercourse and commonality which made it plausible for them to form groups at work. In these instances, locational proximity coincided with socio-cultural similarities to lead to the formation of the group. Location, however, was not the only factor for group formation.

Kinship

From the time I started work I worked with my mother. We were in the same group and she taught me how to pluck. (Kaalka, Aradhana, 16.09.11)

Groups are often based on kinship ties. The workers from the same family, immediate or extended, if working in the same place often form a group. This is, again, not a standard rule and though it was common for sisters-in-law or mother and daughter to be in the same group, there were instances where this did not happen.

We are all related here, Binita (Adivasi, Hindu, late 40s) is my aunt-in-law. Again my niece is also a member of this group. But Binita's daughter again is not a part of this group, she has her own group. (Mamata, Daahlia, Adivasi, Hindu, late 30s, 17.01.11)

Women also formed groups with other women in spite of their family members being present in the same work space.

Priya's mother was Madeeha's aunt. But they were not in the same group. On asking Madeeha the reason for this she says, 'Auntie had started working before me and had her own group. When I joined work I too formed my own group. We are both comfortable in these positions'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 14.06.11)

The divisions here were not due to animosity but rather being settled in one's group. There were, however, occasions when the commonality in terms of location or kinship actually hindered the women from forming groups. The multiplicity of roles that they played within that social space often led one aspect of their identity to be fore-grounded and clash with that of the others.

Nilima is a middle aged woman worker in Daahlia. Both her parental and in-law's home are in the plantation itself though in different villages. A few years after her son was born her husband left her and married another woman with whom he settled down outside the plantation. Since this incident the location had become deterrent to Nilima's ability to form groups or even social relations with her neighbours. Most of the neighbours were in some form related to her husband and they had withdrawn from her. The commonality of ethnicity, religion and in many instances caste did not automatically mean that she could form relations with others sharing these traits. She had to go beyond these to forge new relations, emphasising different aspects of her identity.

I: The friends you have, are they from your work, your neighbourhood or are there no such friends?

N: In the village? No, no one. At work I have some like Bina. In the neighbourhood also I have some like Nirupa, Ujjal's wife (Nepali,

Hindu, married); they are all my friends, sister. But not many from the village. (Nilima, Daahlia, 12.04.11)

The women could not always automatically access the aspects of their identity available to them and use it to their advantage to form networks and loyalties. In case of Nilima she had to go beyond her locational and kinship traits to forge new relations, where other aspects of her identity had to be fore-grounded. Within a set of constrained conditions she had to exercise her agency by rendering invisible some aspects of her identity. It is as a woman, a mother and a separated wife that she formed her networks, her work group similarly reflected this.

The work groups, thus, form a microcosm which captures some of the ways in which intersectional identities play out and effect the way the women form collectives. The singular identity of women workers is framed by multiple other identities often clashing with each other. At times these identities overlap too e.g. location, kinship, caste and religion could all coincide in the formation of a group. It is through the interplay of these identities that friendships are formed, loyalties are displayed and common interests are identified.

Self interest and (re)interrogating identity?

In identifying the concrete elements which define the categories on which group identity forms, self interest often played a central role. The women have certain primordial identities, be they caste, religion or even location. Which identity became primary and which secondary in many instances was guided by a calculation of self interest in the given circumstances. Since self interest is a motive force in forging the groups, it also often causes group affinity to break down. These clashes usually reflect fault lines within the group but might not wreck the group as a whole.

Janaki (Adivasi, Hindu, married) asks her group mates to pluck her melas too as they were ahead of her; but they refuse telling her that there is quite a bit left in theirs which they have to complete. She tells me if she knew that they would be so unhelpful she would have come early and finished yesterday's backlog faster. But she thought that they

are going to work at this together and came along with them. If all of her friends lent her a hand by doing little bits of her mela then she would have finished and could have joined them working together. But they did not, selfishly rushing to complete their own work...A sense of betrayal and anger was expressed by her. Her group mates' behaviour in her eyes subverted the accepted norms of group behaviour and the group code of conduct whereby each assist the other in completing their task. (Daahlia, field-note, 10.04.11)

This was an instance of clash of self interest within the group, a case of an individual body clashing with multiple bodies within the same space. In this particular instance the group interest of finishing their *melas* quickly to catch up with the other women as they were already behind clashed with Janaki's individual interest of getting help with completing her task and there were resultant tensions. These bodies were not defined by differential identities. Given the commonality of the group members on the basis of other indicators such as ethnicity, religion and even age, this clash was not a clash of identities. Rather it demonstrated how individuals' self interest often clashed in spite of commonalities of identities.

Clash of interests can also be seen when the members of the group set a different goal from work for that day. Not all the women in Kaalka were interested in plucking *doubli* during the seasonal period, which will be explained at length in chapter 8. This again resulted in frictions within the group.

*Leela (Nepali, Hindu, married, early 30s) and Soma (Adivasi, Hindu, married, late 20s) worry that they have plucked very little and should get back and at least pluck 2-3 kgs more. Gudai (Adivasi, Christian, widow, late 50s) comes up at this time, having finished her mela. Soma requests her to give them some leaves from her *jholi* as she had plucked plenty. She explains to them that she is plucking *doubli* and hence cannot give them the extra leaves. Had she not been plucking *doubli* then she would have readily given. Though there is no argument the two women criticise her once she goes back to work. (Kaalka, field-notes, 15.05.11)*

In both the instances the groups are formed on the basis of shared identities such as ethnicity (in the first instance) and location (in the second). Through this common context the groups usually share a common interest and function smoothly. This, however, does not preclude difference of opinion and conflicts which usually arise when interests clash between the workers.

The type of work that women are employed in formed a bone of contention between the groups. Work in the nursery or with nursing mothers is among the coveted jobs while others like plucking are not. For the coveted categories of work which are generally half day work the demand is not always consistent. While there is a core team of workers constantly working in the nursery or other such sections, there is often need to deploy more workers from the plucking section to these work sections. The groups which are deployed for these works are usually envied. The reasons for antagonisms here are not aspects of intersectional identities but limited availability of the popular job and resultant conflicting self interest which can cut across identities.

Some of the elderly are given work in the nursing-section. But this is not always welcomed by the other workers. As Nairita (Adivasi, Hindu, married, late 20s-early 30s) points out:

The lataburis (old and infirm) who go to plucking with the nursing mothers are not really weak. But unlike here there is no task there, so they can relax and pluck. It is much lighter work. So many women, who have nothing wrong with them, just go to the office and get the slips by which they can go and work in the section. All deceit! (Kaalka, field-notes, 19.10.11)

In such cases they are accused of making use of their age to access coveted jobs. Since the younger women cannot use this same identity aspect, it results in resentment among them. Age here becomes the basis of conflict.

The nursery work is also coveted as it is half day work for the same wages. Many of the women who work in the plucking section consider

the work to be unfair for this reason. These clashes of interest cannot, however, be understood in a unilinear manner. Coupled with the envy is often the understanding and recognition of the commonality of their fate as workers and women.

Shanti (Adivasi, Christian, widow, late 50s) says that they pluck the whole day and all they get is Rs. 66. In contrast the nursery workers are much better off as at least they get off after one half. The others protest that this is not true; they have to toil the whole time without even having a shade to take rest in, at least we can sit for 5 minutes under a tree and take rest, they don't have a single tree to provide them with shade. Moreover they work hard to ensure that we have good bushes from which we can pluck more leaves and the garden flourishes. Both of us are badly off in different ways. (Kaalka, field-notes, 26.04.11)

Though her group mates point out the unfairness of Shanti's accusation, this perception of nursery work as easier or better keeps doing rounds among the workers engaged in a full day's planting work. While clashes of self interest challenge group identity, these cannot be understood as binaries. Instances of clashes are often negated through a common identification as being '*badly off in different ways*'.

Like any other social groupings, power hierarchies work within these groups too. These were expressed in varying forms in different groups.

Mala (Adivasi, Hindu, divorced, hearing impaired) is soon sent off by Anjana (Nepali, Christian, married) to get a packet of biscuits. Though the two of them spend a considerable time together and to some extent Anjana protects her she also orders her about quite a bit and seems to take advantage of her dependence... On several occasions Anjana ensured that Mala is a part of her group by including her in conversation and giving her a sense of belonging. In return she demands services from her such as fetching things for her, weighing the leaves in the middle of her lunch, etc. Doing these services for Anjana seems the price that Mala had to pay for membership into one such group. (Kaalka, field-notes, 07.05.11)

Mala had hearing and speaking impairment and hence might have found it difficult to become a full participant in a group. Anjana by translating what was being said into sign language and making sure that

she got her share of assistance within the group has taken the role of her protector. This placed her in a superior bargaining position vis-à-vis Mala which she used to her advantage. In this case their difference in terms of ethnicity, religion, age or marital status did not seem to play a role in their friendship. It was, however, Mala's physical impairment as against the able bodied Anjana that defined their relationship and positionality within it. The very functioning of the body became the basis on which the hierarchy operated and the relation between the two women played out.

While I have used the work group as the basis to understand the clash of interest among the women, such clashes were not only limited to this space but were visible in other situations, e.g. domestic life which again were shaped by power hierarchies, mutual interest, boundaries, etc. One of the common, though not the only, expressions of this was in the relation between the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law.

Janvi's (Bihari, Hindu, married, 30s) mother-in-law is a bad sort; not only does she not help with any housework she abuses and calls Janvi names regularly. Janvi says I have to tolerate her as my work is hers, and she can take it away from me and give it to another at any time. (Kaalka, field-notes, 29.05.11)

The fact that the garden job was in her name gave Janvi's mother-in-law (Bihari, Hindu, widow, late 50s-early 60s) the leverage to use it as a superior bargaining position from which to dictate terms with her daughter-in-law. The relation between the two women was shaped, in this case, by virtue of age and position within the family hierarchy. Thus, in the already unequal power hierarchy between the two, her control over the work gave her extra advantage.

CONCLUSION

The multiple entwined and mutually constitutive identities of the women express themselves through their distinctive practices. The identities often formed a boundary of exclusion. But this was not necessarily of

antagonism—the recognition of the differences did not automatically come with hostility. Antagonism, however, was also expressed and the boundaries became markers of inviolability when people crossed over through inter-caste marriages, inter-religious relationships, etc. For the Nepalis who worked in the office, the Adivasis who married Bengalis, the people who attended the religious ceremonies of the others, these boundaries operated more fundamentally in their everyday life. Though they had rejected the identities by crossing over, their transcendence made these identities central to the way society interacted with them. Rather than really dealing with them in this chapter, I have focussed here on the operation of identities and how they regulated the everyday spaces of belonging. This chapter has shown that women's bodies became the canvas on which the different identities were mapped through various everyday norms and discourses and thus, served as markers of these identities. This study of intersectionality, thus, illustrates how the multiple identities frame the gender identity of the women (in this case) and also shape the spaces within which they operate.

The intersection of identity at one plane might break certain traditionally conceived moulds of relations/identities.

Binita says that Basanti (Adivasi, Hindu, married, late-early 30s) is her niece. But once in the field they are like friends joking, teasing each other and doing all kinds of 'time-pass'. There is no conception that she is my relative or she is elder to me so certain jokes or conversation should be avoided. Within the group and at work everyone is like a friend, a group mate to be joked with. The others agree to this saying the family relations are not replicated at work... Everyone laughs at friendly teasing and banter. I notice that many of the women who teased the others were much older. But in the field other social relations like family hierarchy within the women, age, etc., often fades into insignificance. (Daahlia, field-notes, 10.01.11)

Sometimes the hierarchy of elder and younger, the proper codes of behaviour within the family space are, if not broken, at least relaxed in the identity of co-workers. Women joke without inhibition with those who in another plane of relation would have called for a very different

code of behaviour. In fact in many instances the relations do transform with the space in which the interactions occur but in most cases the camaraderie and informality persists and the household/kinship relations get altered in this mould.

The work group formation among the women workers is just one of the ways of demonstrating the interface between identity and belonging. The master categories of ethnicity, class, caste, though important are not the only identities which define these groups. Sometimes micro categories of identity, as has been demonstrated earlier, combine with or even contradict a master category in defining the women's identity and belonging in particular moments and spaces. Finally what aspects of a composite identity come to be focussed on and what are underplayed can be read as an expression of agency directed by self interest.

While the concept of intersectionality is useful, it has the danger of breaking down identities to such a level that a singular identity becomes difficult to conceptualise. A worker is broken into its gender components, the woman worker is further broken along the categories of ethnicity, caste, religion, region and age. Even this can get disaggregated further to location, positionality and many other micro-categories. Therefore while understanding that the constituents of identity are important, the real usefulness of intersectionality for my research lies in recognising how the multiple strands of identity frame these women as individuals and as groups and what these spell for the inter-relations between them. While a focus on understanding differences is useful, this has to be combined with a search for shared interest rather than shared identity (Cole, 2008). While the struggles of different identity groups might be different, there could be 'points of intersection where those struggles can support and legitimise each other in the larger context of power and discourse' (Rao, 2005a: 362). Through building common cause among different identity groups on the basis of their common experiences of inequality and/or agency without losing sight of their differences, intersectionality can be a powerful tool to understand social interaction and the generation of

groups and boundaries. In the next chapter we turn to explore how the women framed by the multiple identities negotiate the intersectional gendered spaces outside and within the plantations.

Chapter 6

Understanding the Plantations within a Gendered Space

'Bazaar, Town and Bagaan'

I often feel like giving it up and going to Delhi to get a job. But the work there will finish one day and I will have to come back. Actually even though this is not like a town or even bazaar, it is not bad here.
(Madeeha, Daahlia, 18.01.11)

As we saw in the last chapter, the plantations are multiple identity spaces. Space was one of the defining concepts of my research, both at the outset and in terms of findings. The following two chapters, therefore, revolve around issues of space and spatiality. While we have seen that plantations are multiple identity spaces, this chapter will explore how the plantations, in their negotiation with other spaces, function as gendered space (specifically focussing on the women workers) units. The following chapter looks at how the plantations internally function as gendered spaces. We begin, though, with an overview of the theoretical literature that serves as a framework for both chapters.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is in relations between individuals and groups that social space is produced and exists in tangible form. Material spaces are built with a design in mind, but these are then transformed or appropriated by the residents through their everyday practices. The people's needs,

perceptions and lived experiences endow meanings to these spaces. This is how representations of spaces, i.e. designed controlled spaces, get converted to representational spaces, i.e. lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Social spaces are constituted by discourses and praxis of people within them (Low, 2003). In an ethnography of a plaza and market, Richardson (2003) explores the different ways that people speak, walk, interact or 'be' in these two places. The plaza and the market have differing characters not only because of the way they have been physically constructed to serve different purposes, but also because of the way the people inhabiting/visiting these spaces perform in response to the space. This interaction shapes the social attributes of the space even as the physical construction of the space influences the behaviour of the people. 'The market's harsh noises' or the 'plaza's gentle order' (Richardson, 2003: 76) derived from the different ways in which people inhabited the space. The interactions, walking, buying, talking were not merely *in* the space but *of* it and in some ways become meaningful only within that space. Thus, the 'complex' and multiple realms of social order, its construction and norms can be unearthed through the study of everyday life (Adler et al. 1987). The meanings attributed to events, the actions undertaken, the roles performed arise in the everyday life of the people and get re-enacted in this realm. The distinctive narrative, actions and embodied practices that are woven into everyday life give shape to the spatial and the way it plays out (Jean-Klein, 2001: 84). Everyday life is organised to the point of being repetitive (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977; Lefebvre, 1971, etc.). It is in this banal repetition, that the roles and norms they perform get embedded.

Everyday spaces challenge the dichotomy between public and private space, which, as Duncan (1996) shows, has been employed to construct, control, discipline, exclude, suppress and hence preserve the existing power structure. This dichotomy has been used to legitimise oppression and exclusion of women on the basis of gender. The boundaries between public and private are fluid, highlighting the way in which the

experiences of one infiltrate into the other and are mutually constitutive (Mills 2007). Kaviraj (1997) holds that the dichotomy of public and private cannot be usefully applied in the case of India. He proposes the distinction between 'home' and the 'outside' to be more relevant as it contains within it the idea of differential access and understanding of a space in accordance with one's social attributes (Kaviraj, 1997). This idea of the home and the outside, however, turns out to be a muted version of the public/private dichotomy and is inadequate to capture the complexities of social interactions taking place (Gorringe, 2006). Through the use of the everyday as the site of exploration, in the analysis section of the chapter, I will show how both the binaries collapse within the various sites of the plantation. These spaces function in varied, complex and at times even contradictory ways making them relational entities constructed by intersecting social relations (Massey 1995: 1–2).

Social space, then, is not homogenous and static but expresses contradictions and paradoxes. Lefebvre's (1974) notion of night time space shows the temporal nature of space. Being approached differently at night, activities which are not accorded space or legitimacy in the day become permissible or even focal at night. Williams (2008) uses night space as a concept to interrogate societal dimensions of space.

Because of its transgressive meanings and societally harmful uses, darkness threatens to deterritorialize the rationalizing order of society... it obscures, obstructs, or otherwise hinders the deployment of the strategies, techniques, and technologies that enforce the rationalizing order of society, thereby allowing potentially transgressive behaviours to occur under a veil of anonymity (Williams, 2008: 516-17).

Beyond the daily cycles of day and night or season, social space is not static in a more fundamental way. It is not a passive surface on which singular relations of dominance and subordination are played out uninterruptedly. The identities of space are always unfixed, contested and multiple (Massey, 1994). Space is not a bounded arena in counter-

position to what lies beyond but formed through interconnections, links and disjunctions to the beyond (Massey, 1994: 4–5).

The differential access to resources and hierarchical arrangement of any social space is maintained by boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. Spatial segregation is a mechanism by which a dominant group can retain its access to resources and its control over the dominated group thus, maintaining the extant hierarchy. One of the ways in which the hierarchical nature of social space can be understood is by using the idea of gendered space.

Gendered space

Ardener (1993) argues that in the organisation, meanings and uses of spaces, the hierarchies of social structural relationships and encoded ideologies are expressed. One illustration of this expression is in relations of power with the men dominating and the women muted and submissive (Ardener, 1993). Feminist geographers (e.g. McDowell and Sharp, 1997; Massey, 1994; Spain, 1992, etc.) have argued that gendered social space is not given but constructed. In explaining how gendered hierarchies function through spatial structuring Spain summarizes:

Gendered spaces themselves shape and are shaped by daily activities. Once in place they become taken for granted, unexamined, and seemingly immutable. What is becomes what ought to be, which contributes to the maintenance of prevailing status differences (Spain, 1992: 29).

Gender is a context-based relational performance, specific to the space in which it occurs (e.g. McDowell, 1992). From the symbolic meaning of space and the clearly gendered messages they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces are not only gendered but, thereby, reflect and affect the ways in which gender itself is constructed and understood (Massey, 1994: 179–80). Tracing the origin of discourse formation to the relational performance of gender, Rose (1993) provides an insight into how gender hierarchies might get established.

Constellations of systematic (but not necessarily coherent) ideas construct gender as relational—masculine and feminine—and also evaluate one gender over another...I will call such constellations of ideas (and their associated practices) discourses: our identities are made through them. Discourses intersect, so that certain identities are constituted as both more powerful and more valuable than others (Rose, 1993: 6).

Particular aspects of performance of the gender roles by both men and women take the form of accepted social practices which, if continued unabated, construct discourses which in turn naturalise the prevailing spatial arrangement. It is in the trivial practices of everyday life that the clues to understanding the power structure lie, as being seemingly mundane they often obscure the ways in which the women (for example) remain constrained within these everyday spaces. It is here that patriarchy is produced and reproduced (Rose, 1993: 17–18).

But these notions of masculinity and femininity are not singular, they vary through space being actively constituted through distinctions of space and place, public and private, visible and invisible (Leslie, 1997: 302–04). Within this space, the body, its gestures, the very space it takes up, the masculine and feminine norms, the difference in physicality which construct and reflect gender norms create and embed ways of being in a space and hence the character of the space (McDowell and Sharp 1997). The body thus, becomes an instrument expressing our perception and behaviour in the space it occupies. The embodied space becomes the location in which these experiences, perceptions and understandings take a material and spatial form. Through the way the body is naturalised into the space, in its actions, its perceptions and its very being the social practices are inscribed in space as they are inscribed on bodies.

Gendered labour

Men and women alike create and participate in a spatial structure of stratification (Spain, 1992:18). By subscribing to a spatial arrangement that reinforces differential access to knowledge, resources and power, the

gender hierarchy is maintained whereby in most cases the men enjoy a superior position vis-à-vis the women. Most status differences are reinforced by subtle forms of spatial segregation (Spain, 1992:18). Spatial organisation can be understood through exploring how domestic space is ordered and how that produces social realities (Moore, 1986:107). While each household may in some ways be unique in its allocation of time and resources there is a general pattern which reflects back and creates the material conditions of spatiality (Pahl, 1985: 252). Domestic space generally is shared space. What is the basis, on which it is shared, what governs the understanding of which space belongs or does not belong to whom? Spatial control thus, implies the significance of boundaries (McKie et al. 1999: 7–8). These might not be physical markers, but they invisibly demarcate spaces inscribing and being inscribed by social practices, and often evading surveillance and control by others. The household tasks not only reinforce gender stereotypes about the sorts of work that men and women do, but are shaped by and reproduce spatial patterns in which the kitchen, for instance, is seen as feminine space. This division of space according to sex role differentiation reinforces sexual stereotypes and legitimises understandings of gender appropriate behaviour.

Similarly non-domestic spaces are also constructed as gendered both explicitly as well as tacitly. McDowell and Sharp (1997) point out how the social construction of occupation in itself is gendered with workers already constituted with fixed gender attributes constructed as suiting or not suiting particular jobs. Jobs are not gender neutral and the set of social practices that constitute them are constructed such that they embody socially perceived characteristics of masculinity and femininity (McDowell and Sharp, 1997: 311–12). The sexual division of labour can be traced back to certain commonly understood and accepted gender discourses. Research has shown (e.g. Kabeer, 1999; Elson and Pearson, 1981) how stereotypical ideas of dexterity, docility, or patience in different factories and plantations are used to devalue women's work.

Elson and Pearson (1981) argue against this devaluing of women's work. They point out that the manual dexterity that these women 'naturally' possess is not inherited but the result of the training that they receive from their childhood from their mother and other female kin on tasks perceived to be socially appropriate for women. Given the privatised and invisible nature of this training, they are attributed to nature and deemed to be unskilled or semi skilled (Elson and Pearson, 1981). Through this process of deskilling, the employer downgrades certain tasks and cheapens the production process (Neetha, 2002: 2048). The lower wage and status spills into a spatial hierarchy whereby this work occupies the lower rungs, as will be seen in the tea plantations.

The labour market works through gender ideologies shaped by the management, employers, unions, and male and female workers themselves (Elson and Pearson, 1981). These discourses do not remain constant across the range of labour practices, and notions of femininity and masculinity are actively constructed within different times and spaces. Similarly, the gendering of occupational roles is not static and changes with transformations in the economic situation. Raynold's (2003) work on plantations in Dominican Republic uncovers the dynamic nature of the gender relations within the plantations. Following a period of economic crisis, more men took plantation jobs which had hitherto been primarily female (Raynolds, 2003). There was a resultant firing of women and hiring of men in their place converting the plantations from a primarily female space to a dominant male space. Legitimising this shift, new gendered discourses privileged male 'competitiveness' as an impetus to increase production in place of the erstwhile favouring of female discipline and dexterity. How this phenomenon of changing labour discourses plays out in the tea plantations will be seen in the next chapter.

The following sections will use this discussion as a framework to explore how in their negotiation and interaction with the physical sites outside the plantation gendered spaces are constructed and played out.

BAZAAR, BAGAAN AND TOWN

The plantation becomes a social space only when the people animate the various physical sites within it, endowing them with meaning. In this section I will examine how the women workers understood the plantation vis-à-vis the other spatial entities in their lives.

Daahlia and Kaalka were quite contrasting in terms of the understanding of the plantation as a social space in relation to other spaces. Much of this can be traced back to the different ways in which they were structured, their proximity to the towns and markets, as well as the circumstances that the plantation experienced. Thus, the two plantations have to be analysed separately at the macro level while they can be dealt together at the micro level as will be done in the next chapter.

Daahlia

In the conception of most of Daahlia's residents and in the way they carried out their everyday life, the sense of being in a space distinct if not isolated from the main townships prevailed.

The bazaar (market), the town and the bagaan (plantation) are different places altogether. The life in the town is very alag (distinct) from here in the bagaan. As it is located near the bazaar they get all the conveniences of life but also there is a lot of noise and pollution. In the bagaan we get a lot of greenery and peace. (Aloki, 11.12.10)

The *bazaar*, the *town* and the *bagaan* remained in the conversation of many of the women as three distinct entities, separate spaces. While the bigger townships of Birpur and Manikpur were the 'towns', Raghavpur remained '*bazaar*' in spite of having most of the makings of a small township. In this section I have sketched how the women in the tea plantations perceive these three spaces and how that understanding shapes their interaction with and in these spaces.

Town:

The contrast between the town and the plantation (*bagaan*) is stereotyped through a few features. In most of the women's perception the town in spite of its advantages did not necessarily denote a better way of life.

The outside air in comparison to garden air is not good...There are so many buildings in the town area you will not get this...but for educating the children the town is better. There everyone studies and the condition of education is better. (Victoria, 3.01.11)

To Victoria and the other women I spoke to there was obviously a difference between the 'town' and the 'garden' way of life. The idea of the 'pure air' symbolised not only their life which was away from the commotion of city life but also portrayed seemingly different values.

There is no problem or unrest here in the garden. Everything is fine here. But we have heard that there are unrests and clashes in the towns and also strikes. The towns always have different things going on. (Sunrita, 23.11.11)

While it was not surprising that the towns were the focus of political unrest, Sunrita's conceiving of them as disjointed areas where there were strikes contrasted it further with the peaceful version of the plantations.

With the admission of more and more of the workers' children in the towns and the resultant greater connectivity, in terms of actual access both Birpur and Manikpur have become more accessible. But for most of the women this accessibility did not translate into their everyday life or perception. The invisible boundaries which had marked the plantations as distant from the towns remained etched in their psyche. Though for some going to the town regularly was common, for many of the women, especially the older ones, this was definitely a venture to plan and prepare before carrying out.

I cannot do the interview tomorrow, as I am going to Birpur. It's my daughter's birthday and I will go there to get some special cake. And since I am going into the town I will also have to do some shopping.

You know in the town how time flies, so tomorrow is a bit uncertain.
(Lata, 04.03.11)

Though she had a specific purpose for going to Birpur, the trip was an occasion in itself. Even the ‘uncertainty’ that she talks about is carefully planned. Such instances illustrated what distinct spaces the town and the plantation were. The town was definitely located on the ‘outside’, away from the boundaries of their everyday life in the plantations. They did not usually go to the towns for their regular grocery, shopping at the towns was marked for something special. It was usually shopping for clothes or shoes and done only for special occasions such as weddings, birthdays, and festivals. Even though it was not far, in their conception it was a journey they had to plan and hence the reason had to be special too. This traversing of boundaries was also visible though in a lesser degree in the case of the trips to the market that the women made.

Bazaar:

The *bazaar* or the market was the space for the weekly or fortnightly grocery shopping. The *haat* (weekly market) was held nearby every Monday (in Jamnaghat) and Friday (in Raghavpur). Unlike visits to the town, this was more mundane and integrated in the daily lives of the people. In spite of this the *bazaar* was still located somewhat on the ‘outside’ not only physically but also in the conception of the women and their approach to it. In case of the towns, the men and the women did not show too much variation in their attitude but the difference was quite prominent in the way they negotiated the *bazaar*.

Most women kept a half day of preparation for going to Raghavpur as this was usually a weekly trip in which they tried to get all that they might need for the week from the shops. Some took this opportunity to visit their friends or relatives who stayed in that area. It was thus, a planned trip which took them outside their everyday routine.

A: I will not be coming to work tomorrow as I will be going to Raghavpur for the haat.

I: What time will you go?

A: 2 o'clock.

I: Then you can work in the first half, isn't it?

A: No, I have to make preparations. Have to prepare food for the children and also a part of the food for the night. It might be just here but have to make sure that I get everything I need otherwise I will have to go again and that is a major bother! (Aloki, 10.01.11)

For most men, however, it was different. Many of them needed to go there regularly for work; for others it was a place where they went to meet friends, chat, exchange news and have a few drinks.

I go to Raghavpur almost every evening. Life is boring inside the plantation. What to do in the evening? I don't like watching television, the women are anyway always capturing the remote and seeing the stupid saas-bahu (daughter-in-law and mother-in-law) soaps which I cannot tolerate. So I take my bike and go there, meet a few friends. We spend the evening laughing and chatting. Much better than staying here. (Ravi, 25.06.11)

The contrast in the two quotes foregrounds some manifestations of the construction of masculinity and femininity within the plantation space. For most of the women tied to their families, homes and work, Raghavpur though not remote was a place to be approached only if needed. The evening for them meant cooking, doing housework and if they had time they visited each other in the houses to chat or sit together and watch television. The evenings, however, were usually a time of relaxation for most men. Many of them sat around in the different *chowpattis* of the plantation to chat and drink. For those who had the means—usually a motorbike—the sphere of relaxation extended to Raghavpur where they could meet their friends from the other plantations. This illustrates how certain ideal gender roles are performed by the men and women in their everyday lives. By engaging in household chores and regulating their activities around these, the women limit their spatial mobility to within the house or the neighbourhood even for relaxation (e.g. McKie et al. 1999). Not being bound to such chores, for most men, the sphere for their leisure is larger. This shows the

inside/outside space to be quite blurred and brings into question the binary of the 'home' and the 'world'. As the women spent a great amount of time in their own or neighbour's houses, this became their home-space. The accessible space extended further for the men. This, however, does not mean that Raghavpur was an extension of home to them but rather an intermediate zone which blurred the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Also, the nature of the men's and women's activities and the discourses attached to them translated these material spaces into gendered spaces with hardly any scope for shared space.

The separation of the *bazaar* from the *bagaan* is brought into sharp focus in their approach to Jamnaghat which was a weekly market or *haat* held not very far from Daahlia.

Anasua says, 'Go with Priya to Jamnaghat then you can get to see the haat'...Priya says, 'It will be a chance to get away from the bagaan and its routine. In fact Madeeha and all might come, it will be nice, we will get work done as well as have an outing'. Anasua agrees, 'You are always working so hard with your report and all that, you also need to relax. Go with them it will be good for you'. (Field-notes, 25.04.11)

While they were going to a market to buy grocery and other necessities, the trip was perceived as one for pleasure and relaxation. In fact, the build up process to the trip which I noticed the next day and several times after, further confirmed the idea of the market visit to be a chance to 'get away from the routine'.

I come in to see that the girls are busy dressing up. Seeing me in my usual jeans they exclaim, 'why are you wearing your usual? We are going out, you have to dress up'...After about an hour of applying makeup and changing clothes a few times they are finally satisfied with their appearance...In the jeep I could sense the festive mood also among the other women. It was quite common for the ones going to the market to have orders from others in their village to buy some stuff mostly vegetables ...It was a big haat, quite like a fair. There were people selling vegetables, meat and other food items. There were also the readymade food stalls of chowmein, momo (a form of dumpling), phucka (a type of fast food), sweets. In addition there were stalls selling jewellery, clothes, toys, and many other wares. Most of the

girls meeting their friends from other plantations or nearby villages went to join them. People from the other plantations and nearby villages also come to this place and this provides people a chance to meet their friends or relatives. Madeeha tells me, 'Priya and Shamoli are going to meet their boyfriends here'. I had earlier seen their father in the haat and asked her whether they could be in trouble if he sees them. She says, 'They will be careful. Also in the haat we often meet our friends who might be male and they can pretend it is just one such friend'... She looks at the food stalls and says for her the treat is to come and eat all this junk food. 'Where we will get such food in the bagaan?'...Kanika joins us. She tells us that she has deposited her son to his father. 'Now I am free to roam about without having to worry about him. It's only fair; at home I am always looking after him. So now his father can take care of him for a few hours'. Madeeha whispers to me, 'She is very lazy. Even at home she doesn't do any work'. (Field-notes, 26.04.11)

The snapshots from the visit to Jamnaghat illustrate how to these women, the *haats* provide a chance to get outside the confines of the garden. Anasua's remark that '*you also need some time to relax*', the dressing up of the girls, all these indicate that going to the market is an outing. Though physically this place remains proximate to the plantation, for the women it is definitely located outside its boundaries. The market is thus, much more than just a place to buy their weekly grocery. The social norms and boundaries regulating their lives within the plantation are relaxed though they do not completely disappear. Madeeha's censure of Kanika for leaving her child behind or meeting boyfriends secretly indicate that certain expectations still continue to operate within the women and in their relation with the others hailing from the same space, i.e. the plantations. Finally, though the women get away from the confines of the plantation or momentarily from the drudgery of their lives, the terms in which this is accomplished remain gendered. The purpose of the visit to Jamnaghat or its legitimising feature is that the women come to get supplies for running the household which is their central sphere of responsibility. It is only by relating the 'outside' integrally to the home and its proper functioning that this gap is bridged and the somewhat outside/somewhat inside intermediate space of the

bazaar is negotiated. Thus, it is through the performance and manipulation of this gender role that the women make this journey from the home, from the everyday to the outside.

The idea of the home again cannot be seen as a simple unproblematic concept. An exploration of their relation to the other surrounding plantations brings out the layers that need to be unearthed to understand what their plantation signified to them.

Bagaan:

Located in close proximity the plantations surrounding Daahlia merge into each other. They are often separated just by a ditch or a narrow pathway. The sense of boundary was, however, present within the workers, in this case both men and women.

The women continued to gather firewood from the other side of the section. The sardar called out saying it was Hamidpur from which they were stealing. The women remained unconcerned saying that since it was from Hamidpur it is no longer within his jurisdiction and they can do whatever they like. (field-notes, 12.01.11)

Crossing over to the other plantations was not uncommon but it was almost always conscious. The boundary beyond which the authority of the manager and the supervisors ceased to exist was etched in the mind of the people.

At the same time, their own plantation usually represented safety. My experience and interaction suggested that this notion of safety was based on familiarity.²⁹

Don't go alone towards that side. It is at borders with Makur and the men there are not nice and they might say something nasty to you. (Basanti, 14.07.11)

²⁹ In the previous chapter, I have shown that in the notion of 'safety' there were caveats. These again are based on similar notions of familiarity and shared identity.

Throughout my visits to the garden I have always been warned about safety when I went to the border sections. These were perceived to be less safe as the men from the other plantations could not be counted upon.

This does not mean that there is no interaction between people of the different plantations. Many had families and friends in the other plantations and often went to visit them. They also went to fairs in the neighbouring plantations. But these visits are almost always conceived as visits to a different place.

Juhi was going back to Gagana for the weekend to visit her mother...I notice instead of wearing her usual shabby kurta or maxi, she wore a glittering salwar kameez. She also applied makeup to her face and did her hair carefully. Telling her that she looked nice, I asked her why she does not dress up when she goes to work. She says, 'there is no point in dressing up while going to work. It is going to get spoilt anyway. It makes sense to apply makeup and dress well now as I am going outside'. (Field-notes, 19.02.10)

Her words implied that though work required her to step outside her house and often even travel greater distance than she would need to reach Gagana, it still was not 'outside' in the sense Gagana was. The contrast becomes even clearer when she goes to visit her friends and relatives within the plantation in the same work attire (unless on a special occasion). Thus, the spaces were conceived as inside and outside relationally. The workspace as distinct from and in relation to the domestic space is more of an outside. But the familiarity of the plantation—domestic or non-domestic—again formed an intermediate zone in relation to the spaces outside the boundaries of the plantation.

In all the various performances involved in negotiating these spaces—the dressing, the preparation or suspension of routine activities—the idea of crossing boundaries emerged. In the physical sense, the plantations are

no longer distinctly separated entities from their surrounding localities. Increasing connectivity, the necessity to frequently go into the town, using materials available in the markets or towns demonstrate a closing gap between the plantations and their surroundings. In the conception of the residents, especially the women residents, however, the boundaries persist. In all the instances shown above it is this idea of the crossing outside the plantation which finds expression. In their perception, the plantations remain a distinct space and this finds expression through their discourses and practices.

The relation and interrelation between the three spaces shown above gives us some idea of Daahlia as a gendered social space. While not entirely dissimilar, Kaalka, due to its physical location and immediate history, had a distinct mode of functioning in relation to similar spaces. An exploration of this now will help foreground the differences and similarities in how gendered space is constructed in the two plantations.

Kaalka

Town:

The proximity to the township and the spread-out nature of the labour villages made the sense of a plantation boundary ambiguous for Kaalka (Appendix 3). Hence it became difficult to delineate the plantation as a well-defined enclosed space or enclave. The idea of the *bazaar*, town and *bagaan* which was distinct and central to the understandings of space in Daahlia did not operate in a similar mode here. The three spheres collapsed together in the perception of the men and women as well as in their everyday negotiation of spaces.

In their everyday life, the people of the plantation, much like the other plantations in the area, had to access the township whether to make it back and forth from work, to buy their daily necessities, or—in the case of the children—to go to school every day. This was more pronounced in the case of Kaalka town but also was true in the case of Henryganj. Hence unlike Daahlia, in Kaalka, the townships formed as much a part of

their everyday narrative as the plantation. The *chowpatti* or the town square is a case in point. It is the point where the town, *bazaar* and the *bagaan* come together. Located just outside the plantation's factories and offices, for most of the people coming to the plantation or going to the labour villages, the *chowpatti* formed a natural part of their routes. It remained a standard point of reference for most directions given to people; distances were measured in relation to the *chowpatti*.

My house from here is not far, it's half the distance from here to chowpatti if we take the short cuts. (Anjana, 28.08.11)

This tendency to perceive the *chowpatti* as a part of the plantation was perhaps natural especially to people who actually had to go further away from the *chowpatti* to reach their labour villages. The township of Kaalka did not always have a distinct identity separate from the plantation. Moreover, some of the roads running through the plantation are roads which are used by the mainstream traffic to go to other plantations or adjoining townships. Thus, there was always a constant sense of merging of the township, its markets and the plantation. In the way the people live their everyday lives these boundaries have blurred.

Though indistinct, they were not, however, completely absent and at times it emerged in people's conversation or actions.

The young girls will not wear their tarpaulin or the bags on their heads in the chowpatti. They feel ashamed at the thought of people seeing them like that. What is there to be ashamed of in that, but they won't wear. Just before reaching the chowpatti they will either take it off or hide and go through the bushes. (Caroline, 12.09.11)

Caroline's remark recognises that the *chowpatti* and the people frequenting the area do not always form a part of the tea plantation. In these moments, the moving from the plantation to the *chowpatti* was conscious and required a certain amount of preparation. In this case it is discarding the work attire to put up a different appearance. The idea of the *chowpatti* not being a part of the plantation while not being on the

outside characterised the plantation's relationship with the Kaalka township (and less so with Henryganj) as well, placing it in that intermediate zone.

Though the boundaries were blurred, there was a concept of 'outside'. During the period when the plantation was closed, some of the men as well as the women worked as daily labourers in the construction of roads, ditches or bridges. This was considered 'public' work.

I: Why do you call it public work?

S: It is outside the garden. Not garden work so public work. (Sheila, 12.10.11)

Similarly the work of driver or helper to the driver was also considered 'public' even if this work involved transporting processed tea leaves from the plantation to auction houses. This blurring of the boundaries between the town and the plantation is also reflected at some level in the way the people approached the markets in the two townships.

Bazaar:

The concept of the *bazaar* as distinct from the town again was not very pronounced in Kaalka. Kaalka township has a regular market while Henryganj had a Sundays *haat* though there are naturally shops from which grocery can be bought on a daily basis. Going to the Kaalka market for buying their everyday supplies was more common for the women than going to the weekly *haat* in Henryganj. The visit to the Sunday *haat* is more planned, more conscious and more distinct of traversing the boundaries of the 'home'.

Amina tells me that she might go to Henryganj later in the day to buy some meat, etc., from the haat. I ask Zohra whether she plans to go. She exclaims, 'My husband will never allow me to go outside and buy things. He does all of that himself. I will just go here to the Kaalka haat and buy things if need be'. (Field-notes, 24.10.11)

To Zohra and her husband the market in Kaalka township was not 'outside' though Henryganj was. The extract also shows that the operation of these spaces in the everyday lives of the women was not uniform. For Amina going to the *bazaar*, the Sunday *haat*, was an extension of her household duties which necessitated her to cross the space of the home to the more (in her world) intermediate space of the *bazaar*. To Zohra however this was 'outside', a boundary which she could not breach even for the performance of her household duties.

Looking into their conceptualisation of the other surrounding plantations helps to better place the ideas of the town and the *bazaar* in the life of the women.

Bagaan:

Unlike in the case of townships, in case of the plantations a clearer boundary operated. Though much like Daahlia there was frequent interaction between the workers of the different plantations; there still operated a sense of belonging or non-belonging to the plantations. The workers visited family and friends in the other plantations. Meetings were another mode through which the people of the different plantations got together. Many of the plantations in the cluster had been closed during the last few years and even in the ones which were functioning workers had grievances. This adverse situation had brought the inhabitants of these plantations into a closer contact and meetings were held in the different plantations to discuss the existing state of affairs and find some way out. In these meetings representatives from the plantations in the immediate area joined in.

In spite of this increased collaboration, the sense of boundary remained.

The plucking section today was right at the borders with Raagini where spraying pesticide was on in the adjoining section. The paniwallahs instead of going further to get water refilled their buckets with water from the Raagini tank...almost all the women on drinking the water grimaced. They said that by having a sip they can understand that this is Raagini water: 'Our water is much sweeter.

Drinking this water we still remain thirsty. That's the difference between our water and theirs.' I expected the paniwallahs to shoot down this argument. To my surprise, however, they accepted the women's point about difference in the taste of water and requested them to drink it as the nearest water tank in Kaalka was at a considerable distance. (Field-notes, 14.06.10)

The taste of water as an indicator of home has been used in many different contexts by the women especially while talking about outmigration. In claiming that the taste of 'their' water is different and 'not as sweet' as 'ours', the boundary between the two neighbouring plantations is drawn. The idea of the familiar is also used to construct the safe and unsafe much like in Daahlia.

I am soon summoned by the contractor who tells me that if I have to go to that side it is best that I go now (it was 11:30 am then) as Lalita will take me there. It was quite clear that they did not find it reassuring to let me go there on my own...Realising the genuineness of their concern I comply. On my way Lalita explains that since this section is at the borders, often men from Bhatpara frequent these sections. 'They are not like the men of this plantation'. (Field-notes, 12.09.11)

This characterising of the people from the other plantations as unpredictable, unknown or dangerous served the same function of embedding the boundaries between Kaalka and the other plantations.

Thus, unlike in Daahlia, in Kaalka the *bazaar*, *bagaan* and the town did not remain as distinct spaces separate from each other, but they operated and interacted in their own way to create specific boundaries. The inside/outside, like in most social situations, did not remain a simple unproblematic binary. Rather, it was shifting, blurred and often even contradictory. The terms on which these boundaries shifted remained different from that of Daahlia but even in this case the way to understand these shifting boundaries was relational. The interface of the *bazaar* with the town, the town with the plantation, the plantation with the *bazaar* was very much evident in the everyday life of the women. Accordingly,

through the use of discourses and practices the women and the men inscribed meanings onto these spaces or performed in accordance to the meanings inscribed on them. This negotiation of space, the crossing over from the inside to the outside or remaining bound within it, the discourses governing these actions all conspired to putting up a gender appropriate performance.

Liminal spaces

Considering these physical sites within which the women interact and the way they interact in their everyday gives us a sense of how the plantation operates as a social unit. Most sites in the plantation were inscribed with definite social norms and identities which brought forth certain performances from those inhabiting or passing through those spaces. But outside those spaces there were certain sites of liminality. These are spaces where social hierarchies and orders remained in a kind of suspension. These are not straightforward spaces of transgression but rather couched in ambiguity. Jaworski and Coupland (2005) say that liminal moments often invert the everyday power relations and structure while at the same time reaffirming them. Even in these spaces, however, the hierarchies may be re-performed.

The roads cutting through the sections of the garden situated away from the village,³⁰ especially in the night, were an illustration of spaces where social codes remained ambiguous. In the morning, they were functional spaces through which the residents went to work in the garden, went from one village to another, etc. They were populated, public and very much a part of the people's everyday routine. After dark, however, they often took a very different character. They became sites where lovers could meet, especially those who were in socially unacceptable liaisons or where young men would sit to consume drugs. They were sites where suicides would also occur.

³⁰The roads within and around the villages have been dealt with in the next chapter.

At night we would never walk through the sections. All the criminal elements make it their place (dera). Respectable people never go there. Also so many deaths have happened in those places that it is said that there are haunted unquenched spirits there. (Aloki, Daahlia, 10.04.11)

*Even if the main road is a longer route, you just **cannot** go through the sections. There are rumours of people having been murdered there and also raped. I am not taking any chances. (Mohni, Kaalka, 19.09.13)*

This then was a space for defeat, death, secrets and even crimes. While on the one hand, this seemed a site for subversion of social codes, on the other, by having to locate them outside the everyday, easily accessed and mainstream spaces of the plantation the marginalisation of these activities was established. While I was fleetingly able to access these spaces I could not undertake much in-depth observation on account of my research participants' and my own safety.

CONCLUSION

The way the different sites within the plantation play out in the everyday life of the actors inhabiting them shows that these are not just physical sites, but are social spaces which are the repository of the rules, norms and boundaries defining social relations. Social spaces cannot be understood on the binaries of public/private, home/world. Many of the spaces spoken about in the chapter moved between the two and occupied an intermediate zone. This intermediate space was also not uniform in all cases and differed in its degree of being closer to a formal open space or personal and intimate. This not only problematises the binary classifications of spaces but also shows that it is difficult to classify social space into two or three types, it is varying, dynamic and inherently contested.

But in order to fully understand how the plantations operate as social spaces, the sites within it and the socio-spatial discourses and

performances around them also need to be considered. In the next chapter, the women's negotiation with the sites within the plantation will be considered. This will illustrate how the plantations are constructed as gendered space internally as well as in relation to other spaces.

Chapter 7

Understanding the Plantation as a Gendered Space

'Our fingers are softer they do not damage the bushes'

It is not just profit and loss, running a tea plantation is much more than that. The men and women and their families, they live here and the plantation is responsible for running their lives as well. The task is vast and multi-faceted. (Deeptendu, Daahlia, October 2010)

The plantations functioned as units of social space in relation to the outside as we have seen in the previous chapters, but as the quote above points out, the plantations are also social spaces within themselves where people live and work. The theoretical framework provided in the previous chapter is useful to understand the themes discussed in this chapter.

Neither of the tea plantations was on the surface characterised by strict separation of men and women in domestic space. It was not unacceptable for a woman to speak to a man in the absence of the men of the family or invite him to come to the house. The segregation was expressed very subtly through the everyday spatial practices which in effect reflected and embedded the gender hierarchy and gender roles often in an invisible manner. In this chapter I explore how the interactions, rules, norms and patterns of behaviour in both domestic and non-domestic sites within the plantation are shaped by and shape spatial practices and negotiations.

DOMESTIC SPACES

In 15 months of fieldwork in both the plantations there were naturally events of death, marriage and *pujas*. The gendering of spaces which are often obscured in its banality, are brought sharply into focus on these occasions. One such event was death.

In most Hindu and Buddhist households, on bereavement it was customary for neighbours and relatives to come to the house to pay their respects to the soul of the deceased and also to offer condolences to the bereaved. This visit by well wishers continues for thirteen days till the final rites are performed. Having attended quite a few such occasions, I could observe a pattern in the way the physical spaces were used to express the mourning.

In the courtyard were seated the men, most of them busy playing cards. Madeeha explains to me that there will be a steady flow of men to the house till well past midnight. Though the numbers tend to decrease, this will continue till the thirteenth day. Inside the house, in one corner of the room separated from all others was Sunil (the deceased's son). There were other men sitting in the room talking to him. In the inside room was the widow Anasua and other women. Sujata (the deceased's daughter), though dressed in white like the mother and son, was not restricted in movement. She moved from the inner room to the kitchen making sure all the mourners were given tea and biscuits and also overseeing preparation of food for her mother and her. The kitchen was filled with the younger women busy making tea or washing cups and chatting. None of the spaces showed a mixing of genders. I asked Madeeha whether this is a custom. She says that though there is no codification, this is the proper way of behaviour. 'Men and women have their different functions to perform in the deceased's house. While the men give strength to the bereaved family, the women have to make sure that all are well looked after. Thus, they can hardly sit together as that would not be proper'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 22.11.10)

The sharply differentiated roles and resultant spaces occupied by them made the household a very visibly gendered space, drawing on a perception of socially appropriate performances. The women assigned

the duty of caring and tending after guests occupied the physical spaces which made effective discharge of this function possible, e.g. kitchen. The men, on the other hand, were responsible for a show of support. Thus, their presence in highly visible spaces such as the courtyard and the main room of the house seemed appropriate. Such differential role performance might not always result in spatial segregation. An illustration of this can be seen during religious ceremonies.

The men and women sat in the courtyard chatting with each other or observing the proceeding. But the chores performed by them were clearly differentiated. The men who were involved in work busied themselves in setting up the microphone and the sound box. The women in general were busy with arranging the things for the puja...once the puja was completed Leela (in whose house it was being performed) had to complete the other ritual associated with the puja which is called the kanyaketi where she has to give a tika (mark on the forehead) to pre-puberty girls. This was a symbolic representation of the girl as an embodiment of the divine force. While the men sat and watched the ceremony, they had the look of a detached audience in a ceremony of which they formed no part. (Kaalka, field-notes, 03.07.11)

The spatial segregation of mourning was absent in the *puja*, but different roles were assigned to men and women. Also, the men though physically sitting in the same space were actually in the periphery as the various ceremonies associated with the *puja* related to the women or young girls, and apart from the role of interested onlookers they had no role to play. Though seated together there was a sense of inhabiting different spaces.

While special occasions were characterised by well defined and distinct gender role performance which stratified the existing physical space into distinctly separate spaces of activities and influence, these were one-off events. People's negotiation of the spatial and inscribing meanings on spaces through practices and their understanding continued on an everyday level in more subtle and varied ways. The spatial and

social practices of the day-to-day life within the labour villages illustrate these.

In chapter 4, I have described the locations of the labour village. But the different villages assumed their character through the people who lived in them and saw them as a space for communion, etc. It was these practices and discourses which inscribed meanings on the spaces. At the micro-level, there were fewer variations within the two plantations in their way of operating, making it possible to examine them together.

Exploring the physical spacing of the house and the practices associated with each section showed how the spatial and the social were mutually constitutive. Just as the discourses associated with perceived gender roles and positions found expression in the way the spaces within the household were managed, so also the spatial behaviour of the men and women embedded, interrogated and often modified the social.

Courtyard

The front entrance of the house opened into a courtyard which formed the most public part of the house being the first point of entry for anyone coming into the house. Most people grew kitchen garden or flower beds in their courtyard. It was common to find betel-nut trees growing on the sides of the courtyard. Betel-nut formed the most common supplementary income and the sale of the fruit enabled the workers to get a sizeable sum of money once a year which they used for their children's admission to schools or such other substantial expense. Since most of the houses also had cows or less commonly goats or pig, and hens, the courtyard had sheds for the animals. For the major part of the day, the hens were left loose outside their coops freely wandering in the courtyard while the other livestock had to be taken for grazing. In the evening, all the animals were put back in their respective sheds. Usually, someone in the house kept an eye on the chickens. In case they went out on the roads, a neighbour would come and return them. This was a typical response and most people felt that their livestock was safe within the village.

Though both tending the kitchen garden and looking after the livestock was commonly the woman's duty, in some houses the men were also responsible for it. It was usually in the early morning or in the evening that they watered the garden and after dark put the livestock back in their sheds. For them it represented a functional space.

It was also a functional space in a different way. It was a common practice for people to take shortcuts by walking through others' courtyards, crossing the fence into yet another courtyard. Traversing this space was not seen as an encroachment or even entry to someone's personal premises. It formed a part of one's travel route; and was viewed as just that by both the resident and the passersby. If the resident of the house was present, the person passing by could stop and chat for a bit before continuing on their way or just wave a hurried acknowledgment and keep walking on their way. Seeking permission or even giving an explanation was not necessary.

Having gone to Lama's house the day before I could not understand how Madeeha remained convinced that it will take only 5 minutes. I was soon to find out. Abandoning the village road she charted a route through the courtyards of houses. After having crossed three courtyards, I shared my unease of walking through people's houses. Hearing this she starts laughing. The woman in the house we were crossing then comes out, Madeeha tells her of my fear. The woman too joins in the laughter and explains to me, 'you are not coming to our home that you should feel uneasy. You are taking a shortcut. This is how most people travel. You will get used to it in a few days'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 13.01.11)

Thus, 'coming to our home' and passing through the courtyard on one's journey elsewhere were two separate activities. When someone comes to visit another, they would come into the courtyard and make their way to the veranda and at that point the courtyard was the entry to a more intimate space of one's house. At other points, it formed the path to one's destination elsewhere.

In Kaalka in certain houses and villages, the courtyards also served as public space for holding meetings and discussions. These happened both

in planned and unplanned fashion. Sometimes, the more active residents of the village asked the others to gather in one of the houses to discuss a particular problem they were facing, e.g. drinking water shortage, not getting ration on time. Sometimes even an unplanned discussion between one or two people might lead to them asking the neighbours to join in. It was usually the courtyard which formed the site of these debates and discussions.

Holding these meetings in the houses of the residents served the function of separating them from meetings held in the *panchayat* office or the trade union offices. While the courtyard was transformed to a political space in those instances, it maintained its distance from the mainstream political space. Most of these meetings were held by the more conscious and active of the workers under no guidance of political parties. Even when initiated by members of *Svatantra*, they were rarely held in the houses of the most prominent members like Shiva.

I went to Badi's house to have a cup of tea before heading off. I found her sitting in the courtyard deep in conversation with Puloma. The chairs arranged in a circle indicated that soon people would be arriving...finishing their housework the women and some men soon arrived. They continued chatting till Shiva reminded them why they were there. He explained (to me) that they were facing a problem with not getting their dues back for over a year and the meeting was held to decide on a course of action. (Kaalka, 12.07.11)

The courtyard was thus, a functional and a social space in different ways. Though it seemed from the courtyard that the boundaries for entering the house were fluid, they were not completely absent. The next point of the house, the veranda or porch, in some ways served to establish this.

Veranda

The veranda served as a social space. In the evenings the women often dropped in from the neighbourhood and sat in the veranda chatting to each other. In some houses, the veranda was the space of recreation for

the male. They sat around there and played cards or board games, laughing and joking with each other. The children of the house played with their friends there once it got dark. Usually the veranda did not function as a shared space between the men and women. In the houses where it formed the recreational space for the men, it did not serve as the space of communion for the women even when it was unoccupied and the reverse was also true. For the children, however, if the time coincided with other's use of the space, sharing was more common although they were often scolded for creating commotion.

The veranda was also used to establish a sense of boundary. Though most visitors directly came into the house with only a knock or a shout, there were some people who were excluded from direct entry into the household.

Noticing the table and chairs on the portico I ask Madeeha why she has brought them here instead of leaving them inside. She says that the excuse we give is that there is not enough space for these inside but I will tell you the real reason. Everybody irrespective of caste or religion directly came inside. Now that we have the table and chair here, this becomes the first stop for people. So for people we don't want inside we can just sit and talk to them here, feed them and everything without having them inside the main house. (Madeeha, Daahlia, 21.02.11)

Placing the chairs outside served as a boundary, a sieve everyone had to pass through. While some could still enter, others had to remain outside. Through this gesture, the boundary was established without resorting to unpleasantness. This illustrated how the spaces and their boundaries were governed not only by gender but other identities such as caste or religion in this case. Boundaries against all identity groups did not operate in the same way or even in the same space. The veranda formed an intermediate zone. Though it obstructed entry to the inner chambers of the house, this did not mean that it shut off all forms of social interaction with the people who were not allowed in. It formed a means by which the body of the other, in this case on the basis of caste,

could be regulated through how space was managed, without necessarily resorting to overt means of disciplining.

Main house

Most of the houses consisted of two rooms. The bigger of these rooms doubled up as bedroom and drawing room for people who might come to visit, as well as the place where the family members (together or separately) can sit and watch television. This was perhaps natural given the paltry wages that the workers earned and its disproportion to the family members. Given the boundary between the personal and more intimate, and the public and open, the people who resided in these shifting spaces had also adjusted their behaviour.

Sleeping, for instance, might be considered a private function of an individual; but often within the same physical space, boundaries were created whereby someone might be sleeping or watching the television or eating dinner while another group of visitors sat there chatting. In most cases, the two functions coexisted without any clash or significant overlap.

Kavita asked us to come in and sit. I told her that Arun sardar was sleeping and we might be disturbing him so it will be better to go and sit in the kitchen. She assures that he will not hear a thing; it is fine for us to sit there. (Daahlia, field-notes, 15.02.11)

This practice of conducting somewhat private function in presence of other people, however, was mostly limited to the men and the children. For the women, these boundaries were much less fluid. Though a woman often continued sleeping if other women came to visit other members of the household, in case of male visitors this was not acceptable. Similarly hardly would they sit and watch television or eat in the presence of male visitors. In these instances, the boundaries seemed to collapse and the whole space became one where rules of proper conduct according to gender norms operated. This practice once again referred to how the body was regulated. The gendered bodies were expected to perform differently

based on differential understanding of the appropriate social norms of men and women. Thus, the female body had to be hidden away or disciplined in their performance of eating, sleeping, etc. while the male body was largely unsupervised and free to perform these functions without physically negotiating the public/private boundaries.

Sania was lying down and watching the cricket match. Namrah auntie, Pranjana and I sat on the sofa as we watched India steadily seal their victory. Soon one of Sania's uncles came to join us. Hearing his voice outside, Namrah asks Sania to sit up instead of reclining. She gets irritated and refuses leading to a slight argument between mother and daughter...but just before the man entered the room, Sania swiftly pulled herself upright and folded her feet underneath. (Daahlia, field-notes, 19.02.11)

Sania was defiant in accepting that the intimacy of the space with its relaxed notions of bodily conduct was about to be replaced by the entry of her uncle. But even she finally responded to the changing nature of the space and the demands to discipline her body, though by continuing to sit on the bed she kept a semblance of her resistance intact. This illustrates how in the conception of the people, the activities of relaxing, sleeping, eating is gendered. The men's performance of these are given an appearance of being carried out in a private intimate space away from the other activities that might be taking place in the room. For the women, however, the creation of this conceptual boundary was not sufficient, there needed to be an actual physical separation between the performances of these intimate activities and the more open social space. This demonstrates how spatial boundaries and notions directly arise from and affect social norms and beliefs, in this case, appropriate gender role performances.

Kitchen

The kitchen in most houses was outside the main residential quarter. Much work has been done on the relation between spatiality and social norms which illustrates how the kitchen becomes the 'conjugal mark of every household and the exclusive area of each married woman'

(Hirschon, 1993:71). Since its primary use is for cooking which is stereotyped as woman's work, the kitchen becomes the domain of the woman. Thus, in a community where culinary ability is highly prized, in spite of the husband being the 'head' of the family, it is the woman, who through her association with essential objects might attain the central role within the household. Conversely, by confining the women to the kitchen they are effectively barred from active participation in more public arenas, e.g. the relation of the Daahlia women with Raghavpur as shown in chapter 6.

In both the plantations while some people had a table or arrangement for eating within the kitchen for many this was not so formalised. For those families which ate together, the kitchen was also the space for dining while for families which did not, the men and the children were generally served in the main house while the women ate in the kitchen. This brought out the gendering of the activity of eating where the women ate within the privacy of the kitchen away from the eyes of the outsider men. Apart from the time of eating (if done together by the whole family) the kitchen largely remained a feminine space. The women spent a considerable part of the time they stayed at home in the kitchen. It was the place where friends got together, gossiped and laughed. Frye (in Rose, 1993: 142) points out that being a site of much domestic labour it is also the site where the wife could challenge her husband, get angry, speak with authority in contrast to the bedroom where she often remains an object for his pleasure. Thus, while cooking remained a major work for the women, the kitchen was not only a functional unit where the women cut vegetables, cooked or washed dishes. It had a distinct social and often transgressive function.

Kavita said that she is going to start preparing the dinner and asked me to come to the kitchen. Soon we were joined by Deepa and Madeeha and few others. We sat there chatting and laughing and drinking tea. Madeeha wanted to drink some jnar (rice beer). Kavita pointed to the mixture kept at one end of the room and asked her to make it from there. She called one of the young girls and gave her some money asking her to get rum for the rest of us. I asked her would

she not get into trouble if they found out. She smiled and said that while it is fine even if people come to know, they will anyway not know what happens in here. (Daahlia, field-notes, 15.02.11)

The kitchen thus, served as a space for secrets, for sharing and relaxation. It was one of the places within the household where usually the boundaries operated most prominently. It was seldom that the men came unannounced to the kitchen. The centrality of the kitchen as a space for subversion of or at least interrogation of gender roles is detailed in the next chapter.

Despite the semi-secluded nature of the kitchen, there were occasions where the kitchen functioned in a very different way, almost as a liminal space. In order to supplement the income from the plantation some of the families sold *jnar*. In Daahlia it was usually the women who made and sold the *jnar*. The kitchen formed the place from where the alcohol was sold. Often it functioned not only as the point for sale but also for consumption of the alcohol. Given that sales were only advertised through trusted social networks and only people who could access these sales were the ones who could be the customers, they were never complete strangers, even if they were not close acquaintances. In this case, the kitchen assumed the character of a communion where men as well as women sat and drank together. To the outside world, this remained a secret. Most of the men who came to buy and consume drinks were doing it in stealth from their family. The entry to this place was closely guarded as unreliable people posed a danger to the secrecy essential for the smooth functioning of the entire operation of selling, buying and consuming of liquor.

While we often sat in Anasua's kitchen and chatted while she cooked, there were days when I was ushered into the main house. I could sense the unease that the women felt regarding my insistence to go to the kitchen...It was strange to see how the kitchen transformed its character at these times when the men came to drink here (in the kitchen). Though there was chatting and laughing, all of this seemed secondary to the two main intentions of having a drink and making

sure that the news did not travel back home. (Daahlia, field-notes, March-June 2011)³¹

Again, in these instances, the kitchen became a somewhat intermediate place between the public spaces of open drinking and their homes where drinking was not allowed. The semi-public but undercover nature of the kitchen was crucial for this function.

This multiple use of the same space shows the coexistence of socially perceived gender appropriate roles whereby the kitchen as a site of cooking was a feminine space and also interrogation of gender roles, where the men and women often sat side by side drinking and joking. This instance illustrates that none of these spaces could be understood in a one-dimensional way or through focussing on a particular gender role performance. The practice of spatiality and the discourses that it entailed both reflected and affected the various modes and ways in which the men and women understood and performed their perceived gender roles.

It was not only the household that functioned as domestic space; the village in itself was its extension. The roads, the *chowpatti* (square) served as spaces for communion, for exchange of greetings and meetings. Following the activities in these spaces also gave a glimpse into the life of the people.

Chowpatti and roads

The roads in the village and *chowpatti* or cross-roads joining two villages formed the centre of the social life. While in Daahlia the *chowpatti* was usually between two villages, in Kaalka the *chowpattis*³² were in the centre of the village from where the villages forked on two sides. These roads within the village generally did not have much traffic with only a

³¹Such incidents were noticed only in Daahlia and not in Kaalka during my fieldwork.

³²These were different from the *chowpatti* described in chapter 6 which was the *chowpatti* or square in Kaalka town just outside the plantation area.

car or two passing through it and slow paced cycles and bikes. In different points of the day, much like the routine of the inhabitants of the villages, the roads took on different forms.

The streets were bustling with activity. The women were coming out from their houses and calling out to their group-mates to hurry up. The men who were going to work were much quieter and rather than grouping together they greeted each other and went their own way to work. Some of the children were also streaming out of the houses in their uniforms and making their way to either the school bus or getting ready to walk to the school if it was nearby. Even though it was only 7:15 the shops had already opened...Some late risers who did not have to go to work right then stood on the roads brushing their teeth and observing the whole hustle and bustle. (Daahlia, field-notes)

The streets become a point for organising themselves for the day's work reflecting the busyness of the people as they got ready for work. In the afternoon the village was quiet and the roads almost deserted. Those who were home were sheltering themselves inside, away from the scorching sun. The children were also resting and those who were out working had not yet returned. This lull however did not continue for long. Once it is around 5-5:30, the roads become a social space.

As I sat in Saili's courtyard, I could see more people emerging from their houses having changed from their work attire. The children having been allowed out from the house run around the road playing and shouting. It was the time to fill water and some women make way towards water pipes. Unlike in the afternoon when a series of utensils will mark the queue (as hardly anybody had the time to stand and wait) now the women gather around the pipe chattering as they wait for their turn to fill water. They also call out to others passing by on the street, some of who stop to chat with them while others exchange greetings and continue on their way. The shops reopen after the afternoon siesta and are the other favourite site for people to gather. On sides of the street there are small groups of women sitting and chatting among themselves. Younger girls and boys come out to meet their friends and hurry through either to tuitions or walk more leisurely to the shops giggling and chatting. (Kaalka, field-notes, 19.09.11)

This is the period of the day when everyone is relaxed and has time to meet with each other. The water collection exemplifies the changing pace

of the village activities over the day. Unlike in the morning, there was no fear of getting late and the water filling became a pretext for conversation, laughter and gossip. Though the men often filled the water especially at midday when most of the women were away, the area near the water pipe was perceived as feminine space. When the men came to get the water they hurried barely stopping to talk to each other. The feminisation of this space by both the men and women points to a wider process of gendering of the work associated with the space. It constructs women as being naturally associated with water collection. Thus, embedding the notion of women bearing primary responsibility for domestic work.

In about an hour, the women start making their way back home to prepare the evening meal. If there was any time to relax and socialise after the housework this would now take place inside the house, most commonly in the kitchens. The men, for most of whom this period denoted leisure time, often sat around or near the shops or at someone's veranda, chatting and playing cards. The roads now become a masculine space. This is not only because of the sheer number of men present and absence of women. In the kind of conversation and jokes, the activities were all not only male dominated but those that the men identify as theirs. The men usually escorted the women if they were unaccompanied moving from one village to the next as there was always the fear of drunk men roaming around. Thus, the roads got a sense of security and communion from the men inhabiting it at that instance. Through this masculinisation of the space there is a performance of certain gendered notions of masculinity with the men both being the threat and protection.

On Sundays, there was a different sense of being busy in the morning, as women went about their housework such as cleaning the house, washing clothes. This was also the day for repair work and it was a common sight to find the men busy fixing things in their houses. While there was a general buzz of activity, the sense of urgency of the weekdays was missing. There was a greater sense of communion and often on their

way to wash clothes women stood on the street chatting. The extract below is a typical example of a Sunday late morning in most villages in both the plantations.

Soon Safina comes to the house. Her house is just the next one from Amina's. She has also finished some part of the work while some remained undone. The women told me that on a Sunday afternoon they had to complete whole week's incomplete housework which included cleaning, washing clothes, buying things. (Kaalka, field-notes, 18.09.11)

After the lunch from about 3-3:30 pm the bustle slows down usually to a quiet afternoon. This is followed by the usual pattern of the evening and the night.

Though this pattern was more or less consistent, the road is not a static space. There were moments when incidents occurred in that space and affected how the space was perceived and lived. The day the workers get their wages, there is a festive atmosphere. Small stalls spring up on the streets serving momo, chowmein or sweets. Alcohol is sold and drunk more openly even by those who usually do not drink in public. The streets are crowded till later with people buying food or just generally drunk men roaming around and chatting with people.

In all these various periods of the day in its different characteristics the road took the shape of both a public space for communion and also an extension of domestic spaces operating as a friendly familiar location. But sometimes some stray incidents might shatter this sense of deep association and construct the streets and roads as alien public spaces—unknown and dangerous.

We found a crowd standing outside. A dog had been run over by a car on the road just now...The accident had clearly shaken them. On this road the children play about and the possibility that the consequence which met the dog today could easily have been for one of the kids, entered everyone's mind. Nikhil's brother, Madeeha, her mother, another woman, Kanta uncle and I stood and discussed how dangerous these roads were becoming. They expressed their fear for the little children who have the habit of running out onto the road

suddenly while playing inside their houses. This is all the more dangerous during the dark nights when the cars go speeding by on this road. (Daahlia, field-notes, 20.03.11)

The roads inside the villages are usually perceived as the extension of the house, with the children playing, people sitting or chatting on the road. This accident, however, altered their view of the road at least for that night and it became a dark and dangerous place; safety now lay within the boundaries of their homes. The usual darkness of the road took a special dimension with this incident. The running down of the dog which had considered the road safe for it came as a shock. The intimacy of the road which functioned as an extension of the courtyard was dispelled and the darkness, presence of cars, its emptiness suddenly became the defining character of the roads. This changed perception of the road, even if momentarily, is different from the liminality of the garden roads described in the previous chapter. The latter by its character was liminal identified as disruptive space, while for the roads within the village their character as a semi-domestic space was so well inscribed that such stray incidents came as aberration and shock.

The way the men and women managed the spaces relate not only to the physical structures of these spaces but the way in which social roles, in this case, gender roles are understood and played out in everyday life. Similarly the spatiality also determined the distinct nature of this performance. The spaces were not static, the different performances, the shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion all of these combined to give each of the physical sites shifting spatial and social characteristics. Finally, the way the domestic spaces operated in the plantation also problematises Kaviraj's binary of the home/world. Much of the physical sites within the labour village cannot be understood through a rigid binary. These spaces exhibit characteristics of the intimate and personal as well as more shared and public. Thus, this binary is not adequate in capturing the multi-layered spaces and the nuances of their operation.

The intermediate, semi-public, semi-personal nature of the spaces was manifested in the everyday interaction of people within these spaces.

WORKSPACE

Gendering of social space is not limited to domestic spaces. In the plantation, the workspace can roughly be divided into the garden and factory though there were many differences between various parts of the field. The sexual division of labour characterising the tea plantations (Kaniampady, 2003; Bhadra, 1992) was legitimised and to some extent naturalised through certain gender discourses and practices. In the formation of these labour practices, discourses and perceptions of the physical body of the worker had an important role to play. The discourses were built on the unquestioned assumption of physiological differences between men and women which thus, makes them ‘naturally’ suited for particular tasks and unsuitable for others. This has its manifestation in spatial forms.

Garden

Since most of the plucking, pruning and maintenance tasks were performed by the women the garden became largely a female dominated space. The perception of these tasks as primarily women’s work was not arbitrary but came from a process of construction which maps certain stereotypical character traits in women to the kinds of job that they perform, e.g. plucking.

Men can do this job, it’s not like they can’t but they are usually not so patient and would randomly pull out leaves Thus, spoiling the bushes. Though some women also do that, on the whole they are more patient and do a much better job of it. (Pankaj sardar, Daahlia, 18.05.11)

In Pankaj’s perception, the idea of patience is the defining point for women’s suitability for the job. The idea of women being naturally suited for plucking was widely held among the workers and even the

management. This acceptance embedded the idea as a part of labour practice.

I: Why is it that it is usually women who do the job of plucking?

M: Women are more patient and this job requires patience. Also look at our fingers, they are softer so they do not damage the bushes and we can pluck better.

I: But if every woman can do this then why can I not pluck properly.

M (laughs): You have to practice more. You come from the city and you are not used to this, we have seen our mothers do this from birth and learnt. (Madeeha, Daahlia, 09.05.11)

While Madeeha argues that it is a natural skill that the women possess, she refers to a process of training and 'practice' as well. Thus, the women's 'nimble fingers', suitable for careful handling of tea leaves, make them 'naturally' equipped to perform this task which in course of time gets essentialised as women's work. Moreover being constructed as natural dexterity it does not fall under the category of trained skill legitimising its low status and low pay. The characteristics of dexterity and patience are highlighted and the process of training is rendered invisible (Elson and Pearson, 1981).

The embeddedness of this naturalisation discourse can be evidenced from two further points. The men who plucked usually fell in the category of *lataburo* (old, infirm or ill) and held unsuitable for any other work.

Men don't usually work in plucking. Only the bigha (temporary) workers during the season and the lataburos who are no good for anything else. (Bachpana, Kaalka, 17.07.11)

An important aspect of the job of plucking was also storing the tea leaves in the bags that the women had on their heads. During the season time, the average weight of these bags was around 8-9 kilogram and for each weighing the women had at least two such bags which they had to lug to the weighing area. This task of carrying at least a few kilograms of

weight at any time during the plucking and carrying substantially more for the four weighing sessions to the weighing scale and then the truck where the leaves were deposited required an exercise of physical strength.

They had plucked so much that it was difficult for them to carry and weigh. They literally had to drag their bags to the weighing equipment and sometimes even had to take the help of another woman to reach the weighing. Most of the women were also unable to lift those heavy bags to the truck and two women would hold two sides and heave the bags up into the truck. The average weight of each woman's plucking was between 17-20 kgs. (Kaalka, field-notes, 18.05.11)

This in fact was a regular part of their job of plucking. In the way labour discourses were constructed in the plantation, lifting of weights was seen as a task for men. The men with their superior physical strength were seen as 'naturally' more suited for such heavy work. Thus, jobs of loading and unloading of any kind were exclusively given to the male workers. Interestingly in the discourses naturalising plucking on the basis of 'nimble fingers' or patience, this aspect is rendered invisible. The similar rationale of care, patience and dexterity were used to naturalise assigning women the maintenance tasks of *kholni*, *jhorni* or weeding.

Unlike plucking, different sets of stereotypes were used for the pruning that women did. Given the obvious physical strength that the work required I asked them why they were assigned this task and also why they did only one type of pruning, Low-Skip.

For Low-Skip you need to summon strength from your womb. To slash the trees well, you have to push from there. Thus, it is more suited for the women. But in case of the other two pruning especially Deep Skip, you need sheer brute force. We are women; how we will have such brute strength? It is on this logic that this division is done. (Barnamala, Daahlia, 13.01.11)

While many of the women had described this work as needing strength from the womb, some women felt that this was not a suitable work for the women and was damaging to their health.

You have to draw strength from below the navel which is a delicate part of your body. Doing this continuously over a period of a month damages it. Often it adversely affects child birth. (Ananya, Daahlia, 17.01.11)

Both sides of the argument regarding the logic of pruning accept that this particular form of pruning is tied to the strength of the women's womb rather than sheer strength. The physiological female body and its difference from the physiology of the male body is the core of the explanation here. It is the suitability or unsuitability of the material body which forms the crux of their understanding. In their description of how the pruning is done, what they often mention but hardly focus on is that there is a technique of pruning and some degree of skill required to perform this task effectively. The women's ability to train their bodies such that they no longer remained constrained by their physiologies but transcend to skilled bodies is rendered invisible.

Once you hold the knife then you have to cut in the level. You have to cut according to what you see and it should not be irregular (upar niche). We have to keep the level same. (Nabhitha, Kaalka, 15.09.11)

Here, there is an emphasis on learning and the proper way to perform this task. In spite of being physically draining work, many women noted that they preferred pruning to any other work in the garden as it involved least labour if one *knew* the correct way to do it.

For those who know the technique, it is the best work. For those who have not learnt it well, it is difficult work. (Saroj, Daahlia, 12.02.11)

The training and technique involved were rendered invisible under the discourse of 'natural' strength. While dexterity leads to one kind of gender discourse naturalising plucking, the strength of the lower body forms another discourse justifying pruning.

Interestingly, though the manual pruning (LS) is done by the women, in case of the machine pruning introduced in Daahlia, it is the men who

do it. On being asked why this is so, I was told that using the machine is akin to 'engine driving' and it is not for the women to do such hard physical labour.

The other two types of pruning done by the men have a different technique. In order to understand their work, I went to the pruning sections where men were working. The all-maleness of the space and the hostile boundaries that came up through the intrusion of a non-male body into that space was evident right from the beginning of my visit there and stayed the same for much of the remainder.

'Very brave of you to come all alone and stand in this men-mela (fair)'. (Manager, Daahlia, 12.01.10)

The fact that it was 'men mela' was evident not only by the fact that all the workers and supervisors were male; their forms of interaction were different from the way the women workers functioned. How bodies were managed within that space was rudely interrupted by my infringement within it.

For all of the two hours I was there hardly did anyone speak to me. Though Nikhil occasionally smiled and asked me a few general questions, most of my efforts at interaction with others met with failure. The sullenness of the silence seemed impenetrable...Listening to my experience in the men's pruning all the women laugh. Anasua explains to me, 'the men are not unfriendly, you meet them in the house or in the chowpatti they will happily answer your question. But it annoys them to have a woman at work. You know men! The kind of jokes they make, how cheap they can be, what not they do. With you there they can't do it, hence they feel awkward with you and uncomfortable in general. For us that is not a problem as you are a woman like us'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 13.01.11)

In explaining why my intrusion into an all male space was disruptive to its normal functioning, the women pick up certain perceived male stereotypes. Through this encroachment the operation of a highly gendered space became evident. It was not only the sheer number, but the

different ways in which they negotiated this space that made these work sections quite distinctly gendered spaces.

Again, the garden functioned as a combination of public and private space. As a space where the women worked and were supervised by the staff and management, they were in the public arena. The plucking or any other work they might be doing was scrutinised. During the breaks, though the women carved out a private, to some extent secluded, space in their public workspace.

The group finds a place between the bushes. Laying out the tarpaulin and plastic sheets on the ground we all sit down. Saili and Neetu have been assigned to get water and they go with all the women's bottles to fill it from the paniwallah. The women take off the shirts that they had been wearing on top of their blouses. Everyone takes out the food they have brought and distributes a portion of this to the other group-mates. While we sit back, relax and eat the food, chatting about mundane things, the thika, doubli, mela all seem at least momentarily to be far away. It could have been someone's courtyard where we were sitting and chatting. Soon after we finish eating some of the women lie down and promptly go to sleep. A couple of them go to get mushrooms while the rest just sit and relax. (Kaalka, field-notes, 29.06.11)

The extract above is pretty typical of how the women in both the plantations spent their breaks. Sitting between the bushes gave them a form of invisibility from the others which enabled them to relax. But even in cases where they sat by the roadside they could build up this sense of being in a relaxed space away from the public nature of the workspace. This was in contrast to how the body had to be managed at home while sleeping, eating, etc. During this time the *sardars* or the other supervisory staff did not disturb them.

In Kaalka the intrusion of weighing which often happened in the middle of that hour made this contrast more obvious.

Seeing the weighing car in the distance there was a collective groan...The women who went to do the weighing straightened up and put their shirts back on. The hum of activity which accompanied the arranging of the bags, conversation regarding how much they have plucked, the babu who came to do the weighing was a rude

interruption to the relaxed sleepy mood that had characterised the space till now.(Kaalka, field-notes, 17.09.11)

The shirt signified work clothes and by discarding it they took temporary relief from the routine. Similarly, putting it back on even for going to the weighing marked that particular activity as 'work'. The 'proper' work attire also signified 'proper' codes of managing the body, how it could be presented in the workspace. Putting on the shirt also signified moving out of a single gendered space where ideas of modesty, codes of dressing are suspended to a more differentiated space where the women were expected to adhere to these performances.

The garden was not, however, all work. It had several other functions and took on different characteristics. Given that at least forty-fifty women were working in the garden anytime, it often became a place for fun, gossip and communion.

As we walked to the next section someone's phone rings. Her ringtone is a popular Bollywood number. Madeeha immediately starts dancing to the beats of the song and is soon joined by a couple of others. Before long I am a part of a group of dancing women making their way to the next section for work. The sardars also watch in amusement. It was something they were used to. Kamla tells me, 'we have to spend the whole day here in the garden slogging, in this laughter and joking with friends we make that bearable and actually even enjoyable'.(Daahlia, field-notes, 06.12.10)

Anjanadidi asks me if I have heard any Nepali song. When I tell her I have not she asks a friend to play one song on her mobile. When Shambhu says it is of no use only playing the song, you have to dance with it, Anjana does a little hop skip but seeing that she has an audience she continues the jig for a few more minutes. (Kaalka, field-notes, 27.06.11)

These were not isolated incidents; singing and dancing was something that the women often did, not only to entertain me but also themselves and most importantly to have a good laugh. The idea is not the performance itself but the fun that it entailed. This could be through anything, a joke, teasing someone, mimicking people.

Alongside a space to interact and form friendships the garden was also a site for disseminating information and spreading awareness. The workers are a part of a larger politico-legal structure. They have voting rights and are party to rules and laws of the state. But being somewhat isolated and not having access to information, they are not always aware of how these things worked and what needed to be done by them to get the facilities they were entitled to. The women often got information on how to apply for job cards or Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards from volunteers with *Svatantra* such as Shiva, and pass on this information to the others in their group so that all of them can access these facilities.

The women who had spoken to Shiva about the job card explain to the others how to go about it. This leads to a discussion about job cards and BPL cards and confusions which arise from not knowing how the process works. (Kaalka, field-notes, 09.07.11)

Similarly the interaction with the more aware women who have had the experience of applying for voter's card often formed the channel for communication of this information. Their sharing of this information enables those less experienced to ask questions and become more aware of the process. This again demonstrates the blurry boundaries between political, public knowledge which becomes accessible through personal social networks.

Kamla recounts her experience of having gone to collect her voter card. She tells the others what documents are required to apply, the time and procedure, leading to a discussion about the voter's card and the method to procure it. Others recount their experience of it. Those who do not have much idea about how to get the voter card ask questions. (Daahlia, field-notes, 12.04.11)

There are certain sites within the garden which perform a very particular gender role. The nursing mothers' space was one such site. In both plantations, they formed their own groups and there was a boundary between the nursing mother and non-mother groups. The performance of mothering frequently works beyond the immediate confines of the home

(Dyck in Rose, 1993: 36–37). The distinct gender roles such as mothering open up spaces in specific ways to the participants. Through the shared characteristic and identity these mothering spaces function in a distinctly separate way from other gendered spaces within the plantations. The boundaries were not of antagonism but were rather defined by their differential priorities and focus.

The crèche area was marked by certain possessions like the blanket on which the babies and the crèche mothers sat, the bags in which their clothes were kept and the tin container to bring the milk given by the company. But perhaps what gave the crèche area its distinct character was the attitude of the actors themselves. While the babies play around under the watchful eyes of the crèche mothers, the mothers also seem relaxed and their whole concentration is on their babies. Unlike other workers who spend the time they snatch from their work for relaxation and chatting, for these women this time is meant to be spent with their kids. Even their conversations with each other mostly revolve around the kids. (Daahlia field-notes, 12.01.11)

The extract highlights the ways in which this crèche space was different from the rest of the plucking sections. The children were the most important part of this space and their activities regulated the others' actions. This is understandable given the fact that women working here are often part of different work-groups and have been thrown together by virtue of being nursing mothers. Like children playing in the street while their mothers engage with other mothers performing the same task of watching over the children (Rose, 1993), here too it is through the children they connect and form friendships. The crèche enables them not only to form a common and shared bond and hence perform motherhood but also to really spend some time exclusively dedicated to their babies. The very way the bodies were managed, through loosening of the blouses to aid nursing the children and not wearing the shirts on top of the saris as would be seen in other sections, was not just the characteristic of the space but integral to the way mothering was performed within the space.

This shared mothers' space is a space of collective motherhood with the women and the crèche mothers looking after the children together.

This provision and its functioning points to the wider attitude of the plantation at some level functioning through the use of the values of an extended family. It is through the operation of these same values that children play in the streets in the village under the assurance that someone or the other in the village will keep an eye on them.

Changing spaces

The spaces though consistent over a period of time, do not remain static. The character of the spaces and the discourses associated with them have grown out of concrete economic logics. The changes in economic needs are reflected in the changing labour practices and discourses. During my fieldwork, growing the saplings and planting them was going through a process of change in Daahlia. With the increased outmigration of the men, the number of men workers was on the decline with strong possibility of this decline continuing. In order to adjust the work with the labour available, the management was gradually introducing women to the work of growing and planting saplings. This began with the claim that there was nothing really gendered about this job and both the men and the women were equally equipped to perform it. At the time of my fieldwork, this process of transition was at its early stage and still very much contested among the workers.

Babul (munshi) comes and tells Jagdish (sardar) that they just had a meeting with the manager and he has told them to also start training women on how to grow the sapling. 'There is nothing in it that they cannot do with a bit of training, he said', Babul informs. Winking he says what choice he has with all the men going to Kerala. (Daahlia, field-notes, 18.11.11)

Some of the women had seen the advantage in this and had already begun to work on planting sections where the accompanied work of digging was not required.

Ordinarily this work of planting was done by the men. Since so many of the men are going off to Kerala, the manager said that now the women should also learn this. I have already done this kind of work when in Assam. There women used to do planting work. Here, earlier

this work was restricted essentially to men but for the last few weeks women are being taken in. This work suits me. It has to be done carefully but it is light work and can be done at a slow pace, relaxing in between. When the men plant a whole section then it becomes heavy work as they have to dig up the whole field but this infilling is not like that. We would not have done this work if it was heavy work. This work also finishes at one which suits me even better as I can then go home and do the housework. (Nandita, Daahlia, 19.11.11)

Even within the process of transition of discourses, the gendered trope of light and heavy work remains. The way planting work was being gradually shifted to women was not through challenging the gendering of heavy work as masculine but through pushing forward the idea that there was nothing within this work which could be called heavy. Through rendering invisible the more physically draining aspects of the work, planting was being portrayed as gender neutral and in course of time might even be re-constructed as feminine.

The acceptance of this shifting discourse was, however, far from complete. Though Nandita looks at this as an opportunity, others allege that since she is the *munshi*'s wife it is easier to get her and her group-mates to accept this 'men's job'.

Pankhuri says that earlier the women did not do planting work because it was men's work but now things are changing. The munshi of this division gives such work to his wife and other neighbours. They all heavily criticise women doing 'men's work'. Planting has traditionally been men's work, never before have women undertaken this work but from this year this kind of malpractice is happening. I ask them why they are calling it a man's work. They explain that the work requires physical strength in bringing the bags of young plants to the planting site. Besides before planting, the soil has to be dug and that requires a man's strength, a woman can never do it effectively...Seeing these women working here, the munshis of the other division will also tell the women there why they could not do planting when it was being done here and force them to undertake this kind of work. Binita says that Ramila has been working here for so long but even she has never heard of such things before. They declare, 'If we are asked to do men's job like planting no way will we do such jobs. After a few days if they ask us to dig the ditches because there are not enough men will we accept and start doing such work? In such cases we will clearly tell them that we will do no such kind of work.

Being done by some women this practice will spread to the whole garden and set a precedent'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 19.11.11)

This discussion shows how deep seated and naturalised the ideas of sexual division of labour were among the workers. Lifting heavy bags of leaves or even planting shade tree saplings were a work which were commonly done by women in connection to other tasks but in this case the heavy job seemed to characterise planting as a 'man's job'. Also the digging of the fields was being done by men and women were supposed to fill and sow the seeds. But the fear that eventually all these aspects of the work requiring hard physical labour would come to them made the women vehemently oppose this job. There was an accepted and deep-seated discourse of the gendered physiology of the body and its ability to do certain things and not others.

This dynamism of labour practices arising from changing economic needs thus, made social spaces fluid and dynamic. The shifting nature of practices and discourses and the resultant shifting nature of space was also very much in evidence in the other physical worksite of the plantation—the factory.

Factory

The factory was largely a male dominated space. The construction of factory as the male space had been legitimised through a particular understanding of gendered nature of labour where men are perceived as being more suited to handle machinery. The general tasks in the factory were perceived as 'heavy' job. The only work held to be suitable for the women and performed by them, in the factories, was that of packaging.

There are a lot of tasks with machines and all that. How can we do it? Hence they prefer the men. It is better that way. Too dangerous this factory work! (Aloki, Daahlia, 17.01.11)

When I told the women my difficulty in getting access to the factory, most of them discouraged me saying that I will not enjoy working there

as it is filled with men and I will not have people to talk to and will be bored. They suggested that I give up on this idea much like the pruning sections where the men worked.

Though this was the common understanding regarding factory work not everyone felt that the gendered segregation was necessary but merely a part of the labour practice

Jayprakash (the floor sardar) tells me that all the workers on the factory floor are men. The work done by them as I could see was mostly manual work of loading, unloading, lifting, packing, etc. I ask him why there are no women on the factory floor. He says that in other plantations women are often employed for packing which is not hard physical labour. Earlier, some women used to be employed here for packing too. However, they have sufficient men to meet the factory's need and do not need to employ the women workers. He confesses there is no real reason. It has simply been a trend for a while and hence has got embedded as a part of the labour practice of this garden. (Kaalka, field-notes, 08.04.11)

But the discourses surrounding the labour practices arose from the economic necessities of the time and are questioned and often adjusted with the change in the economic logic. While many of the workers felt it to be a masculine space with work suitable for the men, the changing labour needs meant the company had to rethink the labour practice and its understandings which had been naturalised over the years. The beginnings of this deconstruction (only for a different labour practice construction) could be seen in the way some of the workers and the supervisors interrogated these seemingly naturalised understandings

In Darjeeling it is the women who do spraying of pesticides even. There is no reason why they cannot work in the factory. Women work in the factory at other places...It is actually better to engage women in factory work. They will work with greater concentration. Moreover they pay greater attention towards hygiene than men do which is also better for their work. (Pankaj sardar, Daahlia, 12.07.11)

The work of spraying was held to be the one most unsuitable for women and by illustrating how even that had been performed by women

in Darjeeling he momentarily challenges the constructions of gendered labour under the label of labour practice. While Pankaj holds that the existing labour practice is not rational, he makes use of the same constructions of feminine labour to characterise them as being careful and concerned about work to justify their working in the factory.

The changing labour practices in both their conception and implementation have less to do with realisation of the artificiality of it and more with changing economic and labour needs. As more and more men started migrating to look for other jobs, there was shortage of male labour. Given that the available labourers were women this necessitated breaking down the gender segregation which the factory work had so far characterised. From being a masculine space, the factory was slowly being reconstructed into a gender neutral space.

I meet Bandi on the road. Surprised I asked her where she had been as I had not seen her for quite a while at work. She smiles and says that their group is now going to the factory. I asked her how she is enjoying it. She says, 'It is actually much better than the garden work. There is shade and we don't have to constantly seek protection from the sun or the rain. The work is also light, just packaging. It is nice. And the best thing is since the whole group is there we can joke and have fun'. (Kaalka, field-notes, 20.11.11)

To Bandi and presumably the rest of her group the factory was not a dangerous and alien place. They had seized the opportunity to work there and had actually found the experience enjoyable enough preferring work there than in the gardens. Though the wage was the same in both the places for the work they were doing, the factory meant more comfortable working conditions. With more and more women then entering the factory, this might in course of time open the possibility of further reconstruction of the factory into new understandings of spaces.

Like in the domestic spaces, the gendering within the workspace was not neutral. The legitimisation of discourses through the process of constructing the gendered nature of labour and labour space implied a certain hierarchy. Much of the work that women did was constructed to

be light and also drew upon their ‘natural’ attributes of the physiological body like dexterity, patience, and docility, etc. Through this naturalisation discourse, the process of training and acquiring a certain level of skill for the effective discharge of these tasks was rendered invisible. Men, on the other hand, were seen to be more suitable for ‘skilled’ jobs such as engine driving, using machinery or growing saplings. The training that these jobs required formed a focus in the way the jobs were conceived as skilled and hence higher paid. Through the gendered discourses an occupational hierarchy was created and legitimised. This spilled onto a spatial hierarchy by which the job in the factory is given only after observing a worker for a few months in the garden job. A person taking up the job after someone’s retirement was automatically given a job in the garden, while for the factory work usually one had to be chosen on the basis of performance. This made the factory a higher skilled, higher paid space where not everyone could enter as opposed to the garden which was a low skilled, labour intensive space with hereditary entry to jobs. Hence, the social and spatial conceptions of the jobs reinforced the gender hierarchy seen in the domestic space.

Supervision

The supervisory staff in both the factories and gardens in both the plantations were men. Chatterjee (2003) in her ethnography provides an insight into how the plantations’ hierarchy is shaped on gender and class basis with the planter at the head of the pyramid and the women at the base.

Simultaneously fetishized and pragmatically devalued, women’s tea plucking creates the outer perimeter of the plantation’s field. The planter’s management of work sustains this as the outer perimeter through a hierarchy of overseers and supervisors who are all men. Work disciplines through the manager’s hokum (command) trickle through layers of surveillance that re-enact his will in decidedly gendered terms (Chatterjee, 2003: 53).

The only supervisory role given to the women was that of the crèche-mothers almost essentialising the mothering role of the woman. There

were, however, no rules about this. Though in a few plantations, I had seen female *sardars* (not beyond that) in most it was prevalently the men.

I: Why is it that all the supervisors are male? Is that a rule?

Manager: Well not really. In some plantations there are women as sardars but just not here. It is more of a labour practice. Having been in operation for long it seems like a rule but it isn't. (Manager, Daahlia, 13.01.11)

Some of the workers made sense of this practice through once again subscribing to certain stereotypes as Chatterjee (2003) points out above.

Men are often better at disciplining. They have more authority you know. Though we joke with the sardar he has his authority. (Poonam, Kaalka, 17.04.11)

Stereotyping men as having natural authority over the women, legitimised not only this discourse of male supervisors, it also pointed to a more embedded perception of gender hierarchy—of men disciplining the women's body and thus, being naturally suited to have 'more authority' over the women.

While for the factory, which was constructed largely as a male space, this was almost universally accepted, in the case of the garden, there were some murmurings of dissent.

It is all politics. That is the problem with the women, always politics. If someone from my group gets it, others will be jealous. So the management avoids trouble by giving it to the men...Earlier in my mother's time there were a few female sardars. (Binita, Daahlia, 15.03.11)

I am the senior-most in the plucking team, I should have been made a sardar but they use politics and don't do it. But the sardars show me a lot of respect. They know I have vast experience (Ramila, Daahlia, 19.01.11).

While there is a recognition of 'politics' denying them the right to supervise, Binita explains this through typecasting women as being jealous of each other. Ramila recognises the politics in this practice. But

as both the extracts show, this recognition remains limited to the specific instance of the specific plantation and does not extend to question the gendered nature of this politics on the larger scale.

CONCLUSION

The sites described are not just material sites; the praxis and discourses surrounding them carves them out as distinct social spaces dependant on and influencing the meanings inscribed by the people in them. The operation of the spaces is not neutral but arises from certain understandings and expectations of gender roles and performances. They assume within themselves a hierarchy. Thus, the implications of the gendered spaces within the plantations reflect some of the key ideas expressed by theorists on space. The plantations demonstrate that the social relations take a spatial form where the existing social stratifications are played out (Massey, 1995). In their working, these sites within the plantations embed the very construction of the masculine and feminine as Ardener (1993) points out. Through repetition and its legitimisation, these spaces continue to be gendered in specific ways and naturalise the existing hierarchies, bodily discourses and gender role performance (Spain, 1992). Much like the previous chapter, within the plantation also the different sites show the inadequacy of a binary understanding. These are everyday social spaces encountered in the lives of the inhabitants. Their spatiality thus, can be usefully understood only as a continuum with varying degrees of public, private and the intermediate.

Just as these spaces are not static, their inhabitants are not passive receptors. They are active agents, engaging with these spaces in their everyday life. Their interaction constitutes the spaces as much as they are constituted by these spaces. Spaces are full of internal contradictions whereby an apparently disadvantaged group might also derive benefit (Massey 1994). Lefebvre (1991) holds that social space is not homogenous and conceptualising it as such only legitimises the

dominant, negating or obscuring any challenge to it. The evolution of different kinds of spatial structure, from establishment through maintenance to eventual collapse or change are not determined by only the characteristics of labour process, the stages of modes of production, political and economic strategies, prevailing social norms (Massey 1995) but by the people within it, their efforts to carve out new spaces. In the next chapter, we turn to explore the ways in which ordinary men and women carve out their space as agential beings.

Chapter 8

Understanding Agency

'I can survive'

Four vignettes below contain some of the main themes of this chapter. These excerpts encapsulate to some extent the various ways and scales in which the women exercise their agency in a prevailing structure of constraints. Ranging from expressions of will to counter-attack to critiques, the women's everyday lives are a kaleidoscope of actions and inactions which places them as agential beings.

It is not an easy life. My father is an alcoholic and squanders all his wages on drinking. Initially, the household and our (her and her brother's) education were managed solely by mother's wage from the garden. Failing to make ends meet I had to give up my education and start working in bigha in the garden to supplement mother's income. My father or later even brother did not contribute significantly. I worked and the little money that I earned from work was given to run the household. If there was any money left, or if there was more money then I bought things for the house, like the bed, fan, etc.; all of these I bought... In the meantime proposals for my marriage started to come and I was married soon. By then I had got the permanent job transferred to my name. As I had a job in the plantation and the responsibility of the household on me, I commuted between my marital and parental home. Staying for a while and working in the garden, earning sufficiently for mother to manage the household for the month, I went back to my husband's home where then I stayed till the end of the month....the neighbours started putting doubts into my husband's mind, casting aspersions on my character. I did not

know anything of this at that time.....My mother was taken ill and I had to stay back to look after her. When her condition became critical I sent for my husband. In spite of repeated requests, he did not come as he had by then started believing the rumours about me. When my mother recovered I decided to end my marriage. I went to bring all my belongings from there. The misunderstanding came to the fore and I cleared my name. My husband, realising his mistake apologised and agreed to take me back. But I refused. 'You did not say such an insignificant thing that I will forgive you so easily. You made such a big accusation on me, and then I faced such sorrow. At that time, I needed you so much but you were not there. What is the point of being here now. Whether you stay or not does not matter to me. You think you will leave me, I am leaving you myself. Do you think my life will stop without you? I have my work, I can survive'. I did not want to live as anyone's burden. I can earn myself. By working I can feed others and feed myself as well. (Shalini, Daahlia 10.07.11)

My mother did not receive any support from my father. I took a decision and told my mother and aunt that I will take the job...Initially, for one and a half years, I did adolescent work. At that time that was half day work and I studied in the other. Those were difficult times...Eventually, when I was in class 8 it started becoming very difficult to pluck daylong, and study after that, I could not manage. I told my mother that I am going to leave studies. It was my own decision. My mother often says that it would have been good had you continued your education, you could have got a good job. But I have no regrets. I am okay with this work and life... I said that I have worked so hard and studied till here; for now that is enough. I can sign my own name...Though many supported us, our own people did not. My father did not once say that let her study I will support the family. My mother had to suffer so much. Once I started working our family life got so much better. We did not have to stretch our palms to anyone. Earlier if she fell sick, she had medicine and then went to work. I could

not see this suffering.... After leaving school, I got into work fulltime. I became obsessed with earning money. If no one is helping us why should we depend on them? We will not take help from anyone; we will accomplish everything on our own. (Aradhana, Kaalka, 20.10.11)

The men will drink and come home and beat us. They suspect others to be interested in their wives and will hit the wife. My neighbour's husband accused her of having an affair and started beating her. Then she threw a bamboo stick at him and beat him. Some get frightened but she did not. (Victoria, Daahlia, 06.11.11)

*In this night of festivals and lights, we have come here to your hearth
To tell you of the pain hidden in our heart.*

The daughters those are not educated

In pain and sorrow their lives are dedicated.

The daughters who are trained in intelligence and consciousness

Get the taste of the real happiness.

Bangles on hand, tilhari in the breast, wearing chaubandi blouse.

Two days guest in mother's home and then wife in another house.

Is it our luck that in the sovereign country here

We still fight for our equal share?

Boy and girl brought up together by the parents.

Only to serve in our husband's home as servants.

On returning home brothers do not let us stay

Keeping son by your side you send your daughters away

We don't get a share of the parent's property.

Live our life in husband's charity.

There is no joy or laughter

Only sorrow is our fellow traveller... (Bhai dooj song, Kaalka)

The narratives of tea plantation workers can be read as stories of deprivation, exploitation and misery, as the first oral history points out—

'it is not an easy life'. To stop the analysis there will, however, be inadequate. In her proclamation, *'I can survive'* Shalini brings out in essence the need to look deeper and explore the understandings and workings of agency among the tea plantation workers of Dooars. This is the task of this chapter.

In exploring understandings and workings of agency there are many common features observed in the two plantations, Kaalka and Daahlia, though there naturally remain specific differences. The chapter will begin with a broad theoretical discussion on agency. The following section will then explore the specific aspects of agency and analyse the vignettes given above; drawing out their implications using other data from the fieldwork.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

An understanding of agency has to include an exploration of the space in which it is played out. Even within the somewhat permissive social space different women experienced different forms of spatial control, be it in physical sites such as household or identity sites such as caste, religion. Given the multi-scalar control experienced by the women through the intersecting and overlapping structure, their expressions of agency and attempts to negotiate these needed to be equally dynamic. The forms and shapes of resistance are challenged and channelled by the structures within which they are located, be it the home, the field, or any other space.

Spatial control is not only material, since ensconced within it is humiliation and processes of disciplining the body. Such issues of dignity and autonomy have been usually accorded a secondary place to material conditions of exploitation. But poverty is not only a material condition; it is also a social reality within which the dominated have to live. Combined with the material difficulties of the situation it is the everyday forms of indignity which shape people's resentment and often express

themselves in open outbursts and at others as more invisible forms of agency (Scott, 1990). Within this chapter I will analyse agential behaviour which originates not only from material appropriations but also personal humiliation which characterises exploitation.

Women in the South Asian context have been portrayed as demure, passive and oppressed (e.g. Elahi, 1993; Samarsinghe, 1993)—a construction which negates their attempts to negotiate with their life situation. Focusing fixedly on the absence of volatile acts of resistance, this trope of victimhood conflates women's agency in the simplistic binary of resistance/subordination and fails to recognise the numerous apparently invisible ways through which agency is exercised (e.g. Jeffery and Basu, 1998).

The women's struggles to address adversities in their lives could involve confrontation or manipulation of other women. Their agency cannot be studied in isolation, it has to be placed in a relational context (Rao, 2005a: 358). Gender relations cannot always be essentialised as oppositional. Men and women collaborate often to guard their common interests. Similarly, women often collaborate with men against other women to protect their interests (e.g. Rao, 2005a; Kandiyoti, 1988). Rao (2005a) points out how, on the one hand, conflicts of interests arising from male/female interests versus role based interest might restrict solidarity and collective action. On the other hand, in several small-scale ways the women collaborated with each other to deal with common issues. As Datta (1997) notes, a collectivity of bodies which possess a fragmentary identity come together in a space simultaneously being transformed and transforming the space by forming counter narratives or the hidden transcript (Scott, 1990). Thus, agency among the women workers in the tea plantations has to be examined from the dual plane of individual and collective agency. Usually, even minute acts of agency depend on shared meanings and often collective performance. Thus, women's agency even when demarcated on gender lines cannot exist in

vacuum and has to be understood within a context of identities and roles available to them (Rao, 2005a: 369).

Thus, the vignettes in the beginning of the chapter illustrate that agency is expressed in different forms and for different purposes. Everyday forms of agency include but are not limited to minute acts of resistance, expression of choice in presence or absence of opposition, in their everyday action and inaction. To understand the workings of agency among my research participants within this framework of power, I have captured it on primarily two different planes—agency as conceived through autonomy and agency as a means of resistance. In spite of separating these threads for analytical convenience, there are inevitable overlaps. A single act of agency might be understood through both the lenses. For instance, agency expressed through autonomy implies a certain amount of resistance to the patriarchal order within which the women were located. Again, agency as a form of resistance might also include within it a certain level of autonomy. These are thus, not independent strands.

Agency and autonomy

Standing (1991:170) points out that autonomy not only refers to the capacity to obtain control over economic resources in a way that enables one to exercise certain choices over the direction of one's life, it also points to a capacity to be considered as a full 'social citizen' at home, workplace and also the larger society, in whatever choices one makes. Seshu (2013: 245–46) problematises the concept of choice claiming that the binary of choice and force fails to map reality. She points out that giving consent cannot be equated with choice as, unlike consensual activities, one's choice has to arise from actual alternatives which are often not possible in the case of marginalised populations (Seshu, 2013: 245–46). While this argument is important to frame a discussion on choice, consent expresses passivity whereas choice is more active. In many occasions, choice remains relevant as it then maps on people's

ability to *create* alternatives even within limiting situations. Kabeer (1999: 437–38) defines empowerment as the *ability to make choices*, a process by which those denied the ability to make such choices acquire the ability. She puts forward a distinction between first order choices which are the strategic life choices that are critical (e.g. livelihood, marriage, children) and second order choices which—though important—are not the defining parameters and are often shaped by the first order decisions (Kabeer, 1999: 438).

Agency (relating to autonomy) has often been operationalised as decision making. The expression of autonomy through exercise of decision making on matters of strategic choice can take subtle forms such as bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (Kabeer, 1999: 438). In systems of ‘classic patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti, 1988), economic and other control within the family and outside firmly resides with the male members of the household. Examples of women supporting their husbands against other women to secure their marital and material interests (Rao, 2005a: 361) or the mother ensuring continued favour with her son or other male kin to retain, establish or achieve a say in family decisions (Kandiyoti, 1988) show that women find means by which they strike subtle bargains to protect their interests within a male dominated society. The strategies which women exercise within a set of concrete constraints are what define the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988: 275).

Hardly any society operates with men making all the decisions and women making none (Kabeer, 1999). It is more common to find a hierarchy of decisions with the trend being men making the important decisions and the women the secondary ones. Decision making is a process of subtle negotiations, a process in which the women may control various critical points through which they seek to influence the final outcome which is expressed by the men of the household or in some cases even by elder women.

Agency and resistance

The struggle of the apparently powerless against perceived adversities in their situation should not be always collated with activism. Agency extends along a spectrum from violent militant activism to complete passive submission to authority (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1994), and often becomes invisible to an unpractised eye trying to map them. Women who are located outside the realm of activism are not passive victims, disabled by their socialisation from discerning gender inequality (Jeffery, 1998). Rather in various low profile, unspectacular ways they critique their subordination.

Scott (1985) speaks of the ‘weapons of the weak’ through which the apparently powerless resist and challenge the structures of power that oppress them. In this chapter, I focus on the hidden transcript which might take place in hidden spaces or open public spaces but this space of agency is almost always disguised. This resistance is typically mundane, spontaneous and individual. These everyday forms of resistance stop well short of outright collective defiance and instead consist of minute acts of foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, deception, false compliance, slander, sabotage, etc.—actions typically identified as the weapons of the relatively powerless (Scott, 1985: xv-xvii). They require little or no coordination and make use of the already built community networks, shared meanings and perceptions. Rather than confrontations challenging the very basis of the system these are attempts to work the system to their least disadvantage. The hidden transcript thus, is a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it (Scott, 1990: 158). Gupta (2010) criticises Scott for focusing on and holding these small scale individual acts of resistance to be just as effective as revolutionary movements. Though in his claims of these forms of resistance causing ‘utter shambles of policy’ there is an implicit romanticisation of resistance, Scott does not overemphasise the revolutionary potential of these acts. These minute acts of resistance do not openly threaten the dominant as open defiance would but rests on an undercurrent of critique.

Ethnographic research has shown how through rumours, vulgar songs, answering back, refusal to cook, etc., women have resisted the oppression of the framework of power within which they have to operate (e.g. Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996). Occasionally, resistance through these channels does mount a critique of the existing framework of social hierarchies and gender roles. In speaking of the significance of poetry in understanding resistance among the Bedouin men and women she studied, Abu-Lughod (1990) says that while everyday responses of people show themselves to be living up to the accepted moral code, poetry can violate this code. Since moral codes are one of the most important means of perpetuating unequal structures of power, the violations of this code must be understood as ways of resisting the system and challenging the authority of those who represent and benefit from it (Abu-Lughod, 1990: 46). In a similar vein, challenging socially unquestioned ideas, e.g. preference for sons, also shows a resistance to the omnipotence of the existing framework.

We have seen in chapter 6 how festivals and fairs provided spaces in which the everyday social order and hierarchy remained suspended. They allow certain things to be said and certain forms of social power to be expressed that are muted and suppressed outside this sphere (Scott, 1990: 174). Beezley et al. (1994: xxi-xxii) point out that carnivals have the potential to both threaten and reinforce relations of subordination. The laughter, jokes and comedy characteristic of these festivities remain outside co-option by the official perspective and may disrupt assumptions about social order and codes. Festivals provide a liminality within which people can indulge in deviant practices (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009). This ability to deviate, however, comes from the codes of the festival itself which by emphasising its liminality ensures that people do not transgress the social pattern of their everyday life.

Lefebvre (1991) argues that the specificity of the space is important to provide the physical boundaries within which such transgressive behaviour remains permissible. In legitimising temporary modification of

behaviour in a space routinely used for other purposes, carnivals firmly establish themselves as temporary deviant phenomena (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009: 45-46). In the tea plantations, the festivities were not characterised by distinctively cut off physical spaces. The liminality, however, lies in the temporal nature of the carnival space. While the carnival allows for the temporary inversion of social order, it is essentially transitory and once it is over, the social order is re-established once again. Research (e.g. Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009; Bakhtin, 1986) shows that carnivals by being transgressive and oppositional re-inscribe and legitimise existing structures of power. 'The license to transgress is a bounded licence, it comes with a code of conduct that is every bit as ordered as people's normal lives' (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009: 40). But even within this boundary, carnivals might constitute a public discourse through which society could reinvent (or sustain) itself.

While the songs, rumours, etc., are a channel of resistance, these acts do not look to transform the existing order. In many cases they uphold and reinforce the status quo. The structure which controls the women and against which they resist is also the structure which sustains them and their well being (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996). Thus, in situations of limited mobility and restricted choices women might decide subscribing to the existing norms serve their interest better (Rao, 2005a). Abu-Lughod (2009: 41-42) holds that the tendency to romanticise all forms of resistance as signs of ineffectiveness of systems of power and the refusal of the human spirit to be dominated, forecloses the possibility of reading resistance as a diagnostic of power. Mahmood (2005) argues that agency needs to be conceived beyond resistance to relations of domination. She problematises the dominant trend in much of the feminist literature (especially of the liberal tradition) of the universality of the desire to be free from relations of subordination especially from structures of male domination and looking for freedom and autonomy as their ultimate goal (Mahmood, 2005: 17). Mahmood (2005) argues that this analysis is flawed as it remains locked in the binary divisions of subordination and

resistance and fails to recognise actions, discourses and agency not captured by these goals. The potential of these acts of resistance to alter the framework of power within which they operate cannot be exaggerated, but nor should these acts be rendered invisible or considered unimportant. These will have to be considered on their own merit as expressions of agency within structures of domination.

Agency can be conceptualised not only as synonymous to resistance to relations of domination but also as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable (Mahmood, 2001). Power—and resistance to it—is exercised through a range of prohibitions and restrictions (Abu-Lughod, 2009). The women in their support for gender roles, segregated spaces embrace these and then protect them as their inviolable separate sphere—a sphere where defiance can occur. Boddy (1989) points out women unconsciously or strategically make use of what are perceived as the instruments of their oppression to assert their values and express their agency. In the sexually segregated world, women daily enact minor defiance to codes enforced by elder men in the community (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Similar use of secrets, silence and collusion to hide knowledge were evidenced among the tea plantation women.

Acts of resistance among my research participants were both individual and collective, played out in the household, at workplace and other sites. The various forms of everyday agency could be identified in patterns of arguing, ridiculing, deception as well as taking and executing decisions which at a glance seemed counterproductive. Not all these acts were invisible, and they often became visible (albeit minute) forms of struggle. Using this framework, I will now look at various categories of agential behaviour.

IN THE PLANTATIONS

Autonomy

Choices:

Without negating the harsh conditions of garden work, wage labour and its combination with women's role in domestic space creates a paradox of empowerment and disempowerment, agency and subordination. Wage earnings create the avenues through which the women carve out some autonomy within the patriarchal space they inhabit. Shalini's life story, at the start of the chapter, demonstrates the role that access to wage work played in enabling her to support her mother, sustain herself, look after the family, and take difficult decisions. In facing the many tribulations, her work remained the basis of her agency and in this case autonomy. In a society where marriage is viewed as a pillar of support, Shalini herself chose to end the relation. Having a source of earning which provided her with her own sustenance gave her the confidence and courage to accomplish this. This ability to choose, however, implies the possibility of alternatives to choose otherwise. Within a set of constraints Shalini made choices which enabled her to retain her self-respect even though it came at a price.

In a similar vein, Ramila chose not to remarry after her husband's death. She shunned the traditional structures of support, in the form of husband and in-laws and rather found a source of strength and independence in her work through which she assumed the role of the chief bread-earner, decision-maker and carer of her natal family. This was not a role that she was forced to assume in the absence of alternatives, but one that she took up consciously in spite of the alternatives.

R: Yes, it was a love marriage. And then he died suddenly a few years after the marriage. He had heart attack. After his death I continued living here with my sister and others. I did not marry a second time though I was young then. I had my work, my family, my happiness lies here, so why to marry a second time.

I: So you did not marry out of your own choice?

R: Yes. My brother's children were there and trying to educate them I have reached here now. Two of them are in (standard) 6; one is in 10 and the other 8. (Ramila, Daahlia, 05.04.04)

In exercising her choice, Ramila provides an illustration of autonomy. Shalini's choices occur within a particular social context and set of relations that restrict her options. Within these, she makes the choices that she perceives to be the most suitable to retain her dignity. They both remain independent and self-sufficient. At the same time, they also end up isolated and burdened with familial responsibilities to be fulfilled almost singlehandedly.

Unlike Shalini and Ramila, many women expressed their agency by embracing the traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. Even while donning the garb of the traditionally inscribed roles, the women often showed evidence of a shrewd understanding of which role served their best interest. The expression of this choice however remained shrouded in the rhetoric of gender role performance. After being a widow for a long time, Puloma married one of her acquaintances who had consistently helped and supported her. This decision was met with a lot of opposition not only from the neighbours and the society but from her sons also.

I was defamed and insulted (badnaam and beijoti). I am also a human being. Why will I stay here if I am defamed? The person for whom I was vilified, he was not doing this for me alone but helping out my family. Who looked after me in those times of misery? No one. I went with the one who looked after me. If they (my sons) did not behave like this I would probably not have gone. But I was forced to go. After going there we got married in court in 2008. (Puloma, Kaalka, 21.09.11)

After she came back to the garden in 2010 the problems persisted. Her elder son refused to acknowledge their wedding and threatened to kill her husband if he came to the plantation, forcing him to stay in a nearby plantation with his relatives. She, however, had decided not to give up on

him. At the time of the research she was planning to go away somewhere as she did not like this life which entailed her staying away from her husband. In making this decision she was not only guided by emotional motives but also by a rational calculation of where her advantage lay.

I have no gain in staying here. I have to work, feed them, will not be able to save any money for myself, nor be able to buy clothes...if I get a good amount for Provident Fund³³ and gratuity my sons will take it. In my old age, I will have no one. They will look after me as long as I provide them money, that's it. Once the money is finished they will kick me out. It is better to stay with my husband than this. He says 'leave your work and come here if I can feed you, you will eat, if I can't you won't. If I have to work as a labourer I will do that also and feed you. You just sit and do the cooking and wash my clothes, that's all.' My children have all grown up. Now for me rather than staying here I prefer to stay with him...I married him, I have not sinned. I did not go with him to roam around. In the government laws our marriage is written. If we stay separately and he marries another then also I will have the proof of our marriage. Whether we have a child or not, he has to pay for my maintenance till I divorce him. And if he gets the government job then it is all the more difficult. I will be able to stop his work. (Puloma, Kaalka, 21.09.11)

This excerpt captures the complexities of her life and the constraints of choice. Though she is able to exercise a strategic life choice (Kabeer, 1999), this is by no means an ideal choice as she recognises that it requires her to give up some aspects of her life, her job, the plantation and even the family. But she strikes a bargain with what seemed to her to be the most suitable within the structures of patriarchy. She decided to stay with her husband with whom she felt that she had a chance of a better life. While conforming to the construction of a wife, nonetheless, her decision questioned and subverted the constructed gender role of motherhood. Incidents of a drunken son beating his mother and taking her money are not uncommon among the tea garden workers. Though she does not make a choice (or at least express the choice) on the basis of

³³Public Provident Fund is a savings and tax-saving instrument in India. In many cases it serves as a retirement plan for those who do not have a structured pension plan covering them.

her being a woman or even an individual, Puloma chose between her role as a mother and that of a wife with careful consideration. At a superficial level this might seem to be a simple enough choice as the children were ungrateful while the husband seemed more concerned and caring. But her anguishing over this decision, her return to the plantation even after leaving it once and the fact that she was not staying with her husband for over six months shows that this was in fact not an easy choice to exercise, or a straightforward decision to make.

The idea of choice within constraints is very complex and often in exercising choice the agent seems to contradict their self interest. Aradhana's (vignette 2) decision to give up on her education was seemingly a choice that was counter-productive to her life chances or access to better opportunities of work. But to dismiss this simply as a choice that in the long run prevented her from realising her full potential is inadequate. By expressing her own will in taking a decision on something which counted as 'strategic life choice', Aradhana showed a semblance of empowerment. Given the circumstances of her life, she might have had to give up her education anyway at a later stage, but deciding to start work alongside her mother, she turned it around to a positive—the dual employment of the mother and daughter made it possible for them to educate her younger sister till the highest level.

The agency expressed by these women has to be studied within the prevailing framework of powerlessness in which they operated. While in Shalini's case her actions were prompted by her strong sense of self respect which might not translate into happiness, in case of Aradhana her decisions cannot be analysed from an individualist plane. Much of the literature (e.g. Kumar and Varghese, 2005; Samanta, 1999) on empowerment has an individualistic focus but Aradhana and other research participants often chose to put their parents and other family members ahead of themselves. They made the choice to improve the life of those important to them by often even doing things which seemed counter-productive to their self-interest.

Decision making:

In case of the strategic life choices such as how to spend the money, education of the children, their marriage, sometimes the women assume the role of the decision maker in the family. Among the women in my research, nearly all who were the primary decision makers were also the main earning members of the family. This is usually always the case when the oldest and only earning member of the house is the woman. In most of their cases they are widowed or separated and assume the responsibility for the rest of the family, Thus, becoming the figure of authority. This is not necessarily in the absence of a male member in the household, but usually the man is younger both in age and relation, being the brother, son, son-in-law or nephew.

R: Who will take the decisions? I take. I am the eldest in the house and responsible for the smooth running of it.

I: do the others accept it unchallenged?

R: Yes, why will they not? I do what is best for them. (Rupal, Daahlia, 20.01.11)

It was more straightforward for women to make important decisions in female headed households. But even when they were not the primary decision makers, many of the women used their earning power and other forms of subtle bargaining to manipulate decisions taken by the primary decision makers. As Kabeer (2005) pointed out we see how the wage earning power was used by the women to renegotiate their relations within marriage, leave abusive marriages (as was seen in the case of Shalini) or even to negotiate the very terms of marriage.

Some of the women who held existing jobs in the plantation did not move out of the plantation after their marriage, even if they were married to people from outside the plantation. Instead their husbands came to reside with them in their natal home. Using their existing jobs as bargaining planks Badi and other women like her convinced their parents

to find a *ghar jamai* (resident son-in-law) for them. Through this they were able to ensure that they retained their job and also remain with their ageing parents to look after them.

I decided that I have job in the plantation so I will not leave this garden and go anywhere. I found a ghar jamai. (Badi, Kaalka, 29.05.11)

Again, the access to an independent source of income enabled the women to exercise or influence strategic decisions within the family. There were instances where the women decided how to spend their wages within the family structure (often in opposition to the opinion of other members). The women's direct contribution to the family earnings gave them a voice.

I put a little bit of money from my wages every month in the bank for my daughters. Later when they need the money for whatever—be it studies or marriage—I will be prepared. My husband gets angry with me about this, saying that what is the point of saving now if we die in the process? But I don't listen to him. (Kamala, Daahlia, 28.02.11)

Having access to an independent source of income, Kamala's decision of how to spend her money could be opposed by her husband, but not prevented. Not all decisions, however, can be exercised with the same level of straightforwardness. There is often a degree of stealth or manipulation involved. The strategies by which the younger women avoid taking work in the plantations and hence being bound within that space or the tactics by which they try to delay marriage illustrate this.

Priya's father had planned to retire himself from the plantation and transfer his name to her while he went to Kerala to work there. He reasoned that by this they will be able to augment their family income. Priya had worked for a few years outside Delhi and was determined not to work in the plantation. She had learnt sewing and embroidery and applied for jobs. In the meantime she kept postponing her father's decision by going to visit elderly relatives for long periods of time. She finally successfully obtained the job of a temporary teacher in the plantation school for sewing. (Daahlia, field-notes, 20.09.12)

Priya manipulated accepted social codes of visiting relatives as delaying tactic and avoided an open confrontation with her father. This might have had a boomerang effect if she did not succeed in getting the job.

Agency, in terms of autonomy and decision-making has to be understood within an everyday field of power in which the women are usually the dominated. Some of the choices that they make might rebound upon them in some ways, but they do not simply reinforce subordination. Often these expressions of agency carve out small spaces of autonomy and even help to reconfigure oppressive structures. Just as the agency expressed remains constrained within the social structure of its occurrence so also do these women use social arrangements creatively to carve out for themselves spaces of autonomy, however, limited.

Resistance

Spatial resistance:

While expressions of anger, dissatisfaction and other forms of insubordination might take place in what Scott (1990) terms the 'offstage', spaces of resistance might be carved out within the everyday sites of the dominant. These are then usually disguised or work within a permissible limit but they exist in public view and are accessible to those with shared codes and understandings. The creation of these sites of agency, thus, does not always require a physical distance from the dominant so long as the codes through which they operate remain opaque (Scott, 1990: 12). In this category of agency I identify those actions whose *intent* is resistance rather than those which *imply* resistance. As seen in earlier chapters, spatial boundaries were established and embedded to perpetuate control and naturalise hierarchy. But even these boundaries were sometimes manipulated.

The kitchen was, as seen in chapter 7, a place of communion, secrets and defiance of the existing order. It was the place where the women smoked secretly, made *jnar* and drank it, tasted the food before it was

served to the family, laughed loudly and made lewd jokes about men. For young girls it was also the space where they discussed their lovers, fantasies, sex and showed each other their new lingerie—topics which were taboo elsewhere. It was a space where the women's bodies remained outside the purview of disciplining. They were unregulated by the everyday discourses of chastity and demureness which otherwise governed their lives in many ways. This relates back to Abu-Lughod's (1990) proposition that by protecting the segregation of spaces and such gender norms, women create their own spaces of subversion without really challenging the patriarchal order of things. The legitimacy of the segregated space comes from the discourse of women as the performers of household duties, which embeds their apparent subordinate role within the patriarchal structure of the household but at the same time enables them to inscribe a subtext of defiance to it.

Similarly in the gardens, the women's work of plucking and pruning usually meant they worked in a women-only workforce with only the supervisory staff being male. The women generally did not challenge this practice and the implications it had on their wages or job prestige. But through subtle strategies they often succeeded in turning the gendering of the field, as primarily women's space, to their advantage. As all of the supervisory staff were men, by emphasising the biological difference between men and women, by constructing boundaries between their bodies they could carve out spaces for themselves.

Sitting between the bushes they asked the sardars to not come this side as they had to retie their saris which had got spoilt in travelling through the narrow melas. In reality only one woman had to wear her sari while the others sat laughing and chatting. The sardar hearing the sounds of laughter was reduced to making ineffectual threats to them to come out and get back to work. When I ask them they assure me, 'do not worry, they will not come here; women have so many different bodily needs. They would not dare'. (Daahlia, field-notes, 13.03.11)

Through emphasising the boundaries operating on basis of physiological separateness of men and women's bodies, they do not

challenge the sexual division of labour in the plantations. Rather, using this accepted division and accepted discourses around ways of managing the body, they carve out spaces within it where they cannot be touched. Again, this was possible through their acceptance of the absoluteness of the divide rather than a challenge to it.

Apart from these wider processes of struggle within a prevailing socio-spatial norm, the women express their agency in numerous smaller ways in their everyday life, be it in the village or at work. The next sections look at these modes of resistance.

Resistance within the household and village:

The third vignette at the beginning of the chapter points to a particularly strong assertion of resistance. In fact, many women's response to alcoholism in both the plantations proceeded along these lines. Alcoholism plagued the plantation society. It was common for the men to spend all the money on drinking. Given the meagre income that the families had to survive on, this tended to create even greater pressure on the woman to make ends meet. The drunkenness often was accompanied by abusing the wife, quarrelling with her and beating her. Though recognised as an evil, there was hardly any activism surrounding it in either of the two plantations. The protests were individual and less sustained.

Victoria's account (vignette 3) shows how a woman protected herself by employing physical violence as a means of resistance. Shalini's case was also similar.

He (her father) will keep drinking night and day, not go to work, create a ruckus. When he does not sleep at night and shouts not letting others sleep I sometimes end up hitting him. It may sound bad but I have to get up and do all the (house) work in the morning and then go to work. It is not possible for me to accomplish that for days without sleep. (Shalini, Daahlia, 10.07.11)

‘Hitting back’ as in the case of Shalini or Victoria’s neighbour is a pretty bold and explicit form of resistance. There is no invisibility or subtlety in this. But the key here is this hitting back is an occasional event, when they are pushed to the limits of their endurance. Moreover, though an act of resistance to the brunt of alcoholism, it does not address the wider issues of patriarchy (such as the man’s right to beat the wife) subsumed within it. In the absence of a sustained critique, it remained a part of the daily life of most women with such occasional sparks of anger. In these occasional instances, the women, even if momentarily, challenged the construction of the diffident female body subordinated to the stronger male body. By hitting the inebriated body of the man, the women’s bodies became the medium of physical, material expression of their anger. In Chapter 9, this role of the body is explored in greater detail.

Women resisted oppression in the household and the villages through complex means as well. One of the most useful channels of getting back was rumour and gossip. Rumour mongering had many advantages—it spread quickly, could not be traced back to a definite source thus, providing anonymity and involved minimum investment. Scott (1990: 144) calls these apparently ineffectual strategies ‘agency of harm’. Often powerless to resist being beaten by their husbands on a daily basis, many women resort to rumour mongering as a form of resistance. These rumours could range from the husband’s impotency to infidelity (alleging that he has a mistress somewhere and hence mistreats her) and usually always cast the wife in the role of the hapless victim garnering sympathy among the people circulating the rumour.

Poonam says, ‘Saili’s husband is impotent. So there is a lot of anger in him because he cannot do anything with his wife. So he drinks in frustration and beats her. Poor girl! What is her fault if he cannot perform?’ I ask her, how does she know all this? Poonam explains, ‘everybody knows! Saili might have herself told one of her close friends in her misery and you know how news spread. Don’t tell anyone, if the idiot (abuse word) comes to know he will beat the poor girl even more’. (Kaalka, field-notes, 27.11.11)

Spreading this kind of rumour might not in reality alleviate Saili's situation and in fact could cause her to be further beaten up if the husband hears of it (which he probably would). The action might seem meaningless and even counterproductive at a glance. But this allegation of impotency made her husband the object of ridicule among others in the village including the men and also provided her a support base among the other women. This might give her a semblance of protection or cause her to get further beaten up by an angry husband. The importance of the act cannot be judged by its final outcome but by the fact that it enabled Saili and other women like her to carve out a space of resistance, however minute, within this oppressive structure. As it is not certain if Saili had spread the rumour or authored its present version, it gave her a shroud of anonymity which at the same time made it an uncertain act of agency. Finally, the resistance evidenced in this challenge to the idea of the man's right to beat his wife plays one aspect of masculinity against the other, in this instance virility and impotence against strength and power. It does not really challenge the construction of the masculine body or even the demure female body which lays claim to victimhood here. Therefore, rather than challenging patriarchy and its constructions of masculinity *per se* this rumour in its present version uses one aspect of masculinity to critique another.

Women used other small tricks to resist household decisions or commands which they did not agree with. Though some resorted to arguing and quarrelling as a direct resistance to these decisions, many simply used deception to get their way.

My husband used to like momo. I did not like it. He would keep on saying 'make momo' almost every day. Once what I did was put ½ kilo onion and ½ kilo meat in the wheat and made the momo. He said that you don't have to make anymore momos (laughs). (Namrah, Daahlia, 16.04.12)

Namrah did not resist her husband's wish directly; rather by manipulating her role of cooking she exercised her agency by cooking it badly. Though she spoilt his pleasure of eating his favourite food, she herself had to eat it too. While Namrah's ploy did work, there were other instances where it did not. Such acts of resistance could often be counterproductive but that did not deter the women from applying them.

When he needlessly quarrels with me or beats me I don't say anything. But I know how to get back at him. He cannot eat too much spicy food so I make the food very spicy; add four-five chillies instead of one. What a time he has trying to eat it. It really becomes very spicy even my eyes water on eating it (laughs). (Kakoli, Kaalka, 10.10.11)

These actions hardly achieve anything in terms of the actual issue against which the protest was being registered. But the intention is hardly ever to redress a grievance in such a way that it does not recur again; rather making the food inedible (even though she herself had to eat it) was a way of 'getting back' at the husband. The tough time he had in consuming his food was her doing and enabled her to register her protest about the tribulations of her daily life. Making use of the role in the household even if that was apparently subordinate, like cooking food or pleasing the husband, the women carved out spaces of resistance. By the very act of reproducing the familial responsibility and by extension the subsidiary position that accorded her vis-à-vis her husband, they are sometimes able to resist decisions and to some extent achieve their own end.

Resistance in the workplace:

These acts of resistance taking place within the household or the village though sometimes relying on community networks and female kin for their operation, in most cases remained individualistic in their aim. Resistance is also evidenced in the workplace. As seen above, women countered the gendering of the field by making use of different meanings within it. While many of these expressions remained individualistic,

usually they were evidenced within the work-group or even the entire workforce.

While the decision to pluck *doubli* was unquestioned in Daahlia, it was not unanimous in Kaalka. Even during the season I found many women not bothering to pluck anything beyond the task even if they finished before time. This was a conscious strategy to best protect their interest against the management's exploitation.

The company's policy is that we pluck 300 kgs for 12 days and anything over that will be doubli. Calculated over such a long period it becomes very uncertain as there are sections where there are not so many leaves. I do not bother to pluck doubli. It would have made sense if the doubli had been calculated on a daily basis but since it is calculated over the 300kgs it really does not make any sense to toil for doubli. There is no point in sacrificing one's health for a pittance of money (Puloma, Kaalka, 14.09.11).

Unlike in Daahlia where there was a clear gain, here the gain in terms of money was so slight and so dependent on long term sustained hard work that the women felt it was not really worthwhile on a cost-benefit analysis. Others, like Aradhana, showed an even shrewder understanding of the system.

'Last week I plucked a lot of doubli. I had understood that we will have one whole week of good leaves and hence it is possible to pluck extra leaves every day. But this week I realised that there will not be enough leaves everyday and decided that I will only pluck the thika and not doubli.' I asked her what the reason is for this. 'If you just pick the thika everyday and then if one day there is less leaves and hence no thika then they will give the hazira and there is no question of adjusting extra leaves or deducting hazira. But if you pluck doubli on most days, then on days when there is less leaves and you cannot pluck thika they will deduct from the doubli that you have plucked all the other days and your effort goes to waste. Hence, it is best to pluck just the thika unless you are going to have uniformly abundant leaves for the whole week (Aradhana, Kaalka, 21.10.11).

In such instances, the women's understanding of the potential yield, etc., enabled them to consciously resist the company policies. One of the other practices that the women adopted was to vary the workday to their

advantage. This was more visible in Daahlia where the contrast between season and off season was prominent. During the season time of *thika* and hence *doubli* the women hardly sat down to rest. They came early, before 7:00 am, in order to get the best *melas* and even in the break they hurriedly ate and got back to their *melas* to pluck as much as they could. The rationale was simple, the more they plucked the more *doubli* they got. In the off season conversely, the women did not do much plucking especially in the second half of the workday. They plucked for a bit and then sat down and chatted, some brought knitting from home and worked on these in the field. The pace of work was very slack. Victoria explained

At this time it is just 'time pass'. We get money for coming to work.
(Daahlia, 12.1.11)

In effect, since there was no minimum or maximum weight they plucked a certain amount of leaves, enough to not get them into trouble and utilised the rest of the time in completing some unfinished housework which they brought with them or simply sat down and relaxed, swapping recipes and eating. Janaki's comment below shows how, through this strategy, they had to some extent reversed the logic of workday and holiday.

'There is no relaxation on Sundays all the housework gets piled up for that day. In fact it is better to have a work day as then we can steal relaxation like this and sit and chat. There is no scope of that on the Sundays'. (Daahlia, 21.01.11)

The women thus, utilise the workday to their maximum advantage. The intention is not to critique the management's exploitative policies but to devise ways to work those to ensure their least inconvenience. Turning the workday from one of least disadvantage to maximum advantage was also accomplished by the women through other modes such as stealing and deception. Through these, they utilised the remainder of the time fruitfully to perform other chores.

There were accounts that the women, for instance, used the work time and the garden to steal resources to supplement their household resources. This has a dual significance. Firstly, by obtaining resources for the household like fuel wood, grass (for feeding livestock) or other things they use their paid work-hours for their own advantage. Additionally, they use the resources within the garden, often illegally, as a means of their subsistence. The most common among these was held to be firewood.³⁴ There were accounts that they obtained consistent supply through breaking/chopping off the sturdy branches of shade trees and collecting the strong branches of the bushes which had fallen off. This is an illegal practice and the workers can be punished by being suspended for at least 15 days if caught. But they apply stealth and there is hardly any account of the management catching them stealing the wood.

Co-opting intermediaries:

As we have seen in the earlier chapters, the relation between the management and the women workers is not direct but mediated. What is the role of these intermediaries in dealing with the actions of the women? If their resistance to the management is to be possible in any form the women have to address this question and either use the same methods of deception with them or co-opt them in their acts of agency.

Slacking at work is usually done stealthily without the knowledge of the *munshi*, *chaprasi* and *bagan babu*. This is also dependant on the time of the day.³⁵ In case of the *sardar*, however, stealth became difficult to exercise as they were always present in the section unlike the former who came briefly to oversee the work. Rather than being uniformly

³⁴ The company is supposed to provide the workers with a certain quantity of firewood in both the gardens. However neither is the quantity prescribed sufficient nor is that provided in its totality.

³⁵ At certain points of time like half an hour before the end of the work day the reaction of the *chaprasi* or the *munshi* and even the *bagan babu* is less likely to be severe in comparison to relaxing an hour or a couple of hours before the end of work.

oppositional, the relation of the women with the *sardars* was a mix of resistance and accommodation and sometimes even collaboration. The women adopt techniques of ignoring, ridiculing and finally arguing with the *sardars* to achieve their end.

The sardar seeing the women resting asks them to get back to work. They do not pay any heed to him. He tells them to resume work quite a few times. Instead of listening to him the women ask him not to stand there. They tell him that if the sahib comes and sees him there, he will say that in spite of you being present the women are sitting and not working. He will reprimand the sardar even more. It is better for him to go and stand a little further off warning them when he sees the sahib coming. Much to my surprise the sardar grumbling, goes off to do exactly that. (Kaalka, field-notes, 29.05.11.).

While at a glance this could be seen as the women successfully resisting the *sardar* and sending him away, it was more complex than that. The *sardar* knew that if the argument continued and reached an antagonistic level he was outnumbered by the women. Moreover, the women had their survival mechanisms and would ensure that they and by extension the *sardar* did not get into trouble with the management. Therefore to quarrel and argue with them might achieve less than walking away. Also by acceding to the women's request he did them a favour which he could later call upon.

The other modes of resisting the *sardar's* authority included ignoring and making fun of his commands.

As they had plucked so little the sardar threatens them that they will have to face 'per rota'³⁶ today. Budhni says it will be good, we have not had 'per rota' (using it in the meaning of the pun paratha—a type of Indian bread) for a long time. But sadly it will not be so nice without the vegetable. The sardar seeing that the threat is of no use goes off defeated. (Kaalka, field-notes, 30.05.11)

³⁶Per rota refers to the practice by which if the yield plucked is unusually low (at the time when there is no task) wage is deducted. This is hardly ever invoked in practice but is intended to serve as a threat. The word per rota has a similarity in pronunciation with *paratha*, an Indian bread.

The women, however, have a certain sense of loyalty to most of the *sardars* and they are in a curious space between belonging and not belonging. It was only for the women to decide whether he was on their side or not. The terms by which their gender identities and its implications were defined in this space were often determined by the women. A *sardar* who had got away with pulling a woman's hair or pulling her up by the hand to make her get to work or even joking and pushing her on one day, might be accused of being sexually abusive for doing exactly the same on another day. This kind of accusation was almost always backed up at least by the accuser's group if not by the whole team. The material body both of the women and the *sardar* and how that was negotiated became the crux of the conflict. The very act of touching the woman's body could be perceived as unproblematic or intrusive, according to the interest of the women. The sexual connotation that these bodily contacts took were thus, decided by the woman in relation to their exchange with the *sardar* on the day, or his behaviour on a previous occasion which they could not protest then or simply by the mood of the group on that present day. In a curious paradox, this placed the *sardar* at the mercy of the women as he often had no clue to predict how his actions were to be judged in that instance.

In co-opting, resisting, ignoring or accommodating the intermediaries, therefore, the women in most cases regulated their relation with these men. Unlike in household relations where their actions of resistance and compliance were usually in response to the others, in this case, it was they who, usually, gave shape to the particular interaction according to what was suitable for their interest at that instance. This act of negotiating with the intermediaries was an expression of agency and a step in resisting the management's intentions of maximising the labour they could wrest out of workers.

Deception:

Deception and cheating was another means used by the women. For example, in the off season when a particular woman had to go home in the middle of the workday and did not get permission from the *sardar*, there were stories of her simply slipping away. The rest of her group mates apparently plucked extra leaves and weighed it on her behalf. Thus, her *hazira* was registered and her absence went unnoticed.

The women were supposed to pluck the leaves using their fingers. But during the winter months when the stems became hard and difficult to pluck there were accounts of them using sickle. The management had forbidden the use of the sickle as it damaged the bushes and the women could be severely punished if caught using it. In this particular practice the *sardars* were also held to be within their circle of trust as they realised the difficulty of plucking without the sickles.

In all these cases of deception, the field functions as a single unit vis-à-vis the staff and management. At the sound of an approaching bike or car (the usual modes of travel by the supervisory team), the workers on the edge of the section warn the others so that everyone is prepared. They hide under the bushes or get up hurriedly and stand in their *melas* pretending to pluck the leaves. In this practice, the *sardar* remains their partner in crime hardly ever giving the women away.

Suddenly the sardar's voice could be heard announcing that the sahib is around. Sure enough the tell tale signs of the bike could also be heard. The women get very angry. A few of them stand up to check where he is. They all abuse him profusely among themselves for coming at this odd time. While a couple of the sitting women announce that sahib or no sahib they are not going to work now, the others stand up. They tie their cloths around themselves, leaving the tarpaulin lying on the floor and stand near the bushes pretending to pluck while at the same time following his movements carefully.(Kaalka, field-notes, 2.06.11)

Foot dragging is employed by the women when they are towards finishing one section and have to go to another section for the last couple

of hours remaining of the work day. This was more so if the present section was near their village while the next one was further away.

Shiano Kanchi asks others to pluck slowly so that they can work on this section throughout this half. If they finish soon then they will be sent to another part for new melas and in that way will not get any rest. Rather, if they pluck slowly till about 3 then they will be able to start afresh with a new mela tomorrow and also get some rest today. (Kaalka, field-notes, 05.06.11)

The more common forms of deception and stealing time out of work, etc., can be noticed during the off season period. During the season, the women find it more advantageous to subscribe to the patterns of the work day and try to pluck as much as they can. Even during this time deception was not completely ruled out. Kalki explained that the deception exercised by them is actually a counter-deception to address the tricks of the management.

'For each weighing, there are nearly full 3-4 jholis. The management uses cunning (chalaki) to deny the workers. They keep the mark on the weighing scale very tight so that the weight registered is less. They also deduct quite a lot from the net weight as the weight of the jholi. Now we have also learnt to get back at them. Some sew a couple of bags together. This not only holds the leaves better but also increases the total weight at the time of weighing.' Bimla says that there is however frequent checking for this. If someone is caught doing this then more weight is deducted from them. (Kaalka, field-notes, 05.06.11).

The methods of cheating and deceiving the management employed by the women to protect their interests formed a part of their everyday resistance. Instead of confronting the management for its underhand methods or striking work in its protest, the women devised their own strategies.

Although the women frequently employed these strategies to minimise the labour they had to put into the garden, the plantation was, for them, both work and home. Therefore, there was a sense of

responsibility and ownership that the women felt about the plantation and its work.

Some people slack too much, they don't do any work and even pluck improperly and kill the bushes. We have to remember this is our garden, if it closes the management will go away but we have to stay. Look at Kalindi (another plantation closed for 10 years) the workers totally vandalised the garden. But here we continued pruning the trees and maintaining the garden. We did work for even Rs. 20 a week. We knew if the plantation survives then we survive. (Kakoli, Kaalka, 13.10.11)

Kakoli's sentiment found echo in lesser or greater degree among other workers in both the plantations. It was more pronounced in Kaalka given its ten years closure, but the sense of responsibility towards the well-being of the plantation was also present among the workers in Daahlia. These discourses of protecting the plantation were not at odds with their techniques of resistance within the plantation. They were rather perceived by the workers as minimising their exploitation within the framework of the plantation's well-being.

Critiquing the system

Beyond these everyday practical acts of resistance is another class of agency which cannot be understood in terms of protecting the women's interest or working the system to their least disadvantage. These acts of agency, within the rubric of permitted carnivals, are intended to carve out spaces for critique, for a counter-narrative within the dominant patriarchal order. Again the critique is not mounted with the intention of overturning the system but rather remains limited to being a counter-discourse, an alternative space. Much like rumours and gossip, folk songs and parodies also have a protective veil of anonymity by which one can deny responsibility of being the originator of the verse.

The creative use of poetry and parodies is a means by which the women both young and old critique the existing order with its inequalities. The sites where these songs/poetries are sung are usually

social occasions such as the *pujas* like *Jitiya*, *Karam* or performance during *bhai dooj*³⁷, Eid or marriages. In extending the liminality to the everyday, carnivals hold out an illusion of becoming the everyday. The consumption of the event, in this instance becomes a political act even if it is imbued with images of the carnivalesque (Ravenscroft and Gilchrist, 2009).

My lover is roaming around in the bhaati (place where alcohol is made),

My child is crying, there is no rice in the house.

My love is going towards the bhaati,

There is no food in the house

My love is going to the bhaati.

My heart cries for you. (Kaalka)

This song sung during *karam-jitiyapuja* by Adivasi Hindu women not only speaks of the tribulations of the wife of an alcoholic but often the women who sing it make indirect reference to actual persons present there to subject them to some form of public shame. This is not done in a direct manner but with very oblique references. The transitory and specific nature of the space is essential for the performance.

Vignette 4 at the beginning of this chapter, is a verse sung by young Nepali Hindu girls during *Bhai Dooj*, as they go from house to house singing songs. It is easier to critique the extant patriarchal order when it is done through songs and poetry than for the women to directly express their opinion on these issues in front of people (Raheja and Gold, 1994). The multiplicity of voices provides a protective cover and when it no longer finds performers or audience, these songs disappear (Scott, 1990: 160). The question is whether these permitted, carnivalesque verses are effective critique or whether through accepted uttering of these during certain marked occasions, the verses in reality increasingly normalise the

³⁷A Hindu festival in which the sisters pray for their brothers' long and happy lives by putting a sandalwood mark on their foreheads.

existing social hierarchy (e.g. Gupta, 2010; Gilchrist and Ravencroft, 2009). It might be more insightful to understand these carnivals outside the binary and view them as being both a critique and a pressure valve. Being located outside the everyday, they served as a pressure valve but at the same time through their tone of critique, these songs and verses introduced a note of challenge to the norms and practices normalised through the everyday.

Name calling is another means adopted by the women and the men alike, for much the same logic—of critiquing someone or something they otherwise have no scope of doing. The use of name calling is most evident in the workplace. It does not appear to serve any immediate purpose either in securing any advantage for them or in subverting the structure of domination. They are most commonly addressed to the members of the management, namely the assistant managers and manager. As the women could hardly protest against these figures of authority or their commands, these are hidden forms of protest. One of these is abusing them profusely. The other is to give them nicknames. Scott (1990: 158) points out how by the subtle use of codes a seditious element can be inserted into any ritual, song, everyday norm of conduct. This will be accessible only to the intended audience who share similar sentiments and understandings, the excluded audience of the dominant would be able to grasp subversion but unable to react because it might be clothed in a perfectly innocent meaning.

Some of the nicknames were even if it is quite unkind like one of the assistant managers in Kaalka had a squint and the workers called him *Kana* (blind). In the initial period, I had assumed that the nicknames, in much the same way as the abuse, were their form of muted anger against these people as well as a convenient code name. But the nicknames hardly ever stayed secret and they usually reached the ears of the management thus, communicating to them what the workers feel for them. It was impossible for the management to find out the originator of the name or how many people were culpable in this. Thus, they are

powerless to do anything even with the information. It also served momentarily as an inversion of the structures, enabling the workers to cross the non-breach-able barriers between them and the management.

This seeming subversion of accepted hierarchies and social codes is also seen at a more fundamental level. Some of the social codes and values which have long been seen as almost unquestioned are gradually being challenged even if not yet converted. For instance, the people of the plantations, both men and women, avow a preference for sons, claiming that greater happiness is expressed at the birth of the son. In course of my interviews and conversation, however, there became evident a different narrative to this mainstream idea of son-preference. This was consolidated by folktales or allegedly 'real' stories about the generosity and greater sense of responsibilities of the girl than the boy child.

Madeeha tells me that in Nepali when someone has a son, he is called chimiki, i.e. when he gets married and brings a wife, they make a separate house and stay there and the parents are left behind. They cannot stay together. There would be two houses in the same courtyard—one of the mother and the other of the son. If daughter is born she is paona (gift). She will look after you all your life. Priya's mother heartily agrees citing the story of someone her cousin knew whose daughter stayed with the parents and looked after them while the son and the daughter-in-law quarrelled and went away. 'She was pretty and educated but still she did not marry and stayed with her parents'. Soon we were all discussing how the daughters are the real blessings though initially people get more status if they have a son. (Daahlia, 23.04.11)

This counter-narrative is often consolidated through the trend of the ageing parents to stay with the adult daughter rather than the adult son and daughter-in-law. This contradicts the patri-lineal and patri-local family system which for long has been established as a norm.

My father retired two years back. He was the compounder; my brother stays abroad in Kuwait. I am not educated so I cannot take up his post but I work in the garden as a labourer. My husband stays in Manikpur and he has a job there. I stay here with my daughter and look after my parents. I go there in the holidays. (Sunita, Kaalka, 17.09.11)

What these stories and values do is to critique and question one of the edicts of society which has been taken to be almost sacrosanct—the son as the sole support of the parents and the daughter as a burden. These practices introduce a challenge to the prevailing structure of patriarchy though not overturning this value yet.

By trying to re-conceive agency outside emancipatory terms it might be possible to see how the structures of subordination—gender role performance within the household, sexual division of labour, feminine virtues and values—can serve as means for the women to achieve their own ends, however limited these might be.

CONCLUSION

As seen through this chapter, there is no one form of agency and neither is it expressed for one purpose. The four vignettes in the beginning point to the range in understanding agency. Within limitations the women express autonomy (Shalini), make choices (Aradhana) or resist (Victoria's neighbour). Alongside these are the indirect forms through folk songs (Bhai Dooj song). What these four extracts do is to emphasise the fact that agential behaviour is multidimensional and complex.

Agency is most discernible when it leads to a semblance of autonomy. This might be expressed as was seen above by playing a direct or indirect role in decision making, exercising one's will in important life choices or—in very rare instances (in case of my fieldwork)—in a straight quest for emancipation. Agency is also expressed in terms of resistance. For my participants this resistance tended to address threats in the household or exploitation in the field. The resistance were generally subtle, mundane and aimed at only securing one's least disadvantage. Finally, within both these categories of agency we find a more ambiguous kind of expression which is often slippery to grasp. It is a hidden narrative which carves out scope for agency within the relations of subordination. The different acts

of agency expressed by the women in the tea plantations have to be situated in the framework of power within which they operated so as to appreciate their significance in carving out spaces of resistance and autonomy.

The conception of agency has to be explored in terms of the specific forms of expression, modalities in varied social circumstances and the grammar of concepts in which its meaning resides (Mahmood, 2005). Thus, we can see that women may consent to patriarchal authority rather than critique it, endure and comply with its norms even if they are antagonistic to their interests. Hence, the question, as pointed out by Jeffery (1998), is not whether women are victims or agents, but what sort of agents the women can be despite their subordination. By adopting a viewpoint which neither unnecessarily romanticises the struggles of the workers nor falls prey to the victimhood argument, it can be seen that those located at the margins of the society—such as workers in the tea plantations—have stories of agency to be uncovered and understood. A superficial reading of these acts of agency might seem to recount stories of success, which is not the intention here. These acts, much like the expressions of activism in the next chapter, cannot be judged on the yardstick of success or failure. While in some occasions they achieved their ends, often they were counter-productive. They represent the ‘conscious and on-going reproduction of the terms of one’s existence while taking responsibility for this process’ (Alexander and Mohanty, 1997: xxviii).

The acts of agency examined here should not be seen always as precursor to open confrontations. These acts exist in their own right. While these could sometimes lead to activism, this relationship is not always automatic. In the next chapter acts of everyday activism will be explored.

Chapter 9

Understanding Everyday Activism

'We cannot be touched'

The powerless usually express their agency through unspectacular modes as seen in the last chapter. Occasionally, though, the defiance is articulated more openly. These collective acts of defiance might not constitute social movements, but need to be considered on their own merit and within context. This gives an insight into how agency is played both invisibly at an everyday level, but also expressively at a more collective level.

Agency is not wholly encompassed in activism (Jeffery, 1998; Molyneux, 1980). Agency is usually a necessary but not sufficient condition for activism (Scott, 1990, 1985). Activism can be broadly described as 'involvement in action to bring about social, political, environmental or other change' (Moola, 2004: 39). There has been a tendency to romanticise activism and activists. But local protests often are not initiated by professional activists but rather the outcome of local situations and people. This chapter explores such activism in everyday life, which the ordinary people engage in. The women who were in forefront of these protests are workers in the plantation, who took the initiative to ameliorate their own and by extension their fellow worker's situation.

Looking at different instances of active protest by the women workers, I explore how ideas of agency are played out in their expressions of activism and what insights it gives into the notions of gendered space, gender roles and agency in general. The chapter begins with a theoretical discussion, which is followed by an analysis of four such protests.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It has often been seen that the economically less powerful are also the ones who in general, are the most acquiescent, but Piven and Cloward (1977) show how even they can show defiance. They note, however, that these displays of defiance, demands for justice denied for so long and other such visible, verbal forms of protest only occur in exceptional moments.

Men and women till the fields each day, or stoke the furnaces, tend the looms, obeying the rules and rhythms of earning a livelihood; they mate and bear children hopefully, and mutely watch them die; they abide by the laws of church and community and defer to their rulers, striving to earn a little grace and esteem...Those for whom the rewards are most meagre, who are the most oppressed by inequality are also acquiescent...Sometimes, however, the poor do become defiant. They challenge traditional authorities, and the rules laid down by those authorities (Piven and Cloward, 1977: 6-8).

This emphasis on the exceptional moment of rupture has been found in Hobsbawm (1978) and in slightly different way in Bourdieu's (1990) works as well. These moments, however, do not arise out of a vacuum but through accumulation of everyday grievances. In this chapter, the activism that I explore encompasses both moments of rupture as well as the activism as a lived experience of everyday.

Activism of the powerless is seldom organised on political demands initially, as that is unlikely to bring people together in the first instance (Kabeer et al., 2013). They organise on more practical, mundane issues of immediate concern. But slowly as their collective identities grow on the basis of common demands and struggle they become more enthusiastic in participating in open confrontations and often on issues of politics (Kabeer et al., 2013: 42-43).

Mapping out a particular example of women's activism, Aretxaga (1997) argues that the women's struggles and protest were not only an important part of the narrative of the conflict but also central to how the

conflict unfolded and how it can be understood. This is, however, often rendered invisible. Unless specifically dealing with the women's movement, war or activism literature tends to portray men as the agents and the women as victims. In Lyons' (2004: 11) work on guerrilla war in Zimbabwe one of the participants brings out the exclusion of women from this literature: 'the issue is not that the women have been silent, but that they were not heard or understood'.

Activism and organisations

What is the role of organisations in crystallising and organising these grievances? Jasper (1997: 107) speaks of how activists mobilise mass actions by cultivating anxieties and fear which can be converted to indignation and anger towards policy makers and their policies. The social movement organisers define a frame within which collective action can be organized. By 'selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action within one's present or past environment, the organisers of social movements align the movements with the people and their life experiences' (Jasper, 1997: 75).

Mapping activism exclusively through organised dissent and their organising bodies, however, is inadequate (Gandhi and Shah, 1999; Piven and Cloward, 1977). The formalised organisations do not create the moments of rupture, rather by organising the mass energy at those moments they can facilitate collective action (Piven and Cloward, 1977). Gandhi and Shah (1999: 299) argue that work on activism usually focuses on organisations; their beliefs, ideologies and strategies become synonymous with the movement. Movements are, however, not only about organisations but also about the people whose belief, history, memories and emotions shape and are shaped by the organisations (Gandhi and Shah, 1999). Protest by the poor cannot always be understood or appreciated by focussing our lens exclusively on organised movements for social change. Rather, to appreciate their resistance,

collective acts of defiance within and outside a formal organisation needs to be explored.

Activism as lived experience: everyday activism

Research on activism, generally, has viewed people's protests as either minute acts of resistance or organised social movements. Gorringer (2005) shows how social movements differ from the former class of agency in their intention to carve out political spaces and make lasting claims to political citizenry. The activism that I explore here lies midway between these. In many ways, it remains a volatile, visible effort to carve out a breathing space within the existing schemes of things but it could often transcend that limitation of its demand and raise fundamental questions on self-recognition, respect and rights.

Thus, to understand women's activism, training our eyes exclusively on political parties and the state will result in a highly distorted picture (Basu, 1998). Much like agency, activism is lived experience situated beyond the binary of women as victims or activists. Women's activism cannot be essentially perceived in feminist terms (Jeffery, 1998; Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987). Even within the realm of activism, not all acts of public protest can be called feminist. As will be seen below, women often mobilise around agendas which are not their own and do not always significantly contribute to their empowerment.

Everyday forms of activism differ from everyday forms of resistance described in the previous chapter. I use the term 'everyday activism' to refer to visible protests arising from mundane grievances. They are usually played out as spectacle but might not come with elaborate organisation or defined ideology. Even though resistance is at the core of these protests, it is different from the former in that it is visible, mostly direct and usually one-off.

Challenging the romantic ideal of activism, Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) show how it exists in everyday practices too. Rejecting the contrast between 'unified activist subjects' and those whose resistance

takes place ‘in all its unromanticised, messy impurities’, they demonstrate that the process of becoming an activist is complex and involves the rejection of binaries between the activist and the other, a plurality of values and a pragmatic goal orientation (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 479). By undertaking activism without self-identifying as activists, the everyday becomes the messy, gritty terrain where struggles are enacted and rights are fought for (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010; Bobel, 2007). Although, emerging and being embedded in the realities where they find expression, sometimes everyday activism can actually transcend the limits of the specific place and time to become a part of a bigger movement of social change (Featherstone, 2008).

By speaking to the needs and rhythms of the everyday, activism then becomes a more accessible set of practices and politics which, instead of remaining at the political fringe can draw in the political mainstream (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010). Instead of being framed by pre-existing, fully formed political ideals, the politics is developed through engagement in particular projects and often follows complex, multiple and even contradictory articulations. ‘It is the fluidity and immediacy of these kinds of decisions that allow political identities to take shape through everyday practice’ (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 479). Menon (2013) shows how the domestic workers in Bangalore started organising on issues of regularised wages, weekly off days, etc., and in course of time organised ‘broom worship’ on the occasion of Vishwa Karma *puja* (celebration of work). This festival is largely associated with vehicles, machines, etc., which are constructed to be masculine and the broom worship mounted a challenge to patriarchy and its constructions of work.

Locating protests in the interstices of the public and private

Mapping everyday forms of activism thus, necessitates a move beyond the binary of the public and private or the political and personal. In her ethnography of Dalit women activists, Govinda (2006) shows how the political is enmeshed with the personal. The personal experiences of the

Dalit women could also be celebrated as political in the arena of local electoral politics (Govinda, 2006: 3). Many works on activism (e.g. De Alwis, 1998; Edgerton, 1986) have shown how deeply personal relationships and emotions may underpin volatile political protest. Edgerton claims that the strongest motivation for women's political action arose from motherhood, from the arrest or murder of their sons (1986, 61–79). In spite of its dangers of over-emphasis, De Alwis' (1998) work on Sri Lanka shows motherhood is indeed a powerful emotion which pushes women out into the 'public' arena. The women were able to access and use a very personal rhetoric for a public protest, in a way that was not available to any other parties and organisations critical of the state policies. By using a vocabulary naturalised within a patriarchal system the women used the existing stereotypes and the state's recognition of the legitimacy of indignant motherhood. Though this embedded the protest within the essentialisation of women as carers and nurturers, these instances show how powerful the personal or the private can be. Sen (2007) demonstrates how women's militant activism could not be understood only through political ideals but from the personal life of the women such as lack of food for the family: 'We didn't join Sena just to shout for the Marathis' (Sen, 2007: 21). The violence they deployed in the public space as their political tool had, to some extent, originated from a long history of internalising it in their homes, villages and other spaces within their social world (Sen, 2007: 67–68).

The 'private' world of the activist woman too is often influenced by as much as it influences their public performance of activism. Basu (1995) speaks of a widow, who during the Tebhaga movement, overcame the restrictions imposed by her in-laws' and became one of the leading female activists of the region. Through attempts to protect their family, the women became conscious of their own interests, demanded increases in income, protested against sexual abuse by landlords and other men (Basu, 1995: 59). In this instance, it was the public space, the political

consciousness which influenced the private space and enabled the women to challenge existing hierarchies.

The SANGTIN collective in their autobiographical work (Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006) traces this process of finding the activist within oneself through various trials and tribulations of domestic life. The sense of courage that crossing the boundaries of the domestic world brought with it gave these women a sense of purpose to not only address issues as NGO activists, but as individual agents in their own homes.

As we battled for our rights to earn our livelihoods, to educate ourselves, and to define our own freedom, we were forced to listen to our own voices and interrogate our inherited definitions of stigma, infancy and familial values. Our inner confidence and courage swelled in direct proportion to the number of boundaries we crossed and the oppositions that came our way (Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006:69).

They describe the difficulties they faced in convincing their families about their work as activists as it required them to venture out of the house and travel to another village on a regular basis, often come back late at night and to ride bicycles—all of which went against the ‘family honor’.

A systematic critique of the public/private nexus is found in Ciotti’s (2009) work on *dalit* activism. She critiques the western notion that politics is built around democratic processes which are dissociated from power struggles within domestic life and do not address the problems of location between public and private life (Ciotti, 2009: 117). The consent of a male member of the family becomes important in determining a woman’s political participation. Without this consent, as seen also in Sangtin Writers and Nagar (2006), private space becomes unpleasant and a site of struggle. This relational dimension of women’s agency where male consent and support to women’s activities play a role is opposed to the conception in western democracies of women as primarily individual political agents (Ciotti, 2009: 118).

This does not, however, mean that all women participated only on the consent of their family members. Women continue with their political and community activities in spite of opposition at home (Ciotti, 2009; Nagar et al. 2006). Thus, their struggle was not only at the political level but also at the everyday household level. The reverse situation could also be true where the women's activism was the result of the men or other family member's agency (e.g. Ciotti, 2009; Basu, 1995). Thus, women's political agency cannot be understood as an individualistic endeavour as it is linked to the household gender dynamics and the agency of the others within the household (Ciotti, 2009:127).

To understand women's activism it is not enough to look at the public performance of it, rather constraints or support within the household often influences if not determines their condition of activism. Activism has to be understood as a relational process between the women and the other agents as also between the political and the personal as agency stem from within the domestic space with its oppressive boundaries. This convergence on various levels is best expressed in the women's own words (Nagar et al. 2006: 96-7):

Whenever we confronted such issues, individually or as a collective, we realised no matter how often we might question the definitions of social respect and honor, it would be difficult to transform those definitions while living within our familial households...For workers like us it is not possible to turn our faces away from the bonds of home and in-laws and shaking the foundations of patriarchy. As we forge ahead, we have to drag these institutions with us. In the early days, this is precisely what stopped us from marching ahead many times, at times we stood facing our families, at other times, it was our religion, and at still others it was the community... Whether we worked inside or outside our homes as organisational workers, our boundaries as women were already defined everywhere in relation to what we were supposed to do or not do, where and among whom.

Tying all this together then we can make sense of this apparent contradiction only by looking at the different spaces and the activities as part of a continuum. Much like them the women of the plantations fought against and engaged with issues of injustice and exploitation but in many

cases their domestic life remained embroiled in various kinds of hardship. They were abused, beaten and subjected to various rumours. As seen in the last chapter, in the face of these crises they deployed their agency in distinct ways not all of which could be understood through the lens of activism. Their response shaped their activism as much as their activism was shaped by these ground realities. Although, the instances given below, were active expressions of agency, in seeking meaning and embodiment within the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, these instances of activism did not always pose a challenge to the constructions of gender and gender role performance (e.g. Molyneux, 1985). But even within an activism framed by their everyday, the participants made a claim to political subjecthood.

Politics of the governed?

Chatterjee (2004) speaks of the relation formed between the government and the governed which results in certain expectations and demands from the latter. If their expectations are not fulfilled they express their demands to the government apparatus through various means. The 'politics of the governed' is constituted by a group or community thus, exerting its demands on the perceived authority and through the establishment of this relationship they become members of a political society. By using the available repertoire of political protests and the language of rights and dues the protesting women in my fieldwork, laid claim to being political subjects. But Sharma (2006) points out that this relation of power with the state is not always spatially distinct. Through the embeddedness of state officials in relations of power, the state instead of an abstract entity became another, though important, node in the network of power relations along with class, caste and gender (Sharma, 2006: 77). Mitchell (2011: 471) argues that democracy in India can be understood, by exploring the everyday practices which broadcast political messages and place them within their historical genealogies. Using the example of pulling the emergency alarm chain in the trains, she illustrates that it is through specific local political practices that individuals and groups

engage with the organs of the state and communicate their needs and concern.

Activism, political or otherwise, need not always be directed against an abstract state but rather the entrenched web of power, in which officials as much as other actors play a key role. In a society where politics is treated as inherently masculine, the women are relegated as passive and their agency is often occluded (Takhar, 2007: 125). But women's activism ranging from their daily life to grassroots agencies to formal institutions is inherently multi-sited and needs to be understood as such (Takhar, 2007: 135). Moreover, claims to be political subjects are also laid through the language and content of the demands. Beyond the struggle for workers' rights that the women in my fieldwork and elsewhere were engaged in (e.g. Menon, 2013) was a clamour for dignity and pursuit of citizenship—for recognition as human beings (Cornwall et al., 2013). In their study of domestic workers in Brazil, Cornwall et al. (2013: 160) note:

Cruzeza's recollections evoke the shame and stigma associated with domestic work, and serve as a reminder that the struggle for rights is also struggle for recognition, and for society to treat domestic workers as human beings rather than as the invisible hands that keep houses clean.

Similarly, Seshu (2013: 239) demonstrates how organising sex workers was not only about addressing their marginalisation in health care facilities or AIDS awareness but also establishing them as political citizens with their right to use public transport, for example. Thus, in multiple ways these forms of activism interrogate the inhabited space and by extension the larger political space and their relation with it.

Spatiality and activism

Bodies are controlled through their regulation in space and time. The right to enter the public space is fleeting and the women's bodies are the embodiment of the constructed difference between the public and private sphere (Gorringe, 2005: 180). The operation of these boundaries almost

spells a spatial segregation where the public space is cast as dangerous and unknown as opposed to the safe haven of the private domestic space (e.g. Gorringe, 2005; Sharma, 1980).

As seen in previous chapters, this extends to the understanding of appropriate ways of managing their bodies within different spaces in their everyday life and what spaces women cannot usually enter or occupy. Viewed from a prism of appropriate roles, the spaces they occupy are thus, conditioned by this understanding. But there are instances where the women do intrude into spaces considered masculine and/or inappropriate for them. Through visible and active signs of defiance often through the use of their bodies, they challenge or manipulate the boundaries constraining them, in order to be visible in more public spaces. Sen (2007: 22) shows how through aligning themselves to an aggressive militant movement, the women activists of the Shiv Sena, came to not only occupy but in fact control a range of 'physical, material and social spaces'. But the appropriation of the space cannot always be equated with visibly challenging the boundaries, sometimes the modes are of subtle manipulation of stereotypes. These acts seemingly do not challenge the established perception of gender roles, spaces and bodies. Rather, overturning the ideas of inviolability and/or vulnerability of the woman's body and its supposed invisibility in public space, women have time and again made strategic use of their gender stereotyping to serve their own ends. Using their bodies and mainstream gender practices within the culture, the women manipulate the structures of the same patriarchy and become effective as political activists. Often a particular image of violence and vulnerability is used by them to portray powerlessness to their advantage (e.g. Jeffery, 1998). When the women in a demonstration were attacked by the army, by emphasising the stereotype of the helpless female being beaten by an army consisting of men, they utilised the ideal of the inviolable body and thereby de-legitimised the entire attack (Aretxaga, 1997: 58). Thus, through negotiating with the limitations and possibilities of their embodied experience the body emerges as a site of

resistance (e.g. Lyons, 2004; Aretxaga, 1997). In order to draw out and explore how activism is expressed by the women, the embodiment of the protest and the central role of the body has to be explored. Time and again the women have physically put their bodies on the line in demonstrations, *gherao* and other struggles for equity.

Bodies in protest?

While the body has been dealt with as the major subject matter of protest, it is often ignored as the site of protest (Sasson-Levy and Rapport, 2003). The perceived inviolability of the female body meant it was to be guarded and protected. This protectionist attitude was manipulated by the women. Women have used their immunity to carry out or manoeuvre a political situation (e.g. Sen, 2007; Ridd, 1986). Sen (2007) speaks of how policemen lamented their inability to capture the rioters as the women stood guard providing a human shield to the men. 'If we touched the women, there would be bigger riots in the city' (Sen 2007: 56). Bearing very similar meaning to the refrain in the title, these words bring out how the act of 'touching' a woman could become a symbol of violation.

Aretxaga (1997) shows how in addition to manipulation, the women also overturned the cultural codes of gender appropriate behaviour in their refusal to clean themselves. Although taking off from the men's version of the dirty protest, it brought to fore sexual differences which usually remained outside representation thus, transgressing the established boundaries of gender differences. The presence of menstrual blood as a symbol of the protest not only encapsulated an experience of femininity, it also brought to the public space a phenomenon which was not only restricted within the home but in fact rendered invisible even there, thus, challenging the extant boundaries within the public discourse (Aretxaga, 1997: 122-28). This was not a protest as mother, daughter or sister; neither was this using the accepted norms of femininity. Rather through using symbols essentially feminine but situated outside the socially accepted gender norms in Northern Ireland, it posed a challenge

which went beyond the immediacies of the protest. The body apart from being symbolic became physiological and by pushing these boundaries fell outside the main narrative.

Intersectionality and activism

The bodies in protest, are not, however, homogenous. In understanding how the other identities frame them, an exploration of the multiple elements of an individual and collective identity playing out in particular spaces are important (Gorringe, 2005: 174). The multiplicity of identity constitutes how one behaves and is treated in different spaces and at different times (Gorringe, 2005: 174–75). Govinda (2008) illustrates how the process of creation of the Dalit activist woman's identity could only be effective when the organisation takes into account the multiplicity of the women's identity on the basis of caste and class rather than defining it in solely gendered terms. In their work on the strikes in Grunwick and Gate Gourmet, Pearson et al. (2010) show that in both instances, the workers' collective action has to be read from the perspective of their cumulative identities as women, as workers, as South Asian and as migrants among other things. It is only through the complex and crosscutting intersectional identities that the reasons behind the outbreak of the strikes and the way they played out could be understood. Much like the protests I describe below, these were not only the response to immediate injustice in the production line but a protest shaped by their multiple intersectional identities and experiences arising from these. The lack of intersectional analysis negated their participation in class action. Using this theoretical discussion to frame my analysis, I will now provide some instances of activism from my fieldwork.

BODIES IN PROTEST: AN ILLUSTRATION

Everyday activism if studied in a vacuum might seem to occur at exceptional moments of rupture. In the performance of the protests, the everyday codes and norms were often challenged or manipulated, but this

did not dissociate them from the everyday. It is through the trials and tribulations of their everyday life that these protests take form and remain grounded and framed in those very understandings. They emerge from a process of evolution in the everyday life of the actors though for the protests to erupt usually the situation has to assume a degree of criticalness. In most instances these are one-off protests satisfied once their immediate objective has been met. They are fought for small victories and hardly ever take the form of social movements.

The active expressions of defiance were more common in Kaalka than in Daahlia. During Kaalka's closure for ten years, the workers had to struggle for the bare minimum of survival. Thus, their grievances or sense of grievance was more acute and immediate. Additionally Kaalka's proximity to the townships and their administrative offices meant that workers not only engaged with the management but also with local administrative bodies clamouring to get their dues. They were dependant on, aware of, and in all had a more direct relation with the various support structures of the government such as the *panchayat* and Block Development Office³⁸ (BDO). Hence forms of protest were not solely directed to the management of the plantation but often became more large scale involving the government too. Finally Svatantra's activities in the region made people in general more aware. Daahlia, in contrast, remained relatively untouched by the crisis which had hit Kaalka and hence the workers there had not been thrown into such a crisis of survival; nor had they received media and social activist attention. Moreover being more in the nature of an enclave, to the workers of Daahlia, the state and its various organs were distant and the grievances were expressly against the management as the form of ultimate authority.

³⁸The official and office responsible for administering the gram *panchayats* of the Block. (See acronyms)

Organised protest

To understand the nature of the everyday spontaneous activism the role of organised protests needs to be first briefly explored. The three main organisations in this case were the political parties, trade unions and Svatantra.

As seen in chapter 4, most of the major political parties in the area had trade unions within the plantations and the two worked in close conjunction. At the time of fieldwork, they seemed to be declining in their importance in connecting to the workers' lives. The political parties and trade unions were considered outside actors by those who were not its active members.

During elections, the parties are vying with each other to make promises, then they disappear and come back only before the next elections. The trade unions are here, they do gate meetings at times but mostly only partywallahs (members of the parties) go there. We go when ABAVP has their meeting; it is kind of a duty. They (trade unions) sometimes raise issues with electricity bills, working conditions etc. and then they will speak to the manager and make some negotiations. What they do only they know. (Bandini, Daahlia, 17.04.11)

M: We will not come for work tomorrow, we are going to Birpur for a demonstration.

I: Demonstration for what?

M: I don't know. Actually I would not have gone but they asked me to go and it is difficult to say no...The demonstration was more like a picnic, we were given khichuri (rice with lentils), and we chatted and teased the policeman and shouted Gorkhaland, Gorkhaland! The leaders gave speeches. It was grand, we clapped and whistled. It was actually a lot of fun. You should have come. (Madeeha, Daahlia, 12-13.01.11).

As the extracts show, the parties and trade unions drew on their support base to organise their movements. But there was a lack of involvement of the ordinary workers in the way these played out. It was their 'duty' to go but they did not really connect with the parties' programmes. Madeeha's account here shows the shouting of the slogans for Gorkhaland did not hold any special significance for her but formed a

part of the 'picnic'. During the wage increase movement (which continued through most part of my fieldwork), there were frequent strikes called by the different parties in which their supporters participated. The participation was sometimes a part of their perceived duty but was often voluntary given their support for the wage increase. But it was always a top down process where the party leaders decided on calling strikes or demonstrations and the trade unions organised all of it, including the dates and simply directed their supporters to abide by it. Moreover, it only drew on the workers with affiliation to that party.

In Kaalka and its surrounding plantations, Svatantra had organised many movements especially during the crisis period and immediately afterwards.

Last year, we organised a movement against the panchayat in demand of 100 days work (NREGA). We had submitted application for the job but they sent us away saying they don't have any job to give. We went to Shiva and told him about this. He then spoke to the leaders and they told him that if they cannot give jobs within a certain period. They are bound by law to give unemployment benefits to the applicants. We then organised the village and went to the panchayat, armed with the laws. Seeing we knew our rights, the members could not do anything. They told us to come the next day and then began our hide and seek for almost 6-7 weeks. We took turns and went but they did not accept our deputation. The villagers were also losing hope. Then we sent them the deputation through registered post and tricked them into signing the receipt of the deputation...But it was a long road even after that. They found one delaying tactic after another for another 3 months. Finally, we had a meeting and Bhavani babu and Tarun babu (the leaders of Svatantra) were also there. They also supported our decision to take action and we all planned it. Next day, we took the villagers who had applied for the job and gherao-ed (blockaded) the panchayat office, locking the panchayat members inside. The pradhan (head of the panchayat) was not there. It was only after he had given a signed assurance of giving us all jobs or benefits within 7 days that we let them go. It was a grand success for Svatantra. (Kaalka, 05.06.11, group discussion by Shiva, Rustam, Avinash, Shonali, Chameli and Chandni).

This account brings to the fore some of the implications Svatantra's role had in the way everyday activism developed in Kaalka. Works on

women's organised activism (e.g. Solomon, 2013; Menon, 2013) show that often activism of women begins with the initiative of people from a different class background. The struggles for survival and security which dominate the everyday lives of these women along with their low position in their job makes it unlikely for them to be able to spontaneously organise activist protest movements (Kabeer et al., 2013). In such scenarios external actors like Svatantra often facilitate this struggle by enabling them to articulate their own priorities (Kabeer et al. 2013; 8). Takhar (2007; 133) argues that organised activism can no longer be viewed as a binary between active and passive status of its members but rather as an 'active social force'.

Svatantra's role in everyday activism had four primary implications. First, with labour welfare and instilling political consciousness as their two primary goals, Svatantra and its activities made the workers aware of their deprivation and also conscious of some of their rights. Secondly, it provided not only the leadership for these protests but also the tools to carry them forward. Svatantra's activities included writing deputations and petitions to the management and various government bodies for their demands. The members, often under the guidance of the leadership, lodged Right to Information litigation demanding the *panchayat* shows them the basis on which dues had been distributed. Apart from these legal avenues they also organised movements. These included blockades, protest meetings and processions and on some occasions refusal to work. Thirdly, though the planning of these movements was done by the leadership, it was the grassroots' members mostly from the tea plantations who did the actual organisation and ensured participation of the workers. This provided them an awareness of their rights, procedure to demand these as well as get a working knowledge of the tools and techniques of protest. While subscribing to the programme of the NGO and using that training, the participants were often able to apply it on their own, for their own ends to organise protests often outside the Svatantra umbrella. Finally, the NGO Svatantra often provided

infrastructural assistance in the form of moral and material support in the later stages of some of these protests to sustain it.

In spite of the important role played by Svatantra, to understand the protestors and their protests, their activism cannot be understood solely from within the organisation but as a constituent of their lived experiences. In all the protests I describe below, it was not only the body of the protesting women but also the ones against whom the protest was aimed. The latter bodies were usually masculine though in different ways. In eliciting a response from the protestors different forms and rhetoric were invoked.

Train and BDO blockade

During the closure of the plantations, the state government was responsible for providing the workers with support. The protest was aimed at the failure of the state to deliver services to Kaalka. Three women of differing political affiliations, Puloma, Lalita and Panita, spearheaded the protest. They enjoyed some popular support among the workers. The protest took the form of blockading the train-tracks which ran around the plantation and refusing to move till their demands were met. In explaining the protest, Lalita, said:

'We were not getting our rights and facilities at the right time. So we blockaded the train tracks to put some pressure on them'. (Kaalka, 30.05.11)

Later, when the promises remained unfulfilled they decided to *gherao* the BDO, the district level state administrative office. They planned to hire a truck, so that more people could go there, but the local transporters had already been warned by the political parties to not give them transport. Panita recalls how they managed to achieve a small victory.

If we do not get transport tomorrow to take us there, the moment you bring out your trucks we will burn it. If you do not take it out today, you are bound to take it out tomorrow. We will not spare you. Within the night the news reached us that they will give us the trucks. They

also reduced the rates a lot and gave one truck for free. So we took 4 truckloads of people. (Kaalka, 2.06.11)

This message was conveyed not only through verbal threats but also through aggressive behaviour. The women expressed their fury through shouting, mouthing expletives and raising their fists in times of argument, using their bodies as mediums of their belligerence. While negotiating with the men of the transport company personnel, they did not maintain the physical distance with these men that they would normally be expected to maintain. Maintaining a fist's distance and advancing further if the argument became more heated, the group of women at that instance overturned most codes of appropriate gendered performance. The aggression in their language and body language continued through the *gherao* and they threatened to burn down the office if they were not given their rations and monthly allowances on time. Here again were in evidence the same raised voices, clenched fists which were verbal threats of violence and the kicking of pebbles towards the officers. Though, not manifested in actual physical action, the threats, the aggressive body language held a potential of violence. Tucking the sari firmly in the underskirt, the women remained belligerent throughout the protest. By physically expressing aggression and overturning ideas of demureness, the body became the medium through which the protest was played out.

The planning and mobilisation required for the blockade was minimal, relying on social networks. Svatantra indirectly provided support before the actual protest by informing the workers of their rights and who the redressal agencies were, following this up with deputations to the BDO, but the protest described was the spontaneous result of the failure of these deputations to come up with any success. In spite of this, it was interesting how in registering the protest the women used a historically available political repertoire of blockade and *gherao*. The operation of Svatantra in the area made the knowledge of the tactics of these forms of protest available to the women. In picking up these available repertoires

of protest, the women showed themselves to be active political agents. They engaged, even if in a limited way, with the state machinery in making their demands.

This phenomenon of placing demands naturally has its spatial manifestation. Through the gendering of the social and political spaces in the South Asian context women are often confined to the house (e.g. Gorrington 2005; Khawar and Shaheed, 1987). Similarly in the plantation society that I studied, women's roles are regulated in accordance to the principles of the patriarchal structure in which they live. They are the carers within the household functioning in their roles as mothers, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, sisters-in-law conceived through the prisms of reproduction, rearing and sexual desire. They work in the plantations, usually in all-women groups, with discourses of behaviour directed towards maintaining certain standards of chastity and discipline. Even their ability to move around in the spaces outside home and work are defined in relation to these norms and mapped onto accompanying bodily practices that reinforce these roles. The women's bodies are regulated through these roles and their appropriate performances. Thus, they are constrained not only to these spaces but are also restrained within them. They are to be guarded and protected. Even when made visible to others, it has to be done according to appropriate codes, e.g. visiting the market (which was an intermediate space) to buy things for the family, attending *panchayat* meetings to report a problem in the household.

The protests, on the other hand, carved out a space beyond these private regulated spheres, a space where the women were visible and heard in the public sphere. Not only interacting with men from outside the plantation, but also the women entered and engaged with the political arenas of the administrative offices, railway tracks, etc. In these instances, they were not just passing by these physical sites on their way home or to market but actually physically occupied and appropriated these spaces. The social codes which operate to make these boundaries relevant in the

women's everyday lives seemed to be suspended as they crossed over from the home to the intermediate to the outside in voicing and playing out their protest. In confronting the issues of the day, they took centre-stage. Thus, symbolically appropriating the notion of men as their protectors. In these moments, they dispelled the notion of the need to protect, guard their bodies or keep them hidden in a cloak of appropriateness. Through body language and bodily practices unregulated by the discourses of chastity and demureness; through the shouting of slogans, making threats of physical harm, etc., the women's protests threw out a challenge, however unintended or small, to the dominant gendered relations of power.

In doing so, at least in those particular instances, the women overturned and undermined social categories, challenging the meaning and structure of different spaces with their gendered ordering. In inhabiting and in some instances controlling these public spaces, the women used the idioms of the protest which not only legitimised but to some extent necessitated their entry and occupation of these spaces, usually considered outside their purview. Even though at the root this was an attempt to secure very basic rights rather than address structural inequalities, the fact that the protest started from the language of rights which was the focal point in its performance also illustrates that this show of defiance used the repertoires of politics available to them.

At the same time, personal emotions were a powerful driving force in the clamour for rights. The following quote from Puloma shows that the protest against the BDO was fuelled not only by the specific grievances against the state but the compulsions and emotions arising out of their daily lives.

I: Do you think you would have seriously carried out the threat of burning down the office.

P: We...I don't know. It is difficult to say now. At that time we were so angry. All of us. It was like this group of angry women, we were almost senseless with rage. At times now I think that it was really the anger which gave us courage. We seemed to be possessed.

I: Was it because of the BDO's rude behaviour?

P: The BDO was actually not rude, he used to listen to us. Though he could not fulfil his promise... Duggi, the mad woman you saw yesterday, was throwing pebbles calling out her mother-in-law's name. We all laughed at her but later when I think I feel maybe it was like that inside all of us. Anger with everything. Why our children can't get good education, why someone's husband drinks and beats her. Everything. Everything. (Kaalka, field-notes, 05.06.11).

While their articulation was against the specific and in some sense external actors, subsumed within it were the un-enunciated grievances arising from their everyday. The 'anger with everything' that the women felt indicate how their activism was not remote from other aspects of their lives. The sense of injustice that they felt with their troubled domestic life, the chronic problems of poverty in the background were all translated into anger to fuel a protest for their rights. Hercus (1999) has spoken of the importance of recognising volatile emotions, significantly anger, as integral to collective action. It was, however, an anger not only arising from the sense of injustice towards the target of the grievance but an anger arising from a deeper sense of deprivation and denial. Kleinman (2000) speaks of the anger which gets buried in the everyday life of a woman busying herself with fulfilling her children and her husband's wants. In describing the dirty protest, Aretxaga (1997:131) shows how it is constituted through an articulation of feelings of hate, rage and pain—'*the anger kept us going*'. Similarly the extract shows how the women used their bodies to vent the anger they felt and bottled up inside them. In the everyday spaces they occupied and the roles they performed the body language of anger had no place. The protest thus, cannot be understood only as political subjects' clamour for their rights (though this definitely formed an important part) but has to take into account these other issues which might otherwise remain subsumed into the 'private' and the 'personal' arena of the everyday.

Molyneux (1985) warns of the dangers of associating women's activism with agency too closely. She shows how the revolution which

included a significant role played by the women either in direct or in indirect manner, still made use of the prevailing sexual division and in spite of politicising perceived social roles did not dissolve them. While the women voiced their protest to other actors, namely the local officials to secure their rights, in their embodiment of the protest and in their communication to each other it was not the same language of rights which found place. Without negating their role as active political agents, my conversations with the women revealed another layer, a very personal reading of their involvement in the protest. The women I spoke to talked of their roles as mothers and the grinding poverty in the home causing the children to go hungry as the reason for them to rise up in demand for their rights. One of the women, Kakoli, says:

'We are women, where will we go to feed our children? We cannot work in other states— that is not appropriate. So we have to stay and fight here, for ourselves, for our children'. (Kaalka, 09.05.11)

Though many of these narratives contain an implicit rejection of their roles as wives dependant on their husbands—or sisters dependant on their brothers—it was in an embodiment of their roles as mothers, as daughters and hardly ever as autonomous political subjects that they protested. One of the women, Panita's words in relation to another similar protest expressed this:

'What can we do? How long can we keep quiet while we see our children going hungry? We are mothers; this is unbearable to us'. (Kaalka, 07.11.11)

By reproducing the roles of mothers, daughters, etc., the women themselves push forward the meta-narrative of the patriarchal society and reaffirm its control on their bodies. In these instances, through using their bodies and raising their voices, they paradoxically reinforce the structures and norms that might disempower them in other settings.

This apparent contradiction between the two ways of framing the protest pointed at a disjuncture between the public performance of activism and its private understandings. Though embedding the gender roles and positionalities within themselves, the performing bodies could not be considered unconscious agents in this. Rather, following from Foucault (1971), it can be assumed that bodies even in this instance acted as conscious agents in colluding with the power relations of domination and subordination. The protests here reveal the duality of the protesting bodies. Through the use of certain accepted (in the plantation society) gender codes such as the sanctity of the woman's body, the moral superiority of victims of violence, and appealing to mercy, the women played out the practices inscribed on them through their *habitus*. At the same time, by manipulating these roles and perceptions to get the maximum benefit out of them, there was a critique and in some sense subversion of the power relations that constitute them and by extension the resultant gender position. This was not a simple disjuncture between one and the other position. Rather, the contradictions pointed to a much more complex understanding of the performance of different gender roles.

The apparent clash between the different spaces in their lives and how these play out was not in reality a disjunction. As seen in the work of Ciotti (2009), Sangtin Writers and Nagar. (2006), Govinda (2005) and Basu (1995), these spaces are not binaries in the women's lives. These different spaces and the activities must be understood as relational and part of a continuum. It is not enough to look at the public performance of activism, rather constraints or support within domestic space often influence if not determine activism, just as the gender roles of being a mother or daughter give meaning to agency. In the site of the everyday, the women make sense of their activism to secure their right to be a good mother, a good daughter. People make sense of their actions through the meanings of their everyday and it is through this the apparent

contradiction between the ways the women articulated their protest to different actors could be understood.

Weighing and deductions

Daahlia was the site of another protest. During the weighing of tea leaves, it is customary to deduct 1 kg of leaves in dry weather and 2 kgs in the rains from the total weight of leaves plucked. A new assistant manager had come to the garden and he arbitrarily deducted weights from the total. The next day, the women plucked the leaves as usual, but refused to weigh them, demanding the manager along with the assistant manager to apologise. In the face of sustained opposition, both had to apologise.

We are not animals that if you explain to us something we will not understand, but there is a way to talk. We labour so much to pluck leaves going through these fields with undergrowths in the rain, facing snakes, poisonous insects and at times other animals too. After that we are subjected to such disrespectful treatment. (Rupal, Daahlia, 13.04.11)

Strikes feature among the classical images of protesting bodies, unmoving till their demands are met. The women did not express anger in the same way as they did in the first vignette. Rather than mouthing expletives or raising fists they expressed a quiet determination. They plucked the leaves but refused to weigh them. Their refusal was polite but firm, both in its verbal and performative aspects. Instead of shouting and arguing with the supervisors they demanded that the manager and the assistant manager be summoned. The women surrounded the managers but did not threaten them. This protest, however, was more than just redressing the arbitrariness of the deductions.

The women's anger was directed at the disrespect that they felt in the behaviour of the assistant manager as is expressed in this quote. The protest rested on the currency of respect which was not immediately visible. Though the disagreement was regarding the arbitrariness of the deductions, it was the 'lack of respect' that the women complained about.

While the protesting bodies did bring out the image of the women's anger at an injustice, the language they used to verbalise the protest and to communicate it was very important. Seen from outside, it could seem like a group of women protesting to secure their economic rights, but the words '*we are not animals that if you tell us something, we won't understand*' point to a more fundamental grievance subsumed beneath this arbitrary behaviour—the demand for respect as human beings.

Pearson et al. (2010: 418) recount how one of the main strikers of the Grunwick protest walked out of the factory before she could be publicly humiliated and dismissed—she walked out with her 'self-respect intact'. The tea plantation workers' demand for treatment as human beings arises from this same denial of self respect. Material demands have usually been the focus of work on labour movements. But these instances show the issues of honour, dignity and respect subsumed within the material demands and often treated as secondary, are also important.

This demand for being given due as human beings again forms a part of a larger narrative of the politics of the governed whereby not only economic demands but also demands of dignity and respect are at stake. Interestingly in this case, the space of protest is neither the domestic nor completely the public political arena. The garden, here forms an intermediary space. This was not so much in the way the women negotiated with the plantation authority but rather in the way a personal relation was emphasised. '*We labour so much to pluck leaves...*' These words express the personal connection between the workers, the management and the plantation itself. It was this connection which served as a platform for their demand to be treated like equal human beings with respect and dignity.

Chicken stealing

In one of the villages in Kaalka, a group of young men had stolen a woman's chicken and feasted on it. These men were known rogues in the village and generally no one interfered much with them. But in this

instance, the particular woman Sandhya, furious with them, went to the police station and launched a complaint against the theft. Later in the evening, the men came and threatened to rape her if she did not withdraw the complaint. Shaken by the threat, she went to ask her friends in the village for advice. The women asked her to not budge from her position. Taking whatever sticks, rolling pins, etc., that they could find they went to the tea stall where these ruffians generally gathered and issued them counter threats.

'So you all are getting very eager to rape her, is it? Come rape her here in front of us, let's see you do it. Come. What? Why are you going away? Rape her, isn't that what you said? Rape all of us. Let's see how much guts you have'. (Kaalka, field-notes, 17.10.11).

Faced with a group of furious women who at that instance seemed unfazed by the danger that the ruffians could pose to them, it was the latter that backed out. Though they did try other tactics such as convincing Sandhya's husband to withdraw the complaint, and appealing to the *panchayat* they left the woman alone from then on.

Chatterjee (2004) mentions the role of violence in the politics of the governed; arguing that outbreak of violence coincides with the increase in democratic assertion of the oppressed groups. Thus, violence here becomes a valid if not a legitimate means of engagement. The women threatening to beat up a group of men with rolling pins for bullying one of them bears striking similarities to Sen's (2007) description of the Shiv Sena women's threats of burning houses, breaking glasses in the Muslim neighbourhood, physical threats of violence. In this protest it was the same evidence of violence, unpredictable, volatile but addressed to an issue of the everyday. At this instance, violence became a powerful strategy to express their activism even in their day to day life.

The women used their bodies not only as the subject but also the site of protest. The angry women advanced towards the men with raised fists, surrounding them, mouthing expletives, shouting at them. Though none

of this was exceptional to this particular protest, what was noticeable was that the body in this instance was essentially a sexual body. The women picked up the threat of rape in its specific meaning and pushed their sexuality forward. In this violent outburst, the women turned the whole notion of the inviolability of the body on its head and made it the agent of protest against the men who had threatened to violate it. In the other protests that I witnessed, the bodies though central were always shrouded in modesty; they could be demure bodies, violent bodies, hurt bodies, mercy seeking bodies but almost never sexual bodies. Women's sexuality was not an arena of contestation but something to be hidden away or only discussed through anonymous modes such as gossip.

While protesting against the authorities, the women used aggression and violence but this was usually shrouded by their moral superiority. By presenting themselves to an audience outside the plantations, they ensured they were not too vulgar or inappropriate and that their struggle would not become illegitimate in the eyes of the authority, be it the organs of the state or the management.

These babus (gentlemen) need to be shaken and only then will they take us seriously. But finally they are outsiders so we have to be careful about our self respect (maryada). After all, we will need to deal with them time and again. (Lalita, Kaalka, 30.05.11)

The 'maryada' thus, provided the limit beyond which the aggression cannot proceed. In Aretxaga's (1997) description of the dirty protest, by pushing forward aspects of the physiology kept hidden in the public discourse, the protest lost its legitimacy in the Catholic morality of wider society. Conversely for the women in the tea plantations, the presentation of themselves to 'outsiders' had to be portrayed in a way which negotiated the boundaries adequately. Possibly, this enabled these protests to remain turbulent but at the same time legitimate.

The spontaneity of the women's outrage in this instance, however, was not bound by such ideas of appropriateness. The women protested as

sexual beings and in the language they used they portrayed this sexuality as crassly as they could. This could be perhaps because the action of the ruffians threatened them within their home-space and they felt the need to reassert the boundaries. In their perception, it was not really outsiders that they were dealing with, but people from their own village, their domestic space. It was their everyday space that had been threatened and they were trying to wrest back their *maryada* as women from being assaulted by a masculine perception of them as sexual objects. This vignette illustrates that sometimes protests are performed only or primarily as women. Stung by the atrocity meted out to a woman, the women put forward an alternative, autonomous body that challenged the attempts by the structures of power and/or the patriarchal society to discipline their bodies in that specific moment.

The physical site of this protest was outside the immediate domesticity of the home, in a somewhat intermediate zone. In flaunting their sexuality aggressively in the semi-public space of the village roads, the women overturned the accepted gender morality and, even if momentarily, altered the style of its performance. This, however, does not lead to an interrogation of gender codes and morality operating in their everyday life. The action remained limited in its purpose. The women protested against a specific act of theft and intimidation; in their verbalisation of the protest or communication they did not raise questions about the construction of the gendered body as sexual.

Action against everyday exploitation

In one of the gardens in that tea belt, reacting to a workers' strike, the manager had kicked a pregnant woman worker in her stomach causing her not only to have a miscarriage but also to suffer severe injury herself. This led to a backlash and it became a rallying point for the workers of the entire belt. Using this incident as the focus, protest was registered against the daily forms of injustice and exploitation that they were forced to bear. The protest transcended the physical confines of a single

plantation. It was no longer against that singular act of violence. Rather, it sought to communicate to an outside audience the plight that the tea plantation workers have been subjected to since the inception of the plantations. Given below is a loosely translated excerpt from one of the songs sung during the protest.

I will tell you today the chronicle of the tea gardens' woes.

Injustice, exploitation is our everyday dose.

There is no education here, no health care.

The sick has to wait till death comes near.

Oh the sad chronicle of the tea gardens.

The past of our ancestors and today's present is the same

The future holds nothing for us but in name.

Today we start our fight

For education, health care and all our rights

The songs and street theatres of this protest were different in nature to the permitted carnivals described in chapter 7. These were not guarded songs of criticism introducing a note of dissent in the prevailing social discourse. They were open criticisms looking to carve out a space of political protest in the mainstream narrative.

The inviolability of the woman's body was breached by the action of the manager. The protest, in its expression, however, did not remain confined to the violence against one woman's body. The singular act of violence against a woman's body became symbolic, a marker of violence against collective bodies. Paradoxically it downplayed the physical aspect of the body. It became a protest against the everyday violence, everyday injustice to the woman's body and to the workers' body. Unlike in protests where the physicality or physiology of the body remained the focus or in the previous illustration where the sexuality of the body formed the core, in this case the physical body was subsumed to a more symbolic level. The violation of the woman's body through attacking it

became the symbol of the vulnerability and exploitation of the workers in general. The body in this case was no longer gendered but became a marker of class. The protesting body was the victim of violence, but no longer of only gendered violence but the everyday violence that the workers go through. Even though this particular manager was punished and suspended that was no longer the goal of the protest. The aim had shifted to address larger questions of exploitation and injustice.

The protest was registered by enacting street plays, songs, and speeches denouncing the everyday violation of the dignity of the human body that tea plantation workers suffered. Through powerful lyrics and dramas the workers played out everyday injustices. As this song shows, they sing not only of the deprivations that they have faced through generations, but also of their rights and the determination to fight for them. Though the translation fails to capture the militancy of some of the words, much in keeping with its body language—the lyrics of the song, alternating between pathos and militancy, set the tone for the struggle.

In the space that the protests appropriated, the idioms and language that it used and in its demands, this protest had all the elements which Chatterjee (2004) has identified as the engagement of the governed with authority. The protest was aimed at the government authorities to take steps against the arbitrariness of the plantation authorities. In this, it showed a perception of the workers—both men and women—toward the hierarchy of authorities. Pande (2013) illustrates how in protest of the murder of a member of women's Whole Village Group (WVG) its members protested through very similar trajectory of demonstrations and rallies. This transition of powerless, in some sense, isolated groups to political activism brings grassroots democracy to life (Pande, 2013: 124) and the participants into a direct relation with the state.

The protest being played out through demonstrations as well as street plays did not only occupy the political space but also a cultural space. It was by combining the two that the protestors sought to engage with the

state against the management. Also, through accessing cultural space, they made the protest available to a range of people outside the tea plantation workers, mostly the economically backward classes of the townships of Kaalka and Henryganj as well as a section of the Bengali intelligentsia. In the later stages of the protest, Svatantra involved itself in supplying resources to sustain the protest, in the form of providing training or infrastructure for staging plays, etc., helping out in writing and depositing deputations.

The combination of the cultural and political idioms used by the protestors constitutes a part of the prevalent repertoire of protest in West Bengal. Thus, through the conscious picking up of this form of protest, the protestors showed themselves to be political subjects. The plays, dramas, demonstrations, street corners all made use of the distinct history of tea plantation workers, cited different tribal or Nepali leaders (as the case may have been) of the plantations, made reference to the distinct Adivasi or Nepali history and cultural symbols. Thus, the protestors, while using a politically and culturally accepted form of protest, made it distinct and indigenous. Using the language of exploitation, deprivation, violence and the denial of the rights and dignity of human beings the protest transcended a specific act to become a proto-movement to redress the fact that some legitimate expectations of the governed had not been met by the authorities responsible for it.

CONCLUSION

The four illustrations of protest discussed above are varying in their demands, forms and expressions. They do, however, shed some light on the way the apparently dominated women express defiance and make a visible show of resistance. While two of the protests were more or less successful in achieving their end goals, the other two did not succeed. But the potential of these protests cannot be measured only through the success of their end results. In their study of labour strikes in Grunwick

and Gate Gourmet, Anitha et al. (2012) quote one of the strike participants who say that even if the strike has failed in its objective, she can tell her daughter when she grows up, how she fought for her rights. The strike in itself did not achieve much but by focussing on this aspect of the strike can its transformative potential be rejected? Giugni (1998) argues that the notion of success can be problematic as it assumes uniform perception, homogeneity of the participants and focuses on a particular end result. Research on social movement outcomes (e.g. Giugni, 1998; Wagner and Cohen, 1991) shows that different outcomes can be understood relationally and often outside the binary of success and failure. Rather than measuring them in terms of impact on government policy or legislation, multiple outcomes could be possible such as cultural impact, spill-over effect from one movement to the other. Further, they could have unintended consequences often even in contradiction to their original goal (Giugni, 1998: 385–87).

Such protests have time and again given women the courage to stand up in their domestic sphere (e.g. Govinda, 2013), increased courage in later jobs (Anitha et al. 2012) and forged friendships. Wagner and Cohen (1991) make the important distinction between social movement *for* and social movement *of* the target group. One of the outcomes of the latter protests is the transformation of challengers into members of the polity (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993) as has been seen with the protestors of the plantation. Wagner and Cohen (1991: 553) point out that such non-material gains sometimes translate into material resources for the deprived who otherwise might lack access to social networks and institutions.

Finally, activism within limitations has no smooth, linear progress and has to be understood as few steps forward and backwards. The resilience of patriarchy or any such dominant order survives the turbulence of the protest with minor modifications and often greater backlash (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1987: 160). These backward steps, again, are not always a negative as it represents the threat that the protest has posed for the

system to push it backward (Govinda, 2013: 21). Thus, the four protests described above remain limited in the immediate terms but cannot be negated for the wider implications in terms of women's agency and individual transformation.

As Scott (1990) notes, everyday protests draw on a 'hidden transcript' of dissent that may, at times, emerge into the open through collective action. In their protest as sexual beings or as fellow women, this hidden 'transcript' finds expression. Also, while the protesting women, in many cases used the language of rights to secure their demands for their children, parents, etc., even this usage cannot be dismissed. Structuring the protests around the idioms of rights, honour, or respect the women were claiming something more than mere survival, claiming their space not only as humans but also as political citizens. Drawing on and adapting a repertoire of available strategies for protest, the women made a powerful claim to be considered as conscious political agents.

At first sight, the four cases suggest an active and militant women's protest that is prepared to break laws, challenge norms and use deception to get ahead. These protest events, however, cannot be fully understood without analysing how the protests are embodied, the body language in which they are played out, their moments of connections and rupture with the meta-narrative of patriarchy and their role in expressions of vulnerability and agency of the body and the person. As a text of social practices the bodies occupy designated and often regulated spaces and play out appropriate social codes and expressions. There is, however, a constant process of change occurring through the interplay of resistance and subordination that the women as agents go through. Hence, the embodiment of social practices, spaces, roles, etc., is not unchanging and certainly not unconscious but goes through a continuous process of modification through constant interrogation and interaction. The protesting bodies may themselves become mere mechanisms for further re-embodiment of the codes of patriarchy, but by arranging themselves into protesting bodies they can become the tools to protest against

normative codes of femininity which construct women as docile, passive and mute bodies, and provide a means of self-empowerment not only as women but as conscious political agents.

Chapter 10

Concluding Observations

'Are our stories not important?'

This conclusion will begin by summing up some of the main arguments of the thesis, identify some of the research gaps before finally reflecting upon possible implications for further research, policy and academia in general.

THE STORY SO FAR...

The research arises from a few specific gaps in the plantation literature. The plantations for the large part are looked at as economic spaces with the workers as a homogenous class of victims. In problematising this dominant claim, certain questions come up which form the core of my research.

The tea plantations, being places where the workers and management work and live are not just economic sites of production but also social spaces. This analysis of the plantation as social space has to address the question of whether all workers in the plantation can access and perform in the same way in all these spaces. Being constituted by a multiplicity of subordinate identities, the women workers' position in the social hierarchy on the basis of their gender, caste, region, ethnicity, etc., remains quite low and frames the conditions of their existence. This leads to a chain of subalternity, where social stratification often takes a spatial form which determines the extent of one's belonging (Massey, 1995).

Not being additives but rather mutually constitutive, these intersecting identities makes the plantations quite complex with changing affiliations, oppositions and resultant hierarchies. The work group formation provides a microcosm in which the playing out of different aspects of identities can be seen. The intersections of identities might happen in the form of clashes or alliances. Sometimes, it is kinship which is highlighted, at other times, it could be location, ethnicity, caste or age. At most times, however, group formation remains subsumed in the rubric of friendship and mutual liking. The commonality of an aspect of their identity might form the ground on which the mutuality of feelings and connection occur. The work group formation shows some evidence of the fact that to a limited extent women often play around with their identities to suit their self interest by invoking certain aspects of identity at certain points of time. I show that the articulation of identity is used not only to determine a sense of belonging or non-belonging to a space but also agency which determines how one belongs.

While understanding intersectionality is important, researching and writing about it without fragmenting these women to a point where nothing useful can be said of them could be a challenge. Thus, just as it is important to recognise the multiplicity and mutual constitutiveness of these identities and how these might frame the different women differently, it is also essential to look beyond this to a commonality not arising from shared identity but from shared situation, what Spivak (1993) calls 'strategic essentialism' or Mitchell (2011;494) calls 'structural marginalities'. These manifold constitutive identities such as caste, ethnicity, region, religion, etc., frame the women and, resultantly, the gendered spaces in which they operate.

Though the way the plantation acts as gendered space is not independent of the multiple other identities that exist within it, the sexual division on which the labour practices are based in the fields and factories as well as the households and villages inscribe the physical sites with certain gendered meanings and performances. They are the sites for the

production of discourses and sites for the lived experiences of the workers, staff, manager and other residents. Through mapping the women's perceptions of these spaces and the appropriate norms and practices therein inscribed, a sense of how they function as gendered spaces can be traced. Moving between ideas of home/world, public/private, these spaces mostly defy binaries and demonstrate that this in fact is a continuum with a multiplicity of intermediate spaces. In the women's differential access to the towns, markets, other plantations as well as different sites within the same plantation the boundaries operating can be discerned. Though, operating in different ways, both the workspaces and domestic spaces function through certain gender discourses which naturalise and to a great extent legitimise the gender division of labour. These function in both ways: the gendering shapes the spaces and is in turn shaped by these spaces. Many of these, such as cooking being a task of the women or plucking being assigned to 'nimble fingers' are then traced back to the construction of the women as patient, caring, dexterous, obedient, etc. Through this thesis, I have illustrated how the women negotiate with these gendered spaces and roles in their everyday lives.

As demonstrated, social spaces are not static. With the onslaught of consumerism through television, cable channels, etc., new ideas made their entry into the plantations and delegitimised some previously existing ideas. The increasing attention given to the necessity of investing in the children's education was one of the most obvious examples of this. The newness of these ideas cannot always be considered synonymous with progressiveness. The rapid de-naturalisation of the previously prevalent system of *ghar jamais*, delegitimation of smoking as an accepted social practice among young women (as opposed to their mothers and grandmothers) were some of the changes which seemed to point towards a more conservative social order from the comparatively relaxed gender codes of smoking, drinking, earning which had historically characterised the plantation societies.

The increasing outmigration also strengthened this entry of new ideas. By placing the plantation firmly within the wider social, political and economic worlds of greater India, the long established enclave nature of the plantations is rapidly disappearing. There is a constant flow of people going in and out of the plantations, bringing with them news, information and dreams of what was once an outside world. Coupled with the increased foray into the schools, markets and other facilities within the nearby townships, these migration flows to different, often far flung parts of India is ushering in a period of rapid change in the plantations, a change in values, norms and, resultantly, in the way the social spaces are played out. Migration foregrounds the fluidity of spaces and the boundaries marking the outside are transitional and often even blurred.

As seen, being women in a patriarchal social space, the conditions of existence for them were of prevailing constrictions. While an understanding of these hardships is important there is also a need to understand how people endure within those limitations. To not appreciate that, is to deny them their agency.

Agency is expressed in multiple ways and hence needs to be read within context. It cannot be understood by training our eyes exclusively on the end results. I have used two perspectives to read everyday agency—expression of autonomy through choice and decision-making and as everyday forms of resistance. Choice operates at multiple levels (Rao, 2010) and in expressing choices within their limiting situations and taking responsibility the women showed themselves to be agential beings. Agency is not always emancipatory and might even reinforce one's subordination. Straightforward role in decision making on strategic life choices by women can be traced back to their control over a substantial part of the household resources. But even when this is not the case women still use other tactics to play a role in the decision making or to see that the decision serves their least disadvantage. Though, located low in the hierarchy; through deception, deceit and strategising, the women still carve out a space within that decision making structure.

Corollary to this is resistance, which mostly operates in invisible and almost underhand modes in carving out minute spaces of defiance. This again can take the form of tricking, deceit, rumour, carnival songs. But it also expresses itself in the manipulation of the existing gender norms and appropriate performances within gendered spaces. Rather than challenging the often restrictive role that they can play in these social spaces, the women pick up these roles to turn the logic of gendering on its head. In sitting between the bushes and chatting, gossiping and drinking in the kitchen as well as claiming a legitimate reason to go to the fairs they push these spaces to become more than they are intended to be without challenging the gender norms. In manipulating these sites to be spaces of communion, joking, sharing secrets and even relaxation they do not negate them as sites of monotonous labour; they remain embedded in certain unquestioned constructions of appropriate chores for women as well as often their subordinate position within the work as well as the family hierarchy. These aspects do not exist independent of or in contradiction to each other, rather the subversive spaces exist because of the dominated spaces and they are mutually constitutive.

In looking through agency I have consciously steered clear of transformative aspects of agency. In the context of the constraints that I am researching in, it is not useful to map agency through transformations, big social changes or qualitative improvements. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there was no transformative potential in these acts of decision making, resistance or manipulation. Are the different forms of agency in their various intentions and expressions solely directed to the present moment or is there a long term end? Do they, in Moser's (1989) terms, always focus on practical needs rather than strategic interests? For instance, the counter-narrative about the value of daughters may be partly responsible for shifting attitudes and practices. Changes may occur over the life course of an individual or group or across generations, as mothers seek to give their daughters the chances that they themselves never had.

A: My sister is in MA 1st year, now she will appear for the 2nd year exams. She is studying alongside her work here. So she does half day work. What I could not do, I ensure that she can do it. For me there was no support, my mother did not know who to approach... The manager allowed my sister to have a permanent half day work. She can be staff or even get a babu position because she is educated. (Aradhana, Kaalka, 21.10.11)

In this action, Aradhana expresses what Kabeer (2005: 15–16) refers to as transformative agency which not only aims towards immediate inequalities but can initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy. In this instance, it is the possibility of a woman—that too from a worker's family—becoming part of the staff. The reverse, however, is also true. Inequalities in one sphere are likely to be reproduced in others if they go unchallenged. Today's inequalities are translated into the inequalities of tomorrow as daughters inherit the same discriminatory structures that oppressed their mothers (Kabeer, 2005). But even within this larger inability of acts of agency to bring about transformations such incidents like this occur, and the decision of one woman then goes on to benefit the lives of others within the family.

Scott (1990), in *Hidden Transcripts*, concludes by giving examples of public acts of protest which challenge regimes and ideologies. I have situated activism outside the structure of organised movements. Much of the literature on activism of women and other oppressed categories situates this within organisations such as NGOs or social movement bodies with a clear set of aims if not ideology. These are usually not one-off protests but long drawn-out movements with regular meetings and events. As we have seen in Kaalka, under the aegis of Svatantra a whole set of protest movements were organised demanding 100 days work under the NREGA scheme, the payment of dues for the workers for the years that the plantation was closed. Svatantra, like many NGOs, had regular meetings and an agenda through which they planned out the protests. It also had the typical feature of training and leadership by a class of professional activists. It was seen how in Kaalka, Svatantra's

work had definitely contributed to a greater awareness among the protestors of their rights and made available to them a whole repertoire of protests. While recognising the role of Svatantra is important, however, these protests much like those in Daahlia were located outside the framework of organised protest movements.

In the thesis, the NGO and activism directed by it consciously remain in the background while I focus on a range of active protests outside this spectrum. While understanding activism and its organisation is undoubtedly important, often not much sustained attention is paid to what we can term 'the activism of everyday life'. These are protests which arise spontaneously usually outside the framework of an organised protest and organisations guiding it, from the realities of the everyday life and its meanings and boundaries, sometimes challenging the established hierarchies and norms but hardly ever mounting a conscious critique against these. They are one-off, remain limited in their demands and reliant on actors of the everyday life to take them forward.

The protesting masses in their performance of the protests often subvert certain everyday norms such as accessing officials and public spaces, being aggressive, etc. But in acting these out the protestors frequently seek legitimacy through certain wider understandings of socially recognised roles such as motherhood or as victims of violence or violation. Even within these limits these acts of mostly spontaneous protest establish the protestors as political citizens not only in their performance of the protests or its public narratives but in the acknowledgement of a real relation with the state and its satellites or in what Mitchell (2011: 471) calls constructive civic engagement. Through such actions they can legitimately demand certain services from the state and its actors and confront it, if the demands are not met.

There is a danger of looking at activism as a step forward from everyday forms of agency whereby activism is equated with active agency on a linear continuum. The everyday acts of activism that I speak

of are visible, often spectacular, acts of resistance as opposed to the minute almost invisible acts of everyday agency (including everyday resistance), but they differ both in the way they are performed and the audience they speak to or aim for. For a protest to be considered as such it has to be a spectacle, it has to be public while everyday acts of agency in most cases tend to be unspectacular and individual. Moreover, everyday forms of activism, unlike everyday resistance have to be usually based on a shared grievance against a common entity.

These differences notwithstanding, they are not two distinctly separate phenomena. In establishing a link between these two classes of action or inaction, following Scott's formulation of agency being a necessary but not sufficient condition for visible protests, I demonstrate that given appropriate conditions, the hidden transcripts of everyday agency could burst out in visible active forms of protest. An illustration of this lies in the way the women routinely used deception and manipulation to work the unfavourable conditions of work to their least disadvantage and very occasionally they actually strike work to demand better treatment (e.g. the weighing incident in chapter 9). This does not place them in a continuum as the very next day they could go back to the more subtle forms of manipulation. What it does show is that these actions share an interconnection in their everyday life by being present as hidden transcripts coming forth at times and remaining hidden at others. Thus, the dichotomy between the literature on agency and activism which treat the two as unrelated phenomenon is not very useful.

While these were the main themes that my research focussed on, like any finite study, there were other things which hovered in the background which I could not concentrate on. These remain gaps in my research, something which I might address if I do the study again.

IDENTIFYING GAPS IN THE RESEARCH

My research concentrates primarily on the women workers of the plantation. Focussing on a certain group meant that others were left out or dealt with insufficiently. Since I spent most of my time researching women workers, I could not map sufficiently the lives of the non-working women. Given the nature of my ethnography, I was able to speak to them and interact with them but this was usually in relation to my understanding of the working women of the plantations. But more importantly what remains unmapped in this thesis is the men's story.

'You are always with the women, talking to them or asking us about them. Are our stories not important? Who will tell our stories?'
(Nikhil, Daahlia, 13.11.11)

By virtue of my being a woman it was easier for the women to interact with me and open up a space in their lives to me. The men in the beginning remained suspicious and then aloof. Though my interaction with them increased as I spent time in the plantations, these were almost always in mixed spaces and by virtue of my closeness with their female kin. Much like the other women, my entry in male spaces was restricted. Till the very end my relation with the men remained mediated through the women.

This does not, however, mean that the other stories are unimportant. In my research, the men feature in as much as they are necessary to understand the women, but hardly ever independently. There is a need to map the perception of the men not only because their lives were closely entwined with those of the women but also in their own right. Studying masculinities and understanding changing masculinities within this context is very important in order to get a complete picture of the plantations as a social space. How did they deal with the increased feminisation of plantation labour? How did they deal with shifting expectations of changing lifestyle? What did they think of the increased outmigration? What was their experience of migration of themselves or

their wives, mothers and others migrating to other places? And most importantly how did they deal with their invisibility from the plantation literature except as the markers of class? Any research becomes meaningful when placed in a broader context. The account of the men, their changing masculinities, their understandings of space and agency has to feature in the wider narrative in order to understand the plantation as a social space and workers as agential beings.

I have tried to address as fully as possible how multiple identities frame gender and even within that intersectional framework provides the scope to study some commonalities as agential beings. While gender is my focus in this thesis, this does not mean that was the single most important identity for the women workers. Ethnicity remained quite fundamental in determining identity, as did caste and religion though in less central ways. Focussing on any of these instead of, or in addition to, gender in greater detail might have provided scope to map these differences more fully. This might have necessitated a different structure where intersectionality would have been the focus rather than the context of the research. Using this structure would have given richer data on how these differences play out. Alternatively focussing on how the ethnic identities of being Adivasi or Nepali determined the position and condition of the workers and defined them as agential beings might have also brought out some interesting findings.

Conducting fieldwork within a distinctly marked space I was consumed by the dynamics within the space. In my research I have focussed on the plantation from the inside, studying those people who did not migrate, who remained within the plantations and less those who travelled between the plantations and outside. But as seen before the tea plantations are not static spaces with impermeable boundaries. Changing aspirations, crushing needs or inevitable departures mean that the space is not independent or static. This movement is not only about the transformation of the movers but also about how they perceive the movement. My research provides only brief glimpses of the

transformations of personhood (individuals, groups, communities), boundaries (geographic, institutional, value-systems, aspirations) and spaces. In retrospect, I would have liked to study the idea of the fluidity of the plantations as social space with transitional boundaries. Capturing more fully how the people in the townships viewed the plantation and its inhabitants might have revealed how they negotiated with the latter. Viewing the plantation from the outside would also have been interesting and useful in getting a new perspective on the plantations. Also, exploring in depth the perception of those who traversed the boundaries of the plantations to set up home elsewhere, e.g. those who married and moved to another place, those who migrated to the townships for jobs or the temporary workers from the nearby villages—mapping their understanding of the plantations might have added another layer to the changing boundaries of the inside, outside and the intermediates and what that spells for the plantations as social spaces.

These gaps would have been interesting to follow through and I would have probably explored them in greater depth if I had more time and resources for my fieldwork and writing up phases. At the same time, no research is infinite and within its limited framework it tries to explore a few issues in depth, as I have done and the gaps in such cases often open up spaces for future research.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE: POTENTIAL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH?

This thesis has tried to answer certain questions to enrich our understanding of plantations as social spaces. But like every new study it has raised questions to pave the way for further research. An area of research that was flagged up by my data is migration from the plantations. In the development of tea plantations in India, as elsewhere, recruitment of labour was an important feature. The tea plantations developed on the basis of this migrant labour force. As an uprooted population, the migrant labour became dependent on these subsidies and

lost the potential to be mobile, in search of better opportunities. Through various mechanisms they remained tied to the plantations for generations to the extent that for a present generation the plantations have become their ancestry. Within the apparent stability, the conditions of poverty and inequality persisted: outstanding dues, unpaid wages, exploitative conditions of work became regular occurrences in their lives. The difficulties of their lives came to a breaking point when the period from 1999 to 2000s with the crisis in the tea plantations which lasted for ten years. What had started as a trickle about five years back with male workers transferring their jobs in the plantation to the women in their families and migrating to distant cities like Chennai, Hyderabad, Delhi, etc., has now become a rapid stream with at least one member from almost every worker's family venturing out in search of alternative employment. Though male dominated, it has not remained limited to the men. A sizeable section of women also made their way outside to look for jobs to sustain themselves and or/ their families. The migration flows are crucial in shaping the plantation the way it functions, in its labour practices, in the aspiration of the people as well as in ushering in changing perceptions and norms. Thus, researching the phenomenon of migration and its circularity is important to carry forward research on tea plantations which for long have been conceived as enclaves.

This also raises questions about the migration experience itself, especially among the women migrants. The stories of labour migration have historically concentrated on male migration. Whether looking for better opportunities or being pushed out by necessity to look for alternative means of subsistence, it is usually the responsibility of the men to migrate. Even within the tea plantations, this was the prevailing understanding. But it is not only the men who migrate; the women migrate too, sometimes with the family but quite often on their own. The stories of their migration are subsumed within the dominant masculine tone of the migration narratives of the tea plantations. The meanings surrounding the women's migration are, however, distinct. Unlike their

male counterparts, for a majority of the women in the tea plantations migration was only to be pursued out of necessity and usually in the absence of an able-bodied male member. Rao (2010: 171) illustrates how women's migration cannot be summed up in a unilinear way; it is a complex and even a contradictory process. An insight can be gained into this important process by tracing the narratives of deprivation which pushed women out into the unknown and in most cases hostile world from the relative stability of the plantation, which in spite of its difficulties had a semblance of security in terms of familiarity and social networks. Moreover, discourses of chastity, appropriateness, etc., make the women's quests for alternative livelihoods challenging. Within this backdrop of chronic poverty and hardships, do these migrant women exercise agency even within their constrained situation? Through capturing the migrant women's voices, mapping their perception of the migration experience and life following it, there is a scope for further research into women not only as victims of poverty and inequality but also the possibility of them being agential beings in spite of the odds stacked against them.

CONTRIBUTIONS

A research project plays a part in the broader scheme of knowledge transfer. Through this study I hope to have added to certain bodies of knowledge. At the most obvious level, this study builds upon the existing plantation literature by concentrating on the plantations as social spaces, adds a layer to the primarily economic studies of the tea plantations in India. In addition, it goes beyond the victimhood discourse of the women workers and portrays them as agential beings. The findings of this research will hopefully enhance our understanding of tea plantations.

The study also adds certain empirical details to make theories used richer and more grounded. In exposition of the themes, I make use of the site of everyday as an analytical tool. It is in the everyday life of the

people that the meanings, perceptions and norms emerge and they can only be understood in all their complexity by looking at the everyday. I map how everyday social spaces in the lives of the people function as gendered spaces through certain performances drawing on common understandings of gender roles, norms, etc. It is again these everyday spaces that are framed by multiple identities making them complex spaces of social interaction. To understand the agency of the subordinate, it is imperative to look into the minute aspects of their everyday life to make sense of the actions and inactions and map the perceptions of the agent. It can be argued that protests or activism, even if one-off usually occur(s) in moments of rupture. But these moments do not arise out of a vacuum; rather they surface from these everyday interactions and power hierarchies. Grievances accumulated in people's daily lives occasionally come to the surface in violent confrontation. That is why they are activism of everyday life, not organised with long term goals but spontaneous outbursts. By using the everyday as the prime site for understanding the main themes, I have added to the body of ethnographic literature such as the literature on banal nationalism (e.g. Jean-Klein, 2001) which explicitly or implicitly explores the everyday and documents its importance.

Through reading agency in situations which are primarily of constriction and subordination, this study contributes to the strand of research which tries to understand the agency of people who seemingly have little control over their lives (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1990; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1996 and 1998; Kabeer, 2005 and 1999; Mahmood, 2005; Rao, 2005; Sariola, 2010; Scott, 1985). By looking at agency in a research context which has been largely characterised by victimhood narratives this study complements this literature and provides scope to understand agency which goes against the grain.

In conceiving of activism in everyday life, my thesis also contributes to the activism and protest movement literature. To briefly reiterate, the visible acts of resistance this study highlights unearths a space in activism

literature which is unorganised, spontaneous, one-off and satisfied by small victories. I have demonstrated how these everyday activisms are different from forms of everyday agency expressed through resistance, in relying on visibility, confrontations and spectacle in place of resistance's usual deception, manipulation and negotiation. These protests fall between weapons of the weak and social movements led by professional activism. This will hopefully enrich the literature on activism by providing a whole spectrum within which protest movements can be located even outside the study of mass movements.

In rejecting the dichotomy of the public and the private, Kaviraj (1997) ended up using an alternative binary of the home and the world. Others similarly separate the inside and outside in such oppositional binaries. Much of this thesis has shown that such binaries are not useful. Lived social spaces have to be understood as a continuum with multiple intermediate spaces between these two ideal-type points. In this it adds to the small body of existing literature (e.g. Gorringer, 2006), reconceptualising the public/private or other variations of this, outside binaries.

The conclusions from my thesis might also help to inform policies of government bodies in that it provides a detailed understanding of social processes in the plantations in a crucial time period just in the aftermath of the economic crisis and onset of the new wage structure. This might give government agencies some understanding of the social reality within which the plantation workers operate and the modalities of such operation and thus, help in informing policies.

The findings of the thesis might also inform policies for NGOs. Usually NGOs, even when operating at the grassroots through inclusive measures, have a programme of action and defined aims which in most cases become the guiding force for its actions. There is an assumption based on the programme of knowing what is best for its target group. Cornwall (2003) and Chambers (1994) have raised the fundamental

question of whose voices are being captured by the development agencies and initiatives. My work demonstrates the workings of agency in the grassroots. Building on the participatory approach to research (e.g. Cornwall, 2003; Chambers, 1994), it shows the need for NGOs and other organisations to be reflexive in their programmes and learn from its members, however insignificant, about what their interests are and which tools can best serve it. In being responsive and adhering to the member's spontaneous activism, grassroots organisations can be truly effective and inclusive.

Finally, in this thesis, I have brought out the voice of the women workers. Through essentialisation of their work and their bodies their voice is subdued by their colourful projection on the tea packets, movies and in the public conception through the construction of their idyllic life. By providing a bottom up approach, I have sought to, as Spencer (2011: 203) says, 'write people back into their own stories'. By mapping their perceptions and presenting their narratives, I have recognised these women in their own right within their social context. While recognising the hardships within which these women have to carry on their everyday existence, we cannot lose sight of them as agential beings. Without romanticising the role of agency or activism, by looking at them in the everyday arena and understanding them on their own terms, we can read and write about agency in the language of the agents. As Poonam and Kakoli put it:

All those years when the garden was closed, so many reporters came. They will ask us about our conditions and numbers. So many numbers, in everything 'how many people'. Some were nice, they took our photos and all that. But your work is not like these reporters?...Initially we wondered why you had come from so far to study our lives? What is special in it? But now you have been here so long, we have opened up our lives to you, the happiness, the sorrow, you have seen everything. You have seen our struggles too. In your London, you will not see such difficulties; but we don't give up. Write also about our struggles. This is a very cruel place, the tea plantations, we are denied everything. The management robs us of our dues and the government of our children's future. Sometimes, it seems it is all dark everywhere, no hope, and no improvement. I am a

plucker, my daughter will also be here. But everything said and done I think everywhere life is a struggle, you have to bite the soil and stick here. This is where we belong, this is where our forefathers came, the British brought them here...That counts for something. Even when the plantation closed down, we did not give up. Some people ran away but we stayed on and fought for ourselves and also for our plantation. Today if it is functioning we have not played a small role in it. It is our blood and sweat that is bearing fruit and we have survived because we fought to make the plantation survive (Kaalka, field-notes, 13.11.11).

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Appendix1

Interview Schedule

WOMEN WORKERS

Introducing myself and telling the respondent a bit about my research (which in most cases they already knew about). I then explain to them the voluntary nature of participation in the interview clarifying that they can stop any time they want. I then take permission to record the interview again specifying that I will turn off the recorder if/when they feel uncomfortable. Having established that this interview will proceed only on the basis of voluntary, freely given consent I begin the interview. There is no prepared script but a few questions to guide the narrative to the direction in which I am interested.

1. Tell me something about yourself? How long have you been in this plantation?
2. If they came here after marriage, then asking them about their pre-marital life. If they were born in the plantation then ask them about their childhood and pre-work life.
3. When did you start working in the plantation?
4. How do you find work in the plantation?
5. What work do you like most, why?
6. What work do you like least, why?
7. Do you have friends at work? A bit about the work groups, their function, inter and intra relations.
8. Tell me about your family. What do they do, etc.? Dreams and aspirations for the children.
9. How does the decision making structure within the family work?
10. Daily routine. How is it different on days when she does not have to work?

11. What is the life in the village like?
12. How do you use your leisure time if you get any? Or the annual leave?
13. Difficulties in life: from low wages, familial structure and situation etc. How do they deal with them?
14. Alcoholism? Is it prevalent here as is a common rumour with tea plantations? Do you think it has ever affected you?
15. Domestic violence. Is that a problem in your village like it is in some other villages? Does it affect you?
16. Is there a formal support structure to help you when the management fails in their functions? e.g. political parties, trade unions. NGOs?
17. Outmigration: In the last few years there seems to have been a rise in outmigration from the plantations. Why do you think this is? What do you think of this trend? Who migrates more? Opinion on women's migration? Would you yourself like to work outside or settle outside the plantation? (If they say no) would you prefer your children to work in the plantation or outside? (If they prefer outside) once they settle somewhere outside the plantation would you want to relocate to live with them or would you want to continue to stay in the plantations?
18. What would be your three greatest wishes in life?

In the case of Kaalka, there were additional questions on the times when the plantation was closed and how they survived at that time.

MALE WORKERS

In case of these interviews there was even less of a prepared script and usually the questions were quite similar to that of the women's.

MANAGEMENT AND STAFF

1. How long have you been associated with this tea plantation?

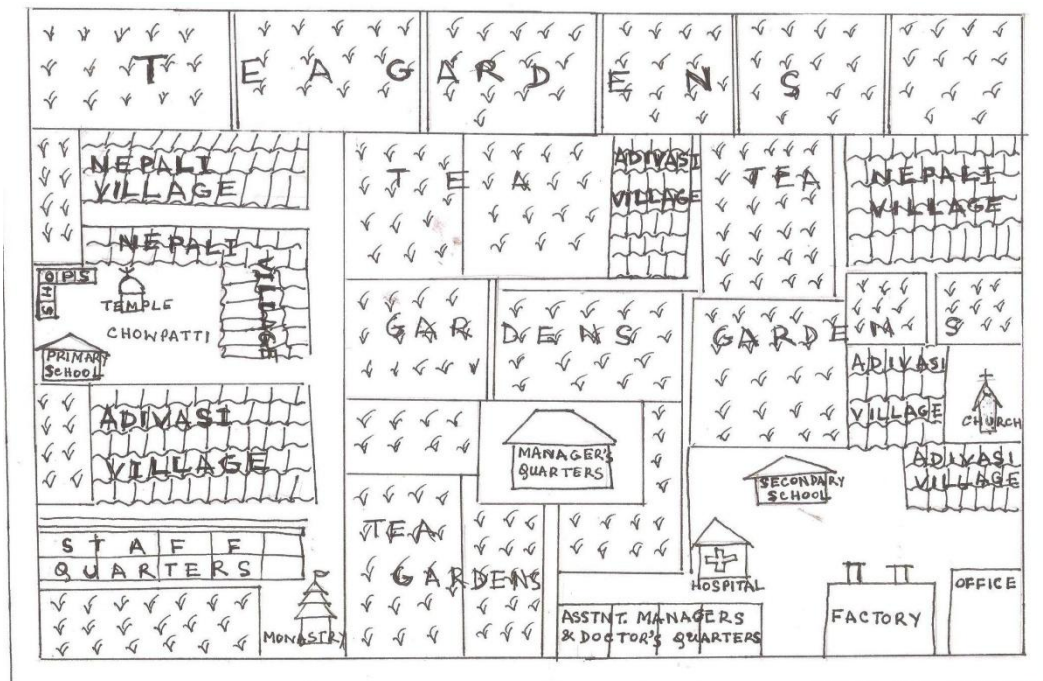
2. Given the immediate background of economic crisis, what is the current condition of the garden in terms of profitability and productivity? What are the steps being taken to bring about the reconstruction? (In case of Kaalka) How long do you think it will take before the plantation can be considered to have fully recovered?
3. (In case of Kaalka) Do the workers have any dues left? If yes, is there a time-frame within which the management/owners are looking to clear the dues?
4. Is there any difference in your responsibility in a recently reopened plantation like this one as compared to one which had been running uninterrupted?
5. (In case of Daahlia) There has been quite a bit of mechanisation in the plantation such as pruning, do you think these will yield dividends in the long run? How will it affect the workers?
6. There has been quite a heavy out migration of the labour from the tea plantations. What do you think is the reason for it? What implications does this have for the future of the garden? Are there any steps being taken by the management to curb this outmigration?
7. Do the trade union and/or the *panchayat* play any role in assisting with the administration of the plantation? If yes what is that?
8. (In case of Kaalka) Given the fact that the *panchayat*/government at present is giving ration and '*fauli*' to the workers does it result into parallel centres of authority?
9. The garden employs both men and women workers. However the women workers are not seen in supervisory roles

which are generally given to the men. Is there a specific reason for this?

10. Generally in a tea garden the manager is considered to be the '*mai-baap*', he is feared and respected and counted upon as the final resort. How true do you think is that image?

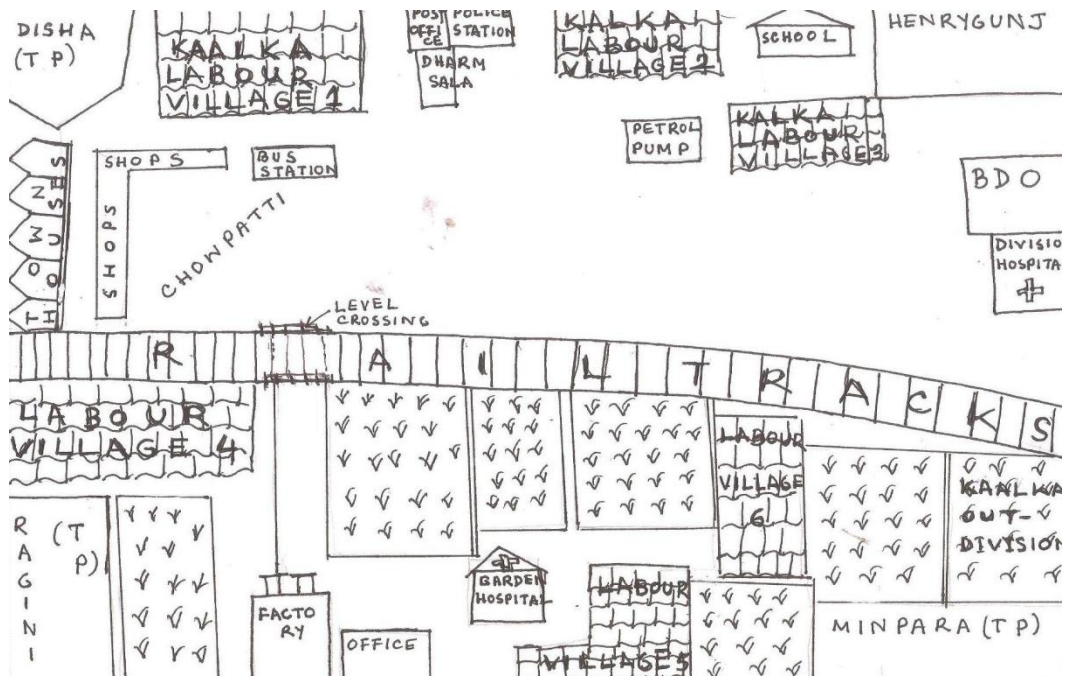
Appendix 2

Plan of Daahlia Tea Plantation



Appendix 3

Plan of Kaalka Tea Plantation



Appendix 4

Contextual details of the women participants

Name	Plantation	Ethnicity	Religion	Marital status	Age	Other information
Medha	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Kakoli	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Bahadur	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Married	Mid 50s-early 60s	
Budhni	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Unmarried	Late 20s	
Janavi	Kaalka	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-40	
Amina	Kaalka	Adivasi	Muslim	Married	Mid 30s-40	
Aradhana	Kaalka	Adivasi	Buddhist	Unmarried	Late 20s	
Jahanara's mother	Kaalka	Adivasi	Muslim	Married	Early 60s	
Jahanara	Kaalka	Adivasi	Muslim	Unmarried	Mid 30s	
Panita	Kaalka	Nepali	Protestant Christian	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Caroline	Kaalka	Adivasi	Roman Catholic	Widow	Late 50s	
Barnamala	Daahlia	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Late 40s-early 50s	
Ruma	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Early 20s	
Kaki	Kaalka	Adivasi	Christian	Widow	Late 30s-early 40s	
Poonam	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	
Leela	Kaalka	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Early 30s	
Soma	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 20s	

Gudai	Kaalka	Adivasi	Christian	Widow	Late 50s	
Nairita	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 20s-early 30s	
Shanti	Kaalka	Adivasi	Christian	Widow	Late 50s	
Mala	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Divorced	30s	Hearing impaired
Anjana	Kaalka	Nepali	Protestant Christian	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	
Janvi	Kaalka	Bihari	Hindu	Married	Early-late 30s	
Janvi's mother in law	Kaalka	Bihari	Hindu,	Widow	Late 50s-early 60s	
Puloma	Kaalka	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	
Badi	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Early-late 60s	Was active in earlier movements.
Saili	Kaalka	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	
Nabitha	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	50s	
Lalita	Kaalka	Adivasi	Hindu	Married (separated from husband)	Late 30s-early 40s	Active in protests. Also member of Svatantra
Chandni	Kaalka	Adivasi	Christain	Single	Early 20s	Goes to college
Shonali	Kaalka	Nepali	Hindu	Single	Early 20s	
Chameli	Kaalka	Nepali	Buddhist	Single	Early 20s	
Pankhuri	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Madeeha	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Unmarried	Late 20s	High Caste (Rai)
Namrah (Madeeha's mother)	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Widow	Early 60s	High Caste (Rai)
Sania (Madeeha's sister)	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Divorced	Late 30s-early 40s	Sick
Victoria	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Married	Mid 40s	Crèche

					to early 50s	mother
Pushpita	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Married	Mid 40s to early 50s	Nurse in hospital (educated)
Budhni	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Unmarried	Late 20s	
Janaki	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-40	
Rupal	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Unmarried	Mid-late 50s	
Subhadra	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Widow	Late 40s-early 50s	
Shalini	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Divorced	Late 20s	
Barnamala	Daahlia	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Late 40s-early 50s	Was once active in the RSP
Nilima	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Divorced	Late 30s-early 40s	
Sunrita	Daahlia	Nepali	Hindu	Married	Late 20s	High caste (Rai)
Mamata	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 30s	
Binita	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 40s	
Priya	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Single	Late 20s	
Priya's mother	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	50s	
Shamali	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Unmarried	Early 20s	Priya's sister. Studies in college.
Basanti	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late-early 30s	
Nandita	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	
Aloki	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Widowed	Late 40s-early 50s	
Ramila	Daahlia	Adivasi	Christian	Widow	Early-late 50s	
Kamala	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	Late 30s-early 40s	Wife of sardar
Bandini	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Late 20s-early	

					30s	
Pankhuri	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	Member of ABAVP
Urvi	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	Late 20s-early 30s	
Kajari	Daahlia	Nepali	Hindu	Unmarried	Late 20s-early 30s	Studied till college
Kanika	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Juhi	Daahlia	Nepali	Buddhist	Married	Mid 30s-early 40s	
Saroj	Daahlia	Adivasi	Hindu	Widow	Mid 50s	Son-in-law is member of <i>panchayat</i> and daughter works in the local health centre