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Historical Position of Women Workers in the Tea Gardens of North Bengal

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Abstract

Women have played a vital role in the labour force of tea plantations across the Indian Subcontinent, significantly contributing to the plantation economy since its inception. However, they have endured consistently vulnerable and degrading conditions, suffering from hardships that date back to the colonial era and continuing under elite Indian planters. The pervasive belief that women are inherently less capable than men is a longstanding issue; this notion has facilitated the exploitation of women across various contexts throughout history. Furthermore, the legal frameworks of many religious traditions have often marginalized women's roles, further entrenching their subjugation. This article examines the persistent hierarchy and division of labour in the tea gardens of West Bengal, where women experience exploitation in multiple spheres, both in terms of labour and sexual harassment, all rooted in an entrenched patriarchal structure It argues how patriarchal hegemony has historically been used to exploit female workers, particularly during the colonial era when planters relied on this system to create a consistent labour force while keeping wages low. It highlights that women have often been regarded as secondary within this patriarchal framework, leading to ongoing inequalities. The remnants of this exploitation continue to be evident in the tea gardens, where the same patriarchal structures persistently undermine women's status and devalue their labour.

Keywords: Women, Gender, Labour, Feminization, Patriarchy, Plantation.

Introduction

The tea plantation in North Bengal was the first major result of the British colonial government's cash crop experiment in the Darjeeling hills. The Plantation in the Darjeeling hills started in the 1850s, and it was commercially established by the year 1856. The clearing of the vast forests for tea cultivation was justified as a process of development by the colonial planters. (Bhattacharya, 2018). The colonial tea plantation was a result of their dominant nature, which was not ready to accept the Chinese monopoly of the tea trade, as the British despised the Qing state due to its restrictive trade policies (Sharma, 2009). The colonial planters were encouraged by the probable profits in tea commercialization, which led them to expand the production area. The tea plantations had appeared in the Terai by 1862 and had appeared in the Dooars region by 1876. The colonial plantation institutionalized the recruiting process on the basis of agents like the *Sardars,* who worked as agents, encouraging the labourers to migrate to the tea gardens in the hope of a better future and economic emancipation. The labourers were lured by the alluring education services and medical facilities, which was been advertised by the colonial plantation (Sarkar, 2020). The recruitment system in Darjeeling was a free flow of labour, while in the Dooars, the labour shortage called

for inter-state immigration from the far-flung areas of central India. It was unlike the indentured system, which prevailed in the tea plantation of Assam, but that did not mean it was free from coercion, and neither does it conclude that the living conditions of labourers were better, in fact, they were taken as captives in the gardens who were long bound to the place with little feasibility and option to exit. (Gupta, 1985). The colonial tea plantations were run on various measures that supplemented them with a cheap flow of labour, such as the sexual division of labour where the plantation management significantly put women in the job of plucking tea leaves, which was often justified in a way that the women had gentle touch and nimble fingers perfectly suited for the task. While men dominated higher positional jobs, such as managers or the machinery work, which didn't require plucking tea leaves. The sexual division of labour created an unequal work sphere where women were denied admission into jobs that were considered specifically for the men (Daura & Mallick, 2019). It was the cost-effective labour of women that led them to be recruited in the tea plantations on a large scale, also the tea industry might have developed around the areas where the female workforce was traditionally low and the areas that were in major crisis and deprived of basic requirements. Such as the Adivasis from Bengal or Santhal Parganas in the case of Dooars and the *Kirantis*[1] from Eastern Nepal in the case of the Darjeeling hills (Dutta, 2015). The Colonial plantation of the Darjeeling hills lured a great number of labourers, such as the Rais, Limbus, and other tribal peoples, who migrated with hopes of economic emancipation and hopes of prosperity contributed to the labour force. (Besky, 2007). The early tea plantation in the Darjeeling hills suffered from low labour, and thus the colonial planters brought in the tribes from the Santhal parganas and central India to fulfil the labour needs, which was justified on terms that they shared the same elevated landscape as Darjeeling. (Lama, 2009). The labourers who migrated into the tea gardens of Darjeeling were termed as coolie, they were previously agrarian peasants who had lost their lands (Subba, 2020). During the early establishment of tea plantations in the Darjeeling hills, the Santhals and Adivasis from the Chotanagpur area were brought in as labour and were forced to work, which partly resulted in the eruption of the Santhal rebellion (Lama, 2009). The colonial planters employed coercive methods used extra-legal threats, to tame the plantation workers, such as prison confinements, verbal abuses, and sexual threats like rape and assault of the women labourers. The women labourers in the plantations were subjected to sexual exploitation by the garden managers and the natives; such areas were often overlooked by the colonial historians (Dutta, 2015). The Adivasi tribal women were accused of witchcraft and would be attacked in case of any unusual or bad happenings in the tea gardens, which suggests that the social position of the women was devastating (Daura & Mallick, 2019). The Colonial plantations used various techniques to maintain a flow of cheap labour, while reinforcing inferior beliefs among workers to avoid any form of resistance. Consequently, the plantation management, maintained discipline and peace in the gardens through the oversight of bodies such as the North Bengal rifles. The planters divided the labourers based on patriarchy, caste distinctions, and patronage, which referred to women as being categorically inferior to the men. The colonial plantations justified the patriarchal dominance to ensure cheap labour, which granted males a sense of ownership and control over the women. The tea plantations are evident to justify that merely employment cannot provide women economic emancipation, as other areas, such as the colonial structure, the socio-economic factors, religious-cultural factors, and patriarchal values, have historically dominated the lives of women. Despite working alongside men, women were never paid credibility for their labour. The

[1] Kirantis are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group predominantly found in the Eastern Himalayas, including parts of Nepal and North-East India, particularly in Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills.

historical narrative of tea plantations often overlooks the different experiences of men and women, which leads to generalization, hence the women and labour should be studied differently.

The labour migration and the Recruitment process in the Tea plantations of North Bengal

Karl Marx explains how capitalism displaces individuals from their native land, further making them fit as per the requirements of the capitalist system (Harris, 2004). Bates discusses the restricted free labour market under a capitalistic structure and argues that the long-distance migration should not be studied as a voluntary choice alone, but rather as a reaction to a capitalist development. (Bates, 2000). By the early 1850s, Dr. Archibald Campbell had already achieved success with an experimental tea plantation. By the year 1856, the tea industry in the Darjeeling hills started as a commercial enterprise with the opening of Tea gardens, such as Aloobari, opened by the Kurseong and Darjeeling tea company, and the Lebong spur by the Darjeeling mortgage bank (O' Malley, 1907). The tea plantation in the Darjeeling hills most likely did not face the critical labour issue, as the migration of Nepali people from eastern Nepal fulfilled the labour need. With the rapid growth of tea plantation over the hills, the colonial planters decided to expand the plantation in the plains, thus the plantation was introduced in the Terai by 1862 and further in the Dooars region by the 1870s, after the region was annexed by the British authority from Bhutan in 1865. The development of tea gardens required mass labour, as locals were unready to work under harsh conditions for low wages, which led British planters to seek out an alternative for a cheap flow of labour. Hence the planters, with the help of the recruiting agents, acquired a large number of migrant labourers, primarily involving the Scheduled Tribes and the Scheduled Castes. The migration was comprised of tribals, including the Oraon, Munda, Kharia, and Santhal, as well as non-tribal communities, such as the Mahali, Chik Baraik, Ghasi, and Turi (Mandal, 2023).

The labour in the plantations of Assam, Dooars, and the Terai regions was recruited from the Chotanagpur region of the present Jharkhand state, tribal belts of Orissa, and the present Chhattisgarh state, where the tribals were already in a degrading condition due to the frequent famines, poverty, and land revenues imposed by the colonial authority (Bhowmik, 2011).

The colonial planters implemented, the family-based system of recruitment, which required the labourers to bring their families along to the plantation. The idea constructed upon the system of recruiting was that the labourers would be distanced from their native lands, and while they were already with their family, it would make them less likely to return home. This colonial strategy acquired a mass of cheap labour force, as it also meant women and children would be an additional labour force. *Sardars* or *Arkatis*, who were loyal colonial agents, served as major agents in recruiting the labourers. Primarily, the British government encouraged the British planters and private companies to invest in the commercial venture of tea production. Hence, the initial colonial plantation was marked by freehold ownership, which meant that the planters could buy or take the tea estates on a lease (Pradhan, 2021). The *Arkatis* were professional recruiters who were popular among the labourers for their cruel and deceptive tactics to lure the workers into plantation contracts. The *Sardari* system has been in place since the early days of plantation in the Darjeeling hills. The recruitment process of the Tea plantation in North Bengal saw both types of recruiters, *Sardars,* were typically former garden workers who recruited labourers through family connections or kinship ties, and functioned as intermediaries between the workers and the planters. The family-based recruitment, aimed at recruiting women on a large scale, who were considered a source of cost-effective labour, who could be paid less, and were viewed as less capable than their male counterparts (De, 2015).

Division of Labour under the Colonial Management

The Plantation all over the world is primarily linked with the colonial institution, where the locals who are non-European have been subjected to economic and sexual exploitation. The tea plantations have historically employed a large number of women labourers, encouraged by economic benefits to the early colonial planters. Despite securing a large labour force in the tea gardens, women are devalued for their labour as the tea plantations created a division of labour. (Bhadra, 2004). Piya Chatterjee discusses the feminization of labour and commodity, which is often created out of patronage. The *Maai-Baap* sentiment, where the planters are viewed as authoritative figures with a paternalistic role. The notion was encouraged into legitimation by the colonial planters and continued to operate in the post-colonial period. Women form the base in this plantation setting, fueling the institution, while the highest sphere of the hierarchy is dominated by male planters (Chatterjee, 2001). Sexual division of labour was prevalent in the plantations, where the authority demanded that the women workers pluck tea leaves. It was constructed on the idea that women had a gentle touch and nimble fingers, making them best suited for the task. The sexual division of labour often creates an unequal work sphere that restricts women from engaging in better jobs. The division of work spheres is often influenced by the entrenched patriarchal norms, which have ever devalued women's contributions and denied them recognition for their labour and dedication. (Daura & Mallick, 2019). The gardens of the Darjeeling hills, located on challenging terrain, required a larger number of workers, as a small part of the area would take more time, and the women were the primary workers. The larger workforce does not guarantee more productivity, instead, it reflects feminized labour that tends to keep the wages low, considering women as substitutes for male labour (Gurung & Mukherjee, 2018). The colonial plantation demanded a strict routine, the workers would often be required to return home if they arrived late for their attendance (De, 2015). The hardship and labour of women were not limited to the plantation but even reached their houses, bearing extra household responsibilities, such as gathering firewood, fetching water, cooking for their families, caring for children, cleaning, and waking early to the garden's warning bell, which has historically gone without recognition or compensation. (Banerjee, 2024). Additionally, they would face physical violence and abuse if their husbands struggled with alcoholism. Women were not safe in the plantations, where they were vulnerable to sexual exploitation that often came from the managers or the high-positioned men. Women in plantations were subjected to a greater number of exploitations as there was no legal protection available to them.

In tea plantations, the role of women is primarily focused on tasks such as plucking, pruning, transplanting, and weeding. The women have not been appointed to managerial roles, clerical positions, or supervisor positions, and have never received promotions. The task of plucking, which is both crucial and labour-intensive, is given to the women while the overseer is generally a male known as the *Daffadar.* Additionally, the *Boidar* is someone who manages the attendance record, working alongside the *Daffadar*; both the *Daffada*r and the *Boidar*, being male, hold authoritative positions within the plantation. The *Sardars* further supervise groups of 20-25 labourers, who ensure the smooth flow of work (Bhadra, 2004). The colonial system of management was exploitative in nature, where discipline was maintained by systems like the *Hatta bahira* system[2]. The colonial planters employed the North Bengal Rifles in the plantations to maintain discipline and fear among the labourers (De, 2015). The labourers in these plantations were not indentured; however, the labourers were bound to the gardens as they could not leave

[2] *Hatta bahira* system was a mechanism to penalize the labourers by exiling his/her whole family from the plantation over some misconduct.

the plantations of their own will. The planters used force to bind the workers to the garden, often leading to harsh punishments for absconders and deserters (Bhowmik, 2011). The women labourers in the plantations have historically suffered from unequal division of labour, sexual exploitation, patriarchal domination, and social hierarchies. The tea plantations of North Bengal were not exceptional in this case.

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