

The Tears of the ‘Green- Gold’: Tea Estates and its Women Population

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Tea plays a significant role in the Indian economy as being a major export-oriented cash crop. The Northeastern Indian state of Assam is the largest producer of black tea in the world. The domestic market for tea in India has increased by 19% in between 1997 to 2010. The importance of tea lies not just in its economic value but also in its ability to provide employment to millions of workforces in rural and remote areas. Here, it should be noted that even though the tea plantations employ hundreds of thousands of workforces, this sector is at the lowest rung of organized sector with very little effective bargaining power.

However, what remains unseen is the silent cry of the womenfolk engaged in the tea production. A number of studies have suggested that women who form more than half of the labour force are facing a dire situation with increasing violence and sex trafficking which has become rampant in tea growing areas. A large number of the women and children of the gardens have been pulled by promises of regular income to work as domestic workers in the metropolitan cities. Many of these migrant workers fall prey to human trafficking, whether for the sex trade or domestic work where they are made to work as virtual house slaves by domestic service agencies. Another area to be concerned of is the high maternal mortality rate in the gardens. The present paper based on extensive fieldwork and interviews throws light on the issue of falling working condition for woman workers in the tea-gardens which have made them vulnerable to kidnapping, trafficking and ultimately disappearance without any trace.

Keywords: Tea- Garden, Trafficking, Women.

I. Introduction

Participation of women in the tea industry has remained significantly high along with other plantation crops such as coffee and rubber. However, the nature of women’s employment within such plantation crops needs serious assessment in the light of current concerns on declining female work participation rate (Abraham 2013). Through various literature, employment of women and children in particular to work in plantations as family labour is historically evident (Bhadra 1992; Chatterjee 2003; Das 1931; Das Gupta 1999; Raman 1992 cited in Rasaily 2014). With the system of family employment, both women and children were engaged in tea picking, weeding and clearing and so on in the plantations. Plantation societies are also defined by an extension of the patriarchal norms and social conditions.

II. Objective and Significance

The present paper in this context seeks to understand the implications to women’s labour in such situation wherein the forces of production and patriarchal norms and social conditions interplay in their everyday life. It arises several questions. How such extensions

infiltrate into women's capacity to negotiate their labour power? To see the conditions of women who have attempted to venture out of their world of tea plantations. The study highlights the pathetic conditions of women workers in the tea gardens of Assam be it trafficking or health conditions.

The tea industry in India is one of the oldest industries and among the largest employers in the organised sector. Over 12 lakh permanent and almost the same number of casual and seasonal workers are employed in the industry. Over 50%, and in some operations, like tea plucking, over 80% of these, are women (Gothoskar, 2012). A majority of the workers are adivasi and dalit women. This is the most disadvantaged section – socially, politically and economically. The tea industry has the almost unique distinction of having managed to reproduce this disadvantaged position generation after generation and of having succeeded in perpetuating a downward spiral. India is the world's second largest tea producer, exporter and consumer. Till very recently, India was the largest producer, exporter and consumer of tea.

III. Analysis and Findings

Women's labour is central to the economies of production; more so in the case of production of plantations commodities such as tea and coffee. Employment of women in plantations historically was sought by the planters in order to "contain the male labour force" and to "ensure a steady reproduction of 'cheap' labour" as recruitment costs were expensive. Quite plausibly, planters saw women adapting well to the plantations' most tedious and prolonged labour of tea picking (Chatterjee 2003). The men workers also pluck tea leaves but it is generally found that the quantity and quality of tea leaves are not as high as that of female pluckers (Bhadra 1992). As Engels (1993) notes the strategy of setting up of 'family units' of single men and women; conducting 'depot marriages' were some of the coercive measures for recruiting men and women that enabled the production and reproduction of labour in the plantations. Thus, one of the important features of tea industry in India is the proportionately higher level of female employment in cultivation and production. Engagement of women's labour is higher in tea plantations because of their gendered-attributes to the task of picking tea leaves in particular and for maintaining a steady social reproduction of labour.

The most dangerous fallout of poverty, discrimination and the non-caring attitude of the state/public towards this community is that of trafficking of women both within the north eastern states and elsewhere in India. Trafficking of women and children basically involves their exploitation for financial gains. This is a serious violation of fundamental human rights. Trafficking, however, is complicated by its link to migration. Research shows that most of the women who are trafficked have a strong desire to migrate because there is abuse in the home, by men of the community or because of dire poverty. One of the main causes of mental and physical trauma in women living in the labour lines is that of the practice of gambling and drinking. All household goods are mortgaged by the men because of loans taken for purchasing the local drink or because of losing a game of cards. This has led to sheer helplessness of women in running their household or preventing their own children from picking up similar habits of their fathers.

Most of the trafficked girls and children, among Adivasis are from the tea areas of Udalguri, Sonitpur, Bongaigaon and many other *Char* (or river bed) areas of lower Assam. In

general, victims are lured either by kidnapping or offered prospects of better income/better life and then forced to work in establishments, (invariably against their wishes). There are arguments which state that countering trafficking by preventing women's migration is to lock them into domestic systems of oppression. We are also told that parents of a girl may want to give their child away for work because there is no other option for the girls to earn in their area. Measures taken to prevent women from migrating such as requiring permission of male members of the family or government sanction may actually compound the problem, which needs discussion and debate.

The UK based newspaper 'The Guardian' narrated a number of stories of trafficked girls which brought to light the dark side of the green gold called tea industry. One of the stories is about a young girl of 14 years old, Elaina Kujar. When the trafficker came knocking on the door of Elaina Kujar's hut on a tea plantation at the North-eastern end of Assam, she had just got back from school. Elaina wanted to be a nurse. Instead, she was about to lose four years of her life as a child slave. She recalled a horrific tale of child slavery. Her owner would sit next to her watching porn in the living room of his Delhi house, while she waited to sleep on the floor. She used to be molested by him almost every day. Elaina was in that Delhi house for one reason: her parents, who picked the world-famous Assam tea on an estate in Lakhimpur district, were paid so little they could not afford to keep her.

There are thousands like her, taken to Delhi from the tea plantations in the north-east Indian state by a trafficker, sold to an agent for as little as Rs. 2000, sold on again to an employer for up to Rs. 5000, then kept as slaves, raped, abused. It is a 21st-century slave trade. There are thought to be 100,000 girls as young as 12 under lock and key in Delhi alone: others are sold on to the Middle East and some are even thought to have reached the UK. But there is a price for keeping wages so low, and it is paid by the workers who cannot afford to keep their daughters. When the traffickers come knocking, offering to take the girls away, promising good wages and an exciting new life, they find it hard to say no. The trafficker had promised excitement and glamour but instead they get abused and mistreated. Many of them are kept as sex slaves and prisoners.

Another story reported was of Rabina Khatun, now 18. She discovered that she had been sold into slavery when she agreed to go to Delhi to work as a maid. A woman from the village had tempted her with the promise of 3,000 rupees a month. "She said, 'Come and see Delhi. It is bigger than your village'," she says. She was 14: it was two years before she was allowed to go home. When she complained she had not been paid, she was sold on again to three men as a plaything. "I was taken to a house and they locked me in. Then they raped me. Afterwards they took me to Old Delhi station and left me there with no money. I was physically and mentally ill from what had happened to me. I want the men to be punished. I am never going to Delhi again. I am very angry. I want to kill them."

Indian government figures show 126,321 trafficked children were rescued from domestic service in 2011-12, a year-on-year increase of nearly 27%. But many anguished parents have no idea what has happened to their daughters. According to India's National Crime Record Bureau, a child goes missing in India every eight minutes, and more than a third are never found. For the parents of the missing, the pain is hard to bear.

The newspaper also reported about the traffickers. Most of the traffickers are members of the same village. They argue that they are victims too. Shobaha Tirki, 50, worked

in the tea gardens for years, rarely earning more than 2000 rupees a month. One day he met a big trafficker who promised him good money if he would send girls from the village to his placement agency. He said that he took around 20 girls from his garden to placement agencies in Delhi. A lot of them came back but five or six did not. He admitted getting 10,000 rupees per girl. It is not hard to convince them to go with him, he says. "I tell them about Delhi and how it is good to go to a big city," he says. "I tell them they will have a room of their own and a bathroom of their own."

The girls who come back and have been cheated of their wages head straight for his house, he says. He tells them to talk to the agency. "They never get their money though," he says.

An interesting fact is that many of the traffickers are women, who find it easier to convince the girls to go with them. Kusma Tikri, 27, gets 4,000 rupees for every girl. She says she needs the money. "This is my job. I know the Delhi placement agencies are bad but I am caught between the placement agencies and poverty."

Another dismal picture of neglect of tea garden women is seen in the health sector. There is a complete absence of welfare state when it comes to the health and hygiene of the workers in general and women workers in general. Here, are few stories from the field which highlights the dismal and pathetic conditions in the tea gardens.

Pinky Munda, 25, is eight months pregnant with her second child. Her husband is a laborer. Six days a week, Assam's tea workers – more than 50 percent of whom are women – have to collect at least 22kg of tea leaves to earn 140-160 rupees for a day's work, well below the 350 rupees minimum daily wage for unskilled labor in the region. Most plantations have no toilets, no drinking water and no running water. Workers are forced to defecate in the tea bushes and have no way to wash their hands before they go back to picking. The world's thirst for Assam tea has also earned the region a far more dismal reputation. Almost a fifth of the state's population of about 32 million is estimated to be living on tea estates, and most of them are in Upper Assam, the region with the worst maternal mortality ratio in the county. According to the latest national health survey, Upper Assam records 404 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births – more than double the national average. Health experts say the high maternal mortality rate among tea garden workers is due to a combination of poverty, malnourishment, and a lack of basic sanitation and healthcare facilities.

At home, Pinky Munda and her family often drink salted black tea, a vestige of the British colonial era. Colonizers in the 19th century would give laborers salted black tea to help replace the essential salts lost through dehydration. But as each generation born on the plantations produces the next batch of laborers, drinking salted tea has become an everyday habit, even for family members who don't work in the fields.

Most of the hospital, with its bare-bones facilities, has not had a doctor for the past year. A pharmacist prescribes medicines; nurses deliver the babies. Five to six babies are born at the hospital each month. The nurse commented that "We look at the ultrasound results and if a pregnancy seems complicated, we take that woman to Civil Hospital, Golaghat or Assam Medical College, Jorhat for delivery, the tea garden women come to the hospital at the last minute of delivery." The doctor at the civil hospital of Golaghat district, said. "They come with severe anemia, high blood pressure, respiratory and abdominal infections." The senior assistant manager at Sorkeiting Tea Garden, acknowledges the estate is falling short on

hygiene and medical facilities, but says his company is doing all it can. “The hospital here is not good. But all other tea garden hospitals have similar facilities,” he said.

Assam enjoys a humid subtropical climate and therefore the tea-plucking season is best during May to October. The plucking is more productive during the second flush of the monsoon that sweeps the state during the month of July to October where the quality of the leaf is at its prime. This whole stretch of around 5 months is when the women workers work the hardest. The Plantation Labour Act of 1951(PLA), regulates the wages of the ‘permanent’ tea workers, duty hours and maintain their authority on the management, who then have to provide the basic amenities of healthcare, education, drinking water, housing, child care facilities, maternal care and accident cover. But such basic needs are not adequately provided. Not surprisingly, the major tea growing areas have shocking MMR figure of 436, much higher than the state average of 347 and 2.4 times the national average. Their dependence on the industry leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. “If we become educated, ultimately we can fight our own battle and this is what the estates don’t want” said Jhumli, one of young tea workers in a Dibrugarh-based tea estate. Child marriage, nonexistent maternal healthcare, poor diet is some of the crucial reasons for the situation. According to UNICEF, consumption of tobacco-based substance and alcohol is higher among tea workers. In general, tea women workers put the tobacco under their lower lips and continue to work as the substance helps them to go for hours without food. Alcohol and salt lead to complication in pregnancy often characterized by high blood pressure and organ damage, in medical terms, it is referred as eclampsia, one of the main reasons for high maternal mortality rate across the world. Due to unavailability of any nearby hospitals and healthcare facilities, patients often bleed to death, a risk known to the world as Postpartum hemorrhage (PPH). PPH accounts for 28% of maternal death in the developing countries.

Measures regarding effective controlling of MMR and IMR figures require a proper diagnosis of health issues, meticulous planning and proper implementation of schemes. It is obligatory to mention here that the Plantation Labour Act 1951 only covers the permanent workers and not the casual workers which has a strength of almost 5,00,000. The next step is to address the severe health issues related to working in the tea gardens. Anaemic, hypertension, substandard food habits are some of the critical issues that need an eye to look at. Almost 87%-90% of young workers working in the tea gardens are anaemic. Anaemic conditions are caused by nutritional deficiency or low iron storage resulting from a previous pregnancy and heavy menstrual blood loss. Tea workers common diet includes mostly rice, dry fish pickle, and chillies. A recent study has found out that they consume around four times more salt than others which has contributed to the rise of pressure strokes and hypertension. Lastly, active male participation is required especially in programmes like Village Health Nutrition Day (VHND) where issues of general healthcare, nutrition, and reproductive health are discussed.

IV. Conclusion

The above-mentioned narratives and stories have shown us how the women of the tea gardens suffer from neglect of the state and exploitation from the society in general. Their world both within and outside is conditioned by factors which are beyond their control. They are ‘doubly marginalised’. Firstly, as a woman and secondly as a woman of a community who are seen as

merely a commodity of production. Even after more than a century of servitude and more than half a century of freedom there has been little change in their life. Poverty and absence of minimum basic facilities drive them out of their traditional work in search of freedom. But most of them end in another extreme form of servitude and suffering.

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