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**Locating the Historical
Past of the Women Tea
Workers of North Bengal**

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LOCATING THE HISTORICAL PAST OF THE WOMEN TEA WORKERS OF NORTH BENGAL

Priyanka Dutta*

Abstract

Since the inception of tea industry in North Bengal during the colonial period, women have had an overwhelming presence in this industry in comparison to their overall work participation rates in the state. But their lives and experiences have not received adequate attention in the Indian plantation labour historiography. Using various conventional and non-conventional sources of data, this paper makes an attempt to trace the historical past of the women tea plantation workers of North Bengal, taking into account the hitherto neglected aspects of gendered nature of labour recruitment, migration, labour control practices and so on, through the intermeshing of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality of the actors involved in the process. The paper concludes that some of the convincing reasons behind the marginalisation of women workforce in the tea industry of North Bengal during contemporary times have their roots in the various systems and practices of the colonial past.

Introduction

Women's labour force participation in the tea plantation industry of North Bengal¹ has a very long history. Barring a brief interruption of a few years during the Second World War and the depression years of the 1930s, *Adivasis*² and Nepali women have all along formed the majority of the workforce almost since the inception of this industry in this region during the middle of the nineteenth century (Bose, 1993; Sen, 1999; Labour Bureau, 2008-2009). Even in the present times, this trend of a high rate of employment of women has continued in Bengal's tea industry (Engels, 1993; Census of India, 1901-31; Banerjee, 1989; Rasaily, 2013). This is in sharp contrast to the state as a whole, where women's overall workforce participation rate has been strikingly low, not only in comparison to their female counterparts in the tea industry but also in comparison to their workforce participation rate at the all-India level, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods (Banerjee, 1989; Bhadra, 1992; Mukherjee, 1995; Engels, 1996).

However, the plantation labour historiography in India all through has almost ignored the specificities underlying the experiences of women tea workers in the process of their becoming the majority of the labouring class in North Bengal's tea industry (Jain & Reddock, 1998; Sen, 2004). All these merit an in-depth examination of when, why and how women started becoming a significant part of the *coolie*³ labour force in the tea plantations of North Bengal. Tracing this historical trajectory of their labour force participation since the years of its establishment during the colonial period also

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¹ At present, the tea industry in North Bengal is primarily located in Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts.

² *Adivasis* are the indigenous communities on the lower rungs of the caste system or who do not participate in it.

³ *Coolie* in the colonial parlance refers to manual labourers.

becomes very pertinent as it helps us to know whether their ‘unique’ historical past holds any relevance to their everyday lives and experiences. Hence, in this paper, using various conventional and non-conventional sources of data, an attempt is made to trace the historical past of the women tea plantation workers of North Bengal, taking into account the hitherto neglected aspects of gendered nature of labour recruitment, migration, labour control practices and so on, through the intermeshing of race, class, ethnicity and sexuality of the actors involved in the process.

This paper makes use of a variety of secondary sources of data in order to trace this historical trajectory of women's labour force participation in the tea industry of North Bengal. Various archival sources of information, like old census documents, reports of various government committees and commissions, planters' associations, newspaper reports etc. have been used for this purpose. For bringing out the subjective experiences of women tea workers, which have been repeatedly ignored in the mainstream literature on plantation labour, vernacular songs and poetries reflecting women workers' experiences, have been additionally used as an important source of information.

Women's Workforce Participation in Colonial Bengal: Discernible Trends and Issues

In this section, the broad contours of women's position in the working force in colonial Bengal is discussed, as an overview of the trends will provide a better context for understanding their work in the tea plantations as well as justify the need to study the trajectory of their workforce participation in this industry. From a brief review of old census reports and a few scholarly works (*Borthwick, 1984; Banerjee, 1989; Mukherjee, 1995; Engels, 1996; Old Census Reports of 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921 & 1931; Mukhopadhyay, 2005*) that exist on women' work in colonial Bengal, following are some of the important issues that emerge:

First, a gender-disaggregated data on workforce participation rates in colonial Bengal brings out disparities in the levels of work participation of men and women in terms of the total size of workforce, sex ratio and worker population ratio –all skewed heavily in favour of male workers, as Table 1 clearly brings out.

Table 1: Male and Female Working Force in Bengal, 1881-1931

Year	Workers in' 000		Workforce as % of population		Sex ratio of workers (females per 1000 males)
	F	M	F	M	
1881	1827	11172	10.1	61.4	163.5=164
1901	1697	12793	8.2 (31.7)	59.5 (61.9)	138
1911	1947	13972	8.8 (33.7)	57.8 (61.9)	152
1921	2058	14063	9.1 (32.7)	58.2 (60.5)	155
1931	1792	12398	7.4 (27.6)	47.6 (58.3)	156

Note: Figures in brackets refer to All-India percentage share

Source: Mukherjee, 1995, p. 240.

Second, another trend which is evident from Table 1 is that from the end of the nineteenth century, a decline in the size of the female workforce can be witnessed compared to their male counterparts during the same period.

Third, historically Bengal has one of the lowest rates of female workforce participation during the colonial period compared to other provinces of British India, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Trends in Female Workforce Participation Rates in India, 1911-1931
(Figures in Percent)

(1)	1911	1921	1931
	(2)	(3)	(4)
Andhra Pradesh	41.6	37.5	30.3
Assam	39.0	37.5	35.5
Bihar	34.7	35.9	26.1
Gujarat	30.0	24.1	28.6
Kerala	28.0	24.1	38.4
Madhya Pradesh	47.9	46.8	37.5
Madras	36.5	29.2	23.1
Maharashtra	39.8	37.0	30.3
Orissa	30.4	33.2	30.0
Rajasthan	45.4	46.2	38.3
Uttar Pradesh	33.3	37.3	29.8
West Bengal	18.8	17.4	13.2
India	33.9	32.8	28.4

Source: Mukherjee, 1995, p. 241.

Fourth, employment of women in colonial Bengal was primarily confined to low caste and *adivasi* women, who actively participated in various traditional economic activities like manual rice husking, fish trading, dairy farming, etc. and for a limited time period in the two modern industries, namely jute and coal, and throughout since its inception in the tea industry.

Even though the reasons for women's low work participation in colonial Bengal are hard to trace with precision because of lack of detailed and systematic information on women workers and is also beyond the purview of this paper, feminist scholars (*Sarkar, 1989; Banerjee, 1989; Mukherjee, 1995; Engels, 1996; Forbes, 1996; Sen, 1999*) have unanimously agreed that deep-rooted Bengali cultural values of hostility towards independent working women, the dominant patriarchal ideology of the state, lack of concern on the issues of women's work by the nationalist movement, trade unions and women's organisations, combined with the relative wealth and prosperity of the province acted as hindrances towards the growth of a female labour force in colonial Bengal. Hence, it would be interesting to find out how in the colonial Bengali society, which was still not prepared to accept women working in the public sphere, women became the majority of the workforce in the tea industry of North Bengal.

Against this backdrop, we would now explore the general trends of women's work in the tea industry in order to bring out the importance and conspicuousness of women's workforce participation in this industry mainly in colonial Bengal, and to some extent in post-colonial Bengal. Women's workforce participation in the tea industry in North Bengal has been an exception to the above-mentioned discernible trends in the following ways:

First, even though the workforce participation rates of women as a whole has been quiet low in colonial Bengal all along, both in comparison to their male counterparts in the province as well as in comparison to the working women of other Indian provinces in the colonial period, a very large proportion of women were employed in the tea estates of North Bengal since the years of its establishment in the colonial period as Table 3 clearly shows. Moreover, Table 3 also brings out that all through the number of women employed in tea industry has been significantly more compared to other two major modern industries of colonial Bengal, namely, jute and coal.

Table 3: Employment in Registered Factory Industries in Bengal, 1901-1931
(figures in thousands)

Year	Coal Industry			Jute Industry			Tea Plantations			All registered industries		
	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Total</i>
1901	11	12	23	87	36	123	83	76	159			n.a
1911	27	11	38	178	37	215	98	94	192	454	163	617
1921	34	13	47	335	48	383	88	102	190	578	179	757
1931	24	9	33	229	32	261	174	288	462			n.a.

Source: Banerjee, N. 1989, p.275.

Second, even though women's share in the total employment of jute and coal industries started declining from 1931 onwards, their share in tea plantations remained assured, as can be seen from Table 3. Apart from a brief interruption during the Second World War and the depression of the 1930s, women in the tea industry have retained their share (about half to start with) till the present day, as Tables 3 and 4 show.

**Table 4: Trends of Male and Female employment in Tea Plantations of West Bengal⁴,
1950-2000**

Year	Male	Female	Adolescent	Children	Total
1950	-	-	-	-	948598 (100)
1961	399907 (49)	368464 (45.15)	25677 (3.15)	22012 (2.70)	816060 (100)
1970	342871 (46.36)	337364 (45.61)	23098 (3.12)	36313 (4.91)	739646 (100)
1980	372285 (43.97)	384641 (45.43)	31351 (3.70)	58382 (6.90)	846659 (100)
1990	453001 (45.91)	458519 (46.47)	24148 (2.44)	51113 (5.18)	986781 (100)
2000	570267 (47.13)	593571 (49.05)	46217 (3.82)	-	1210055 (100)

Sources: Author's own compilation from various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India & Statistical Profile on Women Labour, Labour Bureau

- Note:**
- The category of 'children' and 'adolescent' labourers also include girls, but there is no gender disaggregated data available for these two categories.
 - For 1950, data on labour employed is not available by the given categories.
 - The employment of children below the age of 14 years has been prohibited in the tea industry under the Child Labour (Abolition & Regulation) Act of 1986. However, till 1990 the figures show the prevalence of child labour.

In the post independence period too female work participation in the tea plantation sector in North Bengal has followed the same trend as in the colonial period by retaining their higher share in the average number of labour employed in comparison to the male workers for across several decades, as revealed from Table 4. Moreover, it is interesting to note that women's employment in the tea industry of West Bengal increased by 25.33 per cent from 2004 to 2008, when the average daily employment of workers in this industry in the state witnessed a decadal drop (1998-2008) by 25.14 per cent (*Labour Bureau, 2012:140*). Thus, in a state like West Bengal, where the women's work participation in paid or outside employment has been notably low since the colonial period, the proportion of their employment in the tea industry is comparatively much higher than their participation in other economic activities, as Table 5 clearly brings out.

⁴ This includes combined figures for the women workers in three tea growing regions, namely, *Terai, Dooars* and Darjeeling Hills in the two districts, namely, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.

Table 5: Comparison of FWPR⁵ in Tea Industry in West Bengal, 1961-2001 vis-à-vis FWPR, West Bengal, 1951-2001 (Figures in percentages)

Year	FWPR in Tea Industry	FWPR in West Bengal
1951	-	11.60
1961	45.15	9.40
1971	45.61	-
1981	45.43	-
1991	46.47	11.25
2001	49.05	18.08

Sources: Author's own compilation from various issues of Tea Statistics, Tea Board of India & Census of India

Note: a) Figures of FWPR in Tea Industry for 1951 is not possible to calculate because gender-disaggregated data for that year is not available.

b) FWPR for tea industry is calculated by taking into consideration only the category of 'female' labourers as gender disaggregated data for the 'children' and 'adolescent' categories are not available in the Tea Statistics.

However, in spite of their vast presence in the tea industry of North Bengal since the years of its inception, women tea workers and their experiences have been largely missing from the academic historiography of plantation labour force in India. This brings us to the need to trace the reasons behind this and this can be done by exploring the complexities and nuances of the historiography of women's labour in general in the Indian context.

Gender and Labour Historiography in India:

The Case of Women Tea Workers of North Bengal

Following the major bodies of social theory articulated in the Western scholarship from the eighteenth to early twentieth century, gender as an analytical category has remained largely absent in the scholarship on working class history in India (*Scott, 1986*). This is because following the colonial discourse on labour, working class history in India has been couched mainly in economic terms till the 1960s much to the ignorance of gender issues (*Sarkar, 1997*). As a result, the question of 'work' in colonial India and particularly in Bengal did not become a women's issue even though quite a significant number of women were in the 'paid' workforce (*Forbes, 1996*). This got reflected in women's work in modern sectors, like in factories, mills, mines and plantations as well, where the chroniclers of labour history for a long time have considered women's issues as superfluous and of marginal importance (*Sen, 2008; Srivastava, 2012*). However, this assumption can be questioned in case of tea plantations of North Bengal as women nearly equaled or even surpassed men in this industry. Notwithstanding this hard fact, the historiography of plantation labourers in India has tended to ignore the specificities of women's lives and experiences (*Sen, 2004*).

⁵ FWPR denotes Female Workforce Participation Rate

From 1970s when the scholars of labour history in India, under the influence of E.P. Thompson, started focusing on the comprehensive social and cultural history of the working class in India, gender went on to remain a marginalised category in their analysis (*Sarkar, 1997; Sen, 1999; Joshi, 2003; Srivasatva, 2012*). Except a few pioneering studies, gender and other issues concerning the lives of women working class were not subjects of serious enquiry⁶. Following Thompson, who was criticised by the feminist scholars for remaining virtually silent on gender issues, the cutting edge research on labour in India, like the works of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar and the subaltern school, have neglected the gendered nature of industrial work and working classes (*Sarkar, 1997*). The subaltern theorists have failed to take women into adequate account for a long time, though they have been the largest, ubiquitous and most obvious 'subaltern' group of all (*Haynes & Prakash, 1989*). It is not only in the historical investigations on labour, relatively little attention has been paid to the issues of women's work in colonial period by the scholars of women's studies (*Sen, 2008*). This has only compounded the neglect on gender and labour issues in colonial India. Thus, there arises a need for a separate feminist historiography because of the inability of the various cutting edge research on labour in India to acknowledge the various ways in which gender, like other social markers of class/caste/race, has also marginalised and silenced the 'voices' of working class women (*Poonacha, 2004*).

The plantation labour historiography in India has followed a similar trajectory by sharing some central analytical concerns with other studies located within widely diverse plantation contexts. Like most studies on plantation labour all throughout the world, — be it on the Caribbean islands or on Sumatra— the scholarship on plantations in India have also focused on the questions of race, labour and power. But they have remained silent on the histories of the migrant women in various plantation contexts for a long time. Only recently, compelled by feminist analyses, silenced histories of these women have been moved from the footnotes of historical scholarship into important debates about sexuality, the gendered nature of labour recruitment and migration, labour disciplines and practice, commodity production and labour reproduction, and experiences of coercion that constitute the bedrock of plantation settings (*Reddock 1985; Morrissey, 1989; Chatterjee, 1995; Jain & Reddock, 1998; Sen, 2002; 2004; Chatterjee, Das Gupta & Rath, 2010*).

Apart from this substantial critique of the historiography of women's work in India, there are some methodological critiques as well. Scholars interested on the lives of women labourers in colonial India, including Bengal are confronted with the problem of dearth of reliable and systematic data as whatever little information that is available from the old census documents of British India are vague, sparse, scattered, unconnected to long-term historical trends and largely unanalytical (*Forbes, 1996; Sen, 2008*). Moreover, within the limited scholarship on women's labour that is produced, a noticeable gap is that scholars in their search for colonial women's 'voices' has primarily confined their research to the elite or middle class literate women for the relatively easy availability of information, because these women could leave their own authored traces in the historical records.

⁶ One of the earliest exceptions was Radha Kumar's (1983): "Family and Factory: Women in the Bombay Textile Industry, 1919-1939", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 81-110.

However, even though working class women in India have not documented their own experiences, the elitist discourse of the colonial officials, social activists, medical professionals and publicists, provided a rich variety of information about the lives of 'subaltern women', especially the poor, urban working women. These sources have been judiciously deployed by noted feminist scholars, such as Samita Sen (1999) and Leela Fernandes (1997) to reorient the largely gender-neutral labour history of women's labour in colonial Bengal. This brings us to another noticeable point that the limited historiography of labour and gender tilts heavily in favor of colonial Bengal, to be more precise towards the women working in the jute industry of Bengal (Srivastava, 2012). Thus, missing from this skewed historiography are in-depth scholarly works on the lives of women workers in the tea plantations and mines of colonial Bengal. Hence, in this paper, an attempt is made to bring out the specificities of the experiences of the women tea workers of North Bengal as they became the majority of the workforce in this industry, by using various conventional and unconventional sources of data.

Women and the Beginning of the Tale of 'Two Leaves and a Bud'

Scholars (Ghosh, undated; Sen, 1999) have cited that it is impossible to understand the historical past of women's work in any industry and anywhere in the world without situating it in the specific trajectory of capitalistic development in that location. This holds true in case of the women tea plantation workers of North Bengal as well. Tracing the path of capitalist development of this industry in North Bengal will help to understand why, time and again, throughout the history, the tea planter-capitalists, backed by the colonial state, have shown their preference for women's labour and how they have proved adept at utilising it in accordance with their demand and necessity, resulting in an highly feminised workforce in the tea industry.

The history of tea plantations in India dates back to 1823, when the first indigenous tea bush was discovered in Assam by Major Robert Bruce of the British army (Bhowmik, 1981; Bhadra, 1992; Chaudhury and Varma, 2002). Even though capital was not a problem for the tea industry, from its very beginning as a British imperial enterprise, the 'labour question' in the form of how to settle and control a steady workforce in their remote plantations—to clear jungles, build bungalows, plant tea bushes and meet the increasing demand for tea in the international market—remained an issue of paramount concern (Xaxa, 1985; Chatterjee, 1995; 2001; DBITA, 1979, as cited in Chatterjee, 1995:45; Besky, 2014).

To meet this huge requirement of labour, import of labour became necessary because this industry was confined primarily to a region where the local supply and demand for labour was not always in balance (Banerjee, 1989). This was due to the fact that *Bhumiputras (sons of the soil)* of North Bengal region were reluctant to work in the tea plantations for a number of reasons like the hazardous and arduous nature of tea cultivation, low wages and lack of exposure to wage work since they belonged to agricultural communities etc. In such a situation, as the existing scholarships (Panandikar, 1933; Jose, 1987; Sen, 1999; Dev, 2002) on women's work suggest that the planters would have roped in the local female workforce by reinforcing the notion that women's wages being 'supplementary' to the main earnings of the household and hence they can be paid less. But this did not happen as the local people refused to allow their women to work (as cited in Liu, 2010: 87). One of the

plausible reasons behind this might be that the tea industry developed in a region where traditionally women's workforce participation rates have been quite low (*Banerjee, 1989*). However, it is not always that the planters did not get adequate workforce from the local population. Scholar like Kaushik Ghosh (*1999*) is of the opinion that the labour shortage was more perceived than real, resulting from planters' unwillingness to employ local workers, who demanded not only higher wages but also exercised some day-to-day control over the period and intensity of their labour. In sum, it can be said that the erratic supply of labor, together with their need for a 'docile' labour force, convinced the colonial planters to encourage labour migration into the emerging tea plantations in North Bengal and Assam (*Chatterjee, 1995*).

In order to meet this high demand for labour, the colonial planters in *Dooars* started to recruit from the poverty-stricken and famine-ridden *Adivasi* regions in the neighbouring areas of Bengal, namely the *Santhal Parganas* and *Chotanagpur* Plateau (*Tinker, 1974; Guha, 1977; Jain, 1988*). In case of Darjeeling, the recruitment was done from among the oppressed and marginalised *Kiranti* ethnic groups of eastern Nepal (*Chatterjee, 2001 & Beksy, 2014*).

So far we have discussed as to how and when the migrant *adivasi* and Nepali labourers become the majority workforce in the tea plantations of North Bengal. But we did not distinctly spell out as to why women became part, and then the majority of the tea plantation workforce. In fact, it was in the very formative stage of the tea plantations in North Bengal that the central significance of the female labourers in the work process got articulated and their role become so vital for this industry, especially in North-east India, that it becomes difficult to think of an industry in which women have played so important a part (*Atkins, 1957; Sengupta, 1960; Varma, 2011*).

One can start explaining the indispensability of women in this industry straightaway stating that some of the women who worked in these tea plantations might have come accompanying their husbands or fathers or brothers, unlike what happened in case of other modern enterprises of colonial Bengal, like jute and coal. This is because from the very beginning the planters, both in Darjeeling Hills and *Dooars*, pursued an explicit policy of family system of recruitment and settlement —the organising rubric within which *Adivasi* and Nepali women moved into the plantation hinterlands of North Bengal (*Dasgupta, 1986; Engels, 1996; Sen, 1999*).

Even though women were part of the plantation workforce from the very beginning, their numbers began to increase when the late nineteenth century colonial planters understood that the settlement of whole families guaranteed them a more stable and self-reproducing workforce for their plantations for generations to come and would also relieve them from the very expensive and cumbersome business of recruiting and bringing labourers from outside on a continuing basis (*Chatterjee, 2001; Sen, 2002*). Further, the colonial planters' family recruitment policy was also premised on the belief that the presence of their family members (women and children) in the tea plantations would help to stabilise the male migrants and prevent them from returning to their homelands, as the presence of women and children in a migrant group was considered as an index of their permanency of migration (*Chatterjee, 1995; Sen, 1999*). Moreover, the colonial planters' "family" policy was also motivated by their need to police and control the sexuality of thousands of seemingly unfettered women migrants in the tea plantations under the patriarchal structures of the family

(Chatterjee, 1995; Sen, 1999; 2002). Their preference for family form of settlement was so intense that when a single male or female migrant landed up in the coolie depots en route to the plantations, they, both men and women, were forced into the infamous 'depot marriages' to encourage procreation and thereby to have steady source of labour supply in the tea plantations (Sen, 2004).

Though family recruitment policy of the colonial planters can be considered as a necessary condition to explain women's preponderance in the tea plantations of North Bengal, this cannot be a sufficient condition for a holistic explanation. Thus, it becomes necessary to probe further in order to bring out the other 'implicit' reasons which have resulted in the recruitment of higher number of women in the tea plantation workforce in the context of North Bengal.

Among the 'modern' sector employers of colonial Bengal, the tea planters of North Bengal were the only ones who had a special need and interest for women —for both reproductive and productive purposes (Sen, 1999; Chatterjee, 2001; Sen, 2008). The vitality of the reproductive functions of women in the tea plantations has already been discussed. For productive purposes also, there had been a huge requirement of women labour force by the colonial planters. Thus, even though they were preoccupied with "family" and 'procreation', it did not lead them towards the creation of a group of dependent "domestic" women (Sen, 2008). Their preference for women was based on their strong belief that women's nimble fingers were more efficient at the plucking job compared to men. As a result, work in tea plantations had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains where the crucial labour-intensive, routine and repetitive nature of the task of plucking of tea leaves was said to be quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers of the women and the arduous work of maintenance of the tea plantations and factory work, requiring more physical strength, to be done by men (Bhowmik, 1981, Chatterjee, 2001; Varma, 2005; Sen, 2002).

Another rationale for employing a large number of women in the tea plantations was perhaps to keep wages low, a matter of convenience for the colonial plantation owners. This can be shown from the fact that women were paid less compared to men, for doing the same task all along till the passage of the Equal Remuneration Act of 1975 (Bhowmik, 1981; Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998: 150; Sen, 1999; 2000). There is another reason behind the use of large number of cheap female and child labor in the tea industry. Since labour-saving technology or mechanisation like other modern industries had not developed in this industry even today on account of the reason that tea leaf is best plucked by fingers and mechanical plucking sharply reduces the yield, women have been more employed in this labour-intensive task of plucking of tea leaves and they thus became very vital for the existence of this industry (Jain, 1983).

In case of Darjeeling tea plantations, there is another additional factor which has led to the preponderance of female workforce. During the colonial period, the British deployed the *Gurkha* soldiers, recruited from among the Nepali migrants in Darjeeling, to suppress nationalist movements and also to fight battles for the British Empire across the globe during the World Wars. Because of this, while more and more Nepali men were sent away from Darjeeling, the female Nepali labourers remained on the tea plantations (Besky, 2014). As a result, between 1939 and 1944, the number of women workers compared to male workers increased significantly in the Darjeeling tea plantations, thereby changing the gender makeup of the labour force in favour of women (Dash, 1947).

Apart from these 'pull' factors, there are certain 'push' factors which have also resulted in the preponderance of women in the labour force of tea industry in North Bengal. During this period, the labour catchment areas for the tea estates of north-east India experienced massive migration of labourers, especially that of vulnerable, poor, peasant deserted women labourers, resulting from factors like expansion of opportunities of wage employment in new sites of capitalist production (mainly the North-eastern plantation economies) rural impoverishment in the countryside following from colonial revenue policies, abusive family situations and commercialisation of agriculture and spiraling rent demands.

Thus it can be said that the naturalisation of tea work as women's work and the feminisation of tea labour is an outcome of historical developments in the North Bengal region and the major social and economic processes that took place in the labour catchment areas, entangled with the colonial military and economic projects of the British colonial planters and administrators and that the general relationship between capital and labour, especially women's labour, is remade in specific locations, as found in slightly different relationship between the two prevailing in Darjeeling in comparison with *Dooars*.

Colonial Strategies and Practices of Recruitment of Women Tea Workers

Having got an idea as to why women workforce became essential for the sustenance of tea industry since the time of its inception, we get into the detail of the various labour recruitment strategies and tactics devised by the colonial tea planters to rope in female labourers from the *Adivasi* regions and the consequent implications of these practices on these women.

The special requirement of tea with regard to an abundant supply of cheap and docile labour, capable of doing hard work under severe and difficult conditions, led to the imposition of a particular mode of recruitment, control and authority over tea plantation labour in North Bengal, especially in the *Dooars* (*Bhowmik, 1981; Das Gupta, 1992a; Chatterjee, 2001*). The tea plantation sector, though capitalist, was launched and maintained on the basis of wage labour that was unfree, as from the very beginning not only men, but also women and children were recruited through a system based on coercion. Instead of the market mechanism, force, both overt and concealed, and politico-legal mechanisms became of crucial importance in mobilising plantation labour in North-east India (*Das Gupta, 1992a*).

Even though *Dooars* and Darjeeling faced similar problems like that of Assam in obtaining adequate labourers for its tea plantations, recruitment of labour in *Dooars* and Darjeeling was from the beginning legally 'free' in comparison to the indentured system followed in Assam (*Arbuthnot, 1904:2 as cited in Das Gupta, 1992a: 180; Das Gupta, 1986; Mahato, undated; Rasaily, 2013*). However, other abuses, especially concerning women, had been part of the recruitment arrangement in North Bengal, especially in *Dooars* (*Bhowmik, 1981; Das Gupta, 1992a; 1992b*). An examination of various stories of women's recruitment in the tea plantations of North Bengal, as found from various sources, clearly brings out as to how gender became a primary site on which different and contradictory interests in relation to the labour system came into play.

During the colonial period, an important method of recruiting labour for the tea plantations of North East India was through the *arkatis* or recruiting agents who made regular rounds in the drought-stricken *adivasi* areas of Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur Plateau. The *arkatis* earned a lot of notoriety in the *Adivasi* regions because of their heinous methods of labour recruitment, particularly in case of women. They used every trick known to them, ranging from deceiving the potential recruits by portraying the tea plantations as government enterprise, promoting better marriage prospects for the women to getting them dressed in clothes similar to the government representatives, to recruit the *Adivasis* to the North-east tea plantations (*Bhowmik, 2011:23; Chatterjee & Dasgupta, 1981:1862*). The tea plantations in *Dooars* used similar methods of labour recruitment—*sardars*⁷ or labour headmen were used to recruit labour for the plantations, for a certain amount of commission. Even though the indenture system of labour recruitment through the *arkatis* was not used in case of *Dooars* and Darjeeling, however, like the *arkatis*, the garden *sardars* also used unscrupulous methods and every form of abuse and villainy known to them to recruit workers, including deception, abduction, kidnapping and outright violence, especially in case of women (*Bates, 2000; Chowdhury & Varma, 2002*).

The *arkati* system and to some extent the *sardari* system of labour recruitment to the tea plantations of North-east India became one of the major scandals of the 'free recruitment' system', particularly for the women recruits in the form of numerous cases of their deception and abduction by the *arkatis* and the *sardars*, receiving massive media campaign against it in the nationalist press of Calcutta in the last few decades of the nineteenth century (*Varma, 2005*). Moreover, vernacular literary texts and plays of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also highlighted the highly exploitative labour regimes in the tea plantations of North-east India by inextricably linking the labour and gender questions. As for example, *Kulikahini* (Sketches from Cooly Life), a fictional recreation based on the author's personal experiences, by Ramkumar Vidyaratna (1888) described the ways in which the colonial tea planters instructed their female *arkatis*, *Ramuna* and *Jhamuna*, to lure and recruit peasant *adivasi* women from central India. To quote one of these planters: (*Vidyaratna, 1888:6-7, as cited in Sen, 2008:85*)

"They must say, 'We were in Assam...there was so much comfort there...You too must come with us and you will soon be as prosperous. As it is you are losing weight working day and night at domestic chores without food, without clothes, without a bangle on your arms. To top it all you receive the husband's curses and punches. You women are fools to endure all this".

Moreover, the piece also described how from the peasant families, vulnerable and poor deserted women with dependent daughters and having huge accumulating rent and interest to be paid to the moneylender were recruited by the female *arkatis* following the strategies prescribed by the colonial planters as mentioned above. To quote *Ramuna*, one of the recruiters, 'Men in general are terrible... They die of envy when they hear that you will be able to earn Rs. 5 or 6, that you will be able to live like a queen' (*Vidyaratna, 1888:30, as cited in Sen, 2008:86*). The above account testifies as to how the female *arkatis* augmented women's transition from the traditional familial authority to the new sites of colonial production, where women became vulnerable to heightened labour and sexual

⁷ *Sardar* in the colonial tea plantation enclaves of North Bengal refers to a labour recruiter, who brings labourers from one location to another for work.

exploitation, as discussed later. Similarly, Harilal Bandopadhyay's play *Arkati Natak* (1901) also portrayed the malpractices of the *arkati* system by describing how women who were lured to the tea plantations of North-east India through false promises and mock marriage ceremonies and the tragic consequences that they faced in the plantations in the form of exploitation through hard labour and sexual abuse.

Not only in the vernacular literary works and plays, the problems associated with labour recruitment in the tea plantations of North-east India in the form of exploitation of women also find expression in the indigenous songs of that time period. The *Jhumur* songs, which form an important element of the oral traditions of the labouring communities of the colonial tea plantations in North-east India, sketch their lives in the plantation enclaves by bringing out the perceptions and imaginings of the labourers, including women, regarding the tea gardens of colonial period (*Varma, 2011; Mahato, undated*). The following are some of the examples of such *Jhumur* songs⁸ by the contemporary poet *Dina Tanti*:

*Assam Desher Chah Pat
Pani Boli Bar Mitha
Chal Sakhi Chal Jabo
Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane*

*Assam, the land of tea
Where the water is supposed to be sweet
Friends! Let's go
We will pluck leaves on the gardens with joy*

Again there is another poem

*Chal Mini Assam Jabo
Deshe baro dukh re
Assam deshe re Mini cha-bagaan horiyal
Kodal mara jemon temon
Pata tula kam go
Hai Jaduram
Phanki diye Pathali Assam*

*Mini, let's go to Assam
Our land is full of sorrow*

⁸ The *Jhumur* songs mentioned in this paper have been collected from a number of sources, like, P.P. Mahato (1990), *World View of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand in Karotemprel*, S. B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India*, Shillong: Vendrame Missiological Institute, pp.131-142, pp.214-226; Varma, Nitin M.A.(2011), *Producing Tea Coolies?: Work, Life and Protest in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam, 1830S-1920S*, doctoral dissertation, Humboldt University, Berlin, pp. 125-127; Mahato, Nirmal Kumar(undated), *Environment and Migration, Purulia, West Bengal*, pp. 5; SinghDeo, Mihirlal.2007. *Kaler Prekshapate Jhumur o Swaralipi*, Cheliyama, Purulia: Anriju Prakashani, p-29.

*Mini, Assam is land of greenery and tea
Somehow could hoe the fields
Oh! The Plucking work
Oh! Jaduram
You deceived me to Assam*

The above two songs map the transition of the tea gardens from being imagined as sites of hope and prosperity, as portrayed by the recruiters to the potential women recruits, to becoming the sites of despair and difficulties as experienced by them once they landed in the colonial plantation enclaves.

The following song also reflects the deceptive measures used by the recruiters:

*'Chatichuti diye more samkoralo dipughare
Lekhala hamar sat puruser nam
Hayre lampota Shyam fanki diye badhu chalali Assam'*

[The contractors misguided me by his cunning and deceptive advice and putting me in a dark room. They had noted down the names of my seven generations. This debauch had compelled me to go to Assam].

The planters' lobby could not completely depend on the 'free' operation of the labour market by using the above-mentioned methods to bring forth women to the tea plantations. They influenced and pressurised the colonial state to devise various legislative measures to ensure a steady recruitment of women (*Chatterjee, 1995; Sen, 1996; 1998; 2002; 2004*). As for example, from 1863 onwards when women migrants constituted only five per cent of the total immigrants to the plantations of north-east, the Government of Bengal under the influence of the powerful planters' lobby introduced the *Transport of Native Labourers Act (III) of 1863* (amended in 1865), which encoded a superintendent of emigration, who was empowered to refuse embarkation passes, if any batch contained fewer than one female to every four male labourers.

The issue of women's recruitment to the nineteenth century colonial tea plantations of north-eastern India, especially to Assam and *Dooars*, except as part of the family unit, posed an intractable problem from the beginning (*Sen, 1996; 2002; 2004*). The literature on this issue has been polarised as it tend to describe the phenomenon as being either coerced in the form of kidnapping and fraud (*Tinker, 1974; Breman, 1989*) or voluntary, as a conscious and rational act on the part of economically disadvantaged and socially marginalised groups of women (*Yang, 1989; Lal, 1980⁹*). But to look for one decisive reason will not be correct as both push (in the form of crumbling of their positions within the patriarchal families of the economically marginalised groups) and pull (rapid growth and expansion of tea plantations during the colonial period and also women's requirement in them for their 'dexterity' and 'docility') factors operated in bringing women to the plantations of north-eastern India (*Bates and Carter, 1993, Engels, 1993; Sen, 1996; 2002; 2004*).

⁹ In his more recent writings, Lal (*1985a; 1985b*) has however changed his position, and has endorsed the oppression and exploitation of the migrants, especially the women.

The above discussion regarding the different issues of women's recruitment to colonial tea plantations brings out that as women's cheap labour was indispensable for the tea industry, the colonial planters could go to any extent and length in ensuring a steady supply of women workers by using both legal and extra-legal means to suit their purpose.

'Coolie Drivers' or Benevolent "Paternalists" and Women and Exploitative Labour Regime in Colonial Tea Plantations:

The colonial planters were not satisfied only with the passing of laws in matter of recruitment of the labourers. In order to ensure that the migrant labourers remained within the strict regimes of plantation work, they, often backed by the colonial state, took recourse to various kinds of methods, ranging from penal measures to physical and economic coercion for immobilising and controlling them (*Chatterjee, 1995; Behal, 2010*).

An important reason why the controlling the plantation labour force became necessary was that the low wages in the plantations provided little incentive for the migrant labourers to continue to do the back-breaking work from sunup to sundown. But as the productivity of these untrained migrant labourers in the initial period was low, in order to reap maximum profit for their products by stepping up tea production for the competitive world market while keeping down labour costs¹⁰, the planters fixed the wages at a very low level, sometimes even below the real income earned by these workers in the subsistence economies of their area of origins (*Jain, 1988; Behal, 2010*). Women were not omitted from these penal measures and coercive practices. The poor treatment and physical violence inflicted on them had been documented extensively in government records of the late nineteenth century (*Liu, 2010: 88*), annual Labour Reports, personal memoirs of the colonial planters and nationalist press and vernacular literature of the time (*Varma, 2005; 2011; Sen, 2008; Behal, 2010; Mahato, undated*).

The planters' used both penal measures, as found in their use of Workman's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 and the Act VI of 1865, and other coercive methods and extra-legal measures such as, constant surveillance of living quarters of labourers, referred to as 'coolie lines', detention or arrest of labour without informing the district authorities, various forms of physical coercion like flogging, confinement in 'prison houses' within the plantations etc. and verbal abuse for controlling the labour force, a significant portion of which were women, in order to keep them within the plantation boundaries (*Tinker, 1974; Guha, 1977; Bhowmik, 1981; Dasgupta, 1986; Chatterjee, 1995; Varma, 2005; 2011; Behal, 2010*). In case of women, sexual threat (in the form of rape and assault and violation of 'honour') posed by the colonial planters and also to some extent by the native managerial staffs constituted another additional method of controlling them in the tea plantations (*Sen, 1994*). The following few paragraphs have dealt in details the various forms of legal and extra-legal measures and coercive methods used by the colonial planters in the process of controlling the labourers in general and those devised by them exclusively for the women workers.

Given the considerable expenses incurred by the colonial planters to recruit and transport labourers to the remote plantation enclaves of North-east India, they wanted to protect their

¹⁰ Tea being a labour-intensive crop, labour cost is the main cost of tea production.

investments by influencing the colonial state in passing legislations that ensured the retention of the labourers in the plantations and also in legitimising the exercise of their extra-legal authority (*Das, 1931; Griffiths, 1967; Bhadra, 1992; Behal & Mahapatra, 1992; Sen, 2002; Behal, 2010*). As for example, the colonial state responded to the demands of the powerful tea planters' lobby with the extension of the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (XIII) of 1859 (enacted for employment in general) to the tea districts of North-eastern India. The Act provided penal contracts where workers were subjected to the direct control and authority of their planters by providing the latter with the power of 'private arrest' and delivering punitive sentences to the former. Again, by introducing a penal contract in Act VI of the Bengal Council in 1865 and modified in 1882 through provisions of sanctions for breach of contract by the labourers, planters were given similar kinds of power, as found under Act XIII of 1859, to arrest, without warrant, labourers who 'absconded', and imprisonment was their penalty for refusal to work.

In the colonial tea plantations, discipline was "severe" (*Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*) and it was under such a system that the plantation workers—men, women and even small children—had to do most arduous kind of work, as the payment in the tea estates was generally based upon piece-rates and related to completion of extremely high allotted tasks (*Dasgupta, 1986*). This can be observed from the statements made by *Kadamoni*, a woman worker of Baloma Tea Estate in Assam before the RCLI, "I go to work between 6 and 7 [in the morning], and I return home at 5" and "I am even made to work when I am ill", (*RCLI, 1931: 115*). The *Jhumur* songs popular among the tea plantation workers also testify this stringent plantation work regime. The following *Jhumur* song also corroborates the above fact.

*'Amra duti ma biti dine rate cha kuti
Kutite kutite bahe gham
Adham Dinanath bhane je jabe Assam bane
Ar na firibe nija dhame'*

[We are mother and daughter. We work in the tea plantation throughout the day. While working, we are sweating. The poor Dina *Tanti* tells those who would go to Assam would never return to his native land].

Moreover, the female-*coolies* were not permitted to stay longer than four to five days at home after child-birth (*Varma, 2011*). In the Report of Labour Emigration into Assam (1884), one can clearly get an idea of the attitude of the planters towards child-bearing coolie woman (*as cited in Tinker, 1974: 206*):

A coolie woman gets a variable amount of leave for her confinement. After that, if the infant is not strangled at birth, she must either take it out with her to her work or leave it behind, with no one to look after it. In the former case, tied to its mother's back, or left in the nearest drain, it is exposed to extremes of heat and cold...in the latter, the child gets half-starved...or succeeds in cutting short its career by a fall...

Thus, we see that even the pregnant women coolies were also subjected to the strictest discipline of the planters and were not spared from arduous plantation even during the maternity period.

Under the *Planter Raj*, a number of coercive methods were used to enforce strict and severe discipline among the workers and made them do the arduous tasks. Among this, strict surveillance was the most common method used to control the migrant labourers, including women, in the tea estates of North-eastern India (*Dasgupta, 1986; Chatterjee, 1995*). As for example, *Kadamoni*, who has been quoted earlier, admitted to the RCLI "Yes, he [the *chowkidar*] comes round at night to see if we are at home [coolie line]. He flings the door open even if we are not properly dressed" (*RCLI, 1931:115*). In the plantations of North Bengal, especially in *Dooars*, where the planters asserted about a 'free recruitment' system and thereby claiming the workers to be 'free agents', even in those plantations workers lived under the strict surveillance of the *chowkidars* (*Chatterjee, 1995*). The colonial planters maintained a private militia, called the North Bengal Rifles, to keep a strict vigil on the workers within the boundaries of the plantation enclaves (*Chatterjee, 2001*).

Again, showering of abusive language on the 'native' labour force in the day-to-day tea plantation life, be it at the workplace or the *Sahib's* bungalow, became a 'natural' routine for the planters to enforce strictest form of discipline on them. Women workers were also not spared from this kind of abusive behaviours. As for example, as found in a colonial planter W.M. Fraser's recollection of memories of a senior manager admonishing the women labourers: 'The ground become strewn with bad leaf, while from one woman to the other went admonishing Thomson, his tongue and hands fully employed' (*as cited in Behal, 2010:39*).

However, despite the threat of severe form of disciplinary measures, desertions, defiance of authority or 'shirking' of work by withdrawing their labour became a major source of worry for the colonial planters. Flogging became a very common means for punishing the labourers for the above-mentioned reasons (*Chatterjee, 1995; Chaudhuri, 2014; Behal, 2010*). As for example, Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam during the early 20th century, reported cases where the women labourers were flogged for trying to escape from the plantation on suspicion of helping others to escape (*as cited in Behal, 2010:38*). The intensity of plantation work as driven by above-mentioned threats and systematic physical disciplining by the authorities, ranging from British managers, native assistants and the *sardars* in the plantations found expression in the following *Jhumur* song:

Sardar bole kam kam
Babu bole dhori an
Sahab bole libo pither chan
Re Jaduram
Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam
Sardar says work work
Babu says nab the fool
Sahab threatens to peel the skin of my back
Oh Jaduram
You deceived us to Assam

Apart from desertion, the other possible escape available to workers was to decline renewal of their contract¹¹ at the end of the contract period. However, most often the planters through extra-legal mechanisms coerced or tricked them into renewing the contract, thereby prolonging the period of their indenture servitude. The observations made by Crole (*as cited in Behal, 2010:40*), brings out the real nature of such 'persuasion' adopted by the planter:

"I have known cases where the planter has cunningly arranged so that the wife's original four years' agreement expires before the husband's new agreement is fully served, and then the wife is told she must also take a new contract for two years or else leave the garden, and of course she has to submit to the former. Then when husband's contract is worked out he is again forced to renew it, owing to his wife's term not yet being expired".

To further ensure that the workers were bound to renew their contracts in the plantations of North-east India, as found by a government official in 1888, a planter organised a polyandrous marital union between five 'time-expired' coolies and a single woman brought in under the contract. As a result, each of the coolies had no other option but to agree to work in the same garden for another term (*as cited in Behal, 2010: 40*). Thus, through such kind of measures, almost every aspect of women workers' lives, including those that are supposed to be in the 'private sphere' was controlled by the colonial planters.

Apart from methods like trickery, coercion or surveillance against women, one can find high incidence of sexual threat (in the form of rape and assault and violation of 'honour') posed by the white European planters, managers and the native supervisory staffs on the women workers in the tea plantations of Assam and *Dooars*, as reported consistently in the nationalist discourse in India from the end of the nineteenth century (*Sen, 1994*). This characterisation of planters as sexually abusing working class women in the colonial tea plantations assumed legendary proportions when compared to such incidences among women jute mill workers in colonial Bengal.

Santosh Kumari Gupta, a well-known jute trade union organiser and a social activist also cited the high incidence of molestation of women workers by white planters in colonial plantations. As cited in her column (*Ananda Bazar Patrika, 10th September, 1924: Editorial, as cited in Sen, 1994*):

... at 2 a.m., the manager Mr. Johnson and his assistant manager went to the coolie lines in a car. There they went to a hut and called a woman by her name. They broke open the door and both the husband and wife came out. The husband was pushed out of the way and the woman, *Gedama* was dragged into the car. They took her to the assistant manager's bungalow. *Gedama* was screaming at the top of her voice. The assistant manager pulled her into a bedroom and there raped her four times consecutively...

Different reasons have been cited to explain as why this kind of highly exploitative labour regime went unchecked in the colonial plantations. While according to Behal (*2010*), the existence of this kind of inhuman labour regime was not an aberration but very much a characteristic of 'rational', modern corporate capitalism, Sir Percival Griffiths (*1967*), the official historian of India's tea industry, rationalised this coercive labour regime as 'benevolent paternalism' on the ground that the tea planter

¹¹ As already mentioned, the tea workers in colonial India, especially in Assam, were bound by legal contracts.

as a master of a large body of migrant labour must enforce discipline by occasionally severe measures because they are substantially just and for the good of the general body of coolies, who were in complete dependency *vis-à-vis* the managers.

The above discussion shows how under the rubric of race and class, the question of gender exploitation gets doubly burdened, which in turn had far-reaching consequences in the everyday lives of the women tea workers. It also brings out that the colonial officials, under the influence of the powerful tea lobby forgot about their self-proclaimed ideals of non-interference in the domestic sphere with Indian cultural values and female honour. Moreover, it also proves Engels (1989) argument that the British forget their maxims of gentlemanliness when the women concerned were not the equivalent of English ladies, but came from the working class.

Conclusions

The present paper has thus brought forth the interventions of women's history and historical anthropology to the study of plantation settings in North Bengal by documenting and analysing the terrible story of coolie-catching, especially of the women from the *adivasi* regions and eastern Nepal and their migration to the remote tea districts of north-east India during the colonial period and the harrowing tales of their oppression by the colonial planters and their hirelings-the *arkatis* and the *sardars*. It also highlights the fact that some of the convincing reasons behind the marginalisation of women workforce in the tea industry of North Bengal during contemporary times have its roots in the colonial past. The coercive politics of the colonial planters in the form of hierarchy of relationships, attitudes, politics of patronage, which have kept the women workers isolated from the outside world have serious long-term implications in the everyday lives of women tea workers of the region, in the form of lack of alternative employment by locking them into a cycle of perpetual bondage to the planters for earning livelihoods, low wages and poor working conditions in spite of being in the organised sector, their inability to organise through trade unions etc. Moreover, the paper also brings out the importance of the need to interpret the past as it makes meaningful the current social relations of power, especially pertaining to gender issues in the context of tea plantations.

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