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The Price of Tea: Women workers' Predicament in North Bengal Tea Plantations

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Living through the tea crisis: Women workers' predicament in North Bengal tea plantations

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Abstract

Women historically have comprised a large segment of the working class in the tea industry in India. With more than 50 percent in the workforce, women's employment in this sector continues to remain significant in contemporary times. Restructuring due to neo-liberal policies have accelerated international competition and trade. Furthermore changes in the landscape of tea production and organisation to the small holder sector have severely impacted the conventional estate sector. Such changes are inexorably impacting workers and their families on a large scale. For instance, poor improvement in conditions at work compels them to migrate for employment therefore compounding their vulnerabilities. North Bengal's political economy helps in ensuring commodity production on the one hand while triggering a state of normlessness on the other. What seems pertinent here is to understand that despite women workers' numerical strength they are unable to make any qualitative presence in shaping the politics of labour in this industry. This is linked to the historicity of deprivation on account of gender, ethnicity, shrinking entitlements and resulting subordination. Importantly, fragmentation of trade unionism has substantially affected the working class politics in the tea sector. Reviewing secondary literature and based on the author's empirical insights from the tea estates in North Bengal, this paper attempts to highlight the continued deplorable conditions at work in the plantations. With no tangible improvement in wages, food security, housing conditions, and security for children or at old age has pushed much of the "productive labour" to migrate. I argue that this tendency to migrate may perhaps improve their material situations relatively but with a tremendous social cost of dislocation. Despite the disconcerting situation amidst neo-liberal reforms, there is still room for stakeholders particularly trade unions to negotiate and ameliorate their working conditions. This paper therefore calls for rigorous academic and advocacy work towards alleviating the workers from a future of uncertainty.

I

Introduction

Appalling conditions of workers of North Bengal tea plantations post the Indian tea crisis during the turn of the millennium have been documented through an array of literature and media reports (Rai 1995; Talwar et.al 2005; Sankrityayan 2005). The people who depend on

the Indian tea industry has survived this crisis mainly by the efforts laid by tea plantation workforce through formation of Operating Managing Committees (OMCs), sale of green leaf to the adjoining Bought Leaf Factories (BLFs) and importantly, a huge exodus through distress migration. Women particularly are compelled to shoulder this crisis and face adversities to ensure livelihood and decent survival. It is extremely crucial to acknowledge the contribution made by this large section of the marginalised workforce in producing the internationally traded commodity 'tea'. This industry has been historically categorised as enclave economies with production organised around hierarchies of caste, race, ethnicity and gender thus reiterating a gendered division of labour in the processes of production segregated as 'factory' and 'field' operations. Moreover the notion of 'productive' labour rested with certain ethnic categories as defined by the erstwhile planters and importantly women were considered pivotal for the social reproduction of labour and showing the dexterity of plucking the 'two leaves and a bud'. With more than 50 percent in the workforce, women's labour in the Indian tea sector continues to remain significant till now.

By examining the existing literature and based on author's earlier (2001-03) and recent fieldwork (2016-18) in a tea estate in North Bengal this paper seeks to delve on critical and emerging areas of concern for employment and women's work throughout the significant period of the crisis in Indian tea sector. Some of the specific research questions that the paper outlines are - What makes or conditions the women to continue work in the plantations or is there any other pattern that is emerging wherein women are leaving their homes to work as domestic workers in metropolitan cities or even travel overseas. Is migration gendered or located across specific age cohorts? Is migration the next best alternative for the tea community? Or will situations of change and development be ushered by changing the land use pattern like the case of Chandmoni Tea Estate. Do workers prefer that the demand for separate statehood as the next best alternative to alleviate their situations of deprivation and misery? By raising such questions this paper reiterates the need to examine the future of tea plantation workers' community in such regionally isolated locations.

This paper is divided into three main sections. Section I after contextualising the problem provides the historical background of plantation industry and its labour relations. It further provides a review of literature on conditions of work for women with particular emphasis on government reports from the Department of Labour, Govt of West Bengal and Labour Bureau and other secondary sources. The second section reiterates aspects of exploitation and deprivation that are tangible for the women workers in particular. Importantly, how their locations within the workplace get strongly determined by their efficiency/inefficiency; capacity to overwork and health acts as a tangible measure to link the complexities of conditions of working and living in tea estates, determined by their social and economic positioning in the plantation societies. The third section concludes by asking whether migration is the favoured option for workers given such deplorable conditions.

II Labour for tea

Out of 1325.05 million kilograms of tea produced during 2017-18, the organised estate sector contributes 703.44 million kilograms of tea while the rest from the small tea grower sector. The conventional tea producers are the states of Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala with production now coming from states like Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Sikkim in particular. Assam produces 50 percent of all India tea with 676.31 million kilograms and West Bengal with 387.86 million kilograms (TBI 2017-18). India presently is the second largest producer of tea after China and the largest consumer of tea globally. Chinese production is alarmingly high with 2616000 million tonnes as compared with India with 1311630 respectively (P figures TBI). This of course requires a separate discussion altogether.

Historically established as one of the significant contributors to the Indian tea economy, North Bengal situated north of the River Ganges comprises of six districts of West Bengal that is Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda districts. The tea growing areas are concentrated in the first two districts. Tea plantations were set-up in 1859 in Darjeeling and in 1879 in Jalpaiguri during the colonial period with a workforce largely comprised of the Scheduled tribes (*adivasis*) and Scheduled castes Nepali communities. The *adivasis* were brought as indentured labour from the Chotanagpur Plateau presently the states of Jharkhand and parts of Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar and Chattisgarh. These tribes were namely *Oraons*, *Santhals*, *Mundas* and so on. While the Nepali Scheduled Caste groups comprised chiefly the service castes like the *Kamis* (blacksmiths), *Damais* (tailors) and *Sarkis* (cobblers) respectively. In the case of Darjeeling, free recruitment prevailed unlike the indentured system in Assam, Dooars and Terai tea gardens. Various push and pull factors operated in favour of the colonial state. In the case of Darjeeling discrimination in recruitment of the service castes in the British army, high levels of impoverishment, indebtedness and caste oppressions in Nepal forced people to move to the neighbouring region of Darjeeling that historically resulted in the establishment of the tea industry and populace (Pradhan 1991; Rasaily 2003). While in Chotanagpur plateau region, was a favourable labour catchment area (LCA) for the arduous work in the Assam and lower Bengal tea plantations (Behal and P. Mahapatra 1992).

Importantly, women's employment was pivotal for containing the male labour force and was found to be dexterous by the planters in plucking the two leaves and a bud (Chatterjee 1995). By hiring families both women and children were engaged in such activities (Engels Dagmar: 1999). The Labour Bureau (2012) data (see Annexure I) reflects that 55.9 percent of women were employed across all plantations in India. Between 1995–2010 the proportion of women workers in tea plantations has increased marginally from 49.5 to 54.7 percent but in terms of absolute numbers it has almost halved from 1,220,452 to 629, 995 workers. In the year 2001 i.e. the crisis period it was found to engage only 322,004 women workers. Along with this, the tea sector also has a strong presence of the small tea grower sector, which is relatively less organised. Women comprise a significant size of this population too. At present in West Bengal

there are 2, 62,426 permanent workers engaged in 273 tea estates in the three tea growing regions of Terai, Dooars and Darjeeling in North Bengal (Dept. of Labour Report 2014, Govt. of West Bengal). Table 1 provides the strength of workforce across categories of workers in three regions of North Bengal.

Table 1: Total number of workers across work category in tea plantations of West Bengal

S. No.	Work Category	Number of workers	Remarks
1	Daily rated workers	2,18, 968	
2	Casual (<i>Bigha</i>) workers	67,440	
3	Nayaginti workers	5778	Engaged by 158 tea estates of the 3 regions
4	Staff/sub-staff/workers in factory	15, 362	Engaged by 235 tea estates of the 3 regions
5	Bastiyar labour	8522	Engaged by 31 tea estates of the 3 regions
6	Contract labour	2892	Engaged by 20 tea estates of the 3 regions
7	Computer operator	250	Engaged by 143 tea estates of the 3 regions
8	Sub-staff (OMRE)	16, 347	Engaged by 269 tea estates of the 3 regions
9	Sub-staff (Medical)	564	Engaged by 132 tea estates of the 3 regions
10	Staff (Clerical and technical)	4775	Engaged by 267 tea estates of the 3 regions
11	Staff (Medical)	400	engaged by 175 tea estates of the 3 regions
12	Workmen	2, 62, 426	Adding permanent workforce (Sl nos.1+4+7+8+9+10)
13	Non- workers	8, 72,938	

Tabulated from - Source: Synopsis on Survey of Tea Gardens conducted by Regional Labour Offices under the Jurisdiction of Joint Labour Commissioner, North Bengal Zone. <https://www.wblc.gov.in/download/Synopsis-of-Tea-Garden-Survey-Final-Report.pdf>

The report of the Department of Labour (Government Of West Bengal, 2013) confirms that there are 276 tea estates with 81 tea estates from the hill areas, 45 tea estates from the Terai and 150 from the Dooars region. This report provides some important information with respect to the population and tea workers of this region. There are about 1, 86, 599 families residing in the tea estates of these three regions of North Bengal with a population of 11, 24, 907. However,

the conditions of the plantation workforce are intertwined within a historicity of subjugation and deprivation.

A genre of studies have documents how the tea estate workers were historically subjected to overwork, bondage in extreme inclemency of weather, low wages and an overall gross violation of labour and human rights for almost a century (Behal 1985; Behal and Mahapatra 1992; Bhowmik 1980; Schomowitz 1990 and others). There was no organised form of resistance initially due to isolation, ignorance, poor educational level and lack of contact with any political party or trade unions. In the Darjeeling tea estates, isolation of workers, non-emergence of proper leadership, poor systems of communication and inaccessibility to tea gardens were some of the reasons for non-unionisation (Manas Das Gupta, 1999). The planters' body created the North Bengal Mounted Rifles, a private army to prevent any collective organising. S. Sen (1979) notes, "Development of trade union consciousness and organisation among the tea plantation workers was a comparatively delayed phenomenon" (S.Sen 1979, p. 66). Contemporary forms of protests as examined by scholars like Banerjee (2017) and Chaudhuri (2015) document narratives of protests and violence in their everyday lives of women workers in Banerjee's work and through acts of witchcraft and its accusations in the case of Chaudhuri's writings signify the unequal power relations amongst labour and planters. However, it is important to address the conflicting questions of access to entitlements – housing, food, social security for these historically resident migrant workers who are embedded in the political economy of the region. The subsequent section examines aspects on conditions of work for tea plantation particularly women workers in this region with empirical insights from North Bengal plantations.

Appalling work conditions

Literature has examined the conditions at work in North Bengal tea plantations through various methodological approaches (Bhowmik 1981; Sarkar R.L. & M.P. Lama 1986; Bhowmik, Xaxa and Alam 1996; Das Gupta 1989, 1999; Sharma 2000); Bhattacharya (2012) on colonialism and medicine Besky (2013) on negotiations around fair trade certification for labour, on legislations and implications to labour (Sharma 2000; Rai 1995; Dhar 2015) and so on. With the restructuring of the industry and the move towards casualisation and contractualisation of work, women who are single earners find it difficult to get involved in any organizing activity for fear of retrenchment, which would affect not only their earnings but also their access to housing. Earlier studies by Rachel Kurian (1982) in Sri Lanka has provided a historical and contemporary analysis of tea plantation industry referring to the "wants" of the female workers that are suppressed by the "needs" as perceived by the management. Aspects of physical and sexual violence are also well documented in this study. Studies in India by scholars such as Bhadra (2004), Jain (1988) and Chatterjee (2003) clearly point out how conditions of women's work and position are relegated in the plantation societies evidenced through the sheer absence in supervisory positions and well as union leadership ranks. Another later work by Kurian and Jayawarkne (2015) examines how patriarchy is entrenched in the plantation system in Sri Lanka.

Concerns for women workers are on issues of house repair, crèche conditions, quality and availability of subsidised food grains, firewood and drinking water are evident given their domestic work burden. Women in particular are therefore faced with tremendous physical, social, psychological and economic burdens within a household (Kurian 1982; Bhadra 1992). Importantly, patriarchal set-up and caste relations are entrenched in the plantation societies. Rasaily's (1998) work has reflected how daughter-in-laws become the soft targets to take up work as a daily-rated worker in lieu of her retired father/mother-in-law or any other family member through the system of *badli* i.e. replacement. Importantly, the study based on a tea estate notes that women are mostly single earners of the household as their men are usually engaged in works such as carpentry and other services which are not regular in nature. This tendency to abjure plantation work by men has been clearly articulated by Samita Sen (2008). Reflections of such conditions of burden of earning an income were found to be common in plantations of Sri Lanka (Kurian 1982).

With independence, the Plantation Labour Act 1951 had come into force on 1st April, 1954 after much resentment from the planters' community. This act sought to specifically regulate the conditions of workers in plantations cultivating crops such as tea, coffee, rubber and cinchona. It also sought to provide the permanent workers and their dependents with provisions of housing, medical amenities, education, food grains, electricity, fuel and other benefits. A recent study by Labour Bureau (2009) on the Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Plantation Industry 2008-09 analysed the social security provisions under the Plantation Labour Act 1951 for women workers. This survey was conducted across plantations growing crops such as tea, coffee, rubber and cardamom. Given its select sample size, this survey found that 54.5 percent of the women workers were not literate. Women were engaged in manual jobs mostly as plantation labour as compared to men. 82.3 percent of non-manual jobs are undertaken by men (Labour Bureau 2009: 16). Such trend was similar in case of other plantation crops. Benefits such as Maternity Benefit were provided by 73.5 percent of the units surveyed, 37.1 percent provided crèche facilities. And about 97.9 percent of workers were provided with housing facilities in the case of tea plantations. Specific welfare facilities for women workers such as washing facility, separate urinals, rest shelter were provided by only 6.1 percent, 7.6 percent and 6.8 percent of units respectively (Ibid). Various other legislations such as the Trade Union Act 1926, Workmen's Compensation Act 1923, Factories Act 1948, Maternity Benefits Act 1961 etc are applicable to the tea plantation sector.

Apart from such labour legislations, the tea estates came under the ambit of schemes such as the Financial Assistance to Workers in Locked-out Industrial Units (FAWLOI), Indra Awas Yojana (IAY) during the post – crisis period. FAWLOI was announced by the Central government and was extended to workers in the closed and abandoned tea gardens. Overall data as per the Government of West Bengal on FAWLOI showed that the number of locked out units in West Bengal increased from 219 in 1999-2000 to 256 in 2000-2001. It increased substantially till 2004-05 with 276 locked out units. These industrial units apart from tea, also included; cotton textiles, jute and allied industries, leather and leather products, paper and paper products, printing, rubber, glass and products, engineering, ship building and repair, electricity. Tea industry was however one of the worst hit industries during this period. The change in

ownership categories in the Indian tea industry has also been an important reason for such apathy and neglect over the long run on the part of the management. Decline in productivity of the tea bushes and the requirement of investments in replanting and replenishing the tea estates is an important reason for the withdrawal of the erstwhile Sterling companies (Das Gupta 1999). At the international level, stiff international competition, and overproduction in a neo-liberal regime were some of the factors that brought about this crisis to the industry. This economic situation along with the poor improvement in working conditions were the key factors in triggering migration from the tea cultivating districts of West Bengal.

The increasing international demand for quality and chemical residue-free tea, having a Geographical Indicator (GI) status almost all the tea gardens in Darjeeling are currently producing organic tea. In the tea estate under study, organic farming started in 2010 and by the subsequent year it gained momentum. This tea estate is now a Hazards Analytical Critical Control Point, and has certification from various organisations for bio-organic such as Naturland Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, UTZ, Ethical Trading Partnership (ETP) and Japanese Agricultural Standard (JAS) and Institute for Marketecology (IMO) during 2010-11. As shared by the garden supervisor, in this tea estate IMO certified inputs are used for organic farming. He further mentions that there was a 25 percent drop in production after a shift to organic farming however with a better price realisation by 2011. Table 2 shows a drop in production to which a management staff reasoned it to labour shortage in the tea gardens. For instance, according to the garden supervisor, in this tea garden the required *mandays* for 2017-18 for an estimated crop production of 33,111 kilograms is 18, 625 *mandays* while the available mandays is only 16,000. The average plucking capacity of each worker per manday is 8 kilograms. Therefore there is shortfall of 2625 mandays. Production is less not only because there is less number of *mandays* but also because of factors of absenteeism that results in labour shortage of about 9-10% per annum. He notes that presently 5 workers have gone out for employment or have engaged in MGNREGA works. Further there are also cases of short absenteeism due to marriage/death/sick leave etc.

Table 2: Crop pattern (Annual production of Organic made tea)

Year	Production (in kilograms)
2011	35908
2012	35369
2013	32308
2014	30936
2015	28806
2016	29554

Source: Office of the tea estate under study; December 2016

While examining the conditions at work in this tea estate under study it was found that with bio- organic farming usage of chemicals for spraying was definitely curtailed. A report of the Rainforest Alliance (RA) in the section of social and working conditions it was mentioned that workers were aware of the principles of RA. Usage of PPEs by sprayers and that there was no

spraying near houses, roads and labour lines were kept clean with the use of dustbins etc were noted in this report. However the report also mentioned that delays in medical bill reimbursements as well as construction of latrines in labour lines were prevalent. Under the Fair Trade initiative there is a workers' welfare fund where workers receive a premium on leaf grade @ 1 USD and on 2nd grade @ 1/2 USD. So far Rs 6.5 lakh has been earned from sale of tea through Fair Trade.

There is a joint committee with workers' representation that manages this account in Phuguri. The members are however unsure on the utilization of this money. Such initiatives however noble, also reflects the inability or the low priority attached by the overseas buyers to negotiate with the state with respect to work conditions and entitlements and instead prefer to route through the ideas of 'social responsibility' which essentially should be a state responsibility. Besky's articulates it strongly by arguing for the case of Darjeeling plantations that despite fair trade certification processes it does not reflect on any significant improvement in workers' wages as they are based on tripartite negotiations and rules as applicable under the PLA 1951 (Besky 2013). Given the present situation of changes in labour reforms it becomes important to addresses such shifts in labour welfare. However, a detailed examination of the same is beyond the scope of this paper. The subsequent sections using select workers' narratives attempts to place the kind of trade-offs that workers in the hill tea gardens continue to make despite better economies of scale. Two key indicators are addressed here to understand the same. First, the extra leaf price determination and secondly, changing employment and labour relations.

Workers' Trade-offs

The extra leaf price

The incentive wage system that ensured extraction of labour thereby maximising production. The incentive wage system or the extra leaf price (e.l.p.) in plantation parlance, is a classic example of how exploitation of labour operates in situations where women workers particularly are compelled to stretch work for longer hours to earn an extra income. This was earlier called *bakshish* i.e. the planter would give *bakshish* to a worker if he or she plucked more than the required *task* (Rasaily 2003). This happens particularly during the peak plucking season (May - September) when foliage is highest however having to work in adverse weather conditions. Fevers, diarrhoea, dysentery, gastritis are common symptoms of the workers who work in such abject conditions till they are incapacitated to work. The wages paid under the e.l.p system is abysmally low, and dehumanising and devaluing their labour. In the tea estate under study, the task per tea plucker is 7 kilograms average per day and the extra leaf price is fixed in variance with the quality of tea bush as well as the season (dependent on foliage). The e.l.p rate is as illustrated in table 3. The concept of cash picking in tea gardens at the time of heavy flush on Sundays rarely happens in this estate. It could be possible due to less foliage and perhaps due to climatic and soil conditions.

Table 3: Seasonal Extra leaf price (e.l.p) rates and Leaf foliage since April 2013

Period	China tea	Assam tea
April- June	Rs 6/-	Rs 5.30 /-
July – September	Rs 5.10/-	Rs 4.50/-
October – December	Rs 6/-	Rs 5.30/-

Source: Office of the tea estate under study, December 2016

Table 3 clearly reflects that wages are the lowest when foliage is highest in the tea bushes. This means that the possibilities of workers earning extra income which during the colonial times was termed as *bakshish* is limited. In this tea estate, 67 percent of the tea bushes are of the China variety. The task and the e.l.p are determined by the quality or type of tea bush and according to a senior employee it depends on the benevolence of the *sahib*. He says, “it is up to the *sahib* to determine and fix the rate. It is his wish. The unions do not negotiate that much here. They are not all that firm ...” The workers complained that in a nearby garden the e.l.p. is Rs 10 per kilogram of tea leaves.

At present the work conditions continues to remain the same except the fact that inside the factory premise, the tea leaves are well protected from ‘externalities’ that could possibly affect its quality and therefore market and pricing. Uniforms, gloves, head scarves were made compulsory; with no nail paints and *sindoor* permissible for women workers working inside the factory. However, other externalities that concern labour in the garb of ‘extra leaf price (e.l.p.)’ for instance goes unnoticed when women have to work in a continuous standing position for long hours with weights on their backs, pluck tea leaves in arduous climatic conditions for an extra income. It is important to reiterate here that women workers are the backbone of this industry and are the lowest paid workers. What is pertinent to emphasis here is the capacity to earn is dependent on his/her physical capacity to work or rather overwork or till the worker is physically incapacitated to labour (Rasaily 2003). Thus the quantum of leaves plucked varies from as low as 10 kilograms to 35- 38 kilograms of tea leaves every day. In fact decks (work sites) are categorised also as for ‘the sick and elderly’ who are given ‘light’ work. Therefore health acts as an important measure or indicator for labour ‘productivity’. The following sections illustrate how a) the health of the bushes vis-à-vis workers are prioritised b) the changing labour and employment relations in a plantation economy.

This fieldwork coincided during the period of demonetisation process; and workers were facing tremendous hardship. Wages of daily rated workers’ wages was Rs 122.50/- until March 2016 that increased to Rs 132.50/- from April 2016. During this period, two payments were due (the last payment made was 22nd November 2016) for the workers at the time of fieldwork and tripartite wage negotiation was due in 2017. The working hours haven’t changed. Work begins with the factory alarm in place even now from 7 am-11.30 am and 1 pm. – 3.30 pm. Workers are not paid on the weekly off i.e. Sunday and majority of the workers fall under the daily-rated (DR) workers. One of the women workers notes,

“Either you work on other people’s farm, or carry load. These days the typical system of badli no longer exists. Now, once a worker retires, s/he will have to wait for nine more workers to retire in order to get a member of his/her family, kith or kin recruited in his/her place as a permanent worker. There is work however in bigha work. Here the unions are not as strong as in the plains. Instead they are in consultation with the company/malik. They are not worried as to what the labour wants”.

At present in this tea garden there are 199 permanent workers and 36 workers enrolled as *bigha*. According to the field supervisor, the average annual plucking round is 23 days in order to complete the entire tea garden. The total area of this garden is 71.83 hectares of which 3.42 hectares is uprooted or new planting has begun. The remaining 67 hectares is under tea cultivation. Annually workers continue to get 14 days leave and other leave entitlements such as admissible under the maternity benefits, 4 day leave to construct/repair latrine and one day leave to whitewash their quarter and one day sick leave per 20 days of work. They also get 20 percent bonus as guaranteed under the PLA 1951. Although the certifications boast of protecting the environment and labour welfare, workers reported an increase in mosquitoes due to stagnant water in the nearby *kholchas* (open drains). One of the workers’ said,

“Fevers are common here. We work in rain and cold. We received a bonus of only 19 and not 20 percent this time. We get Rs 7000-8000/- as bonus. This money is spent on festivals to buy clothes and the traders increase the price of garments during the festivals particularly for children’s garments”.

There is currently a visiting doctor in this garden since June 2015. He is provided an honorarium of Rs 1500/- for weekly visit and vehicle for transport from the tea garden. Medical reimbursements are given when actual bills are produced and cases must be referred from the garden dispensary. This sometimes becomes limiting for the workers. The reimbursement takes almost six months. With the implementation of the Equal Remuneration Act 1976, gender-based wage differences per se were averted; however, women continued to face situations of hardships due to their lack of control over their own earnings and lack of decision-making power both in the home and at the workplace. Wage determination in the states of Assam and West Bengal happen through a collective bargaining process (tripartite mechanism – Representatives of tea planters, officials from labour department and trade unions negotiate to arrive at a daily wage) unlike the southern states where the minimum wages notification is applicable. Importantly, the non-cash component for instance food grains available at a subsidised rate has an element of gender discrimination here wherein women are given lesser quantity of food grains (for example 5 kgs for women and 7 kgs for male workers) with the logic that the calorie requirement is lower for women as compared to men.

III

Is migration the only resort?

“Two of my grandchildren are working in Delhi. I could not ask them to work in the garden as they were working as bigha...When they were in school they would work for two days and then attend school. During vacations they would work. What will they do here? Even after studying they don’ t get employment here. Maybe they are happy out there...but ultimately they have to come back home..” (Narrative of a retired women worker, December 2017)

In the tea estate under study there is a significant degree of out-migration of the populace for overseas employment to countries such as Israel, Dubai and other Middle Eastern countries for contractual work in service sector. As pointed out by a local resident, also a practicing photographer - that the number of applicants for an Indian passport has increased tremendously. Such compulsions to leave the tea garden as pointed out by a retired worker arises with increasing standard of living, consumerism and competition amongst peers. She laments *“this was not so during our time..our lives were simple but tough..Educating children these days is very expensive. It has of course more value now”*. Women were found to be saving through *ghummori* (chitfund) from their already meagre wages primarily to give education to their children in private primary English medium schools.

From a group discussion workers shared - *“there is at least one family member from each worker household who have migrated out for work. Otherwise it is very difficult to manage with our meagre tea garden income”*. A young literate women worker said,

“Many of the entitlements and benefits workers hardly receive. There are problems here. Children even if they do not want to, end up leaving their homes to supplement their parents’ income. There is no option for them but to leave as there are no alternative employment options for them. But people cannot just leave the tea garden. We have our homes here, a bit of land. One worker has to continue work in the tea garden or else we lose every little thing that we have.... Even if we fall or trip we have to work to survive. The present government has left our condition in a mess (lathalingai)”.

Such voices were resonating from most of the women workers. However, there were also relieving stories from Sunita Tamang and others whose children had achieved higher education and were well-placed with government jobs. It is but natural for workers to hope for a better future for their children.

M.S.A. Rao’s (1981) earlier works point out any study on migration should consider the historical development of the region, the wider economy and political conditions that regulate and condition the nature of employment opportunities as people invest meanings to a place or territory in which they live and they also attach meanings to their movements. Mazumdar (2004) also argues in her paper that questions around the nature of migration cannot be answered without reference to the sphere of labour processes and accumulation regimes that impact tribal population in the broader agrarian economy. This is true for the tea plantation

economy historically. Few studies specifically on out-migration for instance, a study by Sharma (2014) on out-migration as a survival strategy in the case of Darjeeling clearly pointed out that the desire for higher income was a significant reason across gender for migration. And that some of the migrants also comprised of minors (girls) below the age of 15 years leading to increase in the number of school drop-outs to work particularly as house maids (Sharma 2014: 17). From this study the author concludes that ‘a well-managed migration may not be a survival strategy for the poor’. In the case of Assam, a print media report (The Hindu) points out that the phenomenon of reverse migration occurs where about 300 tea plantation workers have left their jobs to go return to their ancestral homes in Telengana.

Action Aid (2016) report although focusing on child labour clearly demonstrates the rate of migration particularly from the closed and abandoned tea estates of North Bengal. A case narrative reflects the fear and insecurity that comes to children with parents migrating for work outside the tea estates (Action Aid 2016: 64). This study conducted in various tea estates in the Dooars region of North Bengal has recorded more than 200 cases of migration above 20 years of age (ibid). The places of migration as recorded in this study are Sikkim and Delhi largely. However 33 percent of the respondents had no clue where the children under aged 20 years had migrated to. This study also notes a significant degree of migration to states such as Kerala and Karnataka for work (Action Aid 2016: 66-67).

According to a report on Economic scenario and prospects of North Bengal (BCI&i: 2016) in Darjeeling there is a clear absence of small and medium scale and service sector enterprises (ibid: 31). The alternatives proposed according to this report are of promoting tourism industry for instance golf tourism in Senchel and Lebong golf course and importantly tea tourism. The concern remains what could be the extent of employability in this region if small and medium scale enterprises are not encouraged both by the government and private sector. However, the report further discusses that establishing international call centres, BPOs in this region having access to English-medium schools may perhaps restrict brain drain from this area. Despite recommendations from various quarters academics, activists, governmental bodies, the absence of a political will nullifies any vision and hope.

A recent study by Raj (2017) on the Tea belts of the Western Ghats, Kerala points out two important consequences of crisis in the tea sector. One, the out-migration of Tamil Dalits from the tea plantations in search for better job opportunities/ and or going back to their ancestral village in Tamil Nadu. This causes labour shortage, thereby drawing people from the eastern parts of India (Orissa and Jharkhand) to work in the plantations. His study notes that caste – discrimination apart from job insecurity and overwork that characterise their socio-economic status within Tamil Nadu. Work in the garment/dyeing units in Tiruppur provided higher wages but caste-stigmas were very pronounced in these localities. This aspect was shockingly reported by the ex-plantation workers/families in the villages of Tamil Nadu as it was not so in the plantation societies that they left. With such out-migration, this study also noted that the question of labour shortage in these tea plantations of Kerala, and therefore companies have to recruit labour particularly from Eastern India (Orissa and Jharkhand) to work in the plantations. Such labour is either contract/casual and according to Raj (2017) and do not get temporary

worker status either and migration in most cases were seasonal. These migrant workers are not organised because not just their employment status but also linguistic alienation (Raj 2017:76). Such circumstances/movements of labour minimises any kind of unionisation or collective bargaining processes to happen.

Crisis of management

Having visited the tea estate during the period of demonetisation, workers narratives were more of suppressed anger and resentment for the failure of the management to support them in crisis situations. Sangeeta Moktan, aged 34, working in the sorting section in the factory since seven years says that it has become very difficult for the workers to conduct bank transactions as most of them are not literate and would lose a day's income on travel. She wails and says, "*that there are innumerable problems for us as workers. The retired workers do not receive their gratuity on time*". This however had no link with the current issue of demonetisation but there was a concerted effort on the side of the management to defer gratuity payments.

Provident fund an important source of social security for the aged workers post retirement instead has become an easy source for family members to mitigate financial requirements for social occasions like marriage and medical reasons. Almost 80 percent of the tea workers have taken an advance against their provident fund account particularly for these two reasons. An office staff mentioned that after 40 years of service a garden staff receives approximately Rs 7 lakhs as PF while a daily-rated worker gets Rs 1.5 lakh only. This invariably means that after retirement at 59 years, a worker after having availed PF loans get only Rs 30,000/- in hand. This is to reiterate the need to revisit the conditions wherein the wages are so very low in the plantation sector that after 40 years service in such harsh working conditions workers are provided such a paltry old age social security.

Workers' negotiate amidst faltering unionism

As a women worker narrates,

"Women who are active in the unions do not have the capacity to convince. They simply listen and come back from the meetings. There is no unity amongst themselves and have problem when someone younger than them speaks out. She argues that the problem is a universal issue and not a personal issue of entitlements and rights. It is not about whom the officer is or which rank s/he belongs to. Even if we want, we are unable to say or do anything. We end up keeping quiet and work. Even if we demand it is not prioritised by the management".

She further said that when she initially joined work in the gardens and saw the injustice she would raise her voice. She however got no support from other senior workers. She says,

"I got 'labelled' and 'noted'. Henceforth I have withdrawn myself from such discussions. This is the rule of the tea garden as it was during our grandparents' time— stay docile and work. I had once argued with the supervisor (kamdari) and no one supported me and instead rebuked for arguing with a senior. I was left alone".

She also is aware of the hierarchised nature at work when she says that she is at the bottom of the hierarchy. She says, “*Who will listen to me. Even if 10 people support me I can do many things but ultimately I am left alone. I cannot stand injustice. If some feds you bad food and forces you to eat, will you be able to?*” She asks. It was interesting to note that she being a young, dynaliteratemic, and an articulate woman member of the tea community is not a member of either the Fair Trade workers collective or any other organisation/collective. Rather membership is possibly determined by those who would not raise their voices against capital.

The *inability* of women to participate in trade unionism and their limitation in terms of occupational mobility (to supervisory posts for instance) because of various associated factors of gender compounded by literacy. They are instead given jobs such as crèche attendant, *pani wali*, helper dispensary when they are unable to do hard labour in the field or are sent to work in sorting section in the factory. Such transfers/gestures come with the benevolence of the supervisory to allocate/shift their work to lighter tasks. Women have reported that verbal comments that question their strength (for instance they rebuke by asking if they haven’t eaten enough food?) or instigate competition amongst women as to who plucks the fastest in a disdainful manner does not motivate them to work.

Studies (Bhowmik and Sarkar 1998, Rasaily 2003) have shown that union affiliation and/ or membership of women is influenced by male relatives’ to such an extent that even a change in membership is influenced by the family members. Though there have been few women trade union leaders from among the jute mill workers, scavengers in Bengal, and Bombay mills workers, women workers were the first to protest against the long working hours in textile mills (ILO report 1999). Manju Chattopadhyay (1995) notes the leadership of Maili Chettri, a tea garden worker from Dooars who started a union in 1946 and struggled for the workers’ rights in the tea plantations in Dooars, West Bengal. In this case, the tea garden workforce had joined the larger struggle of the peasants and tribals for a right to 2/3 of the produce of sharecropping in the Tebhaga movement throughout North Bengal.

Bhowmik and Sarkar (1998) argue that women do have the potential for leadership which needs to be developed from within. From North Bengal one of the tea garden workers who is aware about the hierarchies at work, her narrative illustrates how women’s voices get silenced.

“Women who are active in the unions do not have the capacity to convince. They simply listen and come back from the meetings. There is no unity amongst themselves and have problem when someone younger than them speaks out. She argues that the problem is a universal issue and not a personal issue of entitlements and rights. It is not about whom the officer is or which rank s/he belongs to. Even if we want we are unable to say or do anything. We end up keeping quiet and work. Even if we demand it is not prioritised by the management”.

It was interesting to note that she being a young, dynamic, literate and an articulate woman member of the tea community is not a member of any organisation or the Fair Trade workers' collective. Such Fair Trade initiatives have been taken up on a large scale particularly in the tea gardens cultivating export-oriented organic tea. Rather membership is possibly determined by those who would not raise their voices against capital. Are the women workers themselves are reluctant to arise and awake? The Munnar event (*Jasmine revolution*) has proved that they are neither subservient nor are reluctant to take over the batons of leadership from their male counterparts. That they could very much be in prominence and force the plantation patriarchy (read management, union and state) to bow down. Why are there no such mass movements or responses in West Bengal and Assam?

III Concluding thoughts

The tea industry in this region has undergone several upheavals since the last few decades. As mentioned, changes in the ownership patterns (withdrawal of Sterling companies, new entrants to tea business); restructuring of the estate sector (closures and abandonments of tea estates due to stiff international competition and overproduction as a result of mushrooming of the small tea grower sector) as prioritised by the state (Das Gupta 1999; Sumitha 2014; Rasaily 2013). The Tea Act 1953 appears to be rarely invoked either for controlling production, pricing or for labour within the Indian tea industry which witnessed a severe economic crisis at the turn of the millennium. Strikes, *bandhs* and lockouts were and continue to affect workers who are left with no option but to migrate in situations of distress migration as experienced lately during the crisis period faced by the tea industry and very recently in Darjeeling during the 104 days strike called by *Gorkha Janmukti Morcha* (GJM) in 2017. Individuals, families and relations who were brought to labour in the harsh climatic and geographical locations by their own kinsmen (*sardars, akritis, kanganis*) across India are now placed in a situation of precariousness and restlessness. There is a sense of discontent and distrust among the tea plantation workers. A significant degree of out-migration of the populace for overseas employment to countries such as Israel, Dubai and other Middle Eastern countries for contractual work was noted during field visits. Importantly, there is a considerable decline in recruitment of permanent workers and upgradation of salaries of sub-staff particularly in the tea estate under study. It is important to reiterate that tea cultivation and production will not be discontinued per se despite a negative growth rate of the estate sector vis-à-vis the small tea grower sector (Rasaily 2013).

What seems pertinent here is to ask is why despite the numerical dominance of the women, there is no qualitative presence in the way politics of labour evolved in this region? What are the structural factors that relegate them to the receiver's end while it is they who predominate the world of plantation labour? Why still today we do not have a single women trade unionist from among the plantation labour from this region? Why the Munnar (Kanan Devan Tea Plantations (KDTP) Kerala) movement (*Pembillai Orumai*) headed by women is simply unthinkable in North Bengal tea zone? Why women's concerns in plantations not a matter of

mainstream politics? How long the voices of the women workers in North Bengal plantations will remain merely as “micro narratives of resistance”? We have seen for more than one and half century that the destiny of the plantation labour did not change much. The tender hands and nimble fingers are suitable enough to pluck all the oddities outside of the plantations besides tea leaves. Is this the price that women workers have to pay (low wages, drudgery, overwork, anaemia – back pain, minimal social security) to generate state revenue? Gender parity should be reflected on their material situations with an improvement in wages that will necessarily bring about a profound change in their physical, social and economic wellbeing.

Thus there are broadly few trends in this region. First, the changing structure of plantation economy from the estate to the small holder sector; second, the shift from the conventional working class led collective bargaining to identity-based politics with workers rights getting replaced with CSR and Fair trade, although a welcome initiative becomes problematic when social security benefits such as Provident Fund, Gratuity and maternity benefits may perhaps get eroded in the long run. And third, with the absence of land ownership and alternative avenues for employment within, is migration the best possible alternative; or could a separate state alleviate the conditions of labour? This revisit thus throws up critical questions on the future of plantation economy and society in North Bengal. Will the economic landscape of this region change? How will it be shaped and directed? These questions embedded in the geopolitical and economic processes of the region deserve some sincere attention by the stakeholders.

Annexure I

Share of Women in Employment across Plantations

Year	Coffee	Rubber	Tea	Other Plantation	Total
1995	36,667 (45)	32,703 (32.81)	12,20,452 (49.46)	6,182 (48.35)	12,96,004 (48.88)
1996	36,260 (60)	24,941 (39.06)	10,12,704 (51.52)	4,756 (50.46)	10,78,661 (51.51)
1997	17,670 (51)	25,553 (40.11)	7,63,496 (51.06)	6,153 (51.78)	8,12,872 (50.72)
1998	28,333 (56)	22,092 (33.61)	8,94,932 (48.89)	5,649 (46.61)	9,51,006 (48.73)
1999	26,137 (50)	18,831 (34.23)	8,52,675 (49.79)	4,488 (51.31)	9,02,131 (49.49)
2000	29,249 (48)	26,556 (40.37)	9,03,024 (50.05)	6,784 (52.89)	9,65,613 (49.73)
2001	31,237 (55)	28,164 (41.26)	3,22,004 (53.64)	7,557 (48.95)	3,88,962 (52.79)
2002	22,769 (58)	29,329 (42.53)	6,65,554 (53.48)	4,223 (54.84)	7,21,927 (53.18)
2003	21,872 (58)	30,789 (42.17)	6,15,195 (53.61)	5,524 (49.96)	6,73,380 (53.21)
2004	14,712 (58)	23,934 (41.69)	6,91,026 (52.81)	3,797 (56.62)	7,33,469 (52.57)
2005	21,641 (59)	25,804 (38.78)	6,26,093 (52.82)	2,148 (56.03)	6,77,372 (52.49)
2006	18,282 (56)	25,997 (37.71)	4,21,582 (52.01)	3,195 (59.03)	4,69,056 (51.41)
2007	18,640 (59)	18,433 (38.76)	6,10,115 (55)	6,387 (45.33)	6,53,575 (54.56)
2008	21,741 (62)	17,143 (37.16)	7,13,931 (53.43)	5,268 (48.97)	7,58,083 (53.27)
2009	19,975 (62.81)	19,534 (40.62)	7,20,315 (53.36)	5,262 (49.26)	7,65,086 (53.25)
2010	12,916 (60.82)	15,370 (39.29)	6,29,995 (54.73)	5,226 (49.90)	6,63,507 (55.86)

Source: Labour Bureau (2012): Statistical Profile of Women Workers, 2011-12 & Statistical Profile on Women Labour 2012-13; Ministry of Labour and Employment, GOI, calculated
 Note: Figures in parentheses show percentage share of women as calculated

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