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Women Tea Plantation Workers of North Bengal and the Politics of Wages and Other Entitlements

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Abstract:

This paper makes an attempt to look into the politics behind the prevalence of low wages of workers in the tea industry of West Bengal where women workers have been preponderant numerically almost since its inception during the colonial era. In its attempt to do so, the paper has delved into the role of the state, planters' associations and trade unions in locating the reasons behind the existence of almost starvation level of wages in this industry where women have been the primary wage earners.

Keywords: Labour, Gender, Wages, Tea, Plantations, State, Trade Unions, Planters' Lobby

1. Introduction

The tea industry has assumed a vital place in the Indian economy being a significant commodity of international trade, one of the largest foreign exchange earners for the central government of India¹ and also for being one of the largest employers², majority of which are women, among the organised sector industries in the country almost since its inception during the colonial period in the middle of the nineteenth century (Griffiths, 1967; Tinker, 1974; Bhowmik, Xaxa & Kalam, 1996; Chatterjee, 2007; Labour Bureau, 2008; Bhowmik, 2009; Rai & Chakraborty, 2009; Bhowmik, 2011; Gothoskar, 2012; Chaudhuri, 2014). One significant feature of this industry is that while the proportion of female workers has declined sharply in the organised sectors in India, in tea plantations, females still constitute almost half of the labour force (Rasaily, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2014). West Bengal is also no exception to this all-India trend and this industry³ provides employment to a large number of women in the state. While one can witness a decadal (1998-2008) drop in the average daily employment of workers by 25.14 per cent in the tea industry in this state, employment of women increased by 25.33 per cent, from 2004-2008, which is no doubt quite significant (Rasaily, 2013:81). However, in spite of all these, the wages of workers in the tea industry in this state have been the lowest among organised sector industries in the country since its beginning during the colonial era (Bhowmik, Xaxa & Kalam, 1996; Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998-1999; Bhowmik, 2009; Gothoskar, 2012). Further, the women workers, who have been the primary wage earners in this industry in West Bengal and also responsible for its spectacular growth because of their feminine skills traditionally associated with 'plucking of tea leaves'-the most vital task of this industry, continued to receive lower wages than their male counterparts for same kind of jobs since its inception till the passing of the Equal Remuneration Act in 1976 (Bhowmik, 1981; Bhadra, 1992). The existence of this abysmally low wage rate in this industry has devastating effects on the women tea plantation workers of North Bengal being the backbone of this industry, in the forms of high incidences of starvation deaths, trade and trafficking of young girls etc. (Rai & Chakraborty, 2009; Chakraborty, 2013; Ghosh, 2014). Given this background, the present paper makes an attempt to look into the politics behind the prevalence of this almost starvation level wage of the workers, in an industry, in which women have been numerically preponderant as well as primary bread earners almost since its inception. In our attempt to do so, we have delved into the role of the state, planters' lobby and trade unions, both in the pre-independence and post-independence period, in locating some of the plausible reasons behind the existence such low wages in this highly profitable business endeavour and the resultant disadvantaged position and systematic poverty of the workers, especially women, generation after generation.

¹ As for example, India exported tea worth of Rs. Rs. 2,203.09 crores during the period January to February 2012 (The Hindu, 2013).

² The tea plantation industry in India employs a little over 10 lakh permanent workers making it the largest employer in the private sector and the second largest employer in the country, after the railways (Bhowmik, 2015). Women constitute more than half of this workforce (Rasaily, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2014).

³ In West Bengal, the tea industry is located in the two northernmost districts of the state, namely Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. There are three tea growing regions in these two districts, namely, Terai and Darjeeling Hills in the Darjeeling district and Dooars in the Jalpaiguri district.

2. Wage Scenario in West Bengal's Tea Industry: Some Discernible Trends and Issues

In this section, an overview of the trends of wage structure in the tea plantation industry in West Bengal, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods, is given as it will provide a better context for understanding the politics involved behind the existence of an abysmally low wage rate in this highly profitable business venture. From our brief review of a few scholarly works (Bose, 1954; Griffiths, 1967; Bhowmik, 1981; 1982; 1994; 2015; Chatterjee, 2007; Gothoskar, 2012; Nandy, 2013b) that have dealt with the wage-related issues of workers in the Indian tea industry, especially that in the state of West Bengal, some of the following important issues emerge:

First, although low wages have always been a distinctive feature of the plantation industry in India, wage rates of tea plantation workers, especially in the states of West Bengal and Assam, have shown an abysmally low rate of increase in comparison to the wage rate of workers in other industries in the organised sector.

Second, the wage of a tea plantation worker in these two above-mentioned states has remained not only substantially lower than that of a worker in the jute mills or textile industries, but even an organised labourer working outside urban areas, such as in coal mines, gets twice his wage.

Third, since the colonial rule in the wage rates of tea plantation workers in relation to the agricultural labourers have also remained much lower. As noted by Sir Percival Griffiths (1967: 309-310), the official historian of India's tea industry, the wages of workers in the tea plantations during the late 18th century and 19th century remained static at around rupees three per month. In comparison to this, the wages of agricultural labourers in the adjoining villages of tea plantations were more than double, around rupees seven per month (as cited in Bose, 1954:87).

At present, the scenario has not changed much. The workers in tea industry in West Bengal get Rs.122.50/ as daily cash wage and what is given in kind hardly amounts to Rs. 20/-. So, the total daily wage of a tea plantation labour stands at Rs. 142.50/-. But when one holiday per week is factored in, the actual wage is reduced. And after state-regulated employers' deductions are taken for social security (provident funds) and electricity (for estates with electricity), the actual wage is further reduced. The amount, thus received, is less than that of the official minimum rate of the agricultural labourers in the state which is Rs. 135/- per day and that given to the unemployed under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is Rs.130/- per day.

Fourth, wages in the tea industry in West Bengal varied across gender lines for a long time since its inception during the colonial period. Women workers in this industry were paid lesser wages than their male counterparts for the same kind of work till the passing of the Equal Remuneration Act in 1976 by the central government of India. Under the Planter Raj⁴ also women were paid lower wages than their male counterparts. Some of the figures of the wage rates available during the colonial period bear testimony to the fact that under the Planter Raj, even though women labourers were indispensable for the growth of tea industry, were paid lesser wages than their male counterparts. For example, the penal contract system, which was introduced through Act VI of the Bengal Council as early as 1865, stipulated minimum monthly wages, which was higher for men workers (rupees five) than women workers (rupees four) (Behal & Mohapatra, 1992:146). Again, while the average monthly earnings of tea plantation workers in 1923, as fixed by the Doors Planters' Association, were between nine and twelve rupees for males and between four and nine rupees for females (as cited in Bhowmik, 1981:68), in 1929, the average monthly earnings were fourteen rupees four annas and one pie for males and ten rupees five annas and eight pies for females (Government of India, 1931: 399). Not only during colonial era, difference between the wages of male and female workers in this industry also existed in post-independent India. Table 1 (Appendix) clearly brings out the wage differentials between men and women workers from 1952 till 1982. However, in the pre-independence period, the difference was greater with women earning three-fourths of what men earned (Bhowmik, 1981:94).

Thus, it is a matter of grave concern and an interesting point of research how the planters' lobby, either with or without the backing of the state, have been able to keep the wages of tea plantations workers abysmally low, even over six decades of legislative provisions⁵ and what special implications this has in the lives of millions of women workers. It will also be a worthwhile exercise to find out the role played by the trade unions, operating in the tea belt of North Bengal, in this whole process.

3. Gender and Wage Politics under the Planter Raj in West Bengal's Tea Industry

The wage rates of the workers in the tea plantations of the North Bengal region are rooted in the history of the tea plantations in multifarious ways. Since its inception, the tea industry in North-east India has certain peculiar features which set it apart from other industries in the organised sector (Bhowmik, 1997). One such feature was the notion of family-based employment, or to be more precise employment of women in large numbers, initiated during the colonial era. In fact, it was in the very formative stage of tea plantations in North Bengal that the central significance of female labourers in the work process got articulated and their indispensable role, became so vital for this industry, especially in North-east India, that it is difficult to think of an industry where women have played so important a part (Atkins, 1957; Sengupta, 1960; Varma, 2011).

The work in tea plantations from the very beginning had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains, where the crucial labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers of women. Hence, women have been considered more efficient in plucking tea leaves than their male counterparts. In reality, however, the division of labour between

⁴ The phrase Planter Raj has been borrowed from Amalendu Guha (1977): Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.

⁵ The Plantation Labour Act came into effect in 1951 which provided non-wage facilities and benefits like ration at a subsidised rate, creche and medical facilities etc to the tea plantation workers.

the sexes is a matter of convention/belief than a scientific reality and the main reason for the widespread employment of women workers has been to keep the wages low (Bhowmik, 1981; 1997; Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998; Sen, 1999; 2002).

From the 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 tea plantations and meet the increasing demand for tea in the international market-remained an issue of paramount concern for the colonial tea planters (Xaxa, 1985; Chatterjee, 1995; 2001; DBITA, 1979, as cited in Chatterjee, 1995:45; Besky, 2014). As the 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., the tea industry faced acute labour shortage during its inception years. However, what is noteworthy is that although during early phases of the Planter Raj, the colonial planters faced acute labour shortage, the wages in the tea industry remained very low (Bhowmik, 1996). This is opposed to the wages of textile mill workers of Mumbai, where labour shortage had increased the wage level of workers (Bose, 1954: 75 as cited in Sarkar and Bhowmik, 1998: L50). But under the Planter Raj, this did not happen because the powerful planters' lobby prevented the growth of a labour market, where wage would be fixed on the basis of a free interaction of demand for and supply of labour (Bhowmik, 1996). This is because in order to meet the high demand for labour, colonial planters of North Bengal region had started recruiting workers, either the entire family or single woman, from the subsistent poverty-stricken and famine-ridden Adivasi regions in the neighbouring areas of Bengal, namely the Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur Plateau and also from among the oppressed and marginalised Kiranti ethnic groups of eastern Nepal using various coercive and deceitful means and methods (Tinker, 1974; Guha, 1977; Jain, 1988; Chatterjee, 2001 & Besky, 2014). But as the productivity of these untrained migrant labourers in the initial period was low, in order to reap the maximum possible profit for their products through stepping up tea production for the competitive world market while keeping down labour costs⁶, the planters fixed the wages at a very low level, sometimes even below the real income these workers used to obtain in the subsistence economies of their area of origins (Jain, 1988; Behal, 2010).

Thus, the tea plantation sector, though capitalistic in nature, 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 of coercion. Instead of the market mechanism, force, both overt and covert, and politico-legal mechanisms became of crucial importance in recruiting and mobilising plantation labour in North-east India (Das Gupta, 1992). The wages of the labourers in the tea industry, in the pre-independence period, were arbitrarily fixed according to the dictates of the planters' associations, like Dooars Planters' Association, Indian Tea Planters' Association etc. The migrant workers, majority of whom were women, had no 'say' in the matter of wage fixation whatsoever (Bhowmik, 1981).

4. Gender & Post colonial Wage Politics in West Bengal's Tea Industry

Even after India's independence from the colonial rule, the wage scenario in the tea industry of West Bengal remained more or less the same. The post-colonial planters ignored the provisions of the Payment of Wages Act of 1936⁷ and continued on not paying a uniform consistent wage and paying even lesser to the women workers (Bhowmik, 1981). In order to improve the condition of the tea plantation workers in the state, in March 1950, the then government of West Bengal appointed the Minimum Wages Advisory Committee for Tea Plantations, popularly known as the Modak Committee. However, in 1952, in spite of its lofty ideals, like minimum wage must not barely be a subsistence wage and should cover different welfare benefits like education, health and other facilities, came up with recommendations that were highly gender-insensitive. The Committee fixed minimum wages at Rs 1.19 for males and Rs 1.06 for females in Dooars, which even by the standard of 1952 Consumer Price Index, cannot be considered as a subsistence-level wage (ibid:88). But the planters went a step ahead and flouted the recommendations of the Modak Committee by resorting to a wage decrease on the ground of a 'crisis' that the tea industry was undergoing at that time. The resultant effect was that this led to an even lower wage for women tea plantation workers of the North Bengal region.

Again in 1952, the Bannerji Committee was appointed by the then government of West Bengal to see whether the decision of the tea planters in reducing the wages of the workers was justified or not. This Committee strongly recommended that the minimum wages stated by the Modak Committee should be put into immediate effect. As a result, in 1953 wages for males in Dooars rose to Rs 1.53 and for women to Rs. 1.39. However, wage increase of the tea plantation workers of this region was triggered off by the fact that some of the essential commodities, both food and non-food items, which were supplied at a slightly concessional rate to the workers by the planters, were withdrawn by them. In return, the planters provided cash compensation of 34 paise for male workers and 33 paise for female workers per day, which actually made them claim of providing a wage hike for the tea plantation workers (Bhowmik, 1981: 88; Bhowmik, 1982:1600). Further, in its final recommendations, which came into effect from April 1, 1966 the Central Wage Board laid down such wages rates that that the wage difference between males and females increased from 14 paise to 17 paise (Bhowmik, 1982: 1600). Thus, time and again, the women workers have been discriminated in the payment of wages in this industry.

But what is noteworthy is that even after the minimum wages were fixed by the Wage Board, the difference in wage payment between men and women in tea industry continued. Although this issue was raised by the labour unions, the planters' lobby was obstinate and disagreed to pay an equal wage. The argument put forward by them in favour of maintaining this difference was that since women were given a lower volume of work than men in the tea plantations, it was necessary to maintain this wage difference. For example,

⁶ Tea being a labour-intensive crop, labour cost is the main cost of tea production.

⁷ This Act aims to regulate the manner of payment of wages and their realisation in case of non-payment.

the thika⁸ (for plucking) assigned to women workers was less than that of their male counterparts by three to four kilograms. In case of cultivation work, it was about 20 per cent less than what given to men workers (Bhowmik, 1981:95).

In 1976, the Equal Remuneration Act was passed by the central government of India, which sought to remove wage difference among the sexes in all industries (Bhowmik, 1981; Ratnam & Jain, 2002). Even after the passing of this Act, following the same logic mentioned above, the planters continued to pay lower wages to women workers. Not only that, some of the tea estates raised the workload of women and made it at par with men in order to pay them wages same as the men. Thus, the planters increased the wages of women by 17 paise. In reality this resulted in a wage cut for them which can be observed more clearly in the task of plucking. Here, the general practice was that a difference of three kilograms exists in the thika between men and women workers. While for the men the thika assigned was 28 kilograms, for women it was then 25 kilograms. The doubly was seven paise at that time. If the thika is made 28 kilograms, women lose 21 paise per day as doubly. Thus, even though their pay was increased by 17 paise, they lose four paise per day (Bhowmik, 1981:95).

Keeping this in view, in December 1976, the Labour Ministry clarified that Equal Remuneration Act applied to 'equal nature of work' and not to the 'equal volume of work'. Hence an increase in thika for women workers by the planters was made illegal for paying them wages at par with men (ibid). But once the thika for women had been made at par with women, this trend is still continuing and there exists no difference in thika for men and women. As for example, Rina Mahato (name changed), a middle aged tea plantation worker in Dooars, while speaking about her experience of plucking of tea leaves, remarked, 'Didi, pati tolar kaam e amader sathe morod der kono tofath nai! (There lies no difference between men and 'us' in plucking tea leaves!) [Author's Fieldwork, 2012-2013].

Another explanation put forward by the planters' lobby was that the employment of women in the tea sector would decline if equal wages were paid to both sexes and unequal workload was maintained between them (Bhowmik, 1981). However, such apprehension does not have much base or empirical grounding because anybody who is familiar with the tea industry, and the ways in which it operates, will easily know that women are indispensable in the main task of this industry, i.e. plucking of 'two leaves and a bud'.

Further, not only one can find gender-based discrimination in matters of wage payment, the very process of fixation of wages in this industry is also highly politicised, which in turn have devastating effects on the lives of millions of women workers in the tea belt of North Bengal (Bhowmik, 1981; 1982; 2011; 2015; Sarkar & Bhowmik, 1998; Chatterjee, 2007; Nandy, 2005; 2013a). Even though the 1948 law on minimum wages has the tea industry on its schedule, almost nothing moved on the implementation of this law until the 15th All India Labour Conference was held in 1957. At this meeting, attended by the representatives of the capitalist sector, the trade unions and the government, the exact modalities of minimum wage fixation were carried out. It was decided that the need-based approach would be used for the fixation of minimum wages of all the industrial workers of the country. Further, it was agreed during this conference that the minimum wage of the workers would be such that it covered the food and living requirements of three units of consumption. Subsequently, for the fixation of this minimum wage the government appointed central wage boards, which were basically tripartite bodies, in 22 industries. Soon after that, minimum wages for all scheduled industry have been declared from time to time in all states. Accordingly the Central Wage Board for the Tea Plantation Industry was formed in December, 1960 to fix the minimum wage for the tea plantation workers in the country. But the Board took more than five years to submit its report because it had to face a strong resistance from the planters' lobby. The bone of contention was the number of units to be covered while fixing the minimum wage for this industry.

Whereas in all industries the wage was determined on the basis of the requirements of three units of consumption, in the tea plantation industry this could not be done. This is because the tea planters' association set up a strong resistance to three units on the ground that as there was equal employment of male and female workers in this industry, it implied that there were two earners in the family and hence the units fixed should be 1.5 instead of three. But the Board had noted that "the family system of employment cannot be considered as unique to the tea plantation industry, and even if it has been so, it is a matter of consideration whether it was justified for employers to claim benefit of it by the way of low wages for male wage earners" [emphasis mine](Government of India, 1966: 68). Moreover, the planters even felt that fixing of minimum wages was 'absolutely unnecessary' (as cited in Bhowmik, 1981:69) as they do not feel that the workers are being paid a low wage in this industry.

Again, in spite of the fact that, time and again plenty of contrary evidences⁹ were cited by the government and labour union representatives, the planters' lobby remained adamant on its demand. As it was already declared by the central government that the decisions of the Wage Boards, even if they were legally correct and fair, could not be implemented unless there is unanimity in the Board, it made the position of the workers in this industry all the more vulnerable by providing the management with a strong bargaining power. Thus, owing to the fact the planters' lobby refused to accept anything from than that of their demand of including 1.5 units, it was reluctantly accepted by the workers and the labour unions. As a result, the need-based minimum wage in the tea plantations was half of that of other industries. The different actors involved in this process of negotiation had their own 'stakes', which made them comply with the demands of the planters' lobby. The workers, for example, if do not oblige to the unreasonable

⁸ Thika in the parlance of tea estates in North Bengal refers to task assigned to the workers or the minimum quota of tea leaves to be plucked.

⁹ The Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931) and the Rege Commission (1946) had categorically stated that the system of employment of family members did not justify in any way the existence of low wages in this industry (Government of India, 1931:311; Rege, 1946: 76 as cited in Bhowmik, 1981:68). Later, in 1966, the Central Wage Board for the tea plantation industry also found that the planters' arguments were baseless because the extent of family employment in the tea plantations was not the same as found in the earlier days when there was a shortage of labour. The Board further noted that there was an increase in the number of single worker households (Bhowmik, 1997).

suggestions and demands of their employers, they would not get anything. Similarly, the trade unions operating in the tea belt of North Bengal gave in to demands of the planters' association with the justification that "something was better than nothing". Moreover, it is also to be noted that even though the Central Wage Board in its recommendations were critical of the prevalence of very low wages in this industry, at the same time it stated that it "was not in a position to re-commend wages in keeping with the present cost of living and in terms of the need-based wage formula of the 15th Indian Labour Conference" as this would result in a sudden jump in wages (Bhowmik, 1982:1600). Thus, we see that there was some degree of duality and vacillations on the part of the Board while coming up with its recommendations.

However, in spite all these in states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, minimum wages in tea are declared regularly at statutory levels. But West Bengal has yet to declare a minimum wage in the tea industry over the last half century. This is because in 1974, the West Bengal tea unions, dominated by pro-business groups (mainly the Congress party) and upper class, educated Bengali leaders of leftist unions, came to a tripartite agreement whereby the government was no longer obliged by law to declare a minimum wage in tea. Whatever actual wage was agreed to in periodic wage negotiations would be taken to be the minimum wage! It is therefore no surprise that all major tea-growing states have wages that are higher than what the tea plantation labourers obtain in West Bengal. In this way, low wages in the tea industry were built into the system in the post independent period. As a matter of fact, the tea plantation labour has the unique distinction of being in the formal sector as they come under all the laws enforced in this sector but they earn wages which are much lower than even the informal sector workers!

What is really striking is that the planters not only do not feel that the wages of the workers in the tea industry is low, but they have gone a step further and have argued that the workers are getting more than their due share and that increase in their wages has caused a fall in their productivity (Bhowmik, 1982). In fact as early as the 1980s, the planters' association believed that wages delinked with productivity has disastrous effect on any industry, and the tea industry is not an exception to this. Thus, the Indian Tea Association¹⁰ has been demanding that wages be linked with productivity and that there should be disincentives to workers who fail to pluck the mandatory thika of tea leaves which make them eligible for receiving the daily wage. Further, they strengthened their argument and demand by claiming that payment of wages and other benefits to the workers account for more than 55 per cent of the cost of tea production in tea plantations (Misra, 2003: 3030).

But their arguments and demands hardly have any relevance because while production of tea has increased by 40 per cent from 1951 to 1980, the overall employment of labour during the same period has decreased by 35 per cent. In an industry which is heavily dependent on manual labour and where mechanisations has not advanced at all and whatever little technological progress has happened is confined mainly to the manufacturing process in the factory, increase in production along with a decrease labour certainly does not reveal lower labour productivity. On the contrary, it is not possible to increase the production of tea unless the productivity of the worker who plucks the leaves and maintains the bushes is increased (Bhowmik, 1982).

Finally in 2005 despite a 20 day strike by 300,000 workers in the tea plantations of West Bengal, supported by the workers' unions and the state government, over refusal by the planters to increase their wages, the planters prevailed in their argument that the workers were being overpaid and that there could be no increase in wages without increase in productivity (Bhowmik, 2009, Chaudhuri, 2014). After the final wage negotiations, even though the minimum daily wage was increased by just one rupee, the productivity clause was passed. In this context, it is worth-mentioning that although there had always been an 'incentive wage' (known as doubly) for the plantation workers to pluck tea leaves above a fixed quota (around 24 kilograms at present), with the introduction of this new clause, the thika remained at 24 kilograms, and the worker is entitled to will get the extra wages only after picking 30 kilograms of tea leaves. This implies that a labourer has to pluck a minimum of six kilograms of tea leaves extra per day during the peak season to receive the incentive wage or doubly. But, as the tea bushes are already old in Assam and North Bengal, it is very difficult to reach even the minimum quota, especially towards the end of the peak season and the question of earning a doubly becomes almost a distant dream. Keeping this fact in mind, when the planters' lobby has successfully managed to get wages linked to productivity in the year 2005, an erosion of the daily wage of the workers has become regular matter (Bhowmik, 2005). This introduction of productivity norm however had far more serious implications than just intensification of work for the workers. With the wage structure intrinsically skewed against the women workers this further intensification of work has forced the women to bring in children to assist them in plucking leaves to meet the productivity quota, thereby leading to the deployment of child labour in the tea plantations once again¹¹ (Author's own Fieldwork, 2012-2013).

The above account of wage determination and fixation and the role of the planters' lobby, trade unions and the state clearly bring out their attitudes towards the women workers, who form the backbone of this industry. The value of shares of tea companies has been rising rapidly and tea prices have increased steadily over the years. Moreover, the demand for tea in the international and domestic markets is also growing faster than increase in production. Though these trends may be good for our foreign exchange craving economy and for the companies owning plantations, it has hardly of any significance for the one million permanent workers in this industry, especially women workers who are the primary wage earners in this industry.

5. Non-wage entitlements and Gender-based discrimination of Women Tea Plantations Workers

In the tea plantations of North Bengal, not only are the wages, but the issue of other non-wage entitlements, as provisioned by the various acts like the Plantation Labour Act, Maternity Benefit Acts, are also worked out through a patriarchal logic, thereby making

¹⁰ The Indian Tea Association represents one body of the tea planters.

¹¹ In this context it is worth noting that 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.

the lives of millions of women workers more vulnerable (Final Report, 2004; Chatterjee, 2007; Dasgupta, 2009; Gothoskar, 2012; Author's Fieldwork, 2012-2013; Nandy, 2013a). For example, one can find strong incidences of gender-biasness in the calculus of food ration entitlements. Let us elaborate this further. A woman worker-and the majority of the workers in the tea estates of North Bengal are women- and her two minor dependents (between six and eighteen years of age) are entitled to receive a maximum of 2 kilograms of rice and 3.7 kilograms of wheat per week. Her dependent husband will not receive any ration. But if a husband is a worker, the wife is considered a dependent and will receive an allotment. In other words, while woman labourer with two children has a ration entitlement of three units, irrespective of the fact that she might be having a husband, other dependents or additional number of children to feed, a male labourer is entitled to four units of ration. This leads to further marginalization of women working in the tea plantations of North Bengal. As overall household food availability does not automatically guarantee individual food and nutritional security, in spite of the vital role played by the women in the tea plantation economies, women continue to suffer in terms of nutritional deficiencies (Chaudhury & Parthasarathy, 2007).

Further, this kind of ration allotment provides only about 200 grams per day per workers food entitlement, a very paltry amount for the hardest kind of physical labour they put in. Moreover, daily wages of the workers are linked to food consumption in a coercive ways. As the tea plantation labourers are daily-rated workers, no work means no pay and consequent adjustments to subsidised food allotments. Thus, if the subsidised cost for ration is 40 paise per kilo per week for six days of work, then just one day of absence will require the worker to pay five times the rate at which she would have paid if she had worked for six days in the week.

All the instances cited above are a clear violation of the law of equal remuneration passed in 1976. But surprisingly enough, such issues, which are blatant discrimination against millions of women tea workers, are never contested by the trade unions, nor been taken up by women's movement in the state. This clearly brings out the fact, that trade unions are insensitive to the gender concerns, even though women are the majority of the workforce in this industry. Also, what is noteworthy is that the women's organisations are not concerned with the issues of women's work, but rather more interested with issues related to violence against women. For example, North Bengal People's Development Centre, a prominent civil society organisation working in the Dooars region, have been concerned with issues of domestic violence and witchcraft among the women tea workers of North Bengal, while the issues of discrimination in the wages and ration entitlements to the women workers do not come up in their agendas.

Another area where women workers are being deprived to a great extent in the tea industry of North Bengal is in terms of receiving maternity benefits-an entitlement considered to be very crucial for most sections of working class women (Gothoskar, 2012; Author's own Fieldwork, 2012-2013). Like women workers of other organised sector industries, the women workers in the tea industry come under the purview of the Maternity Benefits Act (MBA) of 1961. But its importance in the lives of women workers in the tea industry is all the more given the nature of their work- first the work they do is extremely heavy and laborious, and secondly, their daily wage rates are almost at the level of starvation wages, as already discussed.

This is even truer of women workers who work as *bigha*¹² labourers in the tea plantations. According to the MBA, even these *bigha* women workers are entitled to the provisions of the MBA if they have worked for 80 days or more in the 12 preceding months. However, the planters' lobby in some states like Assam is so powerful that they have been able to get the MBA amended and the modified provision entitles a woman worker for MBA provisions if she has worked for 150 days in a year. Tea being a seasonal industry, this amendment excludes almost all the women workers who work as temporary workers. As a result, the planters always have a tendency to employ women *bigha* worker for plantation work in their tea estates, especially during the peak plucking season, for evading the extra cost that they have to bear in providing maternity benefits to the women workers.¹³ In fact, in this context it is worth mentioning that even though we are talking about increase in women's employment in the tea industry of North Bengal, it is has happened mainly in the domain of casual workforce. To a large extent this phenomenon can be attributed to the various legislations, like the Maternity Benefit Act, the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, which had made it mandatory to provide benefits and privileges to the permanent women tea plantation workers, in the form of providing crèches, health facilities and maternity benefits etc.

Again, although according to the MBA, women workers from 6.5 months of their pregnancy period should be given 'light work', this is hardly implemented by the planters in their respective tea estates. This has been corroborated in the interviews with the women workers while conducting the fieldwork in the tea belt of North Bengal for our study. Although such gross violation of the provisions of the MBA is quite rampant, only those cases get reported in the media, where non-adherence to the 'leave' provisions of this Act has led to death incidents of the women workers. To cite an example, in a tea estate owned by the Tata Tea in the Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal, which accounts for a little more than one per cent of the company's tea production in North-east India, a 22-year-old woman tea plantation worker was denied maternity leave and she eventually collapsed while working in the fields. The incident spurred labour unrest, leading to a lockout of that particular estate (Business Standard, 2009). Incidentally, Tetley was one of the founding members of the Ethical Tea Partnership programme, which aims to improve the lives of tea workers and ensure that drinkers can be confident the tea in their cup has been produced in an environmentally and socially sustainable way.

6. Conclusions

The present paper has brought forth clearly the fact that vulnerabilities of the tea plantation workers of North Bengal, especially that of the women workers, are structured into the very wage regime created by the planters, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods. This paper also highlights that the low wages of the workers are not in anyways linked to the price that tea fetches, both in domestic and international markets. The wages are in fact intrinsically linked to the pre-capitalist forms of exploitation that allows tea

¹² The temporary or casual labourers are known as *bigha* workers in the context of tea plantations of North Bengal.

¹³ Permanent workers are just about 20-25% of the working population in the tea estates (Rai & Chakraborty, 2009).

manufacturers and global brands to make super profits. Further, the paper also points out how the planters' lobby has always succeeded in keeping the wages low by using various strategies and ploys, with or without the backing of the state. Similarly, it also throws light on fact the trade unions in this region have remained largely ineffective in matters of wage negotiations and thereby in ensuring the tea plantation workers with the basic minimum wage. To conclude it can be said that the existence of not merely a subsistence level wage in an industry which fills our national exchequer with foreign exchanges, is only possible as there exists a powerful nexus of patronage and sub-patronage among the planters and the trade union leaders which helps in maintaining the pyramid of authority over these migrant labourers. It is then, no surprise that women, who have been the primary wage earners in the tea plantations of North Bengal, bear the brunt of all politics in the most immediate and brutal ways.

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Appendix

Year	Event	Place	Male daily wage	Female daily wage
1952	Minimum Wages Advisory (Modak) Committee	Dooars	1.19	1.06
1953	Bannerji Committee plus withdrawal of concession on essential commodities	Dooars	1.53	1.39
1955	Ad hoc Increment	Dooars	1.71	1.57
1959	Ad hoc Increment	Dooars	1.84	1.70
Before the recommendations of the Central Wage Board of Tea Plantations	Two Interim Increments announced by the Board	Dooars	1.98	1.84
1 st January, 1966	First recommendation of the Board	Dooars	2.11	1.94
1 st April, 1966	Final Recommendation by the Board	Dooars	2.13	1.96
1973(Before the formation of the Second Minimum Wages Fixation Committee)	Through bipartite meetings or agitations by the workers	Dooars	3.00	2.83
1976	Interim Instalments announced by the Committee	Dooars	4.30	4.13
1978	Recommendations of the Committee	Dooars	6.50	6.50
1982	-	Dooars	9.00 (Dooars)	8.83
1982	-	Terai	8.94 (Terai)	8.77
1982	-	Darjeeling Hills	8.62 (Darjeeling Hills)	8.51

Table 1: Daily Wage Rates of Male and Female Workers in the Tea Industry in North Bengal from 1952-82
Source: Compiled by the author from various years of Tea Statistics; Bhowmik, 1981; 1982

Note: The daily wage rates of the plantation labourers in the Dooars region is mainly given because of the availability of data for this region. Apart from the year 1982, for no other year the wage data for all the three tea-growing regions are available.