

# Socio-economic Condition of the Tribal Women Tea Workers in North Bengal- A 20<sup>th</sup> Century Perspective.

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The Tribal Communities are considered one of the most primitive inhabitants of West Bengal. They have emigrated in this state from various places of the Country having lost their land and sources of earning. In North Bengal, tribal community is mainly constituted by the tribal group like Oraon, santal and Munda. These ethnic groups are grossly engaged working in several tea gardens. Both tribal men and women contribute immensely to the economic development of this region but unfortunately they are treated as one of the marginalized sections of the society even in the twenty first century. If we look back to the previous century we can easily assess the prime cause of their backwardness both in their social and economic lives. Throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been a rapid growth in the number of tea gardens in North Bengal. Tea has emerged as a strong contributor in the economic development of this area. Gradually it has been turned to a profit making business in which the planters or the garden authority often deprive the workers of their wages and other deserving facilities. The scenario is heart rending in case of women workers who are subject to various deprivations in their socio economic life. This unfortunate multitude has still remained under the dark phase of unprivileged existential struggle. This paper is a sincere effort to illuminate the deplorable socio-economic condition of these tribal women workers against the backdrop of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding century has witnessed a commendable emergence of women empowerment in various sectors of the society. The Tribal women workers, however, have been suffering unprecedented ignorance and misery since the last century. According to the 1991 census about 33 percent tribal people reside in North Bengal. About 6 percent of this population is constituted by the tribal women. This major section of the society is segregated from the common stream. They are instead receivers of sheer callousness from the part of the state. It is significant to note that the tribal community does not look upon the girls as burden on the family. Even the women in their society participate in earnings and thereby stand by the side of the family. Demographically the growth rate of women is higher than the men in the tribal society in North Bengal. Tribal Women enjoy equal status with their male counterparts. Despite playing a leading role in the community these women are found subject to illiteracy, malnutrition, poverty, premature death and oppression in the society.

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<sup>1</sup> .Hate,C.A. The Changing Status of Women, Allied Publication, Bombay, 1969.

In lieu of their service rendered to the gardens they have been paid a minimum wage by the garden owners or the planters. Through intense physical and financial exploitation they are made victim to the profit making tea business in North Bengal. Most of the tea gardens in Jalpaiguri district employ women workers without providing facilities in the sector of health and education. In these gardens called kalchini, Ramatang, chinchula, Kumlai women workers are found in deplorable condition. Most of them suffer from chronic diseases like tuberculosis and anemia. Ill health and overwork are the hindrance in the path of their socio economic development.

In order to protect rights of the tea garden workers the revolutionary **Plantation Labour Act**<sup>2</sup> was passed in 1951 that came into force with effect from 01.04.1954. The Plantation Labour Act Provides its employer medical, housing, sickness and educational facilities and various Social security benefits. In case of women workers maternity allowances are provided by clause 30 of the PLA act along with Plantation Labour Rules, 1956. In accordance with this

Act the women workers are to be paid for 12 weeks, four weeks before and eight weeks after confinement. They are strictly prohibited from any kind of arduous jobs during pregnancy. But this advantage is not practically enjoyed by the tribal women tea workers. In Clause 9 of this Act shows provisions for separate latrines and urinals for males and females. In the tea gardens of North Bengal such options are hardly provided to the workers. Moreover, out of the total women workers more than 50% have been found to be employed as temporary or 'faltu labours'. They have to spend hours working in the gardens. Lack of toilet and crèche facilities poses real threat before them. It also increases several health hazards in them. Blinded by profit-making intentions the garden owners often violate the PLA. They even ignore to redeem the indictment of these workers. Any kind of prayer goes unheeded and unnoticed. This situation has proximity with the colonial oppression during the pre independent India.

If we turn to the social background of tribal women we can easily perceive the seamy side of their life. These women are utterly exploited both by their community and authority. In side the family they have to undergo great physical toil taking part in the domestic activities. Starting from child rearing they play major role in collecting food and other sustenance goods and thereby contribute to the economy. It is a matter of concern that they are subject to sexual discrimination even in the community. Tribal women have no right in the property. As per the Santhal Customary Laws only males can inherit land. Even a widow has no claim

over the deceased husband's property if there are agnates. She can however keep the land propert only after consented by the agnates. The Santal Parganas Tenancy Act, 1949 contains in section 20, a special provision that permits a male to gift land to a sister or daughter. The matter of female Succession to property is however changing in a slow pace under growing public opinion.

It goes without saying that the concept of socialization is synonymous with education. Illiteracy and ignorance are the prime causes behind the backwardness of the tribal women in North Bengal. They fail to adopt languages like Bengali or English as a medium of communication. Even the Hindi does not serve the purpose. In the First half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century 'OLCHIKI' has been recognized as the language of Santal Community by the then government of West Bengal. But to our astonishment, we still do not find language to be implemented as the first language in the Primary schools that are set up for the tribal's. This creates a lack of interest in them leading to the state of illiteracy. The female children of this region feel it easier to follow their parents doing works than going to schools. Most of the teachers in the schools feel no apathy for these children. Lack of sensitivity on their part often disrupts the process of literacy

<sup>2</sup> The Plantation Labour Act, 1951.

drive in the tea gardens. In spite of various problems there has been an increase in the rate of education in the tribal women as recorded from the year 1961 to 2001 in North Bengal. The number of ST girls in higher education is also increasing day by day. Reinforcing the need for tribal women education in India in The International conference on Social Justice and Humanity held in 2011 a report says: "the fact remains that a large number of tribal women have missed education at different stages and in order to empower them there is a great need of providing opportunities so as to enable them to assume leadership qualities for economic self reliance and even social transformation." This is equally true in respect to the tribal women in North Bengal.<sup>3</sup>

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century women workers suffered gender based wage discrimination. Despite providing equal labour they were deprived of equal wage with the male workers. With the implementation of **Equal Remuneration Act, 1976**<sup>4</sup> this difference was averted. However these women are over burdened with work pressure both in the family and outside. They hardly get opportunity to enter into organizing activities. For obvious reason they have no access to the trade union leadership which is found male dominated. In a report published in 1990 it has been reiterated that the women workers always participate in the movements or struggles in the tea gardens. But their contribution is less admitted by the leadership. Having no platform for raising their voices these women remain silent and distressed.

The Socio-economic condition of the tribal women reaches its nadir due to the frequent threatening of closure of the gardens by the owners or the authorities. Perceiving the

possibility of loss or due to unsatisfactory rate of profit they declare lock-out or closure that of course bring about indescribable trouble and disaster in the lives of the workers. These closure are often followed by a series of death of innumerable workers are specially children and women suffering from starvation, malnutrition, poverty and oppression. During the last part of previous century incidents of lock-outs and closure have increased in North Bengal.

Recently the workers of Kumlai tea estate have called on strike as the factory owner have taken no step to protect them during the period of closures or lock-outs. In survey conducted by Bombay High Court on the tea workers in Jalpaiguri, it was reported that between 2001 and 2004 more than 800 hundred workers died of starvation related causes. Unfortunately in these cases the state shows a sort of callousness in implementing the required steps.

In general, there is a lack of medical facilities in the tea gardens for the women workers. Many of the hospitals inside the gardens are being run by the without efficient doctors. There is also found dearth of medicine and underage conception are increasing among the tribal women. Some of them die unnoticed during the process of child bearing. Very recently the workers of Manabari tea Estate in Jalpaiguri have outraged against the authority demanding proper wage and medical facilities. In order to avert the cases of premature death of women more health centres are to be set up in the gardens well equipped with doctors and trained nurses. A large section of this poverty stricken women workers are addicted to smoking and drinking 'Haria' (local made liquor) that tell upon their health. This has remained a traditional Practice among them. Proper awareness programme is needed in order to discourage them from this deadly practices. Moreover, NGOs have to take up HIV/AIDS awareness programme in these areas.<sup>5</sup>

During 20<sup>th</sup> century 'Witch Hunting' has taken lives of many innocent tribal women in North Bengal as well as in other tribal areas of west Bengal. In this inhuman practice women is called a 'Witch' by the local

<sup>3</sup> . Tripathy, J, Women and their work Environment, Eds. Sharada Rath and Navaneeta Rath, Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> . Equal Remuneration Act, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> . Atal Yogesh, Sociology and Social Anthropology in India, Dorling Kindersley(India) Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2009.

gurus and she is killed after a prolonged physical and mental torture by the men of her community. Between 1997 and in 1999 about six tribal women were killed in jalpaiguri in the name of this superstitious belief. Mahasweta Devi, an eminent writers and social activist, has pointed out that faced with absolute erosion of traditional norms and culture, the tribal's have clung to witch cult in order to assert their identity. Apart from this a women is branded as witches and killed by relatives to grab her property. The continuation of this evil practice was recently witnessed in the case of Laksmi Murmu. A 60 year old woman, Murmu, was hacked to death at kumodda village in Murshidabad district on 5<sup>th</sup> june 2005 on the charges of being a witch. In most cases the role of the local administration or the police department is that of the silent spectator. More efforts are needed to drive away this social menace that takes away innocent lives even today.

To conclude, the tribal women tea workers are passing through lots of deprivations and oppression since 20<sup>th</sup> century in the socio economic sector. The tea garden authorities have to ensure the proper implementation of the Planters Labour Act in favor of these workers. The Government should pay more attention by the dint of new policies for the welfare of thetribal women fulfilling the Constitutional commitments. This section of women has to be identified first in the course of social transformation and economic development in North Bengal.

