

The Reflection of female tea garden worker in the literature of South Assam: Quest for new World View

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Abstract : *The tea labourers were allured by the agents to come to Assam. They were told that in this part of the country, money falls just like the leaves from the trees. In this song, the female labourer brings out this pathos wherein she has been deceived to leave her home and hearth, near and dear one's to an alien land where she was greeted by abject poverty and torture. This and many other such folk songs represent the painful life of the female tea labourers of Assam during the British regime. The female tea labourers of Assam toil hard to strengthen the economy of the garden owners and the state. But in return they get torture, low wages, unhealthy rooms to dwell, unclean drinking water and various other deprivations. As a result not only they suffer but even the entire family of the labourers are receded deep down the socio-economic ladder. The family life of the tea labourers comprises of multiple problems ranging from unchanged work culture, lack of awareness and education, involvement in petty unsocial activities and drinking to economic hardships. As a result, the female members of the family have to take in the reigns in their hands. In such attempt, they often have to take private loans and repay them amidst great hardships.*

IndexTerms – Tea Garden, South Assam, Female Labourer, Literature, Culture

The most outstanding patriotic drama in the realm of Bengali Literature is 'Cha Kar Darpan' by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra wherein we could see how the white-skinned British Sahib inflicted torture upon the tea garden labourers. Another aspect which could also be discerned from this drama is the collective protest by the tea labourers with the increase of the degree of torture upon them. Though this is a drama yet the events in life are not less than any drama. The plight of the tea garden labourers in real life is not at all palatable. They are perennially deprived, uncared and oppressed. The entire society appears to them as a prison. Though there may be chances of getting out of the prison but not from this quagmire of life. They have to spend the lion's share of their life in this environment.

Very often we utter words like class struggle or communism. But such kind of high sounding words seem to be so baseless and fragile as they have failed to show the light of liberation to many. This holds good if we have a glance at the tea labourers, whether of Barak Valley or belonging to any part of India. In case of the tea labourers, both sides of the coin seem to depict the same picture. The tea labourers have chosen this profession for earning a square meal a day for which they toil very hard. Keeping this objective in mind, they set to work, but in return of their sweat what do they get? This is indeed a big question to reckon upon. When tea has achieved the level of a commercial crop, there seems to be no inverse improvement in the condition of the tea labourers. Rather their financial condition appears to get obliterated in perpetual darkness. Their dreams about their socio-economic upliftment have been trampled upon by a coterie comprising of the tea garden owners, the rich merchants, the contractors and the middleman.

If we look towards the history of tea labourers, we will find that how the British recruited men, women and even children from various parts of the country through agents or middleman for working as labourers in the various tea gardens of Barak Valley. The tea community was not merely exploited in the general sense of the term; the roots of colonialism were spread deep down their body, which ripped them off their mental consciousness.

When tea industry was set up in Cachar in 1855, the prime problem was that of labour. The garden owners used to appoint Arekthieus in order to import labourers from broad. The agents or the middleman in order to earn commission used to procure poor people by alluring them of a bright future and handed over them to the garden owners. These labourers were made to work hard like slaves in the gardens. They were not even provided with bare necessities of life, such as, food, clothing, shelter, drinking water facilities and medicines. As a result, many labourers tried to escape.

At that time, the number of local labourers working in the garden was very less. As such, most of the labourers were brought from different parts of the country. In the decade of 1890, the number of imported labourers was 51,894 which increased to 75,412 in the next decade. Those labourers who were imported to Barak Valley had to undergo an arduous journey spanning more than a month. As a result, many labourers used to die on the way. Another thing which could be noticed was that even after the expiry of the contract, many labourers left the garden and settled in its vicinity, wherever they found cultivable land. This category of people came to be known as ex-tea labourers.

At present, the number voters belonging to the tea labourers community in Barak valley is 2, 90,440. Dr. Purnendu Kumar in his research based book has mentioned that the tea labourers of Barak Valley were all victims of poverty and famine who migrated from Chotanagpur in Bihar, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dumka, Buxar, Gaya, Palamo, Bhagalpur, Munder, Chapra etc. Another batch of labourers migrated from Ganjam in Orissa and Kalahandi. Again, a group of labourers came from Raipur, Bastar, Bilashpur and Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh. Many labourers came to the gardens of this valley from Baliya, Deoriya, Mirjapur, Gazipur, Azamgarh and Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh. Apart from this, exodus of labourers set foot in different tea gardens of Barak Valley from Mednipur, Purulia, Bankura and Bardhaman in West Bengal.

On the basis of work, the tea labourers are classified into three categories:

1st-Manager

2nd-Babus (clerical cadre)

3rd-Lower level labourers

Till the decade of 70s of the 20th century, the 'Babus' dominated the Bengalis of Barak and Surma Valley. In the pre-independence era, we have evidence of Trade Union Movement wherein the just demands of the tea labourers were raised. The events of conspiracy hatching by the garden owners as against the labourers were also prevalent. The labourers uprising at Chorgola and Tea labourers' movement at Arunaband Tea Garden are unforgettable instances. The backdrop of the "MulK Chalo Andolon" (Let's Go Back to our Home Movement), which took place in 1821 at Chorgola and Ananya Tea Garden in Karimganj district was already prepared earlier. The labourers of Barak Valley played a significant role in the freedom movement against British imperialism. At that period of time, majority of the tea garden owners of Barak valley were Englishman. There were a few gardens which were owned by the Indians. The British owners inflicted multifarious torture upon the tea labourers. Again, in some gardens, labourers were found to nourish a conscious attitude of protest within them against exploitation. The labourers working in the tea gardens of Barak valley were made to toil as slaves. In return of excessive hard work and coercion, the labourers were given paltry salary and rice every weekend. At that period of time, there arose no question of forming any union by the labourers. In the absence of any means of communication and media, the incidents of torture of labourers failed to reach other villages. Although a few persons tried at times to mobilise the labourers, but they never come to the forefront for fear of the British. The British owners used to exploit the labourers at their whims and fancies and if they protested, the result was:

মার খাও মুখ বুজে

শাস্তি নাও হাত পেতে

(ফেরেস্তা প্রলাপ - অনিল সরকার)

"Mar Khao Mukh Bujhe (Get thrashing with closed lips
Shasti nao hath pethe" Accept punishment voluntarily)

("Ferestha Pralap"—Anil Sarkar)

Such oppression and persecution of the labourers excited two brave Hindi speaking people-Deosharan Tripathi and Gangadaya Dikshit. By virtue of being a 'purohit' (priest), Deosharan Tripathi had the added advantage of visiting the houses of the labourers. He tried to convince them to unite. On the other hand, Gangadaya Dikshit was a cloth merchant at Lakhipur. He also tried to organise the labourers whenever he got the opportunity. However, at one point of time, Deosharan Tripathi was caught by the police and deported to Jorhat jail. He died there in the jail as a result of the inhuman atrocities perpetrated upon him. It needs mention here that, Deosharan Tripathi is the first martyr of tea labourer's movement in Barak Valley. In 1921, a labourer died at Kharil Tea Garden when British opened fire. This death was resented by labourers of not only Kharil tea garden but also of various tea gardens of Barak Valley. The volcano of anger started to erupt in the hearts of the tea labourers. A large meeting was called to organise the labourers of 1st, 2nd and other related tea gardens of Chorgola. Thousands of labourers attended this meeting defying the threat of British police forces. Due to the efforts of persons like Gangadaya Dikshit, Ramprasad Choube, Suresh Chandra Deb and Radhakrishna, the labourers became inspired and began to raise a voice of protest against the oppressors. As a result, in May 1921, labourers of a few tea gardens of Chorgola Valley in Karimganj district launched the "MulK Chalo Andolon" (Let's Go Back to our Home Movement) in order to break away the chains of slavery. Around 30,000 labourers went to board train from Goalnand in Chattagram. The news of "MulK Chalo Andolon" (Let's Go Back to our Home Movement) spread far and wide like wild fire and labourers from many other tea gardens also made up their mind to return back to their homeland. The garden owners conspired with the Railway authorities so that the labourers could not get railway tickets. Unable to procure railway tickets, the labourers successfully reached their homeland by means of steamer. In the meantime, after getting this information, British police inflicted torture upon the rest of the labourers who were on the lookout for returning back to their homeland. As a result, thousands of labourers were killed and many more were injured.

The history of the tea labourers is soaked in tears and sorrow. Being oppressed, their lives have become miserable. But the post-independence era saw the increase in the level of awareness of the tea labourers. They now are aware about the various schemes and projects of the central and state government. Assam government has a separate ministry for the all round welfare of the tea labour community. As a result, the labourers were able to improve their condition to certain extent. Though the labourers have many legitimate demands like access to higher education, medical facilities, ration, bonus etc. yet there exists a wide gulf between their demands and their achievements. What they have received is like a few drops of rain on a sandy desert.

If we turn back the pages of history, we could find out that in Barak Valley and for that purpose in entire Assam, many large educational institutions and industries have been established in the land owned by the tea gardens; but the irony of the fact remains that in those establishments the tea labour community could not reap the gains of employment. Assam University, Silchar has been established in an area of 1897 bigha and 3 kathas ceiling surplus land belonging to Silkuri Tea Estate. Apart from this, Silchar Medical College, National Institute of Technology, Panchgram Paper Mill, Mahasarak, Doordarshan Transmission Centre at Srikona, Sugar Mill have been established in areas which were owned by the tea gardens. Even then, the tea labourers are a deprived lot everywhere.

There are a number of events revolving around the life of tea labourers and tea industry in Assam. The Assam Legislative Assembly and the Secretariat were established in 1972 at Dispur where tea storehouse existed. It was Darwin who mentioned that work and place of work is inversely related with the lives of people related to it, which will definitely have its influence in everyday affairs. However, tea industry is a bit different from all other sorts of industries. It is so because due to weather and atmosphere that every work related to tea have to be done as per strict time schedule. Every activity related to tea production starting from planting of saplings to its manufacture and selling of the product, every step requires lot of care, attention, discipline and expertise. The garden management adopts severe measures even if the labourers commit slight mistakes. The labourers are engaged by the garden authorities for doing a gamut of works ranging from planting of saplings to grafting, eliminating weeds, applying manure, mulching, forking etc. In the evening, the labourers are explained about the next day's schedule of work. Tea gardens usually have their own local time which is advance by one hour as compared to other parts of the

valley. The day breaks in the tea garden with the sound of a bell struck at 6 AM. The next bell goes at 7 AM. At 7.30 AM, when the third bell is rung, the labourers start preparing to go out for the day's work as they are supposed to reach their respective place and position of work by 8 in the morning. The labourers are assigned task on the basis of the work which needs to be performed. For plucking the leaves, female labourers are engaged whereas male labourers are assigned work at the factory rooms.

In the year 1951, the first independent government of India passed the Plantation Labour Act for the all round development of the tea labourers. Whereas, in the year 1953, Assam Government passed the Plantation Labour Rules, wherein it is stated that:

“Provision is made in the bill for assuring to the worker reasonable amenities, as for example, the supply of wholesome drinking water or suitable medical and educational facilities or provision for canteen and crèches in suitable cases or provision and females. Housing accommodation is also to be provided for every worker and standards and specifications of such housing accommodation will be prescribed after due consultation. The bill also regulates the working hours of workers employed in plantations.”

(বরাক উপত্যকার চা শ্রমিকের সাংস্কৃতিক পরিসর, রমা প্রসাদ বিশ্বাস, সৃজন গ্রাফিক্স এ্যান্ড পাবলিশিং
হাউস, শিলচর - ৭৮৮০০১, পৃ-৩৪)

[Barak Upatyakar Cha Sramiker Sanskritik Parisar, Rama Prasad Biswas, Srijan Graphics & Publishing House, Silchar-788001, Page 34.]

It is evident from the above that the new legislation was passed in order to drag out the tea labourers from their sordid life which they led under the colonial masters. However, though more than half a century has elapsed since the enactment of this law, the tea labourers are deprived from those facilities. There is no medical facility in most of the tea gardens of Barak Valley except Kumbha, Kumbhirgram, Chandighat etc. With the onset of the rainy season, the tea gardens of Barak valley become infested with malaria, dysentery and such other diseases. Thousands of labourers die without getting any medical attention. During the months of October and November 1988, around 30 to 40 tea labourers died in Ratanpur and Chandowa tea gardens of Cachar district due to blood dysentery without getting any treatment. Apart from this, in 1991, many tea labourers of Barak Valley died due to intestinal infection. Again, if we turn the pages of history, we find that in 1942 during the Second World War, many labourers died due to dropping of bombs by the Japanese forces in Derby Tea Estate. Many labourers died while a large number of them were injured when the garden owner of Koladan Tea Estate issued orders of curtailment of labour force in 1952. Jayasree Tea Company purchased 9 tea gardens, which included Dewan, Baladhan, Nediacherra, Borthal, Lal, Bandu, labak and Tarapur. After that, this Company increased the volume of tea leaves required to be plucked every day. They even started to curtail the jobs of many labourers and stopped certain facilities which were enjoyed by the labourers since a long time. The labourers were even physically assaulted by the garden owners. When the labourers protested against all these, the garden owners inflicted torture upon them.

A couplet from a 19th century balladist Mukundaram brings forth the might of the colonial power:

মশার মতো রক্ত তোদের নেব চোষে।

হাতির মতো আছাড় দেব মাথার উপর তুলে।।

(মুকুন্দরাম গীতি সংগ্রহ)

“Moshar moto rokto toder nebo chuse (I will suck your blood like a mosquito)
Hathir moto achar dibo mathar upor tule (As an elephant catches a man by his trunk and
tramples, I will do so)”

(From Collection of Songs of Mukundaram)

The garden owners did not stop merely by inflicting torture upon the labourers, they even did not hesitate to take away their lives. In 1883, tea garden authorities of Digabor along with police force broke the houses of labourers and also fired indiscriminately. In another incident at Aynakhal Tea Garden, 4 labourers died and 11 of them were severely injured when police opened fire on them at the instigation of garden authorities for no fault of those poor masses. Again, many labourers of Chenkuri tea garden died in 2002 owing to famine and diseases. The labourers reached this pitiable end as the garden owners did not pay their salaries and also stopped ration for a considerable period of time. In 1994, nine labourers died due to starvation at Putani Tea Garden in Karimganj district. This garden was passing through a phase of crisis. As such, the labourers were passing their days amidst great hardships. In the absence of ration, they started to eat roots, ferns etc. But they failed to withstand long in this manner and ultimately died. In every place, tea labourers die due to the inhuman atrocities of the owners and due to lack of ration and medical facilities.

The saga of sufferings of the tea labourers does not end here. Tea labourers of Mamcha garden of Binnakandi area in Barak valley suffered much loss in 1984 due to an earthquake. These are not isolated incidents as all tea gardens depict a similar picture. On one hand, the labourers have to bear the brunt of the oppression of the garden owners and on the other hand, they were mere spectators at the hands of fate, which had enveloped them in perennial darkness, as if augmented by lunar and solar eclipse. Till date the labourers have failed to come out of this vicious cycle. They are perhaps even unaware of any beacon of light which may lead to their liberation from this morass.