

Research Article

Gender, Space and Identity: Women Narratives and Interpretations, Tea Gardens, North Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Plantation space is the most significant one and central to women workers' interest, as these women are trans-generationally emigrant workforce since the inception of plantation economy till present, and lost their connection from their native roots/origin of the community, resulting into perceiving 'plantation setting' not only as economic but also as their social space. Therefore, both intersection of their attachment to social and economic space grew simultaneously. Hence when, economic space was challenged by closure and severe sickness of gardens/plants as economic production of space, it impacted on their social space as well their narratives' substantiate the same through, a collective sense of suffering and belonging, especially in 'gendered' ways (as women).

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Space, women workers, Tea plantation, Displacement of labour force, Sustainable livelihood,

Getting up at dawn, and then set to work after making light breakfast for them and the family at home, work till dusk with back breaking plucking work of 'two leaf & a bud', with little rest under the strict supervision of landlord representatives on the field, come back by collecting firewood at the end of work and making 'boiled rice', lentil soup with some wild vegetables to feed hungry husband and children, and then try to rest few hours and sleep till it is dawn again—and the circle continues. - **The life of plantation women workers at Tea gardens**

BACKDROP

Women labour force though having majority in the tea plantation economy in North Bengal had been very weak in executing role of a 'social agency'¹. Closure of tea gardens in North Bengal, since 2003 onwards, has been the worst hit on women workforce. Out of 1.1 million labour forces, 52% are women workers in the plantation and these women had no other sources of livelihood except working extensively in the plantations over centuries.

Surprisingly enough, even after independence they have been kept away till date from active unionisation and therefore when tea industry began to crash down (as an offshoot of global war in tea market, low prices at tea auctions, insufficient capital for modernisation, fall in production, surplus workers, huge 'non-productive' expenses and declining demand at domestic market), lack of women representation in the workers' union made their economic crisis and entitlement for work more challenging and complex to be addressed. Patriarchal authority in tea gardens (as feudalistic structural institution) and power dynamics of tea management/owners made these women more vulnerable to their marginalised Identity inherent to lower caste, ethnicity, gender roles, coupled with their poor social indicators of low literacy and poverty. These further lead to lack of participation in political empowerment or awareness of their rights.

Millions of rupees of pending wages were not exactly known to them but to the union leaders or active male Workers in trade union (TU). These all factors constricted their spaces at work threatening their sole means of livelihood at tea gardens-at stake.

Significant percentage (approximately 40%) of these women were the single bread earners of their families and that is why the closure of tea plantations impacted severely on their physical and psychological well-being. The sufferings were not only in terms of loss of jobs and economic empowerment but also social (family) displacement, emotional trauma, health hazards especially reproductive health and for many women letting their children to go out to the cities in searching of meagre source of income, sustenance and survival.

¹In social science, agency is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. But there are underlying factors in social structure that may (such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, customs, etc.) influence or limit an agent and his/her decisions.

Since British colonisation, these women workers were seldom exposed beyond their tea garden work environment and life. They lived within their ethnic entitlement and close communities for centuries. But closing of gardens compelled them to succumb to the external world of vagaries and exploitation. Many women workers committed suicides or made attempt to life or tried finding out desperate solutions to explore other means of livelihood like begging, petty thefts, giving their girl child for domestic work outside of the State or onto the hands of pimps, where many of them became victims of illegal trafficking and flesh trade. Women workers went through an unimaginable plight and deprivation during the period of closure and at present situation, their life situation has worsened further. Chronic starvation, illness and pre-mature death has become common fate for these women workers in the tea gardens of Terei.

PRESENT STUDY

Thus women as ‘workers’ in these gardens who have tolerated and withstood exploitation and co-opted with patriarchal norms of garden and work, would be the ‘main stakeholders’ of this present discourse. Hence, the research was undertaken to learn and document experiences faced by them post closure of the gardens in North Bengal/Doers region, with a special emphasis on the ramifications of the closure on their Identity, work Space and Gender Vulnerability. Their ‘collective narratives’ of co-option, adaptation, and struggle, sexual and economic victimisation—are the main thematic concerns of the present ‘work’. It also encompass the existing issues of sustainability and alternative livelihood within a broader spectrum of gender and labour relations, and social space in the tea gardens of north Bengal, especially Dooersarea.

WORKING ON IDEAS, MEANING AND INTERPRETATIONS

Paucity of literature from a gender perspective in this area of plantation economy and in qualitative research was constraint to substantiate the findings of this study. But in the process of exploring information from the narratives and life histories of these plantation women workers, I tried to construct some meaning and interrelations between few variables, for example, tea plantation, women, labour force as they were integral part of plantation economy, especially women workers as class identity within their economic environment. Working ideas of few variables like ‘plantation economy’ as space or gender as ‘the vulnerable section’ who have

been victimised to all probable offshoots of closure of an enclave economy² like tea plantation were considered. While trying to grasp the space and gender identity, other variables like, ethnicity, religion, caste (Scheduled Caste And Scheduled Tribes) and class (working class) also played crucial role in plantation economy, especially so, because their identities were bound and constrained due to political or economic vulnerabilities (Toppo, 1999).

The intersection of all these cluster of identities has been a continuous revelation and a matter of significance as these women workers share ‘a sense of belonging in their garden space/environment over centuries now. Rigid covert hierarchies were also been observed that were laid out for decades vis-à-vis their gender roles at home, work place and ‘nature of labour’ (mostly plucking work only) and in wage discrimination.

HOW GENDER AND IDENTITY POLITICS WORKED AGAINST WOMEN LABOUR FORCE AT GARDENS

The declining influence and failure of Trade unionism in the garden proved lethal for women workers, when garden started randomly closing down, TU parties which were more focused on the work-related issues and concurrently espousing the sentiment of being ‘Adivasi’ or Nepali did no attention to the ‘agendisation’ process of specific groups, here especially women as active face of plantation labour. This further challenged their survival in the garden and weakened their political identity in all existing TUs for negotiation and again.

Furthermore, women workers at tea plantations cannot be studied in isolation from the interlocking systems of class, gender, ethnic identity and so on. It is important to conceptualise their positions in society. It can be argued that the boundaries between class, gender and community are the products of processes unfolding through everyday social and cultural practices. Increasing recognition of the multiplicity of identities that exist within which they struggled or survived. It is, therefore, only through an intersectional analysis, identifying multiple identities

²Enclave economy exists with limited interaction between tea and non-tea population. It's a kind of industry where the capital is non-local and invested from outside. Workers live within a colonized nature of on-campus living and relatively in isolation from the mainstream of society or population. There are ancillary economies that depend on ‘Tea Garden’ like transport, local market and other informal settings of economy that survives on the main life of functional tea garden.

like, gender, class, ethnic identity and so on, the position of identity of women workers at plantation space can be understood. The following argument are listed below.

Patriarchal and Bureaucratic Hierarchy of Garden, Gender Positioning and Space

The tea plantations setting of economic and social spaces are based on patriarchal norms and roles in North Bengal. Such kind of structures saturates workers' everyday domestic and work lives. The women being situated at the lower end of the hierarchy are usually left disadvantaged. Their other identity indicators, like caste or ethnicity further make them subordinate by placing them at the receiving end of multiple hierarchies and framework, women here were not just mere categories of social location or economic positioning, they posit along the axis of power that are lower, than others' (owners/management) Identities within and outside garden space and posit women at a lower status permanently in such a 'male dominated economic structure'.

However, the question emerges, that within this constrained social space and its intersectional identities, was there a scope to understand these women individually or collectively as proactive and as agential beings against the power structure (hierarchy of owners and managers) and tool of patriarchy (norms).

Majority of the women workforce in the plantation economy, since colonised era had gradually moved towards greater systematisation and institutionalisation of division of labour and unequal wage system that was a part of plantation capitalism and feudalistic exploitation. But after the closure of tea gardens, emerging situations like lay off, retrenchment and displacement of labour lead them to further marginalisation and deprivation of their dues and rights of labour.

Resultantly, it lead to economic impoverishment, starvation, chronic illness and increase in death rates of these plantation workers (irrespective of male or female workers). This clearly indicated a transition from one form of exploitation (under functional/running authority of tea gardens) to another form of exploitation by the same authority (i.e., new ownership of contractors. A closer look at their alternative means of livelihood and life situations post-displacement depicts a scenario that further enforced patriarchal settings of socio-economic space where women negotiated and bargained for wages and sold their labour being at the receiving end. Instead of permanent jobs, these women agreed upon hour basic contract

wages and also agreed to negotiate with much lower wage rates (as volatile as Rs 189–220) and also faced irregular payments and extension of work hours uncoun-
ted as part of wages.

Although both women and men labour force have been exploited and victimised by the owners since from colonial era till date as mentioned before, but due to majority of women labour force in the plantation economy, women are more affected by the process of marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion in North Bengal tea gardens, where women remain exploited could be considered as the most important in such spectrum of oppression of women by the powerful rich owners lobby. This further leads to identify the forces that have operated to dominate the space, workers identity and posit women in gendered ways at the lower bottom of hierarchy which were conducive to exploitation.

Therefore, women workers with their multiple identities (Gender/economic/ethnic/social identity) were in continuous interaction within the given space of tea gardens. The failure or the success of their actions exhibits their positioning as lower and the marginalised, yet thriving for negotiation and survival. Identity politics played a major role here as it was indicated a collective struggle of women against oppressor, be it management or the owners lobby.

Space, Garden and Identity

The fact is, be it open or closed, garden management considered ‘workers’ as undifferentiated economic beings defined only by their ‘class identity’. In the interaction between space, gender and identity, the space term is ‘live’ one, that has to be understood through the process of exploring how these women plantation workers implied their teagardens as a whole as ‘space’; what are the constraints and resistance they are confronted within this ‘live space’ when they have decided to stay on the garden even after closure. What are the external forces, if these women were forced to migrate or send their family members outside of the ‘tea garden economy’—all these intersecting factors played out within their social space making them feel as ethnically minor, political disempowered, financially vulnerable, exploited and marginalised socially excluded and being gendered identity.

Multiplicity of factors like displaced economy, issues of starvation, death, sexual vulnerability and so on, could be interesting to observe, that, at certain point these factors truly invoke women to realise or feel ‘a sense of belonging’ (agential) amongst themselves, also to the ‘space’ they grew up from childhood to adult and

now struggling for mere survival within the physical sites of tea gardens. These binaries have been neglected for decades by the owners or management in the punitive patriarchal social environment and that surrounded 'women workers' life and livelihood at tea gardens. A worker, while narrating her life stated that 'we are here for generations, I grew up here and got married here, if the management refuse to provide us sustenance, I will die but won't leave the garden'—this contextualised an appropriate representation of the above explanation.

Furthermore, the punitive gender-based division of labour, discriminatory wage practices, role of women workers inside household and at villages all were significant yardstick in the physical sites' of gardens as they attached multiple identity and gendered³ meaning to these women.

Women Labour as Social Agent

The changing environment as it was emerging post-closure compelled women workers to adapt, compromise and to perform in a highly volatile plantation economy in order to save their family members and themselves. Furthermore, by the deteriorating economic situation in an enclaved economy and traumatised social environment, the resultant hierarchies of patriarchal norms worsened the misery that can be well examined through their narratives as evidenced by them. It was evident that these 'women' were in continuous process of negotiation and bargaining for mere survival.

The power of collective bargaining remained absent more so due to lack of their active participation in TU but as it was observed that they negotiated in informal ways whenever possible with a small group or individually many a times. Hence, looking deeper into the process, their role as 'agency' can also be understood. A respondent candidly shared

gardens has been closed for years (women) all know, it is not going to open again, I have lost trust in the union as well. They are only interested to use us to come on the news, our situation is deteriorating day by day. To save our family we have sent our sons to town?

or allowing our daughters to go to big cities, some never returned, neither most of us want to return. It's better to work and live there, than starve and die here. It is

³Gendered is the word that defines the process of social construction of female or women in general

not my age (38+) to go far away from leaving my ill husband alone. Furthermore, why should I leave my own place? Will do any work to survive till end but not leave the garden — such statements substantiate pro-active approach of these workers and implied their agential role in displaced livelihood & ways of exploitations.

Furthermore, to add the narratives of plantation workers demonstrated compelling stories of women workers, their journey through a transition of conquest, settlement or defeat with an extended reflection on the cultures of hierarchy, power dynamics and gender discrimination at workspace (at tea plantations) and extended to surrounding villages of neighbourhood. It also emphasised interactions between gender, identity (as displaced workers marginalised and indigenous tribes) and space constitute a sense of belonging within their given setting of fields of labour in other emerging forms than the plantation work. For example, discriminatory wage system and punitive nature of gender labour dynamics to these women workers, was the method of coercion. Consent and resistance were threaded through a process of exploring various alternative means for survival, specific to women only, which were not previously exposed to them when gardens were open and work was severed with weekly payment of wages.

Such changing scenario intrigues further curiosity of many scholars, as new aspirations and alternative discourses emerged post globalisation on re-examining tea plantation economy and its closure and its offshoot on working livelihood. Literature like Bhadra (1992), Kaniampady (2003) and Banerjee (2014) that narrated ‘women’ as focus of the plantation labour force, as gendered identity in a constrained social space, but at the same time denied them as agency in socio-economic transformation. They were more depicted as hapless victims, passive women in the face of exploitation, unable to exercise any decision-making power whether be it at work or home.

Unfortunately much of literature in plantation economy theoretically didn’t address ‘socioeconomic’ process of marginalisation or raised the right of the Labour (other than enacted Act, Like Tea Plantation Act, 1957) in their given space or setting of plantation economy Beckford (1972). Graham and Floering (1984), Daniel *et al.* (1992), Das Gupta (1986) and Raman (2010) have provided elaborative information about the development of the plantation system as an economic system of production, with its history of development as industry, its labour management and labour practices and finally the labour force. Bhowmik (1981) also fell into the same trap of Marxist structural determinism by viewing the workers as only

economic beings. However, he emphasised that there is a need for an intersectional approach to the study of plantation labour by speaking of ‘critical sub-identities’ of the working class in terms of gender, caste and ethnicity. However, there is little sustained analysis of how these identities frame and re-interrogate the worker identity. Raman (2010:128–129) enforced ideas of resistance among the workers. But this analysis remained locked in the binary of resilience and capitulation.

From these perspectives, always looking at the plantation economy from top management to bottom line of workers, lacks examining ‘the working labour force’ as an identity. In the plantation space rather it perceived the labour as nameless, faceless, passive mass that form the backbone of the plantation system yet remain deprived of their personhood.

However, given the distinctive nature of the plantations these were not just spaces for production of tea and resultant profits but also sites for production of discourses, meanings and practices. They are social spaces where the residents lived, made sense of it, formed relationships between their identity as a labour class, their gender representation in their working space (plantation) and thus ‘space’ should be referred here as live/living part of the system.

Therefore, struggle of the class, gender and identity for these women at plantation can not be understood just as an economic part of production but also as a social space. Beneria and Sen (1982) argued that gender inequalities are related to women’s roles in production and reproduction. Jain (1998:118–119) observe that gender relations are bound to differ between predominantly tribal labour of North Bengal tea gardens and the local labour force. The social spaces that the women workers inhabit in this region has been shaped and featured by their tribal and/or caste identity which induce gender inequalities and extend a patriarchal system that reduced their role in socio-economic and political decision-making.

But as observed in this study, women have often taken participation, even with their marginalised and oppressed status quo within the garden economy to protect their families and themselves—exhibits extreme contradiction from praxis into theory.

CONTEXTUALISING THEORY INTO PRACTICE: FACTUAL OBSERVATIONS

In present context, a closer examination to their ‘elaborative life histories’, that have been collected in this work substantiate agential role in decision-making to

save their family and their own survival through various challenges faced by them only because their identity as 'women'. Women as a collective mass, I would rather, envisaged their actions as an expression of agency' although within various constraints. Few reflections of their statements can be read here as collective voice of these displaced women tea garden workers.

Reflections of Few Narratives and Cases

1. Whatever little is available we are trying to survive on that. In the morning, '*pantabhat*' (soaked rice overnight), *kachalankaa* (green chilly), *Pianj* (onion), if available and salt. No roti ever? She said '*nadidiroti kothaia arsamaikothai, ja ration the kepaitaikhaiaamra*' (where is roti, and where is time to cook, whatever we get from ration, we eat that).
2. My husband was 39. One day he complained off ever and stomach pain, me and my son hospitalised him at Lakhipara hospital. We have free medication provision for general illness. But in complicated cases, hospital may demand certain medicines to buy or blood to give. In my husband's case, they had told me to buy few medicines, I couldn't purchase. After a week of his third time of hospitalisation, he died, doctor told me 'heart attack'. I always think he was too young to have heart attack.
3. '...Since my husband passed away, I am always on look out for jobs, which garden is giving jobs on an hour basis and at times, there are contractors who collect stones from rivers, I go and join other women. But this is not something we should do. We should do our plantation work in the garden. However, I will hold this quarter (company provided place to stay) till end, if my son want she can go to the cities for better options'
4. My husband is very ill over past 2 years (in the closed tea plantation, majority of the male tribal workers have been reportedly ill, more due to diarrhoea, malaria, frequent fever, liver problem and malnutrition related sickness). It is me now who is doing garden work. But my wage is not that much as I only know how to pluck the leaves.
5. I have two sons and two girls, after husband died last year. Since then I started working for my daughters. My both sons left garden and working in small shops in cities. Nearby townships are so far that 'domestic work' which I wanted to do is really difficult to find. This is the reason I am still in garden areas and struggling for work.

6. Sometimes few of us go to other gardens where gardens are run by contractors. They give work not specific to the workers but to the workers who are demanding less wage and equal hours. I have worked so far in four gardens including mine. All are managed by contractors, owners or management never visits us.
7. I let my only daughter go away as I could not feed her any more. My son left this garden too. He is working in Jalpaigudi hotel. He comes once in a while. I am looking after work and my ailing husband too. Not sure how long he will survive; he complains of stomach pain and always has fever!
8. We are reducing by number day by day. Many of my friends died in past 7 years. I am scared to go out of this area as I cannot even speak Hindi well. My children are very young, have to be here to help them to live till they are grown up to look for jobs. They demand fish and rice for meals but how will I give that, even if we hunt a bird, we just have to burn it and eat. We don't have enough spices to make curry.
9. Garden may not be open gainfully. These days no party workers come in support. It looks like they have abandoned us. We also do not need them, I don't think they have helped us in anyway or gave our long due wage to ease our struggle even for few months.
10. Garden has been closed more than 6 years. We know garden will not be open; any Management has abandoned us and did not pay salary of years. Many of us have taken of collecting stones for the contractors who send their truck to nearby rivers. We have also taken up work as domestic maids with new owners of some new gardens. We also work on forest roads by cleaning up dry leaves and on some contractual construction work. We have received 100dayswork permit but within 100 days. We may have got work for 40–60 days our suffering seems never ending.

The manifestation of their decision-making can be understood through their actions they took up under severe economic adversity, be it adopting to the economic constraint or standing up with an alternative livelihood (working as daily wage labourer outside of plantation economy, working as domestic help, etc.) or at certain times, may be through overt actions like, trying to protest collectively, in public forum (under all TU party banner) or confronting the challenges with further challenge put forth by them (like e.g.) letting their young 'daughters' go for the

first time out of their conformed social space, even with a risk of never seeing them again at the cost of any form of exploitation were observed.

Plantation space is the most significant and central to women workers' interest. As these women were migrant workforce, since the inception of plantation economy till present, and lost their connection from their native roots origin of the community, resulting into perceiving 'plantation setting' not only as economic but also as their social space. Therefore, both intersection of their attachment to social and economic space grew simultaneously.

Hence when, economic space was challenged by closure and declining of garden activities, economic production of space impacted on their social space as well. The large number of these displaced foot loose labour started a migrating trend towards big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai or Bangalore. It was not a unique case of one case of a gardens or tea estates. It became rampant all tea gardens in Dooers (North Bengal), gradually spread over their social sphere, where their narratives substantiate a collective sense of suffering and belonging, especially in gendered ways (as women). Thus, one condition of deterioration (closure) triggered the other condition (migration) and economic forces played a crucial role in shaping both in larger context of North Bengal plantation economy.

In addition, gender identity has played a crucial role in developing a 'sense of belonging' that influenced these women workers to cross their age old boundaries of means of survival within a highly constrained economic and social space. A woman respondent in her elaborate interview shared

'we all women feel just the same about the in difference of the garden management. Our sons have left us, husbands are dying, we are sending our daughters outside of the garden, that never happened in our community, but when it is a question of survival, we will do our all efforts to survive and let our family survive too. Trade unions did not take our demands seriously. Government is not active to solve or question the owners. We have only one solution left to us is fight and struggle till we are dead'—explains women not only as, 'collective identity of women labour force', a sense belonging as 'we' but also enforce their manifestation of alternative roles as 'agency' in a gendered way within their constrained plantation space, alive yet dysfunctional.

Therefore, it can be concluded that at the backdrop of dying declining disappearing plantation economy, women workers struggle and survival became a continuous process of conflict between economic space, gender and identity politics and it continues to be true till date.

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