

What Caused Marginalization: A Study of the Tea Plantation Women of Cachar

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Abstract: *Plantation industry, one of the major industries of the world, is a product of colonialism in India. Its discovery in Assam in 1823 was followed by the expansion of the industry in different parts of the state. Its establishment in Cachar in 1856 had resulted in the recruitment of huge number of labourers from the Eastern and Southern most parts of India. While both men and women labourers were victimized by the process of marginalization, the worst victims were the women labourers. This paper deals with the Tea garden women of Cachar district, who remain marginalized over the years. It is an attempt to explore the reasons that caused marginalization of these women workers. The paper is divided into two parts. While Part I is an attempt to understand the concept of marginalization, Part II is an attempt to explain the major causes behind the marginalization of Tea Garden women workers.*

Keywords: Marginalization, Caste, class, gender, immigration status

“From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is backbreaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a Kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn”.

Bama (2005:22),
In *Sangati Events*

1. Concept of ‘Marginalization’

Marginalization is described as a process, whereby a group of individuals are pushed to the ‘margins’ of the society. It is defined as a social process whereby people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources, resulting in the prevention of the individual members from full participation in the economic, social and most importantly political life of the society in which they live. The process impedes a person, a group, a section or a community to enjoy the privileges and opportunities that are normally enjoyed by the people as a part of their being members of a society. They are thus, pushed to a complex state of disadvantage and powerlessness due to their lack of participation in the social, economic and political spheres, where they are expected to participate according to certain determined criteria. The group of individuals who are pushed to a marginal situation is referred to as ‘marginalized group’.

The process therefore involves the polar relationship between two groups of people, one the marginalized and the other the dominant. And many a times, it is used synonymously with the term ‘oppressed’ as used by Paulo Freire, ‘proletariat’ as used by Karl Marx, ‘subaltern’ as used by Gramsci, ‘powerless’ as elaborated by Michel Foucault, or exploited, vulnerable, discriminated, disadvantaged, subjugated, socially excluded, alienated or downtrodden. But the point is that many of these words cannot be used synonymously. As

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in an interview explained that “...subaltern is not just a classy word for “oppressed”, for [the] Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie. . . . In terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern — a space of difference. Now, who would say that’s just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It’s not subaltern.”

Oppressed and subaltern therefore do not mean the same thing. Oppressed means those who are discriminated in some sphere. It cannot be used for those who are ‘marginalized’. To clarify, marginalized is a term used for those who have limited or no access to the social, economic and political, and not necessarily just the cultural ones. For instance, Tea Garden women are ‘marginalized’ in Assam Legislative Assembly or the parliament. They are not just ‘subaltern’ by cultural imperialism or ‘oppressed’ by social norms, or ‘exploited’ within the tea garden settings. The term ‘marginalized’ is, therefore, something more than oppressed, exploited, subaltern and the like.

2. Marginalization of the Tea plantation Women of Cachar

Tea Plantations in Cachar (1856) has been a product of British colonialism in India. According to a definition provided by the International Labour Organization, the term *plantation* referred at first to a group of settlers or a political unit formed by it under British colonialism, especially in North America and the West Indies. With the colonization of Africa and Asia by British and European entrepreneurs and colonialists, the term acquired a broader connotation, coming to denote large-scale enterprises in agricultural units and the development of certain agricultural resources of tropical countries in accordance with the methods of Western industry (Bhowmik 2011. 235). Other than India, Tea plantations were also established in Indonesia and China.

Development of tea plantations in the district raised demands for a large labour force because alike the other plantation sectors, tea plantation has also been a highly labour intensive

industry. At the same time, local labourers would not serve the purpose. Recruiting local labourers sometimes demanded high wages, or sometimes to face dangers by the aboriginal tribes. Local labourers were also reluctant enough to work as wage labourers. The only way by which the planters could get cheap labour under conditions of acute local labour shortage was by having abundance of 'obedient labourers'. The tricky minds of the planters finally found the way when they discovered that people of the famine and poverty-stricken areas of Eastern and Southern India were living in a state of starvation. Thus began the 'slave trade' (Toppo 1999. 131) in Cachar, by which huge number of labourers were imported as immigrants.

After importation, the labourers-men, women and children, were given different tasks to perform. While the men were given tasks of planting, hoeing, clearing field, and the like, the women and children were given the task of plucking leaves which would suit their soft kindle fingers. Such a division of work followed by varied forms of discrimination is continuing till today. The Tea Garden communities constitute a marginalized group in India. Of both male and female members, it is the women who were the worst victims in the hands of the planters, and are today the most discriminated groups. Although Tea Garden women workers of the entire country faced varied forms of discrimination leading to their backwardness, the women workers within the Tea Garden settings of Cachar are the most backward. Situated at the lowermost rung of the society, they are victimized by structural or systematic marginality. Their marginalization is caused due to their being immigrants, women and members of lower castes.

2.1 Marginalization by 'immigrant status': A dismal picture of human rights violation

Tea plantation labourers who had been imported to the Tea estates of Cachar are deprived of not only the economic resources but also of the opportunities whereby they could move a step forward towards development. Their present state of backwardness is the result of the exploitative socio-economic measures adopted by the planters after importation. The immigrants were treated as mere beasts, which to a great extent framed the local people's attitude towards the labourers. They were kept in total isolation from the external world. Within the plantation area, they were treated with extreme forms of brutality by the planters. Celebrated authors like Griffiths, Amalendu Guha, Purnendu Kumar and many others presented the frightful picture of cruelty faced by the immigrants. Plight of the early immigrants can be understood by these lines of Purnendu Kumar (Kumar 2006. 13),

No one cared for their burial and they were thrown into the river water like beasts. Nowhere in the annals of mankind was such dishonor shown to the dead as was meted out to the newly recruited tea garden labourers dying under trying circumstances. Those who survived reached their destination in Cachar in psychologically depressed mood and most frustrating appearance. They were first put in concentration camps in Katigorah or Silchar from where they were sent to different tea gardens. The moment the uprooted men put their feet on the soil of Cachar, their hopes and aspirations were

shattered by the blow of misfortune...In case of any refusal to work, boots and kicks of the European planters were the only reply. In fact they were brought and sold in auction just like slaves, without their knowledge...After detection (in case of an attempt to escape) they were whipped mercilessly by the managers. And in fact cane was an indispensable accompaniment of the garden managers.

The inhuman treatment meted out to the immigrants did not leave the women of the garden world. While the men were exposed to physical tortures, women were subject to the worst forms of both physical and sexual tortures. They were also treated as object of hire and fire at par with men. According to Purnendu Kumar, women living in the estates were often utterly dishonoured and demoralized by having illicit sexual relationship. The managers of the garden often exploited the chastity of the innocent female workers. Instances were numerous when the women labourers were occasionally tied up to a tree and their clothes lifted up to the waist and were beaten on bare buttocks with leather strips or boots (Kumar 2006. 14). Someone pointed out very correctly that germination of present human civilization undoubtedly takes place in the embryo of the past. Exploitation and economic deprivation of the immigrants, from its initial years, has presently pushed them to the margins of the society.

Immigrant Women Marginalization by legal, structural and economic imperatives

A number of scholars like Robert Park, Estellie Smith, Robin Peace and Kitty Calavita explained that immigration of individuals lead to the marginalization of those individual members. Calavita, a Professor of Criminology, Law and Society at the University of California and an activist of the Immigrant Movement International, explained that deprivation of the immigrants from resources and opportunities push them to a state of marginalization. She is of the view that policies in a state are formed in such a way that the predictable consequence is to marginalize the immigrants. Their socio-economic exclusion and marginalization are not primarily the cultural issues but are produced systematically by legal, structural and economic imperatives.

The economic imperatives of the management and the legal imperatives of the government are instrumental in keeping the women labourers outside the benefit of such imperatives. Management, with its mighty financial resources formed by the blood and sweat of the labourers and immense political influence can dare to ignore the legal provisions of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 or The Tea act 1953 or The Assam Tea Plantation Employees Welfare Fund Act 1959, Maternity Relief Act, which can to some extent benefit the poor immigrant Tea garden labourers of the land. They are also deprived of the government schemes on the logic that they are under the private sector, in spite of the fact that tea is a major foreign exchange earner and that this section of Tea labourers have contributed much to the revenue of the country (ibid. 152). Despite such contributions, the labourers, specifically the female ones became the victims of the process of marginalization.

2.2 Marginalization by 'gender'

Marginalized being immigrants, the women labourers of the Tea plantations of Cachar were also marginalized systematically by gender. Gender is a form of structural marginality. A specific category of individuals called 'women' are forced to attain marginal status by the continual rejection from dominant group-the male as well as the denial of getting full membership of society, due to their gender specific roles (the traditional division of labour between men and women) assigned to them by the entire structure of society. And such roles are double for these women workers, including that inside home, and that in the garden. Besides this, a number of other factors pushed these women to a state of marginalization.

In the theoretical plane, patriarchy and sexism remain the core factors. The feminist concept of *patriarchy* (from the Greek roots 'patria', meaning 'family' and 'archy', meaning rule) was initially applied to the male head of the family (exerting autocratic rule), and then was extended to denote the senior men who ruled government. Later it was taken up by the second-wave feminists like Kate Millet to mean the general system where social practices, institutions (religion, family, state) and cultural images organize the power that men exert to dominate, exploit and oppress women. According to Millet, patriarchy is a 'universally exploitative system' that has led to a hierarchical social order in the society. In such a society, women may have some power, but that is operated within a set of patriarchal norms. Patriarchal relations within the family (social), state (political) and workplace (economic) determine their position in the paid work. And women, who are subordinated within the paid work (productive process) have little access to forms of political representation. Thus, patriarchy that traces its roots to sexism, leads to the exclusion of women from every significant spheres of state and society.

Sexism, on the other hand, refers to the prejudice or discrimination based on a person's biological sex. However, it should not be misunderstood with gender discrimination, which refers to the prejudices and discrimination based on one's identity (inclusive of third gender, gender queer and gender prejudices of other non-binary identified people). Such kind of discrimination is prevalent in every society, in varying degrees. And it is the exercise of such structural discriminatory practices that has marginalized women in a given society. While Alan C. Kerckhoff, bell hooks, Thomas C. McCormick, Nancy Miller & Tania Modleski, Gisela Brinker, Lou Charnon and Sean Hanretta through their writings have pictured marginalization of women in the world, authors like Vina Majumder, Ila Patel, Sarbani Ghosal and Kasim Ali Ahmed described that women have been one of the most marginalized sections of Indian society.

The Report on the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1974, a document that explored the position held by women in India after independence, observed that though women do not numerically constitute a minority, they are beginning to acquire the features of minority community by the three recognized dimensionseconomic situation...social position and political power. If this trend is

allowed to continue the large masses of women in India may well emerge as the only surviving minority continuously exposed to injustice". Although situation has changed much, mostly among the urban upper and middle class women relating to the persistence of inequality between men and women. But the category of 'women' is not homogeneous. Status of women greatly depends on the social context. In a multi layered society like India, certain groups of women are more vulnerable to discrimination than others. Shalu Nigam, who is currently working at the Centre for Women Development Studies, thus writes that a woman labourer from a schedule caste background may enjoy a certain degree of autonomy but may not enjoy a high status in the wider social setting (Nigam 2014). Hence, apart from being marginalized by virtue of their gender, social status relating to caste and class are also significant to categorize the Tea Garden women labourers as a marginalized group.

2.3 Marginalization by 'class'

One of the significant aspects for the migration of the tea garden labourers from their native places was the class factor. Denial of resources subjected these women labourers by feudalism existent in parts of India during the nineteenth century which merged with capitalism and globalisation at present to make them the most economically vulnerable groups of Cachar society. Hard labour of the entire day also could not bring them the money sufficient for daily needs. "We have to labor in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they have finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women what good we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vagina shrivels" (Bama 2005. 64)-says one Dalit women. With the only difference of agricultural fields, the experiences of the immigrant women working in the tea gardens are all the same, excepting their immigration status, an added form of structural exclusion. Interlocking systems of caste, class, and patriarchy create a multidimensionality, simultaneity, and intensity of oppression (Tomar 2013.2) for these women. They die in order to live (Tomar 2013.5).

2.4 Marginalized by 'caste'

Marginalization of the immigrant Tea garden women by the structural and systematic discrimination is further stimulated by their social status. In initial days, the labourers were recruited mostly from the famine and poverty-stricken areas of Eastern and Southern India, where, social anarchy, excessive exploitation and economic harassment of the ordinary farmers and landless workers belonging to lower castes by the feudal lords and Zamindars (Kumar 2006. 38) put them to the lowest stratum of society. Social exclusion of the groups for they were the members of lower castes (Bhadra 1999.91) led to their economic exclusion. They were exploited by the Zamindars at their native places, by the planters during colonial period and by the management at present. With such a socio-economic status, they could hardly influence the policies of the government. Mostly they remain unaware of the economic and government policies

due to lack of education. Such social and economic exclusion has also pushed them towards political exclusion.

Exclusion of all form shares a common character. Whatever the form, the marginal status of the members in reference to a group characterized by continual rejection by the dominant group, provided that some members within the group may experience more rejection while others may experience less, depending on their degree of acceptability of such a trait. Acceptance of such 'rejection' is sometimes through direct domination and sometimes through hegemonic mind control. This character of rejection along with unequal or inequitable environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic factors (Mehretu et al. 2000. 90), assign the groups based on immigration status or gender or caste throughout the world (victimized by structural or systematic marginality) with the status of marginalized groups, thus affirming the immigrant Tea Plantation women labourers with the status of 'marginalized groups'.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

Discrimination due to systematic and structural marginality has in its every possible form exploited the Tea garden women labourers. Across the geographical areas, these women remain an excluded category. But as pointed out by Purnendu Kumar, women workers of Cachar district are more backward compared to the other Tea Plantation areas of Upper Assam or North Bengal. The early conditions of the plantations were created systematically in order to keep the labourers captive. The measures taken later could in some extent improve their conditions, but they still remain within the shackles of patriarchy and low-paid work. They have to take up the double burden of work both at home and at the garden. They are discriminated not only within the family in matters of education or other resources, but also in their place of work. Being members of the Trade Unions they have no say to the decision making process of the union, which is dominated mainly by the men. Isolation of initial years could not till today bring them outside the boundaries of the garden to make a place at the mainstream state and society of Cachar. As bell hooks, the feminist scholar pointed out that 'to be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body'. This deprive them from not only the political but also the other important spheres of economic policies and opportunities, thus excluding them from the social, economic and political developments of the district in specific, and country in general. And it is their being the members of marginalized categories like immigrants, women and lower castes that caused their marginalization.

The situation of these marginalized groups can be changed to some extent if, measures pertaining their development is taken. Some of the measures include-

1) Education has always played a vital role to bring social change. It opens mind and help to bring consciousness among the educated. Hence it can help to bring these women workers out of their traditional norms of marginalization.

- 2) More schools should be developed within the garden settings, which can enable the women to educate at par with men. NGOS and Women's Organization can take up the task of making the garden people aware of the values of education, as well as the different governmental policies.
- 3) Trade Unions should not be management oriented rather labour oriented. It should give a space to the women's issues.
- 4) Lastly, women should be made politically aware so that their votes which were used as 'vote banks' be used for their development. They should be encouraged to participate in the political arena, for these women workers can themselves articulate their issues and in a better way than those who represent them.

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