



## IDENTITY AND POLITICS OF EXCLUSIVITY IN THE NORTH BENGAL TEA PLANTATIONS: A FEW REFLECTIONS

**Dr.D.John Paul**

*Assistant Professor, Social Work Department, Loyola College, Chennai.*

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, tea has been a significant commodity for international trade. India is the world's highest consumer and second producer of tea. Strikingly, despite the improvement in tea prices internationally, the conditions of the workers remain to be dismal, which throws further questions other than which are directly related with the decline of the industry or its production relations. In several cases also it was illustrated that better price for tea or increased demand in the international market were not sufficient conditions for better wages or living conditions of its workers. History has proven that employment is directly related with booms and downs in the market. However, the question of who copes better up with the situation, in several instances, plays a significant role, especially when the state is not proactive enough and it doesn't create demand in the market.

Exclusivity as implied for the tea plantation populace in north Bengal is deeply entrenched in its geo-political and set notions of plantation workers as a seemingly 'privileged class'. It however continues to confront with questions of marginalisation and exclusion within its contested exclusivity. This paper argues that the politics of exclusivity interplays in ensuring that the populace remains marginalised and fissured. Such politics also infiltrates and reflects in the state planning and policy making processes. I would like to develop the exclusivity argument in the context of north Bengal primarily by considering the characteristics of plantation labour as a working class embedded in the dichotomies of caste and tribe; and education as a key indicator of human development. Rather, this paper is grounded on the conjuncture that apart from the mere capital-labour dichotomy, the questions of coping up and coming out from distress possibly are entangled with other issues that could include identities, entitlements, networks or some forms of social capital, which they gain because of all these. How despite governmental and other non-governmental efforts the populace actually holds 'inferior' citizenship rights and is socially discriminated as a result of their ethnic identities.

### SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF PLANTATION LABOUR

Several scholars have documented historically; the social, economic, political and health conditions of the largely indentured population in both overseas and Indian plantations. North Bengal after Assam is one of the largest tea producing regions in India. Its history got increased during the colonial rule with the establishment of tea estates in the hilly tract of Darjeeling, and in the lower plain regions of Dooars and Terai in north Bengal to cater to trade by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Labour recruitment in these regions was 'free' unlike the indentured system of the Assam plantations. Chotanagpur plateau especially *Santhalparganas* was the 'labour-catchment area' (LCA) for the tea estates of Dooars and Terai. Mundas and Oraons were considered to be the 'best tea garden labour' in eastern India. For Darjeeling, in the beginning, labour from the Bengal plains was brought to work in the tea plantations. But it increasingly became difficult and expensive for the planters since workers from the plains found it difficult to acclimatise to the mountain terrain and conditions. Nepal was found to be suitable in matching the requirements of the East India Company and for developing the industry. Caste oppressions, heavy burdens of debt, slavery/bondage were the main reasons of migration from Nepal. Recruitment of soldiers was simultaneously going on in Nepal for the British army where the lower castes comprising of Kamis, Damais and Sarkis were not recruited as fighting soldiers but were taken as 'laskars' as part of the service group for the regiment. The British government kept the classified ethnic groups separately under one regiment to maintain both social and military hierarchy. Medical standards for recruitment were also very strict. Members of the occupational untouchable castes were not used as 'slaves' as they could not work in the households. A considerable section of the socially and economically deprived populace began to migrate and settle in the Darjeeling hills.

Thus movement, control and disciplining of labour were systematically carried out through various legal and extra-legal measures such as provision of garden plots for subsistence cultivation. Labour was thus 'tamed' and a steady 'reproduction' of labour was made possible to cater to the global demands of tea trade. In such a context the birth of spatial locales got defined exclusively by identities as tea workers characterised through caste/tribe and ethnic lines in the contiguous hill regions of Darjeeling and the plains of Dooars and Terai regions of north Bengal. An apparent hierarchical distinction based on the lines of race, caste /tribe in plantation "enclaves" was maintained and was reproduced in work hierarchies. Such enclaves were made to be socially and economically isolated from the mainland populace. British planters ensured that specific castes /races/tribes were chosen to work as coolies in the plantations. Preference of the aboriginal race from Chotanagpur divisions for example, as they could adjust with the work conditions and labour-process was one such measure.



Their physical and racial attributes were important yardsticks taken to engage them to work in these plantations. Such ideation of racial embodiment does conflate the notion of the other and gets socially conditioned as something distinct and different.

Available literature on agriculture land holdings, reveal that the agrarian economy in Dooars for e.g., was primarily ruled by Muslim jotedars and Rajbanshi sharecroppers, who cultivated land and gave part of the produce to the jotedars and paid rent to the revenue collectors. Land from the autochthonous inhabitants like the rajbanshis, meches, tolos and lepchas were taken through various means during the colonial period for the setting up of tea plantations in Dooars and Terai regions. From 1889-1895 and 1931-1935 there was a considerable decline in size of land holdings from among the autochthonous communities especially like Rajbanshis and Meches and the muslim community and a likewise increase in land ownership among the marwaris and Europeans. Compiled data reflects a considerable increase in land ownership among the Oraons and adivasi community from 1.16 percent to 7.14 percent studied. Bhowmik (1986) noted that there were considerably more hard working and thrifty who were mainly sardars who saved some money to purchase jotes and became jotedars . However later, the government insisted on land distribution through leases, which most adivasis were unable to afford. Rules and regulation moreover made it easy for the local jotedars to sell land to Marwari traders and entrepreneurs and immigrants from east Bengal .

Growth of Indian entrepreneurs was marked in Dooars unlike Darjeeling by the turn of the century that created a different class of elites as distinguished from the labouring plantation workers, who comprised of the ethnic minorities largely. Fading of the earlier land owning communities and the dominance of other upper castes resulted in a further segregation along caste and ethnic lines, which in turn perpetuated into the set notion of the labouring 'other'. As a result, access to land and other entitlements became a critical area of concern linked to issues of marginalisation and exclusion.

### **EXCLUSION IN EDUCATION**

The Indian tea industry is currently regaining its foothold in the global economy .however not regarding the larger structural issues that are significant to the industry's growth; the above discussion on social dimensions must be sidelined. The paper seeks to contend in the context in north Bengal that coping with crisis situation is all about development in this region and isolation, multiplied through social identities ,are embedded and reasons for economic deprivation. It argues that it is pertinent to examine other dimensions beyond production relations and industry at large that have resulted in such conditions. In this context, education perhaps could be an important indicator to assess deprivation and denial.

At present, based on the Human Development index (HDI), the tea producing districts- Jalpaiguri ranks tenth and Darjeeling fourth out of 18 districts of west Bengal. Literacy rate is relatively high in Darjeeling with 81.28 percent for males and 63.92 percent for females with school enrolment rate of only 51.9. As per census 2001 the total population of this district is 3,401,173 of which 18.87 percent are S.T.s and 36.71 percent are S.C.s. The literacy rate for S.T. (male) is 31.69 percent and 12.52 percent (female) and S.C. it is 54.82 percent and 26.57 percent respectively.

Female literacy is astonishing low in the case of the S.T.s in Jalpaiguri. If we take into account the gender disaggregated data with respect to GER for class 10-11 (2008-2009), overall GER for Jalpaiguri district is 21.28; but boys it is 23.37 and girls it is 19.07. Figures for Darjeeling girls are much lower with 18.62 as compared to boys with 26.79. The figures for west Bengal are also not positive with GER -23.77 for boys and 19.03 for girls respectively. There are other worse performing districts in west Bengal with respect to such indicators that require a separate examination. Another important indicator i.e. the repetition rate was found to be highest for Darjeeling for children of 5+-8+ years group with 35.0 percent and for the 9+-13\_ year's group with 17.45 percent respectively. Drop outs rates for both these groups were higher in Darjeeling as compared to Jalpaiguri. Many factors such as quality of education, accessibility to schools in terms of distance and time for female members to drop the children to school during work hrs; disinterest of both teachers and children etc perhaps could be attributed to such dismal figures for Darjeeling.

Low school enrolment rate in Jalpaiguri district also is linked to factors such as inaccessibility to schools given the isolated geographical locations of the tea estates and most importantly, the medium of instruction. There are very few hindi-medium primary schools and majority of the secondary schools that are proximity are in Bengal medium .there are discussions to introduce at the primary level, Sadri, a common language among the adivasis as a medium of instruction. Nandy (2013) argues that there is a need for an ethnic assertion for education within the upsurges for statehood to raise class consciousness to new levels. Lack of access to basic education and higher education in particular has been a major source of discontent among the populace and youth in particular. A complete absence of vocational training institute for skill development and thus alternate employment opportunities have perpetuated high levels of out-migration on the hand and an emerging phenomenon of labour shortage in plantations on the other.



## IDENTITY ASSERTION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Human development indicators for this region do mirror the gross absence of investments on education as an indicator for regional development and growth. Intergenerational concentration of immobility was found to be the highest among the permanent and casual labourers along with extremely limited opportunities of vertical mobility for workers within the tea gardens were some of its key findings. A few issues, in this context need to be highlighted here. Firstly, how and why certain social categories continue to be defined and redefined to cater to the plantation economies of production and reproduction? Secondly, whether it is a restatement of the colonial methods of labour control by maintaining the region as backward by absence of investments in education and occupational mobility? Thirdly, the political hesitation to address viz-a-viz these indicators of exclusiveness by the state, workers and employers representatives clearly retells the apparent ethnic disparities. These questions continue to resonate in all discussions on the tea sector but are nonetheless relegated to the colonial past.

One of the important developments to be highlighted is the emergence of identity politics and demand for separate statehood in the region. Multiple layers of exclusion and discrimination have possibly triggered the emergence of such movements. In this context, there is a need for a systematic regional development by the state. Recognising, instead of denying ethnicity; holds the key to democratising state and thus development. Non-recognition of this identity question, by state and other agencies, a central argument of this paper, would hold any development programmes meaningless for this region. The development programmes therefore need to be inclusionary in nature. compilation of district – wise disaggregated data based on social indicators such as caste, tribe, and religion and gender; against the overall human development indicators would be useful toward creating systematic need- based policies and programmes. Along that currently are limited to tourism are areas where urgent governmental attention is called for.

## NOTES

1. The notion of the privileged class here is used as perceived by those outside plantation economies. In this context, it is understood that plantation workers receive benefits such as housing, garden plot as 'kind benefits' along with other benefits such as education, medical, electricity, water supply etc. this has been arrived at after discussions with stakeholders including workers' representatives and management during various points of my research work.
2. See studies like Mohaptra (1985), Behal and Mohaptra (1992) for details
3. In the plantation parlance, labour was termed as coolies; overseas as sardars and managers were the white sahibs or kures as euphemistically called in the mountain regions of Darjeeling.
4. Rural development statistics, ministry of rural development, government of India
5. Jote specifies agricultural land and jotedars are the agricultural landholders
6. Data compiled from various sources in Rasaily
7. Ibid
8. In the Dooars region, some of the first few tea grant lands were bought by Indian entrepreneurs who later either transferred or surrendered due to paucity of resources and other factors
9. Labour Bureau (2012), statistical profile on women labour, 2009-2011, ministry of labour and employment, government of India, Chandigarh.
10. Ibid.
11. Based on indicators such as literacy rate, infant mortality rate, school enrolment rate, expectancy rate, health, education and income indexes.
12. District wise GER FOR CLASS 9 -10 in 2008-09, department of school education, govt. of west Bengal
13. District wise GER, NER, drop out and overall repetition rates, department of school education, govt. of west Bengal.
14. Personal discussions with workers' representatives They comprise mainly the oraons, Munda, santhal, gond, birhor, ho, khond tribes from the erstwhile chotanagpur plateau. As per the annual report, 2012-2013, ministry of tribal affairs, there are approximately 40 different STs in west Bengal Based on past field work experience in north Bengal

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