

Politics of Gender and Sexuality: Agony of Womanhood in Assam Colonial Plantation

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ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination was the main reason of women suffering throughout the history. So, here we made an attempt to show how gender discrimination, sex based division of labour, division of work and patriarchy worked in colonial tea plantation of Assam and how it affected women socio-economic life. Attempt has also been made to focus on how women workers were used just as reproductive agents for the commercial growth of tea industry and her physical presence to fulfill sexual lust of European masters. The paper also focuses on practice of keeping coolie girl by colonial master that became a feature of plantation system of Assam who began to consider the weaker section as public property. One of the important priorities of this paper is to emphasize the reasons behind the less proportion of woman worker in cotton textile industry Bombay and Calcutta Jute industry in contrast to large number of woman coolies in Assam tea plantation in colonial context. How women become the victim of more work and less wage; less in educational cum other opportunities than boys, domestic violence on women are also covered in the paper. In addition to these, paper also tries to highlight the issue of Assam Maternity Benefit Act 1940 and how far it implemented in reality.

1. Introduction

Till date in India research work done on 'Plantation' in gender perspective is quite limited and whatever exist most of them comprise post colonial discourse. Although Marxist historians highlighted labour issue but it was in terms of class perspective not gender relative. It is true that Marxist historians has great contribution towards labour history, but as they tried to work by taking male and female together as one class, in such condition woman voices seem somewhere lost. Tea Industry, the identity of Assam began to flourish from mid-nineteenth century due to the efforts of British colonialism. Colonialism brought to Assam the light of modernity and development in one hand and darkness in other way. The main motive of this paper is to study the suppressive voice 'the women' purely in gender perspective.

The concept of 'gender' used as a methodology part has aroused in late twentieth century and now it become a major discourse among the feminist group of writers and several social scientist. Gender is basically designed as "sex roles" in social science¹ and it can be said that from then and now the concept of gender is socially constructed in our society. And according to that order all important social institution such as polity, education, economy, family, culture, religion are constructed where masculinity ruled over femininity. The chief reason to appear the concept of gender in social science is the social inequality.

Plantation industries are mainly based on manual labour force and in such place where machine use was quite limited, proportion of women workers were intentionally high. Although now a days due to various technological innovations some

works are done through machines like- rolling, packaging, drying etc. But during colonial period it was totally depend on manual labour. The concept of 'gender' which is the main reason of women suppression throughout the history is taken as a perspective in this paper to bring out gender discrimination like division of labour, division of work, less education to women, patriarchy, female suppression and oppression in the context of colonial tea plantation.

In the book *Second Sex* author Simon de Beauvoir's chief argument is that man is viewed as supreme humanity in the society while woman is considered as inferior or second sex. By criticizing the state of society she defined "humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being."² In most of the cases, either it is the state or society it has been seen that majority imposed rules over minority and that has some point to agree but suffering and subordination being a majority group is totally unacceptable. To describe the gender inequality being a majority group Simon de Beauvoir said women are not a minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth.³ This was case of women labour in Assam plantation. In spite of huge proportion of female coolie they become the victim of gender discrimination or gender inequality. Male centric colonial government and tea companies treated women workers as weaker sections and within the labour class women were the victim of male subordination.

History of women has always been submissive to men, and hence their dependency is not the result of a historical

¹ I. Kennelly, S.N. Merz and J. Lorber, *What Is Gender?* American Sociological Review, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Aug., 2001), p.600

² S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1953, Lowe and Brydone Ltd., London, N.W., P.15

³ *Ibid*, p.17

event or a social change- it was not something that occurred.⁴ Throughout the history women have been nothing for themselves, even they are recognized through father before marriage and through husbands after marriage. They have no permanent religion, before marriage they follow the father sect and after marriage they are forced to adopt husband's religion. Similar things happens with their surname as well, they adopted their husbands surname after marriage. No one has time to understand the feelings of women who is forcefully separated from her long time attachment with something. They have no caste, class and religion of their own. Therefore Beauvoir said –“They have no past, no history and no religion of their own”⁵ women are used by men according to their convenient in the globe. Women are like water- that change according to the shape and colour of a container. Here, for society water indicates simplicity of woman while container indicates man's personality.

Throughout the history reproductive role of woman was the chief cause to her enslavement and hence prevent her from act to shaping the world.⁶ Woman own body becomes an obstacle for her freedom and independency, while men make it worse to fulfill their own interest of in order to rule as superior in the kingdom. In the same way one of the chief reasons to employ women in the colonial tea plantation of Assam was for her reproductive role.

2. Material and Method

The present work is based on both Archival data and secondary literature including field work. Data collected from various sources have been systematically arranged, analyzed and then put it into a suitable theoretical framework using empirical method to acquire the expected results.

Gender Perspective have been used as methodology to bring out the gender based discrimination that had taken place in Assam tea garden during British colonial era where feminine gender was poorly discriminated. So various feminist theories have been used, such as the concept of 'second sex' by Simon de Beauvoir, Judith Butler's theories on 'Gender' and 'sex' as a product of social and cultural construction, etc. to justify the suffering of woman labour in the plantation of Assam during colonial time.

3. Body and Sexuality

Woman body witnessed several experiences in plantation history of Assam and hence study would be incomplete without referring it. Physique of woman had a great contribution in economic growth of tea industry through her role in cheap labour production. Along with labor, woman had to sell her body to survive in the plantation. But what was the result? She gets the name *randy*.

If we go through the information either of primary and secondary literature, we will find a vast differences regarding the condition, situation and life style of tea garden workers in current days and during colonial period. The people of new

generation may not feel good to accept those situations that are beyond their imagination. But truth should come up to bring out woman workers' hidden miseries.

In a colonial garden, during the time of child birth, the age of the mother was sixteen to twenty years, unfortunately not more than that. Difficult lifestyle of garden forced them to adopt the situation at earliest. Therefore, it was not difficult to convert a small girl child into a mother. And thus without having any knowledge of child care she became a mother.

After baby born, mother and child need nutritious food and garden women often had to suffer deficiency in nutrition. And foods which were easily available only few had the proper knowledge of its use; as a result they suffered from malnutrition. Various diseases related to postpartum period did not escape the mother. Very less among them went to doctors, therefore in garden areas mortality rate of child and mother was comparatively high. Mulk Raj Anand in his novels "*Two leaves and a bud*" mentioned regarding the existence of *Dai*⁷ and Hindu Bengali employee also supported to deliver their child with the help of *Dai* rather than a doctor.

The percentage of female mortality was more, because including all the possibilities of death among both male and female coolies, female coolie has extra reasons such as during pregnancy, child birth and postpartum period and due to various reasons like malnutrition, lack of medical care, work burden etc.

In cleanliness garden areas are still poorly lagging behind. Regular bathing, nails, teeth, hair, cloth cleaning are not taken as important matters. They have no proper knowledge regarding the birth control process even today. Most of them believe that child's are gifts of god. In spite of that various superstitious belief, bad habits, lack of knowledge are the common things among the garden workers. Since, the beginning of coolie life in Assam garden, some changes only in their lifestyle can be notice from few years back among the large backward community of Assam.

"Two leaves and a bud" is a fascinating novel by Dr. Mulk Raj Anand published in 1937, where the author tried to portrayed a story of poor peasant Gangu, came from Hoshiarpur District of Punjab to Assam plantation by misleads of a fraud sardar. Instead of better life imagined by Gangu and his family had to face more difficult life than in their hometown that had never been experienced before. Gangu lost everything in the garden. He lost his wife in malaria, and most unexpected and worse time for him was then, when Assistant Manager's eyes were on his beautiful and lovely daughter Leila. And Gangu was shot dead due to refusal of planter's proposal to submit Leila to him and the accused was simply acquitted. In colonial plantation of Assam only rule that existed was called *Planter Raj* which Amalendu Guha beautifully narrated in his book *PlanteRaj to swaraj*. In the book author Anand mentioned various incident of helpless coolie who surrendered their daughters and wives in front of planters to acquire a plot of land and in many times in fear of losing plot, sardar give away

⁴ Ibid.p.18

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p.139

⁷ Local woman helped to deliver child in traditional way without any knowledge of professional or medical training

his daughter, mother and wife to planters. Women were used like a play ball without their concern. Author has mentioned an incident- where a coolie from Ranchi was lashed, because he refused to give his wife to assistant planter. And later he was imprisoned and planter kept his wife at the bungalow and after a month sent her back to the lines. Almost every planter kept coolie women to fulfill their sexual lust in tea plantation of Assam. Coolie girls were the most important source of corporeal entertainment. All young girls in the plantation were like planters' own property. Author described the feeling of Assistant Planters Raggie Hunt who pointing his colleagues said "how many of us did not have coolie women? Hitchcock and Ralph did exactly what he has done. And old Mac and Craft Cooke had done the same before their marriages, in their younger days".

Although this is a fiction but knowingly or unknowingly author depicted true picture of coolie and planters life of colonial tea plantation of Assam. Author must have encouraged by reality of plantation life to write this book. In similar way, where Mulk Raj Anand described about the fraud sardar, the fraudulent recruitment of coolie was a common feature of Assam tea plantation. And regarding the exercise of planter power on inferior coolie Amalendu Guha clearly mentioned in his book "Planter Raj to Swaraj:" about the planter coolie relation with sufficient primary evidences. And Anand's fiction of keeping coolie girl by planter is also true because many writers like Rana Pratap Behal, Samita Sen also mentioned about the fact. Interestingly Priya Chatterjee in her book "A time for tea" mentioned regarding the existence of *Chokri Khana* (girls house), which were small house in remote area but within the boundary of plantation for planters' favorite women and it was common in early 20th century.⁸ She also mentioned that women were offered to planters by their own community people.

"*Chameli Memsaab*" is a 1975 Assamese film based on love story between a European tea planter and woman tea worker, directed by Abdul Majid, music by Dr. Bhupen Hajarika won national award in the year 1975. With the story of Nirod Choudhury the film *Chameli Memsaab* provided vivid ideas regarding the relations between coolie women and British tea planters. The story of the film mainly focused on the love story between British tea estate owner and coolie girl but actually it seems just a unrealistic fiction script of a poor, dirty, illiterate coolie girl became a part of luxurious planter life. European planters lead a luxurious life in Assam tea gardens. Couple of servants existed to serve their daily life which was far away from the imagination of general garden workers. There are various sources provide us with the tradition of European planters to keep coolie women as concubine. May be in the same way some *chameli* delighted the bedrooms of some European planters and very few became *Chameli Memsaab*.

4. Sex and Gender Role in Women Suffering

The story of Assam tea plantation was not just like the story of Cotton Textile industry, Bombay and Jute industry of Calcutta where only 20% workforce constitute as women

labour and sometime less than that. In an industry where most of the works were done through machine, women could hardly find any employment in such place. Management gave numerous excuses for not including women in employment, like the concept of good mother. The concept of good mother was followed by colonial manager of Jute industry, Calcutta to not employ women workers but it is irony that when management employed women worker in urgent time the concept of good mother vanished with water. But in Assam tea plantation huge number of women labour constitute as the majority of workforce and it is important to notice how gender discrimination was taken place in Assam tea plantation in spite of huge proportion of female coolies.

Along with other reason, most important cause behind the story of huge proportion of female workers in Assam tea garden was their reproductive role. Unwillingness of Assamese people to work at the garden of foreigner left no option in the hands of colonial planters rather than to totally depend on migrated labour from different parts of India. And labour recruitment from outside Assam was a very costly process, and therefore as a motive to reproduce cheap labour, colonial planter started to recruit female coolie and family labour from last part of nineteenth century. As a result proportion of female labour increased dramatically in first half of twentieth century as per the labour reports. In 1905-06 from Chotanagur region 86,148 woman labours were employed with 84,782 numbers of man labours.⁹ Similarly from Bengal, plains and United Province 72,665 male coolies with a number of 77,132 female coolies showing female workers exceeding male coolies in number by 51.5% female workers constituting the total workforce.¹⁰ Throughout the history reproductive role of women was the chief cause of her enslavement and hence prevent her from act in shaping the world.¹¹ Women own body becomes an obstacle for her freedom and independency, while men make it worse to fulfill their own interest in order to rule as superior in the kingdom.

The Act of 1865 prescribed nine hours of work per day and six days per week¹² but it was hardly implemented in reality. Kadamoni, a woman worker of Baloma tea state, Jorhat stated "I go to work between 6 and 7 in the morning, and I return home at 5."¹³ Woman labour usually wake up in morning around 5 O' and after completing their household task like collecting firewood, bringing water, preparing and serving food for all the family members, taking care of child, cleaning, washing cloth etc, go for garden work. After returning home at

⁹ Resolution on immigrant labour in the Assam district of Eastern Bengal and Assam for the year ending 30th June 1906, printed at the Eastern Bengal and Assam secretariat printing office: Shillong, P.12

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1953, Lowe and Brydone Ltd., London, N.W., p.139

¹² A. Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam 1826-1947*, New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1977, p.14

¹³ R. Das Gupta, "From Peasants and Tribesmen to Plantation Workers: Colonial Capitalism, Reproduction of labour Power and Proletarianisation in North East India, 1850s to 1947", *Economic and Political weekly*, 1986, p.3

⁸ P.Chatterjee, "A Time for Tea", 2001, Duke University press Durham and London, P.163

5 O'clock evening, again similar routine followed and probably she could manage to go for sleep around 10 O'clock night after continuous work of 17 to 18 hours which was obviously far more than a male worker. Social construction of sex roles proved highly dangerous for female workers. Man perception of household work as women responsibility in spite of woman participation in family earning extended double workload on coolie woman. And marriage created double problem for plantation women with frequent conception and childbirth and once size of the family extended simultaneously work burden on women also increased adversely. According to social scientist Oakley- "household work has become an ideology by itself to exploit free female labour."¹⁴ But at the same time, man had time for smoking and drinking which was so called to please them at least for a while but for a woman it was wrong to expect any leisure time.

Woman labours were also not benefited by maternity benefits because reports let us know that lots of infant mortality occurred during that period due to malnutrition and various serious health problems. The Assam maternity benefit act, 1940 was applicable for the employee of factory, plantation, oilfield or mines. The act included various provisions like¹⁵- no employer shall employ woman during the four weeks immediately preceding and the eight weeks immediately following the day of her delivery or during the two weeks immediately following the day of her miscarriage, every woman shall be entitled to leave for twelve weeks on full pay at rate of her daily earnings, in case mother dies before the expiry of twelve weeks the full wages of twelve weeks still be payable for the benefit of the child, employer was to make free provision of qualified midwife and trained nurse, 10 Rupees bonus by employer to meet the preliminary expenses of the child, Compensation for dismissal to avoid payment of maternity benefit, penalty for contravention of the act by an employer. But it existed in paper only and never implemented in reality because inspection report of labour inspectors clearly described the defects of maternity benefit act.

Labour officer of Massimpur, Cachar submitted his inspection report of Bondookmara tea estate on 1949 to the Labour Commissioner of Assam where he mentioned that "there were no provisions for maternity ward or segregation ward or camps. Confinements usually take place in the garden lines. It was a pity that the garden has no separate trained midwife. One qualified midwife is maintained at warband tea estate who is also entrusted for work in vernerpur and ondookmara tea estate as well. It is absurd to depend upon a midwife who lives nearly eight miles away from the garden. So, a separate trained midwife for the garden is deemed indispensable."¹⁶ Labour inspector of Cachar wrote to Labour Commissioner of Assam on December 1949, describing the situation of Santhalia tea estate of Cachar where no qualified midwife was available in the garden and expected mother went

on without any scientific care. So he requested to appoint midwife in immediate necessity.¹⁷

Inspector report of Burnie Braes tea estate of Cachar let us know about the violation of the provisions of maternity benefit act 1940. Labour inspector of the garden mentioned two cases of the violation of the provisions of the act, one in 1947 and other in 1948.¹⁸ In first case child died within four weeks of delivery and the mother survived. But strange enough, payment was stopped after the death of the child. In second case women died after two weeks of delivery but payment was not made to her. Labour officer of Sibsagar, Jorhat in 1950, reported regarding the Barujan tea estate, Jorhat, that "there is no record maintained on maternity benefit till now. No monetary benefit is given. In this connection it is pointed out that the Assam Maternity Benefit Act 1940 and the rules there under are extended to tea industry also and is applicable in this garden also. So, the management's attention is drawn to the immediate application of the act. The contravention of the act is avoided."¹⁹ In Saikhowa tea estate, Dibrugarh labour inspector reported dispensary was under construction. So, it was no doubt that confinement took place in garden lines only.

Examining the labour inspector report on tea garden it can be said that the Assam Maternity Act 1940 was not implemented in reality during colonial time. Although according to the reports some provisions of the act were followed by the management in Brahmaputra valley but it is difficult to find any garden that maintained any provisions of the act in Barrak valley during colonial period.

In spite of facing double burden at home and garden women were the frequent victims of domestic violation, drunken husbands physically harassed their wives. Every important decision was either taken by husbands or elder son of that family. Further, wages earned by women were invested on household expenses and portion of male wages were used by them for their own enjoyment like drinking and smoking. It was probably due to male domination within the labour section. Participation of women labour in trade union during colonial period was very less. Hartmann in her article links the development of patriarchy with the development of capitalism.²⁰

Light of education on plantation of Assam was extremely poor during colonial period. Most of the children were illiterate. Among those who were able to have a glimpse of schools were mostly boys because it was seen that girls were either engaged in household work or in taking care of her younger brother and sister. Condition of female education was extremely poor as compared to male. Here, gender inequality is clearly visible. The concept of patriarchy where male get preference in every matter either elder or younger and treated female as inferior

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ A.Ramegowda, "Gender Equality: Power, Privilege and poverty in Plantations", Rawat Publications, Jaypur and New Delhi, 1997, P. 12

¹⁴ A.Ramegowda, "Gender Equality: Power, Privilege and poverty in Plantations", Rawat Publications, Jaypur and New Delhi, 1997, P. 13

¹⁵ File no. L/602 of 1939, Assam maternity benefit act 1939, pp.2,3

¹⁶ File no. GLR 13/50 of 1950, Inspectors reports on the garden, Judicial department labour branch

being and have no role in decision making. Perception like male should read and female will help her mother in household work and in taking care of her siblings because ultimately after marriage she must have to engage with that work was one of the reasons for less enrolls of girls in school compared to boys. And fortunately those who had got the chance to enroll could not attend the class due to work burden of sex based

responsibility. The following tables shows the statistics of boys' and girls' enrolled in school from most of the part of Assam during the first half of twentieth century where status of girls' were very depressed as compared to boys.

Return showing statistics of tea garden school in Assam valley division for the year ending 31st March 1924.

	No of School	No of Student enroll	
		Boys	Girls
"A" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	2	52	3
Golaghat Sub-division	1	21	1
Sibsagar Sub-division	2	75	9
"B" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	6	34	-
Golaghat Sub-division	-	-	-
Sibsagar Sub-division	-	-	-
"C" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	1	10	-
Golaghat Sub-division	4	95	5
Sibsagar Sub-division	16	339	36
North-Lakhimpur Sub-division	3	45	-
Dhubri Sub-division	2	28	6

Source: File no. XVII-31 OF 1924, General department, Assam Secretariat

Return showing statistics of tea garden school in Assam valley division for the year ending 31st March 1925.

	No of School	No of Student enroll	
		Boys	Girls
"A" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	2	67	3
Golaghat Sub-division	1	19	2
Sibsagar Sub-division	2	66	5
"B" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	7	131	-
Golaghat Sub-division	1	31	-
Sibsagar Sub-division	11	-	-
"C" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	1	10	-
Golaghat Sub-division	4	96	6
Sibsagar Sub-division	16	304	9
North-Lakhimpur Sub-division	3	44	-
Dhubri Sub-division	2	33	7

Source: File no. XVII-24 OF 1925, General department, Education branch, Assam Secretariat

Return showing statistics of tea garden school in Assam valley division for the year ending 31st March 1926.

	No of School	No of Student enroll	
		Boys	Girls
"A" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	2	60	2
Sibsagar Sub-division	2	60	5
Golaghat Sub-division	1	13	3
"B" Class School			

Jorhat Sub-division	7	144	-
Sibsagar Sub-division	-	-	-
Dibrugarh Sub-division	1	32	4
"C" Class School			
Jorhat Sub-division	1	15	-
Sibsagar Sub-division	15	359	17
Golaghat Sub-division	4	82	7
North-Lakhimpur Sub-division	3	47	-
Dhubri Sub-division	2	38	11

Source: File no. XVII-25 OF 1926, General department, Education branch, Assam Secretariat

5. Conclusion

Viewing in overall it can be said that gender and sex based discrimination was the chief reason of women exploitation in colonial tea plantation of Assam. The existence of social system called patriarchy played a major role in keeping girls child away from education which is now considered as basic right of every child. Patriarchy and gender based division of work led the women folk to suffer from double work burden at home as well as in garden. Apart from work

load the woman coolies were the worst victims of sexual harassment which is yet a burning issue in this century. Considering the beginning of tea plantation woman labours must be termed as the building block of the tea industry as they had been used for reproduction of man force. In the mean time they had been thrown deepest to the darkness of exploitation, suppression and abuses. Thus the period of the raising of the great tea industry was nothing else an epitaph of woman labour misery.

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