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**Coloniality and Its Continuity:**

Understanding Patterns of Structured Violence in  
TEA Plantations of North Bengal

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**Abstract:**

*Building on the growing scholarship on women's work and labour, this work has tried to address the discourse of the plantation economy in North Bengal. The tea 'gardens' sustain the colonial 'legacy' of hierarchy, exploitation, deprivation and power relations essentialized to produce a brew, recognized globally. The existence of the women tea labourers continues to remain a part of an imagined conscience amidst the enduring landscape of the hills. As attempts are constant to rebuild the deteriorating tea economy, not much scope has been given to improve the conditions of the tea labourers. Scientific tea research, workshops, conferences and grants has more to do with refining the quality of the tea plant rather than the labourers who are integrally allied to this economy. This has led to negligence on the part of the state and the management to identify the conditions of the workers to devise ways for improving their social status. The state apparatus remains economically and politically motivated to address the demands of this region as this work explains. The premise of state intervention is around wages which fails to problematize the nature of work that beholds it and the challenges they face on an everyday basis. This has led to immense deprivation for the women tea labourers both at the political and personal levels. The primary objectives of this work try to identify how the women live through these vulnerabilities and how they create a scope for negotiation to survive in this situation.*

**Keywords: Gender, Tea Plantations, Labour, Violence, Colonialism**

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Tea as a discourse intervenes in multiple moments of colonial history of India that has shaped the way it has been conceived across the world. Tea is implicated socially, politically, culturally and economically spearheading a long historical trajectory in the way it has been consumed. After the decline of the China market for tea, the British East India Company exported Indian tea to the west from the plantations of Darjeeling and Assam. The plantation economy in Darjeeling is thus irrevocably linked to the colonial history of

India. This history is largely fragmented and subjected to multiple interpretations under different spatio-temporal conditions.

Plantations could be assessed as an institution which has been responsible for European expansion and a tool of colonization in various parts of the world (Tomich, 2011). The plantation economy was an important part of British imperialism in India as well. An effective understanding of the premise of a plantation economy depends considerably on the interdisciplinary methodology of historicizing the encounter between the 'East' and the 'West' in the context of modern capitalist world. Plantations were reproduced through a colonial imagery of a space which demanded large-scale landholding based on an institutional regime (Thompson, 1975). Racial hierarchies sustained this 'modern' system of an export-oriented and productive enterprise through mechanized means. The growth and spread of plantations in India changed the subsistence nature of the Indian economy as it became the 'state's' "most favored child" (Jayawardena and Kurian, 2015; p 2).

Labour force in the tea plantations is a heterogeneous category and needs thorough scrutiny before being used as a tool for understanding the context. The labour force includes semi-skilled and unskilled workers comprising of the Bhutias, Lepchas, Raj Bangshis and Nepalis who were brought in as indentured labourers as a colonial enterprise. The social fabric of this space which existed much before European intervention; was disturbed as labour was being categorically placed to suit the requirements of building a sanatorium and later establishing the tea plantations. Darjeeling suits a seamless instance to comprehend the British rule in India not just because it has been the colonial 'paradise' due to its overwhelming landscape but also because of its long history of a plantation economy. There is an ecology of imperial remains within it that needs to be re-appropriated in contemporary times as an amalgamation of the material, the social and the symbolic aspects of everyday life in tea plantations, or, 'gardens' as they are known more popularly, signifying various moments in history (Besky, 2014). One could anticipate a stringent structural and an elaborate arrangement that generated deprivation and inequality within the plantation economy which had a history through imperialism and colonization. The hierarchy comprises of the tea garden managers at the top and the *coolies* or the workers at the lowest rung. The assistant managers and the factory supervisors constitute of the intermediaries along with the 'skilled' employees or clerks and staffs or sub-staffs. However, the most significant part of them constitute of the female workers who are strictly engaged in tea picking. Though some men are involved in such activities but that usually is an exception primarily for two reasons. Women are considered to be better at plucking tea leaves and men are involved in carrying out 'harder' physical activities. Though such is the apparent cause, the real motive behind such moves seems to be exploitation of female labour which is utilized to create a surplus value for the tea economy through unequal wage payments (Prasanneswari 1984 & Savur 1973). Women's labour remained unrecognized as they were restricted to a routinized field work which was largely deemed 'feminine' (Mair, 2000).

Amartya Sen in one of his lectures on "Reason before Identity" at the University of Oxford 1998 mentions that there is a need for an essential questioning of these traditional passive roles which most of the women are involved in and not just restrict one's attention

to the structure of inequalities that exist. Nature and culture cannot be looked upon as binary categories which essentializes hierarchization but must be looked upon as an instrument that nurtures exploitation of gender-based, class-based, caste-based roles. There is a severe crisis while handling the formation and consolidation of these multiple identities. These become bare, vulnerable 'bodies' on which violence and exploitation are manifested.

Within the framework of modernity, there has been lavish theorization on binaries such in terms of conflict and consensus or harmony and resilience. However, in an excessive commitment to social consensus and harmony within social sciences, violence as a subject has been denigrated to the edges for a very long time in history. Its presence has either been neglected or much taken for granted. In spite of substantial contribution of conflict theorists such as Marx, Weber or Simmel, the discourse has been far too oriented towards a social theory that contained a "domesticated view of the social world" (Coser, 1966). It was only with the coming of the alternative discourses that the complexities of the social spaces came to the forefront which declared an urgent need to recognize violence as a category of academic analysis.

Existing academic work has frequently propounded the articulation of violence through the *body*. However, if so, is the case, then can the body be regarded as an interplay of experiences and ideologies of the dominant upon the dominated? The shifting power relations however complicate the understanding of the dominant and the dominated. Also, the inherent practice of institutionalizing the body becomes the penetrating factor to conceptualize violence which is largely problematic. The body becomes a tangible entity on which abstract schemes of exploitation and suppression are manifested. However, from a post modern lens, the body itself becomes a contested category which disintegrates the conventional understanding of it. The body harnesses multiple social identities from where one cannot define it as a unified, generic category.

'Work' was never a subject of women's issue in colonial Bengal in spite of a significant number of women who were part of the 'paid' workforce since colonial times (Forbes, 1996). The historiography of the colonial plantations overlooked the specificities of women's lives and their experiences (Dutta, 2015 and Sen, 2004). Gender remained a marginal category of analysis for a very long time (Sarkar, 1997 and Sen, 1999). There has been a deficit in systemic and reliable information about these women also because their voices have not been recorded in history in comparison to the upper class educated Indian women who could record their own lived realities (Dutta, 2015). Largely with contributions of labour historians like Samita Sen (1999) and Leela Fernandes (1997), a gender neutral history of the working class women in colonial Bengal has been re-written (Dutta, 2015).

The history of women being a part of plantation economy has a conjoined history with slavery (Jayawardena and Kurian, 2015). What the British claimed to be a familial labour was only a residue of the essence of slavery where the African slaves were confined along with their wives and children. A family based recruitment system involved women as a way to retain the male force within the plantation economy and as a form of 'cheap labour' (Rasaily, 2013 and Viswanathan & Shah, 2012). As extended units of the family where housework is not recognized as an income generational labour, the workers have to

negotiate their labour power in much more ways as against their male counter parts. Women have invariably been assigned tasks which generate lesser remuneration for what they do. Feminization of labour is legitimized through an economy which draws a potential to resist the terms of wage labour (Chatterjee, 2001). The plantation patriarchy, an imposing medium on this space, is therefore direct, repetitive, structural and cultural, legitimized and routinized, affecting not just the physical health but also the mental health of the worker (Galtung, 1990).

It is crucial to identify the histories of certain practices of tea picking which are inscribed within certain power structures of gender and these structures become the continued site of identity for these women today. The 'native' woman represented a body through which they could be 'disciplined' as laborers in the tea economy. Chinese author, Lu Yu described a process of tea picking as a feminine activity in the Tang Dynasty which circulated to the colonial empire where women had to abstain from eating fish and certain kinds of meat in order to prevent the leaves from getting affected by their breathe (Chatterjee, 2001). The task was initially specified for virgin women as they were more agile and nimble. Their hands, fingers and body oils and sweat were scrutinized to ensure meticulous cleanliness to prevent the leaf from being contaminated (Chatterjee, 2001). There was thus an effort to produce a delicacy which could only be mediated through the pristineness of the virgin woman. Virginity was paralleled with a kind of innocence that was pure and chaste which would help in retaining the flavor and taste of the brew. Such notions of the colonial enterprise feminized and nativized not just the plant but also the act of tea picking. The symbolic became the political. Sexual politics informed the re-imagination of the native woman creating an imperial aura through the body as the site on which such imperialist interactions were carried out (Chatterjee, 2001). The bodies of these women are fixed and marked through certain constructions of the 'native' which have been produced and reproduced in history and under post-colonial conditions. It is therefore crucial to identify tea plucking as an activity and not just conceive of it as a woman's activity where the labour remains undermined as it has been the case so far.

In order to situate labour and women's work in the context of the plantation economy which generated deprivation and inequality in complex ways, one needs to understand how the notion of gender manifests itself within the structure. Women who comprise of the 'producers' of tea are a significant part of the industry, are employed upon possessing 'feminine attributes' of soft and nimble hands which are 'conducive' for tea picking, a necessarily gendered task rather than a skill orientation.<sup>1</sup> Such a social condition tries to invisibilize exploitation and nurtures gender inequalities in terms of remuneration or access to subsidies provided by the state. This manifested a strong gender prejudice towards the preferential demand of female workers in the plantations (Konings, 1995). Low skilled,

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<sup>1</sup> It was a colonial construction, derived from a selective translation of the Chinese 'tea culture' and sustained by the postcolonial plantation discourse, dominated by the owners and managers.

highly laborious and repetitive tasks of tea plucking was labelled as 'feminine' through uncertain normative correlations that have been drawn between the woman and the tea plant (Sen, 2002 and Chatterjee, 2001). Such associations have been detrimental in defining women's work in the context of the tea economy very strongly. Conceptual understanding of terms such as a tea 'picker' or a 'worker' over 'labourer' in the tea gardens is an essential exercise to not only highlight the persisting structural inequalities but also to understand 'women's work' within and outside the garden. The new historical identities produced around the idea of race in the new global structure of the control of labour were associated with social roles and geo-historical places like the tea plantations. In this way both race and the division of labour remained structurally linked and mutually re-enforcing. Employing women was an imposed systematic racial-gendered division of labour, producing new historical and social identities. The racial distribution of new social identities was combined with a racial distribution of labour and the forms of exploitation of colonial capitalism (Brass, 2011).

**Plantation as a Site of Coloniality:** One needs to map a location where violence is legitimized upon the bodies of the subaltern as a result of colonial experience. Questions of modernity emerge as particular pasts and concrete histories, defined by projects of power and molded by provisions of progress. The history of modernity itself began as a violent encounter between Europe and America at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. From then on, knowledge production was systematized through Eurocentric interventions to establish an order based on the category of race. This new cultural imperative was built around the crux of reason and rationality of the English Enlightenment to modify and tame the unsettled 'east'. A constructed social inter-subjectivity was employed to fabricate the civilizing mission. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, and the model of power that is hegemonic and distinctly evident in the plantations today presupposes an element of coloniality. Social identities were thus forged on binaries which produced new historical social identities- the oppressed labourers. It became a way of granting legitimacy to the colonial domination, legitimizing the ideas and practices of relations of superiority-inferiority, the dominant and the dominated.

As discussed above, a similar rational space where capitalism could establish itself and flourish was created in the North Bengal tea plantations where the lives of these workers could be situated. Tea is mainly grown in four states across the country namely, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and West Bengal. Darjeeling, located at the foothills of the Himalayas which remained the summer capital for the British for a very long time, is the one of the ethnographic sites that this essay would be looking at. Darjeeling suits the perfect instance of a colonial paradise not just in terms of its physical and geographical conditions but also in terms of the persistence of dominance and exploitation (particularly upon women) that surmounted during the British rule in India. North Bengal as a region has a history which is structurally different from the rest of Bengal as far as development is concerned. The plantation economy in the North seems to be the apparent cause of such underdevelopment.

Deprivation within this particular region thus seems to be a product of the historical conditions that this region was exposed to.

The first tea garden was established in North Bengal in the year 1874 when tea was grown for export. An essential element that one required was massive labor force and large areas of land. The shortage of labour however had to be overcome and workers were brought in as a part of the indentured labour from the Chhota Nagpur belts. Sharit Bhowmik (1980) quotes Erik Wolf who believed that the institutionalization of a plantation economy alters the social fabric of that particular space. It reiterates and reproduces class hierarchies and a stringent social structure through which exploitation is implemented on an everyday basis.

The question that Virginius Xaxa (1985) in his article asks is that if this belt was exposed to a capitalist market from a very early stage, then why is there still so much difference and stratification between the North and the South of Bengal. Have the agrarian parts of Bengal superseded the plantation belts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri? Both the agrarian and the plantation economy witnessed class differentiation but the latter constituted of class subordination between the colonizers versus the colonized while the former was an interjection of class relations between the *zamindars* and the peasants (Xaxa, 1985). Class differences were mixed with ethnic differences in the latter that created further violation and oppression for those who were the periphery. This shuffle by the colonizers was accentuated to retain maximize profit for the 'core'. The entire infrastructural developments occurred to feed the capitalist interests of the plantation estates where nothing trickled down to the margins.

All forms of control and exploitation of labour and production, control of appropriation and distribution of products revolved around the capital-salary relation and the world-market. This created the 'working bodies' who were subjected to unrestrained and unjustified physical and mental subjugation. The only justification provided by the 'superior white' was that of racial superiority and thus serfdom was legitimized. These forms were deliberately established and organized to produce commodities for the world-market. Thus, a new global model of labour-control was created, which again depended on a new model of power. Vaskar Nandy (cited in Chatterjee, 2008) states that certain global multi-corporation giants such as Unilever and Lipton have played a major stake in the underdevelopment and crisis of the plantations in India. These corporations have tried to control the entire "commodity chain from plantations to teapot" (Chatterjee, 2008).

The new historical identities produced around the foundation of the idea of race in the new global structure of the control of labour were associated with social roles and geo-historical places like the tea plantations. In this way both race and the division of labour remained structurally linked and mutually re-inforcing. Thus, a systematic racial division of labour was imposed. In the course of the world-wide expansion of colonial domination on the part of the same dominant race (the Europeans), the same criterion of social classification were imposed on all of the world population. The racial distribution of new social identities was combined with a racial distribution of labour and the forms of exploitation of colonial capitalism (Quijano, 2006).

Each form of labour–control was associated by a particular race. Consequently, the control of a specific kind of labour also became the control of a specific dominated group. Colonialism is nothing but a form of invasion, not just on one’s territory, but it is a colonization of the mind. Colonization was not a mere annexation of a piece of land, but a complete captivity of the dominated mind which is brought under complete control by the colonizers. It is a controlling of one’s own knowledge, of one’s consciousness, and it is the highest form of captivity. The colonized world seen from the metropole is a magnificent museum of primitiveness.

**Conclusion:** Though one may find evidences of constant dialogue between the authority and the tea plantation workers, it has been silenced in its entirety. It could be counted as a form of suppression of resistance so that the workers are unable to organize themselves against the Management. There is yet another visibility of an intense confrontation when on the one hand, the plantation was decisive of the market rates, yet it played its own power politics and kept the wages of the labourers reduced so that it largely varied with respect to other sectors including agriculture. “Coercion, low wages and immigrant labour were initially the three important, or rather, inseparable, components of the plantation system. These ensured the planters their high profits.” (Bhowmik 1998, p 1525).

Isolation, supreme subjugation and exploitation through coercion were the means by which the civilizing mission of the West continues to harness itself in modern times. The oppressive working conditions comprise of the prime character of the tea plantations which continues to function discreetly and at the same time put up a glorified position that the tea as an industry holds in the world platform. Plantation has been conceptualized as an economic unit and thus the ‘social’ aspects of it were completely overlooked by scholars. The social which would also gather on the discourse of the body was invisibilized. The reason could be such that in order to promote such a space as an economic unit, it had to ignore all the other realities that lay deep within it. Structural inequalities and violence which was not just economic but also social, lay in the dark. The motivation of the scholars has therefore been in issues of wages primarily. The plantation became a site which exemplified economic inequalities which withheld the darker aspects of a plantation life. It seemed to be more of a concentration camp for the workers that disabled resistance from its exteriors or from within. The issues were regarded as either struggles of the tribes or of simply being the ‘colonized’. An identity as a plantation worker got submerged through such vast violent conceptualizations and theorizations. The women and the children were even less spoken of as has been the usual standards of a male dominated discourse analysis. Media reports and existing archival material of this complex reality are an effort to normalize the harshness that exists within this state sanctioned violence. Such a sanitized version needs to be re-explored that nurtures domination and oppression through myriad ways. Symbolic degradation of the “self” needs to be contextualized in terms of the physical deprivation in order to define violence incurred on these ‘working bodies’. Understanding the matrix of oppression in a particular space/dislocated space and time, and politics of emancipation should begin from the logics which are already there in the forms of

resistance in the society. It cannot be simply buried in the history of colonization and needs to be reproduced through a rewriting of history.

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