

Scheduled Communities of North Bengal Tea Gardens: Unintended Consequences or Politics of Exclusion (Dr. Lalit P. Tirkey, published as a Chapter 10, pp. 171-187 in Anup S. Chakraborty and Padam Nepal (eds) *Politics of Exclusions and Inclusions in India: Construing Commonalities and Complexities*, published by AUTHOURS PRESS in 2016)

Introduction

A large population of the North Bengal tea gardens especially in the Terai-Dooars regions comprises scheduled groups (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). This is a population that is fearful about its gloomy prospects and anxious about its basic subsistence, overly dependent as it is on low and insecure income, inadequate social services, and a shrinking labour market. A glaring example of livelihood challenge can be found among the tea garden workers of North Bengal. Study conducted in 2003 by Centre for Education and Communication shows that wage cuts or delay in wage payments, increasing job reduction leading to rising unemployment, and above all, hunger and malnutrition related deaths are creating a fear psychosis on the tea workers of the region. In recent years, a large number of these workers are threatened by impending tea garden closures or abandonment, while even on operational gardens, workers are suffering wage cuts, tougher picking demands, increased short-term insecure contracts and appalling living and working condition (Biswas et al, 2003; Goddard, 2005). In this complex situation the worst affected sections of the society belong to the scheduled communities.

The aggravating livelihood situation of the scheduled communities in the tea gardens of North Bengal is not merely a fallout of economic crises as often cited tea producers, neither is it due to their financial mismanagement. Indeed, the siphoning or embezzlement of workers provident fund has caused serious economic hardships to the workers' community. However, there is also a deep seated, unsaid dynamic at play to ensure certain sections of the society—, and in the context of tea industry—the labour class from the scheduled communities, is constantly deprived of their various rights. And so, though subtle in its appearance, yet deep rooted in the socio-economic system of tea garden in east India, is the process of '*otherisation*' of this scheduled group by the dominant 'other' symbolized by the majority mainstream society. Various socio-cultural factors embedded in the social structure reinforce the process of *otherisation* and perpetuate '*exclusion*' of a community/society in terms of their share of social, cultural and economic resources in society (Silver, 1994). Such social exclusions have led to denial of rights of some communities in India (Nagla: not dated) for centuries, including the right to livelihood.

The social exclusion is a process of systematically discriminating against scheduled groups and keeping them outside the power centres and resources (*ibid*). It is the process in which individuals or entire population of a community are systematically blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group, and which are fundamental to social integration within that particular group (Silver, 1994). The notion of social exclusion may be widened to incorporate the notion of rights, for instance, the right to livelihood, etc. In India, the process of social exclusion involves some sections of population like the Dalits and the Adivasis who are forced in to isolation, discriminated against, and deprived of equal access to social and economic opportunities (Nagla:

not dated). Generally, this ‘idea of social exclusion has conceptual connections with the notion of poverty as well as capability deprivation’ (Sen, 2000). It is often considered a loaded term; but concerns about the status of minorities, immigrants, women, the unemployed, and indigenous peoples fit nicely into this school of thought (Loury, 2000). This feeling of insecurity has come about due to their marginalization from the mainstream society as also due to the fact that they have been time and again excluded from decision making process.

North Bengal Tea Garden Workers of Scheduled Communities

In West Bengal, although the majority of the population comprises the dominant Bengali community, Table 1 below shows that the highest percentage of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in the entire state are found in North Bengal, particularly in the tea regions. In fact, the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri are characterized by a sizable proportion of Scheduled Tribe population (21 per cent and 13.8 percent respectively) as compared to the State average of 5.6 per cent (North Bengal Report: 2002). The other districts of North Bengal, namely, Cooch Behar, Dinajpur and Malda, too, are characterized by high proportion of Scheduled Caste population (Ibid). The region, though pre-dominantly rural, having agriculture/farming as the major livelihood activity, also has tea garden work that constitutes the central livelihood source for a large number of the population. The scheduled groups, belonging to the economically backward and socially marginalized tribal and lower caste communities (of Nepalese and Bihari origin), constitute the fulcrum of the work force in the most important industrial sector of the place, that is, tea garden. This labour force in the tea gardens of North Bengal, the second major tea producing region in India, was brought as indentured migrant workers from the central provinces of India more than a century ago (Bhadra, 1992, Bhowmik *et al*, 1996, Kramatempel *et al*, 1999). On a daily basis a large number of both permanent as well as casual workers are employed in the tea gardens of the Darjeeling Terai of and Doors of Jalpaiguri tea regions. One significant aspect of the tea workers’ community in the North Bengal tea region is the ethnic diversity. Ethnic groups, belonging to diverse ethnicity, caste and tribes work in these tea gardens. Bengalis, Nepalese, Rajbansis (Koch) and *Adivasis* of Chotanagpur-Santhal Parganas origin (Oraon, Munda, Kharia etc) are some of the major groups while Bodos, Garos, Meches and some smaller groups are also found in these tea gardens (Barma, 2007). It is significant that most of these groups fall under the category of STs or SCs. Although there is no logical basis for relating to high ST/SC population with low human development indicators, several empirical results in tea regions indicate lower development trend in diversification of income base and literacy rate: North Bengal tea region has much lower literacy rate (50.13 percent in 2001) as compared to 61.7 percent in the rest of West Bengal (North Bengal Report: 2012).

Table 1

Distribution of SC/ST population in the three North Bengal Districts of West Bengal

District	Percentage of SC Population			Percentage of ST Population		
	1981	1991	2001	1981	1991	2001
Coochbehar	47.03	49.84	51.76	0.61	0.57	0.60
Darjeeling	12.58	14.25	16.15	10.60	14.75	13.78
Jalpaiguri	34.02	34.61	36.99	19.35	22.20	21.04
N. Bengal	27.69	29.91	29.10	11.21	11.29	16.29
W. Bengal	25.22	21.98	23.62	5.72	6.63	5.59

Source: India Census: 2001

Economic Marginalization of SC/ST Tea Workers of North Bengal

There are various factors that contribute to the livelihood threats and challenges of tea garden workers especially of scheduled communities of North Bengal. First, for generations of tea workers in North Bengal wage labour has been the only source of livelihoods. Consequently, they suffer livelihood threats whenever tea industry faces crises in the form of tea garden lock-outs or abandonment. During these periods, tea workers, besides losing their daily wages, are also deprived of the benefits enumerated in the Garden Labour Act (PLA) 1951, such as, ration, bonus, medicine and firewood while electricity and water services are withdrawn from them (Goddard, 2005). UNDP Report (2006) and studies conducted by Talwar *et al* (2003) and Biswas *et al* (2005) in the North Bengal Tea Regions have shown that in recent years, the closure and abandonment of tea gardens have led to the humanitarian crises in the form of malnutrition and hunger, which in turn resulted in various sicknesses, hunger and starvation deaths. While, the aged, children and women have been most vulnerable to sicknesses and malnutrition, the tea workers' community as a whole becomes susceptible to shocks and stresses resulting from the loss of their primary livelihood source (North Bengal Report, 2002; Talwar *et al*, 2003).

In economic terms, social exclusion also takes into consideration deprivation in number of spheres, of which low income is but one (Rawal, 2005). The tea garden wages in West Bengal are far too low for the workers and their households to make any meaningful savings or investment for future. These wages, despite being fixed after tripartite meetings between the representatives of government, planters and workers, are too meagre and hence, economically non-viable. It is merely at the subsistence level that is not adequate to grant them any purchasing power in crises situation. And so, the workers and their children are deprived of their basic standard of living without any security for future.

Viable livelihood options are necessary for securing food and other basic amenities whenever basic livelihood system like tea industry collapses. In North Bengal tea region, except tourism, other large alternative industry hardly exists that could provide job opportunities; small scale cottage industries and even small time alternative livelihood options are conspicuous by their absence near tea gardens. Lack of alternative livelihood options, in and around tea garden of North Bengal means that not only during the closure or abandonment of tea gardens but even during normal operational period of gardens, tea workers of the scheduled communities face poverty and are left out of the equal opportunities and integration into the mainstream society. Rising poverty and lack of work opportunity in tea gardens further aggravate unemployment problem, thereby exacerbating poverty status. Thus, social exclusion can be a possible result of long-term unemployment; thereby making it

a key cause of, or at least correlating factor with social exclusion (Loury, 2000). This is because most people's social networks and sense of embeddedness in society also revolve around their work while at the same time, paid work, which besides being the principal source of income, is also considered the fount of individuals' identity and feeling of self-worth (*ibid*). Many of the indicators of extreme social exclusion, such as poverty and homelessness, depend on monetary income which is normally derived from work (*ibid*).

To add to the hardships of workers, many tea gardens are located away from the urban and market centres which make the availability of work or job opportunities hard to come by. Is the lack of opportunities and absence of any viable alternative industry just a coincident in tea industry-rich Terai and Dooars regions or a subtle way of further marginalizing the group already at disadvantageous position and predominantly dependent on tea industry? Deep reflection provides an insight into some kind of sinister plan of the dominant other to further exclude in an implicit way and at other times in a systemic way the tea garden dwellers of scheduled communities from availing other means of livelihood. The economic exclusion can be seen even in the government schemes rolled out for improving the lives of the poor. In recent years, many agricultural poor and landless labourers have been provided with work opportunities like '100 days work' under NREGA scheme. These welfare schemes that function as short-term alternative livelihood options are aimed at helping the rural poor particularly the very backward scheduled communities (Hanstad & Lokesh, 2002). The schedule group tea workers, by contrast, have been kept out of the purview of these many government schemes. Many government schemes and benefits are not easily availed to these communities in the tea gardens of North Bengal. For instance, they have the right of employment under 100-day work scheme but powers that be ensure they are given a mere two-week work; poor are entitled to housing under IAY, yet many poor SC/ST household have to run from one government office to another; and when the amount is sanctioned management comes on the way of housing construction. At different moves, underlying signs of exclusion, when management has no qualms in their workers getting the benefits, then the Panchayat dilly dallies; when the Panchayat avails the schemes to the workers (eg Indira Awas Yojna), the planters create problem in providing NOC for work under their jurisdiction. Consequently, most of the poor, landless and unemployed garden residents, including casual or seasonal workers from the garden are deprived of work opportunities and other benefits. In most tea gardens of North Bengal, the tea workers belonging to these marginal and scheduled groups are not even granted Below Poverty Line (BPL) status despite losing their only livelihood source after the closure or abandonment of gardens (Rasaily, 2008). Thus, they are deprived of even short-term livelihood alternatives. That is why, despite being associated with tea industry for so long there is no real noticeable change in the socio-economic condition of tea workers nor has economic development of tea regions occurred. As a result of systematic exclusion and denial, they have remained dependent on tea garden for their food and livelihood security.

Ownership of land and access to other resources are essential not just for strengthening of livelihoods security but even enhancement social status. Land ownership, both homestead and agricultural can provide livelihood security and aid the intervention against economic crises, besides, providing regular subsistence income for improving the livelihoods (Hiremath and Anand, 2007). But in rural society, the ownership of land also gives social and economic status; a landless labourer has very low social status as compared to a landlord. In the Terai and Dooars tea gardens, inhabited primarily by Adivasi workers, the non-possession of land is unthinkable,

considering the fact that their forefathers solely depended on the produce from their land. But since their arrival in the tea gardens of North Bengal their dreams of owning a small parcel of land has not been fulfilled. It is a sad story but as a matter of fact, they are considered part of the garden assets that are sold or bought from one owner to the next, without having any legal property rights of their own or any say on the decision-making (ICIMOD, 2001). Again, is it not social exclusion when many late entrance into the country from Bangladesh, Nepal and even refugees from Bhutan have been settled with patta and registered paper in their hand, a community that settled the land more than a century ago and made the land habitable has been denied land rights? In addition, households of SC and ST communities are denied the access to some common property resources that their village counterparts can quite easily claim as their own. In fact, 'given a very high level of dependence of rural SC and ST households on CPRs and growing landlessness and marginalization of their landholdings, these communities are the worst affected due to the depletion and degradation of CPR land resources' (Reddy, 1998).

It is a fact, that these tea garden residents, comprising ST/SC in majority are still illiterate, ignorant, naïve and even submissive, the last quality attribute being embedded in their culture. Yet, the dominant other, often in the garb of the ruling class, has systematically denied proper education, deprived of many benefits and above all cut off the opportunity of owning land in their own names. Therefore, it is no surprise that the socio-economic status of this community has not changed despite unquestionable role played by the current workers and by their descendents of yesteryears (Bhadra, 1992; Mukherjee, 1997).

Social Exclusion and Marginalization of the Tea Garden Scheduled Communities

Tea garden workers of scheduled communities are given various rights on constitution and papers but are denied, deprived of or excluded from on the ground. According to N. Kabeer (2000) three types of attitudes and social practices, either conscious or unconscious, intended or unintended, explicit or informal which result in exclusion: mobilization of institutional bias, social closure: and unruly practices. According to him the mobilisation of institutional bias refers to the existence of "a predominant set of values, beliefs, rituals and institutional procedures that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others". Social closure is the way in which social groups seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligible people while unruly practices refer to the unofficially perpetuated exclusion by institutions and discrimination or prejudices perpetuated by public sector workers through use of their position.

Majority of the tea garden residents in North Bengal are fourth generation workers mostly belonging to either tribal (Adivasi) or low caste peoples belonging to the lowest social strata (Bhadra and Bhadra, 1997). Ever since their in-migration to this tea region, their descendent, like their counterparts in Assam and Bangladesh, and the present workers have been subjected to oppression, exploitation and inhuman treatments (Bhadra, 1992; Bhowmik et al, 1996). In a social system littered with casteism and discrimination embedded in the social

psyche, the tea workers of scheduled groups are looked down upon by the mainstream society. The derogative terms like “tea tribe” in Assam, “*dhangor*” (servant) in Bangladesh, “*kamane*” (labourers) in the Darjeeling Hills and “*madesia*” (consumer of liquor) in the Terai and Dooars of North Bengal tea regions are common terms and phrases to address the scheduled group. And perhaps, due to their birth in the marginal and socially excluded community, despite forming the ‘backbone’ of tea industry for over a century, they have lived a life akin to ‘bonded labourer’ in the enclaves of tea garden settlements (Bhadra, 1992; Lahiri, 2000). Therefore, though settled at least three to four generations ago, they are still viewed as immigrants and suffer from a social discrimination akin to a landless farming population (Dacholia et al: 2006, Turkey, 2010). In fact, in Assam as also in Bangladesh Adivasi workers are viewed as second class citizens and have been denied the ST status in the former case (Fernandes, 2007). A general sense of apathy towards them due to their social origin and status can be felt by the tea workers of scheduled groups. (ST/SC Commission Report (2009) have reported grave hardships dealing with different issues, abnormal delay in payment of compensation and government benefits to the tribal tea workers on account of their origin. For generations these tea garden scheduled communities of North Bengal have lived a life of subjugation and submission at the hand of not just their tea garden masters but also government officials (*ibid*).

Social exclusion was quite clearly evident during hunger and starvation in the Dooars tea gardens of North Bengal which was related to the entitlement failure during garden closure or abandonment that in turn resulted in unemployment and loss of purchasing power leading to shortage or stoppage of food supply. During garden lock-outs and abandonment by management the government apathy towards them palpable, often being manifested through inaction or indifferent attitude of the government agencies. For government agency and the management, addressing the problems of workers, comprising chiefly of scheduled groups, becomes a low priority perhaps because workers are not considered socially significant as compared to those from the mainstream society neither do they enjoy any significant bargaining power in the political arena. In this age of globalization, the social protection of workers is kept out as the profit-making becomes the central concern of the tea planters (Sen, 2011). Moreover, in the garden economy, where ordinary tea workers are perhaps the most important factor in the growth of the tea industry, the labourers are not only deprived of the due share in the total revenue earned but are also treated as commodities (Mukherjee, 1997). But the deliberate act of social exclusion and marginalization has been deeply embedded in the social structure which has systematically marginalized these sections of the society for centuries (Nepal, 2004). Hunger can also result from the loss of job followed by peoples’ inability to find other jobs or may be denial of jobs owing to their allegiance to the scheduled groups; thus, manifesting other kind of social exclusion (Sen, 2000).

Political Exclusion and Marginalization of Tea Garden Scheduled Community

The life of scheduled groups (SC/ST) has been that of silent suffering due to weak social capital and constant social exclusion in the past. Paradoxically, despite sizable population in the tea gardens particularly of the Terai-Dooars tea region, they have remained a mass of voiceless people as either they never realized their collective strength and political bargaining power or their attempts of realizing their political capital was squashed by main stream society. In the backdrop of this situation the emergence of *Adivasi Vikas Parishad* (AVP) in the Terai and Dooars region and Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) in the Darjeeling Hills almost

simultaneously from 2008 became significant. While, the political bargaining power among the Gorkha population in the Darjeeling Hills was evident from their hold over many political organizations, the emergence of GJM provided a new dimension to the aspiration of the people of Nepalese origin, including the tea garden workers. This new party not only annihilated other national and regional parties by taking up the causes of the people as one entity, it also empowered the tea workers union to bargain for better wages and benefits. AVP on the other hand has had limited success and has trudged its course through potholes. It started as being a non-governmental organization fighting for the causes of the tribals (*adivasis*) with limited success. Consequently, in the past, faced with the economic backwardness, social marginalization and deprivation in every sphere of life, the tea garden workers of North Bengal especially of scheduled tribe origin seemed to have alienated themselves from the mainstream politics (Sen, 2011). One of the reasons being that despite forming a large vote bank in the Terai-Dooars tea regions, this community was not able to produce even one able leader or politician of any stature. They could not gauge their political strength, nor could exercise political bargaining power despite having reserved constituency, in the Terai region and Dooars. Why? Candidates from tea garden scheduled community contesting for assembly or parliamentary elections were picked by mainstream political parties and so, they became mere puppets. Therefore, these 'elected representatives' never really represented the masses; neither did they had wherewithal to bring about socio-economic transformation of the region. As a result, the Marxist government that ruled the state for more than three decades did precious little to make policies that would bring fruits of globalization to the people of this region. Thus, AVP emerged into a political force in 2008, as a response to and even to some extent counter the GJM's clout, and as a reaction to the unbearable exploitation of the tea workers by the tea planters but above all to assert the rights of the marginal scheduled communities in the tea gardens of the Terai-Dooars regions (Sen: 2011). While the ordinary workers in Terai-Dooars tea regions couldn't fathom the micro-politics involved in the evolution of this party many opinion leaders interviewed asserted the emergence of AVP as a resultant force of long years of ignominy in the tea gardens of North Bengal. While still not a force to reckon with politically, AVP is being seen as an alternative to many mainstream parties that failed to do anything significant for the people of North Bengal tea gardens. Consequently, not just *adivasis* of Chotanagpur origin but even many scheduled caste groups have made allegiance to this party, as witnessed in massive enrolments of tea workers under AVP-affiliated Progressive Workers Tea Union (PWTU) in the Terai-Dooars tea gardens. In a separate way the emergence of GJM has been the symbol of Gorkha identity; and at the same time this political organization has become voice of the subdued tea garden workers of scheduled communities in the Darjeeling Hills.

Indeed, political power is very important political capital for the scheduled communities in enhancing livelihoods or providing strategy for better livelihood promotion. However, the level of mass consciousness can be raised only through mass struggle and political movements (Prashad, 1995). In the face of government's neo-liberal economic policies posing livelihood threat to tea workers of North Bengal, the emergence of *Adivasi Vikas Parishad* (AVP) has come as a boon for the erstwhile voiceless people of Terai-Dooars tea region. Giving shape to the identity of the marginal tea garden community of North Bengal, *Adivasi Vikas Parishad* (AVP) has emerged as the new political consciousness of the people in the Terai-Dooars tea region, bringing in a new political awakening amidst tea garden workers especially of scheduled tribe origin (*The Telegraph*, 2007; *Tea News Darjeeling*, 2007). Beginning of this decade has witnessed GJM and AVP exerting pressure on the other trade unions to comply with their

demands for higher wages for tea garden workers. Though unrealistically high, the pressure paid off, with the planters lobby agreeing to raise the wages in all the three tea regions of North Bengal, albeit with some difference.

Notwithstanding achievements, the attainment of any political capital depends on the momentum of the socio-political movement for sustenance of peoples' livelihoods. Despite some success and achievement of political capital by AVP, this political organization seems to be losing ground as far as the base support of tea garden workers of Scheduled groups (especially adivasis) is concerned vis-a-vis GJMM of the Darjeeling Hills among the Nepalese or Gorkha population. Generally, the submissiveness and serfdom syndrome tends to precipitate and perpetuate the subaltern and backwardness (Bakshi, 2008). There are forces that try to break and weaken the movements of workers' class to ensure scheduled community remains suppressed and subjugated. There is also infighting that corrodes the strength and unity of the organization. That is why a big question is already being posed: will the leaders from this marginal community remain united to fight the causes of their people? Or like most political movements, even this resultant force will fizzle out after becoming mired in its own micro-politics.

6.6. Concluding Observations

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the tea garden workers of North Bengal Tea Region, most of who belong to the scheduled groups, have been subjected to a vicious cycle of livelihood threats, poverty and marginalization or socio-economic exclusion, which gets reinforced by socio-culturally embedded processes. The process of otherisation, marginalization, and exclusion of the scheduled tea garden communities in the region has time and again reinforced their livelihood threats and perpetuated the exploitation. Therefore, there is a need to break this vicious cycles to enable these scheduled and marginal communities come out of livelihood threat and socio-economic and political marginalization. History is the witness that oppressors or exploiters from the dominant group will always like to have upper hand so long as they sway power over the subservient group. This will further perpetuate poverty among the poor, particularly the marginal and subjugated scheduled communities. In these circumstances, the possible remedies for the scheduled communities of tea gardens is first and foremost to demand for their rights- their fundamental rights of food and livelihood security, alternative livelihood options, equal work opportunities, land ownership rights, and above all inclusion and integration into the mainstream society so as to live with full dignity.

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