

Plantation Sociology of North-East India



Khemraj Sharma

The present work entitled "**Plantation Sociology of North-East India**" is a pioneering research study. It highlights the ways how the plantation workers of North-East India have been marginalized from all corners of the society. Since the present research falls under the category of labour studies relating to the plantation workers in the age of globalization, it highlights the ways and means of marginalization of workers in the golden era of globalization. The study highlights the fate of tea garden workers, their present being as marginalized human resource capital and their urge to become the integral part of mainstream human resource capital of the country. The plantation workers as everybody knows, are the most neglected, marginalized and little known working citizens of the country. The study also highlights that in spite of their acute marginalization, they have still possessed high commitments to the industry although they are facing unwanted upheavals brought about by the vagaries of times in the history of one hundred and sixty three years of its origin, growth, development and present state of decaying in the era of Globalization. The plantation industry is the most tradition oriented industry and therefore it is infected by all sorts of traditionalisms on its modus operandi. The work will definitely help the readers, scholars, students and thinkers of the society who can contribute a lot to the literature of plantation workers of the country. The work is a noble exercise to explore a new theory that will be most applicable to the study of plantation workers and thereby to enrich the literature on the plantation workers of the country in the era of Globalization, Liberalization and Privatization of Indian economy.

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Introduction

To develop a distinct discipline known as “**Plantation Sociology**” as a separate literature free from the bondage of traditional Industrial Sociology as the sole approach of studying the industrial organization is the prime objective of the present empirical study. The Plantation Sociology is suitable as a pragmatic approach for studying the plantation universe as the plantation sector is neither purely agrarian nor industrial sector of the country (Sharma: 2009). In fact, the Plantation Sociology exclusively deals with the issues pertaining to the plantation workers and management in the globalized era as Industrial Sociology has not so far covered by the existing literature of Industrial Sociology of the country because the Industrial Sociology mainly deals with the concepts, theories and parameters evolved in technologically most sophisticated industries after the Industrial Revolution ever since early 18th century in Great Britain. While the **Plantation Sociology** is the resultant outcome of British colonialism as well as Indian neo-colonialism in the plantation enclaves of the country without implementing the fruits of Industrial Revolution of Great Britain at the plantations. Historically, almost all the industries except tea plantations were out and out seasonal industries during the British period. Hence, in this context, the tea plantations were not the seasonal but the permanent enterprises of British

Government. So, the plantation society has fulfilled the fundamental characteristics focusing totally different type of social system and the social system was basically agrarian in nature (Sharma: 2000) in so far as its modus operandi was concerned. In fact, plantation was neither purely industrial nor specifically agrarian sector in so far as its nomenclature was concerned. It is because of the fact that during the British period, the plantation sector had never given the status of industry but it was termed as "estate economy" only. It used therefore, to carry the status of pseudo-agrarian sector economy of the country. This may be the reason why after 1947 in very many ways, the plantation has been designated as one of the agro-based industries (Bhowmik: 1981; Xaxa: 1997) of the country. The same characteristic feature is still continuing today in the industry except with some alterations in the process of operational techniques. Subjectively, it is called an industry but objectively, it is as good as an agrarian sector (Sharma and Das: 2008) of the country in so far as its dynamics are concerned.

There is no distinct or separate literature evolved so far in India for studying the plantation workers except the efforts that are being made for integrating the workers with the centurion old British discipline known as Industrial Sociology. It is due to the fact that no serious effort is being made so far to study the plantation system. A few stray studies have utilized the British approach (Industrial Sociology) while studying the plantation workers throughout the period of last sixty years of independence. However, this may be the reason why Prof. Sharit Bhowmik (1981), a prominent Social Scientist, adopted the Marxian approach while studying the dynamics of plantation workers in Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. It is therefore specifically visualized that the Plantation Sociology as a new discipline has been evolved from the present research findings from Darjeeling tea industry in order to lead other future scholars to develop the new philosophy so that more and more contributions can be made to the existing literature of plantation society of our country. It reflects totally a new dimension that particularized a suitable approach to the Indian cultural heritage—the culture of forceful integration of the plantation workers to the national mainstream.

The tea garden workers over the period of last one hundred and sixty years have been integrated themselves with the various upheavals as brought about by the forces of the society, government and management. The Plantation Sociology is therefore, the philosophy of life and labour of the plantation workers amid the upheavals in India in general as well as the Darjeeling hills in particular. It has nothing to do with the British Industrial Sociology being blindly adopted by the Indian Sociologists so far as the sole discipline of study for Indian industries especially since the independence of the country. To be more pragmatic in approach and application, the Industrial Sociology is mainly concerned with the study of industries which have high level of technology and skilled manpower resources. The plantation society is the admixture of traditionalism in its modus operandi and having modern competitive entrepreneurship of global orientation. Although the tea garden managements are literate enough but we can in no way fully put them at par with the highly skilled management of technologically sophisticated industries of the country. This is apparent from the fact that hardly the tea garden managers can shift their occupational loyalty to other technologically sophisticated industries although they change one tea company to another quite frequently. So, they are treated as distinct type of management personnel employable merely at the plantation sector of the country. This may be the reason why still they call themselves as "Planters" rather than managers in absolute sense of the term. So, they along with the illiterate/semi-literate workers belong to the distinct type of human resource capital of the plantation sector of the country. Considering this fact, the present approach known as Plantation Sociology has been explored and administered in the study. Hence, the Plantation Sociology is the Sociology of plantation sector of the country with particular reference to North-East India including Darjeeling-Dooars regions of West Bengal. The present study shall highlight the various dimensions of tea plantation workers which will primarily reflects separate approach that has been explored through the research findings with reference to Darjeeling Himalayas along with other tea growing niches of North-East India.

Like other plantation workers of North-East India, the tea plantation workers of Darjeeling hills are under the same umbrella known as "Plantocracy" (Devi: 1989) established ever since the British period through enclave formation, peripheral approach of the government and mainstream communities of the country to the workers and industry as well as the distinct British colonial operational philosophy (Taming the Coolies) being imported by Indian tea planters (Wolf: 1959; Jones: 1968) after the independence of the country. So far, the British Industrial Sociology as the only approach of study of the plantation sector continues to be a viable approach ever administered to study the society of tea garden workers by scholars of the country. In fact, tea industry was of alien origin in the world (Greaves:1959) as well as in India. So, the British legacy needs introspective analysis today in the period of Liberalization, Privatization and Global Hut concept brought about by the Globalization.

Over the period of history of Darjeeling Himalayan tea industry ever since 1840, the plantation workers like other people of the region have not been liberalized from the blemishes of categorizing them as immigrants or descendents of immigrants by the mainstream communities of the country. The colonial planters made the tea sector theirs including the workers and the independent Indian planters like the British owners have also fully own the plantations as their private property but they have not own the working class thereof who have been still kept isolated and designated as immigrants. So, the Plantation Sociology is the discipline for such workers who are not being brought within the mainstreams by the core communities of the country. Therefore, the Plantation Sociology is the approach as evolved by us to study the nature of relationship between the workers and management on the one hand and workers and mainstream society on the other. In fact, Plantation Sociology ultimately aims at exploring the intricacies of working class of the plantation sector which is having all sorts of uncertainties, agonies and survival crisis today in the period of Globalization. It explores the answers to the question "Do the workers really depend on the tea plantation sector?" or something else in this regard. Secondly, how far it has really

employed the unemployed youths of the region as declared by the government and management of the plantations? What are the parameters for socio-economic living of the workers in the so-called agro-based sector of national economy? Sociology of the plantation workers in a broad spectrum unfolds the social framework of the workers in the present era of globalization. The framework has been transformed under the constant dynamics of liberalization of Indian economy.

In spite of the silent exploitation of organized type, the workers have kept wide aspirations, hopes as they have despairs and melancholy in their day-to-day life although they appear to be open hearted, delighted and still innocent as they were made so by the various forces of the society ever since the British days (Sharma: 2000) to the globalized era of 21st century.

Traditional studies using Industrial Sociology as theoretical approach has not been able to reflect the region specific problems of the plantation workers in India. The problems associated with the Assam tea plantation workers are totally different from the Dooars and Darjeeling Himalayan tea plantation workers. The Assamese tea plantation workers are called "Tea Tribes", but they have not attained the 'Scheduled Tribe' status in the state of Assam as they have been already enforced socio-culturally to be merged with the core culture of the Assamese society. In fact, the Assamese culture has dominated the Tea Tribes of Assam while the Nepali tea plantation workers of Dooars and Darjeeling hills have not been at all forcefully merged with the dominant Bengali culture of West Bengal as the Nepali tea plantation workers could not be fully dominated by the Bengali community in not only socio-economic perspectives but also in political perspective especially ever since the last two decades. Of course, they have been denied with development strategies which have been normally outlining for the main land of West Bengal leaving Darjeeling hills outside the purview of plan packages of the government as the West Bengal Government has nostalgia to adequately sanction funds for Darjeeling hills. Like Tea Tribes of Assam, the Rajbansi communities of North Bengal have been also totally dominated by the Bengali community. The major chunk of developmental funds of Darjeeling hills has been diplomatically

utilized at Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district. All the essential government service centers of Darjeeling district head quarters have been randomly shifted from Darjeeling to Siliguri to merely develop the Siliguri sub-division, of course, giving official justification to the verdict given by the High Court of Kolkata of West Bengal since early 2009. May be, the justifications are correct to the Bengal Government and people thereof but not for the Gorkhas of Darjeeling hills.

Managing the tea gardens of Darjeeling hills, hiring local political leaders and trade union leaders and also the local goons by the management of the plantations appears to be the easy way to temporarily solve the problems of tea plantation workers. To the workers, this process is locally called as 'Kunai Jogi Aye Pani Kanai Chireko' meaning thereby every leader comes and goes with the same malaise attitude that reflects his inherent corruption. In the beginning, the leaders try to lure the workers with whimsical assurances for labour welfare but as soon as their pocket is filled up, they left the garden workers in oblivion. Thus, the trade union-political leadership of Nasty Nexus at par with management-Government Diplomatic Nexus (Sharma and Das: 2009) has been solely considered to be the responsible factor for pauperizing the Himalayan tea plantation proletarians (workers). This is another reason for adopting new approach known as Plantation Sociology in the present study pertaining to the socio-economic dynamics of the Himalayan tea plantation workers in the globalized era. No more, the centurion old Industrial Sociological approach can have a valid empirical theory which can hardly explain the ground realities of the workers. The establishment of new form of slavery system by the partners of tea economy among the workers upon the old slave tea trade of British planters appears to be against the Transparency Culture as being brought about by the liberalization and globalization processes of the world. The Plantation Sociology is therefore a new approach of study for identifying sub-regional specific problems of the workers in order to come out with sub-regional solutions. The whole lot of industrial relation philosophies and mechanisms as articulated by chauvinistic Bengal Government can therefore hardly satiate the hill plantation workers in particular and

people of Darjeeling Himalayas and Dooars region in general. If the ongoing political entanglement is not resolved or rectified in time then there is every possibility of reign of terror sooner or later in the region. The Industrial Sociological approach for the Himalayan tea sector is found to be tested as a biased philosophy of British legacy followed by the Bengali intellectuals who have not been solely able to explain the real life situation of hill and Dooars tea plantation workers. What is real is avoided by generalizing the workers keeping in view of the chauvinistic interests of the Bengali community of West Bengal. Thus, the Plantation Sociology of Darjeeling-Dooars region of West Bengal is a maiden attempt to discover a new approach of the study in regard to the Himalayan Darjeeling and sub-Himalayan Dooars tea plantation workers. The problems of Gorkha tea plantation workers of Dooars region of West Bengal are similar to that of the Gorkha tea garden workers of Darjeeling hills. Therefore, the work is mainly based on a case study as done by the authors in Darjeeling hills during 2008-2009.

Fair Trade and Plantation Workers

Very recently, the tea sector of the region (Darjeeling) under study has been stretching forward with the fair trade policy as per the quality specifications prescribed by ISO, 9000, ISO, 14,000 and other free trade certificates from the international buyers for tea products. But interestingly, the fair trade policy is not applicable to the quality aspect of the workers who have made the prescribed quality of tea for the international buyers. It means that the tea products come under the purview of fair trade policy and not the workers who are rather under the unfair labour practices of the industry and it has also been accredited by the Globalization policy of government. This is apparent from the statement made by Shri Jairam Ramesh, the Union Minister for Commerce and Industry, Government of India while re-inaugurating the old Tea Auction Centre at Jalpaiguri (West Bengal) in December, 2008. In course of his inaugural speech, he expressed for downsizing the tea garden work force is the only rational as well as logical options left for the survival of

tea sector of India so that we can reduce the cost of tea production (Asopa:2004) in India.

However, it will be transparent from the study, that under the downsizing process, the Himalayan tea garden workers are completely left into oblivion and hence losing their centuries old habitation at the plantation industry. The workers are asked to abandon tea garden jobs if they are not able to attune themselves to the changes made today in their terms and conditions (Hire and Fire approach of the management) of services at the gardens. Although till the recent past, it was appropriate to call this sector as plantation industry being regulated by the various provisions of government legislations. But today, it is simply called as the plantation sector and therefore each plantation can appropriately be called simply as a "tea garden" giving more and more agrarian specificities that reflect the absence of clear cut terms and conditions of work of the industrial workers as per the provisions of labour legislations of the government. Thus, the unfair labour practices in tea garden sector of the country have given birth to the present study.

Thus, if any sector is made informal from its original formal structure, then the fruit of the informal sector has also therefore to be equally shared among the producers along with the owners of the sector. This may be the reason why the local scholar, Prof. Mahendra P. Lama, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sikkim, suggested the Himalayan tea garden workers to demand for share from their owners and they should not be merely satisfied themselves with the ritualistic Bonus, Gratuity and other fringe benefits provided the management. The benefits as provided to the workers so far are rather eye wash to the people concerned. It is due to the establishment of so-called Management-Trade Union-Government-Nasty Nexus during the period of last sixty years of independence of the country.

The Pro-Rata Economy

The terms and conditions of the workers are presently regulated by the pro-rata system. This new system is articulated in order to introduce the structural adjustment policy of government

in so far as the wage and other payments of the workers are concerned in tea industry. The pro-rata system of work may be called as pro-rata economy for the workers because they have been forcefully accepting the pro-rata economy while working at the tea plantation sector of the region. The pro-rata system has introduced very many changes in the wage and other incentive payment structure as it is maintained in paying everything to the workers according to the quantum of works that they do at the plantations. Today, each and every aspect of workers working at the plantations is standardized according to the principle of Productivity-Wage Nexus Payment. Doing this, the prescribed standard of each and every type of work has to be strictly maintained. Right from the ground levelling to plucking to drying to fermenting to pruning to packaging of made tea etc., the prescribed standards are to be maintained. This may be one of the reasons why the majority of male workers are leaving the tea plantation jobs. The pro-rata system has however, accredited by all the partners of tea estate economy. The system has on the other hand enforces the female tea estate workers to limit their number of children as they can not devote much of their time at home to look after the unmanageable children for their socio-economic development. The irony of the fact is that the pro-rata system as introduced by the management at the plantation industry has not so far been officially notified by the Government of West Bengal in her gazette notification following the legislative process of the government of West Bengal.

The Proxy War

If we look at the close quarters today, the partners (management-owners, trade unions and the government) of the tea garden economy, at times, encounter with their respective proxy wars picking up the pertinent issues of tea garden workers. It is really a proxy war because ultimately the war is negotiated at Kolkata or Siliguri with sharing the outcome of the wars among other parties by making the workers fool as they ask them to satiate with whatever the benefits they have brought from the war. Rather, it appears to be the cheap alms to the workers. The

proxy war of each partner lingers till other parties agreed to provide good ransom to the warring partner. The instance of such proxy war is noted with the reactions of trade unions in West Bengal during the later part of 2008 when Shri Jairam Ramesh, the Union Commerce and Trade Minister asked the planters to reduce the existing numerical strength of tea garden work force to raise the productivity of tea gardens so as to satiate the tea customers supplying good tea with low price. Now, all the trade unions are under the process of proxy wars in this respect so as to settle the reactions of the statement made by the union commerce and industry minister.

Similar war is being played at times by the management and government agencies respectively. The proxy war has been institutionalized as per the tea plantation collective bargaining process and informally articulated so as to justify the innocent tea garden working class telling them the chief slogan as "sickness of tea sector". Thus, the proxy wars are approved by the inherent corruption method of the partners of the industry and in the wars every partner of tea plantation industry is the apparent fabricated fighter. Therefore, all the partners are on the one side of the drama and the working class on the other. Normally, the wars are played in telephones and other electronic media such as television, radio, fax and websites and terminate the wars across the table but the terms of agreements are always evolved through the media as stated above. And if the proxy wars through the media and discussion tables are not terminated then the whole tea sector is made redundant, abandoned and permanently closed down. This is found in case of the fourteen closed tea gardens of Dooars region of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal ever since the last two decades.

This is the background reason why K.R. Sharma and T.C. Das (2009) have stated in their book entitled *Globalization and Plantation Workers in North-East India* that what is winning the day is consumerism or peculiar type of capitalist system of super-exploitation over the super-marginalized tea garden workers and it does not appear to be the victory of western ideal capitalism in truest sense of the term in the period of Globalization.

Silence Structure of the Partners of Tea Garden Economy

Whenever the management does anything whimsical today, the other partners remained literally silent. For instance, the government remained quiet on the introduction of pro-rata system very recently by the tea garden management for all aspects of the tea garden workers. Similarly, the garden management is silent on the introduction of Public Distribution System for the ration quota to be provided to the workers ever since 2008 by the government. In fact, the new system has also indirectly favored the tea garden management rather than the workers as only the two dependent members along with the worker is covered under the scheme and the distribution of ration is at par with the prevailing market price. Here, the trade unions are quiet and calm. It indicates that all the partners of tea garden sector are in the same boat and they are all sailing in the same boat for their common destiny and their common destiny is to acquire something substantial ransom out of urgent issues of the workers. Whenever a situation arises when they see any tea garden becomes unviable, they keep mum on its abandonment and closure. In the process, the corrupted political leaders also go hand in hand with the management and rather ask the workers to improvise their work culture, if not to sustain the tea gardens by their Self Help Groups or Workers Cooperatives. In this way, the deception of the partners of tea industry to the tea garden working class has given rise to the birth of terrorist outfits in North-East India and political upheavals in Darjeeling hills and Dooars region of North Bengal.

The emergence of this new discipline called Plantation Sociology as the new approach of study has been developed due to the overall resulted outcomes of deception of working class ever since the British period to the present day of globalized era. It is all about the detail accounts showing how the tea garden workers are made fools and why they are still clinging to the tea industrial jobs of national economy.

Ethnicity and Tea Garden Economy

All the ethnic movements taken place in North- East India

including the Darjeeling hills started from the tea gardens and the workers associated with the tea garden jobs as they became the central focus of the movements because the very movements highlight the structure of injustices done to the marginalized and super-marginalized groups of the plantation society. Although tea garden workers are socio-culturally called peripheral but they are central in ethnic movements. For instance, in Darjeeling hills, all the ethnic movements ever since 1907 sprouted from the tea gardens. The tea gardens became the focal point of debate in the period of ethnic agitations but it dwindled after the settlements taken place through the political dialogues. As soon as the movement is over, the garden workers are again sent to the same pavilion where they were prior to their involvement in the movements. This is the history of ethnic movements in so far as the status of tea garden workers of Darjeeling hills is concerned. The ethnic movements in Darjeeling as championed by the British planters, Communist Party of India (CPI), Gurkha League, Pranta Parisad, Gorkha National Liberation Front and present Gorkha Janamukti Morcha have taken for granted that the tea garden workers are their faithful dogs so as to be utilized the workers as their fighting soldiers. The soldiers are so much faithful to the cause of the political parties that they can be molded according to the demands of the situations. The same soldiers are utilized as brutal warring force during the ethnic movements and again made them faithful workers of the tea garden enclaves. Thus, they are very much concurrent and thereby elastic in usage in so far as their innocent services to the industry and political parties are concerned. Diverting the attention of workers to ethnic movements in the region helped the British planters till the independence of the country to exploit the workers successfully throughout their tenure and the same process is being continued today at the hands of neo-colonial Indian tea planters of North-East India.

The Industrial Level Agreements

The new approach being adopted in the present study is to thrash out and hence identify the garden specific problems and

solutions thereof. The prevalent generic industrial level agreements entertained by the partners of the garden economy do not however appear to have solved the specific problems of workers of Darjeeling hills. It is because of the fact that the general agreements do not solve the garden specific problems having divergent enclave philosophies as adopted by different tea companies. The Plantation Sociological approach therefore suggests for particularizing the approach of study while articulating the solution after identifying the genuine garden to garden problems. So, as history repeats itself, the earlier Sociological Middle Range Theories as evolved by Robert Morton are gaining the ground today while addressing the tea plantation workers of North-East India in general and Darjeeling Himalayas in particular.

Scope of the Study

The discipline "Plantation Sociology" is the departure of the approach of study from the traditional Industrial Sociology as evolved by the British scholars and blindly followed by the Indian academicians ever since the independence of the country. The Industrial Sociology is very much a colonial approach administered in these studies. In fact, the Industrial Sociology was the concomitant outcome of Industrial Revolution in England during the early 18th century. Adopting the same approach means looking at the workers with the same colonial eyes or fashion which can hardly brings the workers into the national mainstreams. Thus, the present approach of study is Plantation Sociological ones that has rather given realistic explanations which are mostly suitable to our country while objectively studying the plitudes of the tea garden workers in the age of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization of 21st century. The Plantation Sociology is indigenous approach explored by the authors to explore the inherent dynamics of the little known marginalized tea garden workers of North-East India in general and Darjeeling hills in particular.