



WOMEN IN TEA-EMPIRE: EXPERIENCES FROM COLONIAL BANKURA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260404005>

Abstract

As the colonial economy grew, the profitable tea garden industry in places like Assam, Sylhet, and Cachar grew rapidly in the second half of the 1800s. As a result, job opportunities are created, and the demand for workers also increases. Poor and landless agricultural labourers from various districts of South-West Bengal were also lured in as indentured coolies to meet the demand for labour in the plantations. Bankura district also became one of the labour reservoirs of tea plantations. Among these coolie labourers who migrated from the district there were a large number of women workers. The images of the dire plight of the women of Bankura district trapped by false seductions in various contemporary elements reveal a grim aspect of the suffering of lower-class women in the nineteenth century as a whole. The government's declared policy was to employ more women in tea gardens. Because the additional employment of women in the plantations would have ensured the employment of labourers in a regular manner. An attempt has been made in the discussion article to present the picture of the plight of migrant women tea-coolies from the Bankura district through the analysis of overall data.

Keywords: *Coolie, Bankura, Arkathi, Assam, Bankura Darpan*

Introduction

One of the most significant economic sectors in the first half of the 1800s, the tea business viewed India's growth as a direct result of the company's capitalist economy. In India's organized manufacturing sector, tea is the oldest industry. With the development of tea garden centres like Assam, Duars, and Cachar from the 19th century onwards, the demand for labour also increased there. The discovery of the native tea plant in Assam in 1823 and the breakup of the British East India Company's tea trade monopoly and trading with China in 1833 AD were the two major events that fuelled the growth of the tea garden business in the Assam region. The issue of labour was a subject of concern among the planters as well as the state. The workers were supplied by the helpless poor tribals and lower caste Hindu people of Chota Nagpur, Santal Pargana, Jungle Mahal and different parts of India.

The majority of coolies in the Assam tea garden came from Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana region. In 1878, labourers from the Chota Nagpur and Santhal Parganas alone constituted 59 per cent of the male and 50 per cent of women to the plantations.ⁱ When the government expanded the special labour laws and deregulated emigration in 1882, the tea sector saw a significant shift. Over a million people, including children, were brought into Assam as indentured labourers over the following 20 years. In Assam, the average annual importation was as high as 50,000 per year between 1880-1905. Assam was at its highest in 1919, 900,000 labourers were employed in the tea industry.ⁱⁱ The Chota Nagpur division alone had 1,90,000 persons migrate to Assam in the ten years between the two censuses, with an average of more than 19,000 each year, according to the Labour Enquiry Commission of 1896.ⁱⁱⁱ Being an economically and naturally backward district in colonial Bengal and as part of Jungle Mahal, the Bankura district also became one of the reservoirs of workers. As a result, a significant emigration trend was observed in the district as labourers in tea gardens.

The tea plantations in India which were launched and maintained by the planters, mostly the British were supported by the colonial government and state. Clearing the dense forest and preparing the land for plantation needed a huge amount of labour-intensive work. The area where the plantation was set up was less populated than the rest of the areas. According to a report in 1853, the density of population per square mile in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts was 9 and 30, and in 1872 it grew to 27 and 64 respectively.^{iv} The conditions of work and life prevailing in the plantations were not very attractive to the local inhabitants. They preferred agricultural work rather than the tea plantation. Even the wage rates in tea gardens were much lower than the

agricultural work or the railway work. Ranajit Das Gupta points out that, "In Assam till the early 1860s, some local labour belonging mostly to the Bodo-Kachari tribe, constituted the most important source of labour for the tea gardens. But with the rapidly growing demand for labour consequent upon a phenomenal expansion of the tea industry from the mid-sixties onwards an acute labour scarcity was experienced".^v

After the abolition of slavery in 1834, Indian Labour was mobilised to perform service in the tropical plantations of the British Empire. From the 1860s-70s the tea planters started a policy of systematic and organised recruitment of labour from the Adivasis and semi-Adivasis peasant communities in eastern and central India. It was 1841 when the Assam company brought the first batch of labour from Chota Nagpur, but all the members died on the way. In 1859 only about 2,000 were recruited from different parts of India. The labourers were collected in groups and families from various cultures, linguistics and heritage from famine-stricken areas of different parts of India, so that once they came, they could not return to their native place and were bound to get settled permanently.^{vi} The Adivasis and lower-class agricultural labourers and tribesmen of Chota Nagpur, and Santhal Parganas were pushed to tea districts of Assam, Kachar, Dooars and Terai plantations throughout the nineteenth century. A large-scale recruitment and transportation of migrant labourers to the Assam valley from 1860 onward initiated a process that transfer more than two million peasants of Chota Nagpur, Bihar Bengal, Orissa and Upper India into the tea plantation 'coolie' for over three-quarters of the country.^{vii}

There were four systems of recruitment for the tea plantations (a) the license contractor's system (b) the special local agent's system (c) the certificated garden Sardari system and (d) the free emigration system. Since the introduction of Act VI of 1901, however, the special local agent's system ceased to exist, and a new system of recruitment by specially employed garden sardars was introduced, with effect from the 15th of July 1901, in the districts of Manbhum, Hazaribagh, and the Santhal Parganas^{viii}. However, the two main systems operating in Assam were the 'contractor system' from 1859 to 1915 and the other was the "Garden-Sardari system" from 1872 to 1959. The contractors were licensed persons who were recruited to bring labour. A contractor did not require to do anything more than a confirmation, the consent of the labourers whom he brought mostly by fraudulent method. On the other hand, the Sardar was a person who was already appointed as a labourer in a garden, and he was entrusted with bringing his relative to work in the tea gardens.^{ix}

The recruitment of labour for tea plantations from Bengal through the agency of labour contractors and Garden Sardars was started in the early nineteenth century. From 1916 only one system prevailed for the recruitment of labour in the tea districts, namely the Garden-Sardari System,^x under which the two classes of Garden Sardars existed, those who worked independently and the other who worked under the control of Licenced Local Agents, appointed by the Tea District Labour Supply Association and other recognised associations. The colonial government received active cooperation of coolie contractors with Assam's garden merchants in Assam. With the advent of plantation chieftains alongside garden sardars employed by contractors, the volume of coolie collections continued to increase from year to year. This method of collecting garden workers was called a free method. In the free system, the incidence of fraudulent recruitment of workers in tea gardens was increasing year after year.

Middlemen like Sardar, *arkathis* played a pivotal role in the process of migration in tea plantations. They served as intermediaries between the plantation owners and the labourers. *Arakathi* or the village recruiter had played a crucial role in controlled emigration. Most of the recruitment under the licensed recruiting system and garden sardari was done by *arkathis*. They were professional recruiters, mostly villagers in the labour catchment areas, where they were initially given the task of catching the labour. The *arkathis* then sold them to licence contractor. They were mostly Europeans, and their headquarters were in Calcutta. The contractor then sold them to the planters at a market price. In the case of the so-called 'free' labour, direct recruitment took place through garden sardars who went to their villages to bring back more workers to the plantation and persuaded their kin and village folk to migrate the family. Recruitments in tea gardens were often bounded by loans from the sardars.

In 1877 the *arkathis* received between Rs 2 to Rs 5 per coolie. In 1883, after the promulgation of the 1882 Act, the price paid to *arkathis* was nearly doubled, to Rs 10 per head. By 1888, it was reported that they got Rs 20 per coolie supplied to the Sadar *arkathis*. The Sadar *arkathis* also received Rs 50 to Rs 60 per coolie from the depot owner and garden contractor. The high rate paid to the *arkathis* affected the collection of labourers. They used different unconditional methods to collect coolie for more profit. They could be labour hunter. In November 1882 Officiating Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur, Were Edgar, reported that a great number of *arkathis* or collie dealers had acquired a notorious reputation as 'bad characters', 'deceivers' and 'cheaters'. The *arkathis*' success lay in being in close touch with the villagers. Above the village, *arkathis* were the *sadar arkathis*, who normally lived in the major towns of the recruiting district, and he dealt with the local agents and advanced amounts of cash for the confirmation of the suitability of the recruits.^{xi}

The tea industry in Assam and Duars was expanding during this period, and there was a high demand for workers. Many people from the Bankura district seized the opportunity and migrated to these tea gardens to find employment. From the second half of the 19th century, the practice of collecting labour for the tea gardens of Assam, Cachar, and Sri Hatta from Bankura was introduced. The agents of the tea planters in Assam were recruiting a large number of lower-class people to work in the tea gardens. In the late 19th century, William Hunter, a British colonial official and historian, wrote extensively about the tea labour in Bankura, In 1886 onwards, He wrote "A large number of the labouring population of Bankura have proceeded to the tea districts of Assam, Kachar, Silher etc., besides these, there are many who, although unwilling to immigrate to such distant place, leave the district to seek employment on the railway or public works in different parts of the country."^{xii}

The district commissioner writes as follows in his administrative report on the quinquennium 1900-1901 to 1904-05, "It appears that there was a steady increase of emigration from year to year, but the number represents to a large extent the coolies recruited by garden sardars, who are more successful in securing coolies than the recruiters employed by contractors"^{xiii}. Mc. Alpin wrote in his report in 1909 that, "The Sonthals appear to have given up going to Cachar and Assam, though they to emigrate there. In Basudebpur one Sonthal brought back Rs. 100 from Assam."^{xiv} F.W. Robertson^{xv}, the settlement officer of Bankura district observed in 1917-24, that a considerable emigration from the district was taking place to the tea gardens of Assam. But he also pointed out that this permanent type of emigration almost disappeared.

The emigration of workers from the Bankura to tea districts like Assam was often a result of forced labour practices and coercive measures by the tea plantation owners. These labourers were often lured or coerced into leaving their homes and families to work in the tea gardens, as they faced economic hardships and limited opportunities in Bankura. So, the out-migration of the workers to the tea districts from the Bankura district was not a spontaneous or natural phenomenon but was a largely forced migration process. Tea plantations in Assam were not at all attractive to the agricultural labourers as they were more comfortable doing agricultural work. But due to the shortage of labourers in Assam's tea plantations and various deceptions and farces of *arkathi* and *sardar* in the region, agricultural labourers of the Bankura became tea plantation coolies. Therefore, the migration of labourers to the tea districts was largely a result of coercion and economic necessity rather than a natural desire to explore new opportunities.

From the second half of the 19th century, when labour demand was very high in the plantation districts, many labour collection centres emerged in different parts of the Bankura district. Ranchi, Purulia, Raniganj and Calcutta were the main centres of plantation labour contractors. All the emigrants collected from the local areas of different parts of the districts were gathered together in the following places, the labour-catching centres which were called *depots*. The existence of some of the depots can be found in different contemporary official records. According to municipal records, in 1875 there were two coolie depots in Ghatak Mohalla and Rampur Mohalla. These two depots were headed by Srinath Sarkar and Kedarnath Dey. Probably there was also a depot called M/s Durham & Company in Raniganj. In all three cases, the municipal tax was levied separately.^{xvi} Even still today, a part of the city's Lalbazar is known as 'Depo Gora'. During 1899-1900 AD in Bankura town area the number of these depots was five. In 1905 it rose to six depots.^{xvii} There was a coolie depot in the village of Raipur police station in the southern part of the district which was mainly Santhal and Bauri populated area. In Raipur, the contractor for this depot was Kar Darpanarayan Sarkar of Birbhum who maintained good relations with the local zamindars and Chowkidars for the collection of coolies. The district commissioner mentioned that there were 12 depots and rest houses from 1899 to 1900"^{xviii}. A Coolie depot in Khatra police station is also mentioned in the contemporary Bankura Darpan. It is to be noted that Khatra and Raipur police stations account for the maximum transfer of land among the tribals. These areas became one of the strongholds of coolie workers. Babu Rajni Bhushan Ghoshal, a local collie recruiting agent from the Bankura district, was charged in 1913 for smuggling coolies from neighbouring districts.^{xix}

Coolie depot owners employed as middlemen to procure labour were called *arkathi*. These workers used various tricks to procure workers. These *arkathis* and contractors were also active in Bankura to procure labour for the tea gardens of Assam during the colonial period, as the district was an important labour district from its inception. Tea garden Sardars were more successful in this district than coolie collectors employed during the second half of the 19th century to the first three decades of the twentieth century. For the tea gardens of Assam, coolies were collected from the Adivasis people mainly the Santhals, Mundas and the other lower castes Hindu people like, Bagdi, Dom, Khayra, Gowalas, Napits, Khayra, Tamli, Tanti, Kamar and even Brahmans were sent to tea districts of Assam. In this case, the false promises and greed of the *arkathi* are mainly responsible.

Table No- 1

Recruitment of labourers for the tea district of Assam, Cachar and Sylet from Bankura

Year	No of Labourers registered by licensed labour-contractors.	No. of Labourers registered by labour - contractors.	No. of labourers registered and recruited by Garden Sardars and Sardarnis.	Total number of labours immigrated into Assam, Cachar and Sylet.
1903	42	245	129	374
1904	107	384	180	564
1905	20	140	06	146
1906	25	79	NIL	79
1907	07	74	NIL	74
1908	31	245	38	283
1909	12	300	86	386
1910	10	305	NIL	305
1911	14	363	NIL	363
1912	100	151	18	169
1913	59	77	326	403
1914	--	33	187	220
1915	--	11	162	173

(Source: Chattapadhyay, Haraprasad., Internal Migration In India: A case study of Bengal, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1987, p. 201-223.)

Table No- 2

Recruitment of Labour from 1916 to 1931 under the Garden-Sardari System for the labour district of Assam from Bankura district.

Year	Number of labourers recruited by Sardars and Sardarnis is independently for the labour districts of Assam province.	Number of labourers recruited by Sardar and Sardarnis working under licensed local agents of the labour district of Assam province.
1916	Nil	5,940
1917	Nil	773
1918	Nil	101
1919	Nil	--
1920	Nil	23
1921	Nil	1
1922	Nil	1
1923	Nil	20
1924	Nil	12
1925	Nil	32
1926	Nil	109
1927	Nil	29
1928	Nil	43
1929	Nil	70
1930		41
1931		--

(Source: Chattapadhyay, Haraprasad., Internal Migration In India: A Case Study of Bengal, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1987, p. 224-31.)

The two above-mentioned tables (1&2) show the emergence features of the movement of labourers from Bankura district to Assam during the first three decades of the 20th century. None of the labourers listed in the first table who were registered by licensed labour contractors was from the Bankura district. Many of them were registered from mostly Bardhaman and 24 Parganas. The recruitments made by the Garden sardar and *sardarnis* were normally the residents of the districts where they were recruited and registered. In the Bankura district, the garden sardars and *sardarnis* recruited the greatest number of people in 1904, 1913, and 1916. On the other hand, workers from the Bankura district used to run to the tea gardens as tea coolies through Raniganj, which was the main labour collection centre of the Bardhaman district. As Raniganj was located in Burdwan district, it is easy to imagine that most of the coolies were collected from Bankura district.

The number of labour migrants from the district was much higher than this estimate. It has even been discovered that workers from the Bankura area had faced challenges from the Purulia depot and other Bengali districts. Nearly every year, the districts with the highest number of labour registrations were 24-Parganas and Bardhaman, where the labour contractor registered the workers. The labourers from different parts of Bengal came to Calcutta with the hope of employment, and they were easily caught in the trap of labour contractors. They gave assurance of the availability of employment opportunities. Under their control, the labourers were registered for employment in the tea gardens of Assam.^{xx}

Poverty, famines, and scarcity played key drivers of labour emigration to the tea plantations. Poverty-stricken regions of the district, especially the southern and western parts which lacked sufficient resources and limited employment options, pushed people to search for work elsewhere. During the famine and drought conditions, the tribal and lower-class people faced food insecurity and resource depletion. In this situation, the landless agricultural labourers and hopeless people decided to move for better opportunities. So, migration became a crucial survival strategy for the people of Bankura. It is shown that when the difficult situation of drought, scarcity, and famines occurred in the district the migration to tea plantations increased in the following years.

Most people migrated because of poverty or shortage of land, but not everyone migrated because of the shortage of land or poorer conditions. Many of them were trapped by the “knowledgeable agents” or *arkathis*. They were forced to imagine a dream of better living conditions in destination areas, like the Assam plantation. Many men and women fell into their trap, and they were sent to all those places. There are several examples of such forced migration in contemporary newspapers like *Bankura Darpan*,

Sanjivani, and *Hitavadi*. There was also a strong tendency of the people to go to the destination area where friends or other relatives went before them. The contemporary periodical, *Bankura Darpan* reported on 15th July 1894, "oppression by cooly recruiters in Bankura has greatly increased of late. These men now never miss an opportunity to forcibly carry people to cooly depots, without the least regard to age, sex, and social rank. It looks as if there is anarchy in the district."^{xxi}

Garden Sardar and *arkathis* encouraged the local people by the attraction of tea-garden life and assuring them to settle on independent holdings in Assam. The Sardars described the land of Assam to the Adivasis and kindred people as a 'province where monsoon never failed'.^{xxii} The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported "Contractors collected coolies by the hundreds of false promises of high pay and light work and despatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey; the result was shocking morality on the voyage up, while many of the immigrants were of cast or constitution which precluded all hopes of their serving many months in the jungles of Assam."^{xxiii}

The employer made many false promises while recruiting the labourers in the tea estate. Employers promised higher wages than what they were intended to pay. Employers however exaggerated or misrepresented the working conditions on the tea estate. They may portrayed it as a comfortable and safe environment. But, in reality, it may be physically demanding, dangerous, or lacking in basic facilities. False promises by employers can lead to exploitation, poor working conditions, and significant hardships for labourers. The colonial government also expressed its support by enacting different regulations to legalize the new form of slavery. Under false pretences, ignorant men and women, chiefly from the most backward districts of Bengal and other parts of India, allowed themselves to be conveyed to Assam. Malpractice and false promises of well-paid jobs were also quite common tricks.

The contemporary periodical, *Bankura Darpan*, (published as a fortnightly paper from 1892, became a weekly paper in 1894. The founding editor was Dr Ramnath Mukhopadhyay. He edited the paper till 1937.) reported that the condition of the villages kept deteriorating continually with the passing of days. Poor people, under starved conditions, migrated elsewhere every year. Over time, many stories of the illegal practices of the *arkathis* were published. The issue of coolie supply in the Bankura district was protested from the very beginning. *Bankura Darpan*, the first newspaper of the Bankura district, protested coolie trafficking in the tea garden from 1892. In 1905 AD, the newspaper boldly questioned the English administration for slavery and human trafficking. The issue of coolie supply in Bankura district was protested from the very beginning.

The *Bankura Darpan* on 16th December 1895 reported that the business of cooly recruitment had struck terror into the hearts of the people, and the Press had been repeatedly urging the Government to amend the cooly law. No heed has been paid either to the complaints of the oppressed or to the just representations of the Press, simply because the tea industry brings large profits to the Europeans engaged in it. But it is high time that the Government adopted measures to check the abuses attending the business of recruitment. They can be to a great extent put down by inserting a provision in the law making it punishable for an employer of labour to purchase coolies from any unlicensed *arkathis*, and making such an *arkathis*, too, liable to punishment. Fraudulent recruitment has become so common only because employers do not hesitate to purchase coolies from anybody and everybody who brings them for sale.^{xxiv}

The *Bankura Darpan* on 1st January 1896 had reported that almost every family resident in Dakshinpara in village Telenda in the Bankura district carried on business as cooly-recruiters. They decoyed men and women into their own houses, and after detaining them there for some days took them to Raniganj, Purulia, Dhubri or Nupur, and under false representations sold them as coolies.^{xxv}

The *Hitavadi* of the 28th of July 1899 reported that the present system of recruiting coolies might be advantageous to the tea planters, but was ruinous to the coolies. Before going to Assam, the coolies were led to entertain high hopes about their future; but once in the tea gardens, they only got disappointment. We do not know when the coolies will be free from the provisions of the Labour Contract Act. The coolies are ignorant and illiterate. They do not understand the force or meaning of the contract into which they enter before going to Assam. There are, it is true, remedies in the case of a real grievance; but the coolies are ignorant of these and are quite helpless.^{xxvi} The editor thus comments,

'Hundreds and thousands of men and women are, like these women, being fraudulently recruited and sent up to tea-gardens as coolies. So long as the contract system will remain in force, ignorant labourers will fall into the snares of wily recruiters. When slavery is prohibited by the law, when no man has the right to sell or kill himself, cooly recruitment should also be prohibited, and the tricks of the recruiters should be put down with high hand. The Government is strongly in favour of free trade; why should it not also be in favour of free labour?'^{xxvii}

The migration to tea plantations had a significant gender dimension. The arrival and participation of women and children in large numbers in the tea gardens was an important phenomenon of labour emigration in the tea districts of Assam. Among the labourers from the Chota Nagpur region, women were almost equal to men. It is believed that women are more efficient than men in plucking tea leaves, that is 'two buds one leaf'. In the tea plantations, the planters encouraged emigrants to come with families rather than individuals to minimize the recruitment costs.

Some cases of women decoying or forcible recruiting in the tea garden have been published in local newspapers. Like, The Makhan, a woman of Bankura district has sent to Assam as cooly. The description of this fact follows like this- The Beni Das Baishnab, a collie recruiter and an old acquaintance of Makhan, a maidservant in the employ of Kader Babu, the postmaster of Asansol, one day came to Makhan and asked her to escort the wife of Kandal Chakravarti from Hooghly. She agreed to do so at a daily remuneration of annas 4. Makhan took leave of her master and followed Beni to Raniganj. Five or Six days after they

were joined by Kangal Chakravarti, who seemed to be the owner of the depot, and who sent Beni and Makhan to Hooghly. On reaching Naihati, Beni and Makhan Kangal Chakravarti's wife, who lived at Goalpara brought her down. Both Makhan and Beni accordingly left Dhubri. On reaching Dhubri, a woman gave Makhan a blanket, a cloth, a *kurti*, a *thala* made of tin, and a tumber, and told her that these would be required for her use. Beni then gave Makhan a paper, saying it was her steamer pass, and took leave of her on board the steamer on the plea of marketing. Not finding Beni in the steamer when it started, Makhan tried to jump into the river and was prevented from doing so by the Doctor attached to the steamer, who also told her that she could not leave the steamer at Goalpara, as she had been booked as a cook for the Dhanasiri tea garden in Golaghat. She now for the first time came to know how she had been decoyed to Assam by Beni, and she cried piteously.^{xxviii}

Madhusadan Rai, a *ghatwal* from Jhare in the Barajora thana of Bankura district, lured Kandan Khairani with false promises of love. He brought her to Goalundo and abandoned her, forcing her to work as a collie in the tea garden. This tragic situation has left behind a four-year-old boy, who is the son of Madhusadan Rai and Kandan Khairani.^{xxix} On the other case like Barada Dasi, who had been decoyed by two collie recruiters, Surya and Mahesh. They forcibly carried Barada Dasi, the daughter of Bhavani Sardar, to the local cooly depot. But the accused were prosecuted and sentenced to three months imprisonment.^{xxx} A pathetic case of Kamini was found in the Bankura Darpan. She was the wife of Nader Chand Khasia, of Chuamasina, in the Bankura district. She was fraudulently sent up as a cooly. In her home, her one child died of grief for his mother, and one more of the boys was very upset and likely to share the same fate.^{xxxi}

Brinda, a girl of thirteen or fourteen, sister of one Rakhali Tanti of Dubrakon in the Bankura district, who was employed as a servant in the house of Madhav Goswami, has not been heard of since the 23rd of August last. Initially, the villagers said that her master's son Radhagovinda had lured her away. But since Radhagovinda's return home four days later, it is rumoured that the girl has been sent away as a cooly.^{xxxii} Janani Dasi of Birsinga, in the Bishanpur subdivision of the Bankura district, was fraudulently recruited as a cooly and sent up to an Assam tea garden but has now been ordered to be released by the Subdivisional Officer of Bishanpur.^{xxxiii}

There was a woman, named Dhuni, her father's name was Gadadhar, and she was a Kamar (artisan) by caste. An old woman took her to the Raniganj cooly depot on the pretext of taking her to the Ganges. She was then taken to the Purulia cooly depot and there made to register her name. She did not know that she was being sent to a tea garden. The following entries regarding the woman occur in the register as, Name Dhani, age 28 and her father's name Gadai, district Bankura, thana Onda, village Chabra.^{xxxiv}

Suradhuni a young girl, aged 22, of the Tamli caste. She resided in her father-in-law's home at Bikna village near Bankura town. Her husband kept a shop at the Chakbazar at Bankura. It appears that being childless, she wished as a means of propitiating the gods to bathe in the Ganges. Now a person named Ramani Man, working in concert with a secret cooly *arkathi* of the same village in which Suradhuni resided, took advantage of this wish on the girl's part. This person offered to accompany Suradhuni down to Calcutta where her brother resided. But as a matter of fact, Suradhuni instead of being taken to Calcutta was taken to Raimani Naptini, a notorious female *arkathi* of Bankura town. Thus, the poor girl was permanently sent to Dibrugarh.^{xxxv}

The aspect of the large participation of women in the recruitment of tea coolies in Bankura district was brought out in the report of the contemporary paper. These images of the dire plight of women ensnared by false seductions overall reveal a grim side of the suffering of lower-class women in the 19th century. The government's declared policy was to employ more women in tea gardens. Because the additional employment of women in plantations would have ensured the employment of labourers in a mature manner. Women *arkathis* were employed in the Bankura district to send women to tea plantations, Raimani Naptini being a notable example. The harming of women through the abuse women is another aspect of the colonial state's exploitation of women.

In the tea gardens, women and child workers suffered from discrimination, low wages and various types of malnutrition. Jorhat Tea - Company's Senior Medical Officer Dr Gay reported that infant mortality from "Infantile typhoid-malarial fever" was highest during the rainy season. Dwarkanath Ganguly, from the report of the deputy commissioner of Sibsagar, mentioned that the *kamins* were forced to join the work on the day or a few days after the birth of the child. As there was no maternity leave, the newborn was forced to take the child to work in the garden or leave it in the slums. As a result, many children die prematurely.^{xxxvi} In 1884 the infant mortality rate in tea gardens rose to 44 persons per thousand. The remittance report of 1884 states that women workers in tea gardens can't work in tea gardens and look after infants at the same time and that children are neglected due to financial reasons even if the mothers are sitting at home and this is why the infant mortality rate is so high.^{xxxvii}

Both female and child workers were paid less, although they had to work about the same number of hours as male workers. Not only that, women workers also had to be victims of various types of tricks and lust. Sexual harassment of women was a regular feature in the tea gardens. The *Hitavadi* magazine wrote on the 28th of July, 1899 that, Rape of female coolies, murder and beating of coolies are no longer rare incidents.^{xxxviii} The evidence of women's coolie exploitation found in the contemporary material paints, a vivid picture of the helplessness, exploitation and oppression of women in the tea garden and the collection of them. The female body became a symbol of the supremacy of the British garden owners and chieftains. The sending of coolie to Assam tea gardens in the colonial Bankura district created a panic among women of all classes and castes. The social status of the women who returned from Assam was damaged. As a result, women have been moved away from living a normal life. The role of Sardarinis in sending women to Assam was also significant.

Women constituted a significant portion of the workforce, with many families relying on their wages. Their contributions were vital for the profitability of the tea estates. Samita Sen's observations^{xxxix} about women in tea gardens highlight the complex socio-economic dynamics that colonial policies imposed on labour systems. The realities faced by women demonstrate a dual burden: they engaged in both unpaid domestic responsibilities and paid work in the tea plantations. This situation illustrates the exploitation inherent in colonial economies, where women's labour was undervalued and often under-compensated. The targeting of women by British planters reflects a strategic decision shaped by economic incentives. By recruiting women, planters not only secured a labour force for the intensive task of plucking tea but also ensured that the labour pool could be sustained through reproduction. The high death rates among male workers due to harsh working conditions meant that a steady supply of labour was crucial for maintaining productivity. Overall, the experiences of women in tea gardens illustrate not only the economic exploitation of labour but also the significant gender dynamics at play, as women navigated their roles within a patriarchal and colonial framework.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Dr. Sovan Ghosal: Literature Review, Data Collection, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing;

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

Notes:

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