

**A study on the identity formation of tea garden workers: *Stories
curtained in the narrative of development***

A Thesis Presented By

Syeda Sayka Tabassum

Id: 14217002

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Signature of the Supervisor

Dr. Seuty Sabur
Associate Professor
Department of Economics and Social Sciences
BRAC University

Student's Full Name & Signature:

Syeda Sayka Tabassum
14217002

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Abstract

Shreemangal is one of the most popular tourist spots in Bangladesh. Shreemangal is known as the land of tea. At the entrance, there is a statue of a woman plucking tea leaves in a basket which is tied to her head. This same type of image we can see in most of the tea packages. In the beauty of the green hills and fresh tea leaves, we rarely ever think about the people who are spending their whole life in the tea estate. In my thesis I tried to see how the identity of these tea workers is forming and how they are being marginalized. In order to find these answers, I conducted an ethnography in a tea estate in Hobiganj. My findings showed me many aspects of tea workers life which helped me to realize how the identity construction and being marginalized is entwined with each other. It showed me a system within an institution which I never expected before.

Chapter: One

Introduction

In 2015, a local music band of Rangpur named *Aadhpagla* sang a song called, “*Felbo Kothay Dom*” where they portray how tea workers are being oppressed generation after generation and how their rights are being denied for all these years. This song made me interested in tea workers; and since then I have been curious to know more about their lives.

At the beginning of 2016, some of my friends and I went to Shreemangal, which is known for tea plantation in Bangladesh. In this trip, I met a 10/11 years old boy working in a tea stall beside Madhapur tea plantation. After talking for a while, I asked him about his parents. He told me that his parents work at tea plantation. I was intrigued by his accent, which was very different from the locals. So, I asked him about his residence in Madhabpur. He told me that he is of *Bhojpuri*. His grandparents came to Madhabpur before the birth of Bangladesh and his family is working for Madhapur tea plantation and living in that area for two generations and he has to work there when he is old enough.

A movement for raising wages of tea workers coincided with my trip, which helped me understand their poor working conditions and minimum wage compared to insane amount of labor they put in producing tea. After witnessing the emergent movement and listening to the young boy, question arises, whether their identity is making them vulnerable and depriving them of their rights.

Almost two centuries ago, the journey of Indian subcontinental tea started when East Indian company was trying to find an alternative source in order to overthrow the monopoly of Chinese tea industry. According Ghosh (Hazra)(2001, pp. 39–45) in 1835 British government started first experimental tea estate at Lakhimpur in Upper Assam and they found a wild

indigenous tea plant in Assam. In the beginning of tea plantation industry, there were two important components which were very essential in order to establish tea plantation in the subcontinent. One is the ideal land for tea plantations were covered with unhealthy plants which were needed to be clean and other is scarcity of cheap labor. Local people were not interested to do the job because of bad working condition and low wage. Their wage was as low as three rupees per month. Because of that British government brought labor from tea plantation from parts of India where economic condition is quite bad (Ghosh (Hazra), 2001, pp. 60–61). Their journey to tea plantation from different parts of India was so hard that almost one third of the plantation worker died on the path. They got new identity “*coolie*”, when they arrived. Company provided them food, medicine, accommodation etc. and turned them into property of the tea company. As a result, all the ties to their origin were cut off. In order to “disciplined the workers body body”¹, company used to beat, fine and imprison workers as punishment (Gain, 2009, pp. 14–15). But, in 1921 tea workers started protest “*Mulluk Cholo*” (“চা-শ্রমিকদের-‘মুল্লুকে-চলো’র-রক্তমাখা-দিন,” 2013) when they found out their lifestyle have not improved a bit rather, they were being forced to work in a horrible working condition. In “*Mulluk Cholo*” protest they started leaving their garden and started a journey toward their own land. In order to stop this protest British government shot at the tea workers and many tea workers die at that moment and with it the dream of returning home die too.

During the 1940s, the rate of buying tea garden by the Indian tea plantation owner increased. In 1947, with the partition of India Pakistan the Tea industry entered into a new phase of ownership. After partition the ownership of tea estates in East Pakistan fell into control of

¹ The body that does not have the ability to act according to its own will or choice but it not done with coercion rather putting a system in a place that discipline or compliance the body.

West Pakistani capitalist from the Hindu capitalist. But, the scenario for the poor tea workers did not changed at bit.

During independence war of 1971, tea industry suffered colossal damage. After independence thirty-nine tea estate was declared abandoned by the new Republic of Bangladesh and Nationalized which were owned by the Pakistanis (Gain, 2009, p. 2). Argo based tea plantation industries played a vital role in growth of GDP in Bangladesh. According to Hossain(2015, p. 15) Bangladesh produces 2.11% tea of the world. Like other industries, for example- garment, cheap labor is the main source of power of tea plantation in Bangladesh.

According to Gain(2016, pp. 10–16) there are 80 ethnic groups in 156 tea gardens in Sylhet, Hobiganj, Maulavibazar, Chittagong and Rangamati districts. There are 4 lakhs tea workers in Bangladesh. Among 4 lakhs 75% workers are female and 25% are male(Hossain, 2015, p. 7). For most of the people, tea garden is the only source livelihood. But tea garden workers are being severely deprived from their basic provisions, which are problematic considering the growth of this industry, however, this deprivation is also incidental and consequential to this rise. There is a very little implementation of the labor law. In 2013, their daily wage was 55Tk. Which later become 69Tk. In 2016, their daily wage become 85Tk. from 69Tk. with the condition that they have to collect at least 23 kg tea leaves/day to earn their minimum wage. Still, this payment does not meet the criteria of minimum wage according to Bangladesh labor law 2010. Sanitation system and education system of tea garden can barely fulfill the need workers have. Rahman says, the workers get only 14 days of holiday in a year.

My personal experiences, tea workers' movement and historical background of tea estate triggered me to understand tea workers community. As I was searching for questions raised, I found some earlier works on this topic, which help me to understand the situation better.

Theoretical Framework

For theoretical framework I chose four particular works-articles, books, reports etc. These works put some light in some parts of the historical background of the tea workers, helped me to see the current picture of tea workers community and also inspire me to look through different windows. Firstly, the article “Politics of Development and Articulation of Indigenous Identity: The Formation of Munda identity in Barind, Bangladesh” by Shaila Sharmeen sketch the formation of plantation workers identity during colonial period which gave me an overall idea on the historical background of tea workers. secondly, an ILO report “A Study Report on Working Conditions of Tea Plantation Workers in Bangladesh” by Faisal Ahmmed and Md. Ismail Hossain lay out the present condition of tea workers community which gave me generic idea of tea workers class identity and political negotiations. Further, a book named “The Story of Tea Workers in Bangladesh” by Philip Gain gave a broad-brush view on the life of tea workers which cover few parts of their history, class identity and ethnic identity. Lastly, “Fair Trade vs. Swaccha Vyāpār: Women's Activism and Transnational Justice Regimes in Darjeeling, India” an article by Debarati Sen tells the story of gender role negotiation of female tea workers through a new economic system in Darjeeling. This article gave me the mind’s eye to see the gender role negotiation of Bangladeshi tea workers.

(Sharmeen, 2013, pp. 141–160) explains the construction of the identity of an ethnic group- The Munda of Bangladesh by the state and development agencies and she also put some light on the identity formation process throughout the colonial and post-colonial period. Sharmeen says that the construction of identity takes place in two levels. One is on the individual level and the other is on the level of societies and interactions between groups. She also adds that in Bangladesh the identity of Bengalis and indigenous people are binary opposites and it became aggravated

because of vicious competition for natural and state resources. This information sheds light on the relationship of the tea worker's community and Bengali community. In my paper, I would like to bring the present condition of their relationship.

Again, the author tells that during the colonial period, colonial administrative used to tag Adivasis as “primitive”, “backward”, “savage” and “uncivilized”. During late 18th to early 19th century a British official named James Cleveland differentiate between people from plain land and people from hill and forest and in 1852, an official named Briggs created a difference list between aborigine and Hindus based on their eating habit, caste division, kinship and marriage (Sharmeen, 2013, p. 144). Sharmeen also points out that Permanent Settlement Act alienated Adibhasi from their land and forced them to migrate as contract labor in Assam as tea worker, in Bihar as coal miner and in Bengal as indigo cultivator. This contact labor was a form of bonded labor. This information gives a glimpse of the history of tea workers.

Furthermore, the writer claims that the diverse culture and livelihood practice of indigenous people are being officially unrecognized from British colonial period to present Bangladesh.

In a report of ILO, Faisal Ahmmed & Ismail Hossain(2016, pp. 23–55) try to draw a complete scenario of tea workers working condition. . The authors suggest, tea workers usually introduce themselves by using two identities. One is their identity as a tea worker community and another one is their ethnic identity, which they inherited from their ancestors. They identified 38 ethnic groups and among these groups, *Koirey* is the most empowered group in the community (Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016, p. 48). There are many educated people in this group and the leaders of *Panchayat* and tea workers union belong from this group. There is also hierarchy among these groups. It gives me hind of the class difference and political identity of

the tea workers community. Furthermore, the writers have discovered that there are almost ten languages in tea garden community (Ahmmed & Hossain, 2016, p. 47). Mother tongue of migrated workers from different parts of India have mixed with local language and evolved in a new different language. These languages are commonly known as “language of tea garden”. They say that tea community leaders figure out that their languages are being disappearing because of lack of practice. Furthermore, the authors get to know that generally, people of tea garden community do not want to leave tea garden and they avoid getting close to the outside community. A leader of *Panchayat* tells them that language is a barrier to their communication to outside community. This information helps me to understand the dimension of ethnic identity of the tea workers community. My work would explain their caste system and the hierarchy within their caste system.

In his book, Gain(2009, pp. 1–251) gives a complete picture of how tea industry, tea plantation and the life of tea workers are entwined. He also tries to show how this complex state of interdependency started. British colonial government started bringing labors from “tribal” and “Dalit”² communities who came from different parts of India to Sylhet region and the journey was so tough that one third of the plantation workers died during this journey. The workers who reached tea plantation got a new identity “*coolie*” which basically is the properties of tea companies who belong to different ethnic groups. They were promised to be in a place where they can have better living standard but instant, they arrived in a place where their life become more horrendous than before. The writer also says that the tea workers and their family have no right over the land or the room they live in, in order to live in the “labor line” one must be a labor working in tea garden. From British writer Dan Jones’ report in 1986, gain finds that this bonded life of tea workers started with four years contact with the companies when they came to Sylhet

²Lowest caste of Hindu

first time and their condition was no better than medieval serfs till early 20th century. Though several laws were being made to establish minimum standard of living and working condition, but there was no enforcement of these laws.

From the first settled down in “labor line” more than a century and a half or four generations has passed and now they have got citizenship and voting rights in Bangladesh. However, most of them are still uneducated, which is a suitable condition for the tea planters to exploit them. Gains finds out that due to high dependency on company for basic provisions and being cut off from any form of ancestral ties with “home” made them susceptible to exploitation and define them as socially “untouchables”³.

Sen, 2014(pp. 444–472) describes the gender role or identity negotiation of women tea farmers who cultivate organic tea in Darjeeling, India. A movement or economic system name ‘Fair trade’ is introduced in Darjeeling to empower marginalized producers who are mainly women and to ensure that they are participating in key decision making in their community. In reality, fair trade is a localized, gender political and symbolic economic system where women have to struggle to earn respect and recognition for the hard labor, they do to cultivate tea. Male dominance is seen in everywhere. Firstly, Women’s wing which was established so that women can get microcredit loans easily but it was under male governance body of Cooperative. In 1950s British owners abandon tea plantations because of the independence of India and some workers and their families divided the plantations among them and get the ownership of the land. Then they became the tea producing household and women in the family continue growing tea. In 1960s they could not join green revolution rather they start cultivating organic tea but their tea was labeled illegal because of lack of factorial processing and it had cheap rate in local shops.

³ People who are forbidden to touch. Specially, a member of a large formerly segregated hereditary group in India having in traditional Hindu belief the quality of defiling by contact a member of a higher caste.

NGOs intervened so that the marginalized tea producers can get competitive price. But when fair trade started, middle men and male member of the family saw good economic opportunity in it. Men started doing the formal works and NGOs started depending on them which gave men the prominence position.

Again, Sen says that with same age, caste and material statuses women of smallholder tea producing household have better economic status than a wage-earning woman tea worker. Land ownership and practice of agriculture make them different from low-grade workers like *coolie Kaam* and also shape their family identity of smallholder tea farmers' family which indicates that they have better status and freedom than women tea plantation workers. The author states that one can understand the competing gender ideology of Darjeeling by understanding the shaming practice of women's self-identification.

Sen's work cast light on complicate gender role in former period and the way they are doing negotiation in the present time. However, I could not find these sorts of development in Sylhet region. But it will be worth looking at if there is any presence of NGOs and if there is NGOs, then how much impact they have in the life of tea workers.

These are the theories or works I found while searching for my answers. These researches helped me to frame my research questions and provided background content. They help me to understand how identity of a population is entwined with its origin and there are several factors that are continuously negotiating and contribution to construct one's identity. Again, these theories and my personal encounters make me realize that there are certain gaps where there is not much work those issues in contemporary times. So, I am trying to raise some questions-

General Objective:

How the identity of tea worker is forming and how this results in slave like system.

Specific Objective:

1. How textual history and family history define their identities?
2. How do they negotiate day to day politics in labor line and tea estate?
3. How their social identities like class, ethnicity and gender are being negotiated in their daily life?

In order to address these research questions, I conducted a moderate ethnography a tea estate in Hobiganj.

Methodological Framework

For this research, I have used a semi structured interview in a “A” grade tea estate with 5,000 tea workers in Hobiganj, Sylhet. There I had interviews with five tea workers who belong to different position of tea workers community. Through these conversations I tried to understand their thoughts and experiences and their life in labor line. I invoked the discussion around identity through my questions. In my conversation with tea workers, I tried to make sure that I don’t ask any leading question. In the beginning of the interview, I build rapport with interlocutors by explaining them why I was there and my intensions are so that the interlocutors do not feel hesitant in sharing their thoughts with me.

During my interviews, I realized that getting access in a tea estate to conduct formal interview with tea workers was way more difficult than make them talk about themselves and their life; especially when you are coming from a privileged position and their *shaheb* is somewhere around. One of my brother’s friend contacted one of his friends who is a manager of a tea estate in Hobiganj to help me out with my interviews and he permitted me to do the interview with the tea workers of his tea estate. While I was having a conversation with the first interlocutor, their *shaheb* was with us which made the interlocutor reluctant to share her thoughts and also the shaheb was sometimes answering the questions for her. In order to avoid this problem, I conducted the rest of the interviews in labor line where *shahebs* never go.

Since tea workers are strictly regulated through the rules and system by the authorities, they were not very comfortable and open to talk to a person who was introduced by someone from the authority. So, I conducted two interviews where the interlocutors did not know that I went there as their *shaheb’s* guest. These two persons were more comfortable to talk to me who

is a random person needs help with her work and they were also more expressive and open with their opinions or answers of the questions.

A very important part of ethnography is observation. While I was conducting my interviews and the three days, I stayed in the tea estate in Hobiganj, I tried to observe and learn about every rule, gestures, postures and the ways of maintaining certain relationships within one another. It helped me to see a better picture of tea estate. It made me realize that only words cannot tell the whole story. Participant observation helped me to understand the genuine feelings of the interlocutors or tea workers regarding the system of tea estate. On the other hand, observation of the gestures, postures and the way of talking of the authority members helped me to understand their relationship with the tea workers.

It is not possible to completely understand every aspect about tea workers and their life only by conducting interviews, reading articles and doing participant observations. But, within the limited time I had, I tried to get a more or less holistic picture of tea workers and their life in labor line.

Chapter: Two

Family Genealogy

Chinese had been drinking tea 2,000 years earlier from the British even got the taste of tea(Chatterjee, 2018). Chinese and Dutch were the only supplier of Britain's thriving demand of tea. After Anglo-Dutch wars in the 18th century, the tea business relationship between British and Dutch burned out. Though in 1824 wild tea sapling was discovered in Assam, British wanted to know Chinese tea technic and bring Chinese tea in India so that they can overthrow the Chinese tea monopoly business(Chatterjee, 2018). Chatterjee(2018) mentions that a Scottish horticulturalist Robert Fortune smuggled 13,000 plant samples and 10,000 seeds to India and with that British planters started tea industry in India. Chatterjee(2018) also adds that in 19th century any Chinese settlers like shoemakers, carpenters etc. were being sent to Assam and Darjeeling because British used to believe that every Chinese are expert in tea cultivation and manufacture.

According Sharma(2009, pp. 1290–1293) British governor started bringing Chinese people from Penang and Singapore and they gave the title of “genuine” tea-planters or tea-growers. Many newcomer Chinese tea cultivators fell ill because of rainy Assam weather and malaria and British were not giving them the promised facilities and money. On the other hand, although the Chinese were recruited to cultivate tea, they were often told to clean the undergrowth forest which was initial task to build tea estate. But Chinese cultivator refused to do this job. So, the company started recruiting local indigenious inhabitant the Nagas alongside Chinese to do the jobs Chinese refused to do. During 1840s to 1850s company tried to hire other local groups of people in Assam. But they found it hard to make Nagas and the other people work together. By the 1860s, Chinese tea cultivators left the Assam tea company completely and

rest of the workers either died or deserted. So, the company started fresh recruitment from South-east Asia.

When British learnt to grow tea, they found out that Chinese and Chinese-Assam hybrid tea plant are not suitable with the environment of Assam. Sharma, 2009(pp. 1304–1305) says that the planters used to refer the Chinese-Assam hybrid as “plague”. So, they started shifting to improved varieties of native Assam tea plants and they started producing it on large industrial scale. British company was very dissatisfied with both Chinese worker and local worker and the foremost need of this new tea industry was cheap labor forces which have to be docile and easily reproducible. In order to make ideal work force for tea plantation British took control over Bengal’s “wild frontier” which is the Chotanagpur-Santhal hill territory. Majority of the inhabitants of this area belonged to ethnic minority groups and they used to work as slaves in sugar plantations till 1830s. After taking control of this area British dislocated its inhabitants physically and mentally with the help of moneylenders, traders and landlords from plain lands. So, whenever and wherever they found any job or work these displaced hill people became forced to be submissive and hard-working labor. As a result, they become a prime candidate for tea plantation labor force and cherry on the top they had the experience of working in sugar plantations.

Tea industries are very different from other industries. Like the industry the workers of tea industries are also different from other industry workers. British first established tea industry in Bangladesh. Their first experimental tea garden in Bangladesh was established in 1840 in Chittagong and the first commercial tea garden was established in Sylhet in 1854(Gain, 2009). Since then the tea garden has witnesses many historical events. The partition of India in 1947 and liberation war in 1971 were two very important historical events among them. But one thing

that has not changed till now in these tea gardens is the lifestyle of the tea workers. They are being treated and regulated in a way they used to be treated and regulated in British period. The labor force that keep the industry running are not local people. According to Gain(2009, pp. 14–16), British colonial companies brought them from Bihar, Madras, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and other regions in India in order to work as a tea labor in Sylhet region. These were not actually well-off people. They belong from the “tribal” and “Dalit” communities who are lower caste Hindus. They were economically and socially struggling and desperate for better lifestyle. Gain(2009, p. 14) quoted that they were told that they would arrive at-

“A lovely garden in the hill country where they would look after trees with leaves of pure gold which would fall if you shook them” (Jones 1986:11)

One third of the tea workers died on their way to tea plantation and on their arrival, they got new identity “*coolies*” which means they become the property of the tea companies. This “*coolie*” identity surpasses their identities of different ethnic groups. Tea workers told me that their grandparents and great- grand parents used to called *coolies* and now they are known as tea workers. But, still sometimes local people and *Shahebs* call them *coolie- kamin*. They also said that there is very little difference in the estate of being *coolie* and being tea workers and mostly the difference was recognition from the state. Coolies were not recognized as citizens of the state but state take tea workers as its citizen. However, the working condition and living standard have not get better than the *coolies*. A tea worker told me, “ওই ডাকটাই শুধু বদলাইছে, তা বাদে এখনো কুলিই আছি” (Only the title we are being called has changed. Apart from it we are still *coolies*). According to Gain(2009, p. 14), this submissive life of tea labor started with a four-year contact with companies. More than a century and a half has passed since the tea workers settled here. It

is almost their fourth generation who are serving the tea industry. Though they are citizens and voters of independent Bangladesh, their basic rights are being denied. They are the people who are less talked about and almost forgotten.

When I was doing my ethnography in the tea garden, I wanted to know about their ancestors from the tea workers. Surprisingly, majority of the people who are almost fifty to fifty-five years old do not have any idea about their ancestors. They barely know when their ancestors came in this region. Two of them do not even know about their grandfather. A tea worker named Chandra who is almost sixty-five years old told me that he heard from his parents that his grandfather came in this region from somewhere of India but he does not know the specific area. He does not know the name of his grandfather and the reason behind they came here. He has no idea about the work his grandfather used to do when he first came here. Another tea worker named Monu who is nearly 75 years old told me that his grandfather came to the tea garden from West Bengal of India during British period and his grandfather used to work in the factory. But apart from it he does not know any other information about his grandfather. He also said that his father used to work in the tea garden as a *Mistri*⁴ and he got his job as a tea worker from his grandmother when she became unable to do the job and went to retirement. A woman who is nearly forty years old told me that here great grandfather came in this Sylhet region in the beginning of the tea garden and she does not know any other information about him.

So, these tea workers are the third or fourth generation of the tea workers who first settle down in the labor lines of the tea estate. They barely know about their ancestors and their origin and the little bit knowledge they have is fading from a generation to next generation. There is no paper works or books or records which can help them to trace their ancestral origins. Many researchers and writers claimed that there was a four-year contract between the tea companies

⁴The workers who work in the technological or the mechanical section of the tea estate.

and the tea workers who first came in this region. I asked the manager of the tea estate whether he knows anything about the contract. The manager told me, “there was no contract between tea companies and the tea workers who first came here”. He also added “there was only promise of golden leaves and better life which made the tea workers travel to a place from where they could never go back to their home”. The tea estate is making them pass the job on to the next generation but there are no official record or paperwork regarding who is getting who’s job. It means there is no concrete evidence or paperwork which can give a lead to origin of the tea workers. With this depleting knowledge information of the origin and ancestor of the tea workers, many unspoken stories of struggle, bond of friendship, blood and humanity are also fading away. Our family history, our origins are the ties that bind us with people on whom we can lean on when we need to. Without it we become vulnerable. Forced displacements artificially (dis)integrated people (*coolies*) to live in a multi ethnic setup. On the top of it lack of record makes them lose their traditions. They do not even have enough people to practice or celebrate their own culture. A hybrid culture has been created through this artificial integration and forced amnesia is the key ingredient of their social cohesion. It was part of colonial project. In order to manage the labor force, they took them from different parts of the colony and plant them in another part of the colony. As a result, all the ties with their culture cut off and for this reason they became able bodied but with uprooted or docile entities who were force to unionize. They also keep them away from local politics and uprising. This forced amnesia impacted the way tea workers constituted their entity or identity which is nothing but “*coolie*” – an identity with no memory or history and they become one of the most vulnerable communities who have no one to depend on in times of need.

Chapter: Three

Social Identities

The identity “Tea worker” constitute with several factors or identities. Their origin, their belief, language, ethnicity, religion, gender, education, food habits, economic conditions etc. all of these factors play its own role in constructing the identity of a community. Identity of a community is not concrete rather it is fluid that is continuously changing and giving it a new shape. Although, tea workers community may seem like a single identity, there are several different social factors which are contributing to that identity. Among all social identities I decided to look through ethnic identity, class identity and gender identity of tea workers. I tried to understand how these identities are constituted and how they negotiate it in their day to day life.

Ethnic Identity:

According to Gain(2016, pp. 16–17) there are eighty ethnic communities in 156 tea gardens in Shylhet, Hobiganj, Maulvibazar, Chittagong and Rangamati district. I found nine ethnic communities in the tea estate of hobiganj where I did the ethnography. Tea workers refer ethnic communities or groups as *Jati*. Munda, Goala, Tanti, Koiri, Kanu, Hunsh, Jhora, Urang, Painka, Bengali are the ethnic communities live in the labor line of the tea estate. There is hierarchy in the caste system of these ethnic groups. A higher caste and a lower caste cannot establish any kinship relation among them. If a higher caste establishes kinship relation with a lower caste, the people with higher caste will fall into the lower caste. An interlocutor named Monu told me that his great grandfather belonged to *Kanu* ethnic group. When his grandfather and father married with women who belong to lower castes, they descended to lower ethnic

group *Koiri*. He thinks it was a disgraceful act of his ancestors since this lowered their position in the society. When he was telling me about his *jati* and how it changed through generation, he looked very sad. This is because if they belong to a higher-level ethnic group ascribe certain status in the society. As a result, people respect the person and try to follow their words when they say something. Another interlocutor Chandra who was one of the elders in the labor line told me, “people come to me whenever they face any problem and need suggestion”. He belongs to Goala ethnic group. He told me, “my age and experience in tea garden and most importantly my higher *Jati* gave me the respect of elders”. Though Monu is older than Chandra and has more experience in tea garden, he does not consider as an elder because of his lower *Jati*. Again, *Panchayat* members are also selected from the higher *Jaties* since other people of the community honor their words and they hold certain amount of influence over the community. As a result, in spite of having the qualities of becoming a *Panchayat* member one cannot get the position because of this hierarchical caste system. It is giving birth of a *Panchayat* which is not fair in constitution. So, the hierarchy of caste somehow determining social status and the position of a tea worker in the tea workers community.

Every ethnic group has its own language through which they communicate within their community. Kids learn the language at early age when they hear their parents or elders talking in the language. Like other languages in the world the languages of ethnic communities of tea workers have changed a lot. Some languages have mixed with other languages and create a new language. Ahmmed & Hossain(2016, pp. 47–48) find out that the people who migrated from Orissa talk in a language called *Deshali* which is a fusion of Bangla and Oriya. An interlocutor told me that their language has changed and turned into the language of tea worker which is very different from the language his grandparents used to talk. Ahmmed & Hossain(2016, pp. 47–48)

get to know that there is a ubiquitous language among the tea worker which is commonly known as the language of tea worker. The language of tea worker is a fusion of *Deshali*, Hindi and Assamese.

Now a days the scenario is changing, the children are forgetting their mother tongue. When a kid starts going to school, they start learning and practicing Bangla since their academic curriculum is in Bangla. They almost stop using the language they learn from their parents and elders. An interlocutor told me that the kids now a day do not want to talk in their ethnic language rather they prefer to talk in Bangla since having good skill in Bangla is very crucial for their academic education. As a result, the words of these ethnic languages are losing its utility and purpose; and if it continues the languages of ethnic group would extinct. In order to avoid this situation, it is necessary to teach their academic curriculum in their own language until certain age. Language creates a sense of association and attachment in the community. With the extinction of these ethnic languages that essence of attachment among the people of the ethnic community will disappear. It will leave them in a lonesome world with no one to practice their language where they have no one to rely on. They are isolated individual with no past to long for and no future hold hope.

Class Identity:

By the title “Tea Worker community” it can be simply understood that the people of the community belong to working class. But the inside scenario is very different. There are layers of classes within this community. Even though workers belong to working class community but they are very different from the working-class in other industries. In tea industry, bourgeois does not only have control over the labor force of working class rather they also have control over worker’s daily life, their behavior, their way of thinking. When I talk with the *shaheb* and the tea

workers, all of them confirm that marriage in tea workers community cannot take place without the permission of *shaheb*. It is the *shaheb* who decide when a person will be eligible for marriage. Like workers in other industries tea workers cannot live in an area or place which he or she thinks suitable for him or her. A tea worker must live in the labor line. They are allowed to have forty-days holiday allocated including twenty days sick leave which they rarely take any since they can barely feed their family with the money, they earn daily wage including overtime. They do not have any savings left in the end of the day. So, if they take any leave, they have to starve the day or eat so small that is not even able to fulfill their hunger. Most of the interlocutor said that their monthly expenses are five to six thousand tk. per month which is almost double than the wages they got per month without overtime payment and hardly covered with the wages including overtime. So, there is no option for them other than doing overtime. They are bound to do it. They have to borrow money in every 4 to 6 months. So, they do not have any saving after doing hard work for whole life. Leaving the work is not an option for them since without any saving they cannot get a place to stay and find a new job. Like other industry worker they also theoretically fall under the working class category but there is a huge difference between them. They do not have any agency like other workers. They are completely subservient to the managers.

Hierarchy of *Jati* among the ethnic minority creates a certain class differences within the tea workers community. People with higher level *Jati* have better social status than the people with lower level *Jati*. It creates a certain gap between the people in terms of respect, influence, self-esteem and relationships. I have often found that People with low level *jati* are prone to have low self-esteem which can be seen in their body posture. They are tended to be submissive. Other people in the community do not care much about their opinions. People in tea workers

community try to follow the words of elders who belong to the upper level *jati*. They go to the elders whenever they face any problem and need any suggestion. People think they are the wise persons. They respect the people and their opinions who belong to upper *Jati*.

There are some permanent tea workers who are the *Panchayat* members. Though *Panchayat* members are also tea workers, but the power they hold as a *Panchayat* member gives them better and well-off(?) position in the tea labor community. Not only workers but also managers try to maintain a good relation with the *Panchayat* members. Their economic condition is better than the other tea workers. In labor line, tea workers live in rooms built with mud walls and straws but the *Panchayat* members live in the room build with brick walls and tin shaded roof. Because of having better economic condition than other tea workers and having manager's support is easier for the *Panchayat* members to cope up with the struggles of labor line. People in tea workers community are bounded to respect them because of the authority they have over *Panchayat*. People go to the *Panchayat* members whenever they need something, face any big problem and when they need to negotiate with the *Shahebs*. So, the system of tea estate creates an informal institute called *Panchayat* among the tea workers.

With a glance the class identity of tea workers looks so plain but the more time and concentration I paid to it I found more complexity and more layers in it. First time when I saw tea workers during the trip with my friends, they were just a community of tea workers like a flock of birds. But, during my ethnography I got to see that they are not identical rather they are divided into different classes on the basis of their language, their *Jati*, their religion, the authority they hold and even the place they are born in.

Gender Identity:

Sen(2014, pp. 444–472) draws the picture of gender role and identity negotiation of women tea farmers through “Fair Trade” in Darjeeling, India as mentioned earlier. I wanted to see how the tea workers of Bangladesh negotiation their gender identity.

In the tea workers community in Habiganj, women tea workers do all the household chores by themselves and after maintaining the household chores they do their part of the work as a tea worker. If a woman tea worker has a daughter or lives with her mother in law, sometimes she gets helps in her household works from them. But, male members of the family never get involved in any household work. Most of the interlocutor told me that both husband and wife take part in decision making. They told me that they discuss about the thing and take the decision with mutual consent. This mutual decision making scenario at household is entirely opposite from the decision-making process of *Panchayat*. Though *Panchayat* has female members, but they are more like ornaments of *Panchayat*. They are not active in *Panchayat*. They do not even attend the meetings of *Panchayat*. Female members of *Panchayat* only attend the meetings when a woman is somehow involved with the dispute. When I asked an interlocutor about the reason behind this irregularity of female *Panchayat* members, he told me that after doing all household chores and doing their works in tea garden, female members do not get much time to work in *panchayat*. Because of these irregularities, many male *Panchayat* members do not feel the necessity of the opinion of female *Panchayat* members in decision making in the *Panchayat*. So, the women tea workers have small platform to show their agency and negotiate their role in the community but they miserably failing in it.

Furthermore, most of the girls in tea labor community do not even go to primary school, whereas the rate of boy's rate of attending primary school is quite good now a days. I asked about the reason behind it to an interlocutor who has two sons and one daughter. His sons go to the primary school of the tea estate which is funded by the government, but his daughter does not go to the school. He told me that girls in the tea estate do not go to school. Another female interlocutor also gave me the same answer that girls in the tea garden do not go to school. She also said that education is not that important for the girls. It is better to keep them at home. A girl who does not have basic education and never see the world outside the labor line, it is not easy for her to understand that their rights are being denied and they need to negotiate their role in the community.

Chapter: Four

Political Identity & Negotiation

Political identity gives people power which comes with responsibilities. If the leader fails to complete his or her responsibilities, other people have to bear the consequences. In tea estates of Bangladesh, only functional political institute is called *Panchayat*. *Panchayat* is a committee or organization which form to ensure workers' rights and facilities by negotiating the terms and conditions with the *shahebs* or managers.

The members of *Panchayat* are elected by the vote of the permanent tea workers. This election is organized by the government. There is a central *Panchayat* committee among 173 tea estates in Bangladesh. Central *Panchayat* committee members are also selected by the vote of tea workers. There are few groups of panels in the *Panchayat* election. Through the election they chose which panel is going to be the central *Panchayat*. For example, current central *Panchayat's* leader is Makhanlal. Leaders of *Panchayats* sit in the meetings with *Shahebs* or managers and negotiate their wages, facilities, working hours, area, electricity and many other things.

Participants of the *Panchayat* election are selected by the votes of the majorities. So, between a labor line with large population and a labor line with small population, the participant will always be selected from the labor line with large population. As a result, the labor line with small population left with no one to represent them. Interlocutors say, "since 75% of tea workers are Hindu, 20% are Muslims and 5% are local and migrated people from other areas, the participants for election of *Panchayat* members are always being selected from the Hindu majority". So, the opportunity to participate in the *Panchayat* election is not equal for everyone.

In *Panchayat* panel, there are some seats for female *Panchayat* members. But, the male members of the *Panchayat* committee run the organization. Female members of *Panchayat* are so inactive that they even rarely attend the meetings of *Panchayat* committee. In decision making process their opinions are invalid. They are more like embellisher of the *Panchayat* committee. In their report Ahmmed & Md. Ismail Hossain(2016, pp. 42–43) say that though according to data 47.8% *Panchayat* members participate in *Panchayat* activities but in reality, 52.2% members never even attended the activities. They also add that some wicked leaders who use the power of *Panchayat* for their own interest is responsible for this inactivity.

People of tea worker community go to the panchayat members for conflict resolution or service delivery; for examples, they need to alter their duty time or they need to renovate their house etc. since it is the responsibility of the *Panchayat* members to solve any conflict among the people of labor line and negotiate facilities with the *shahebs* on behalf of the tea worker. While talking about *panchayat* few interlocutors told me that the problem, they face with *Panchayat* frequently is that when they ask for any help from *Panchayat* members or complain about any dispute, they ask for money. They also said that if a person is able to pay them, he or she will get the facilities or the decision of the dispute will be on his or her favor and if the person unable to pay them, he or she will be deprived of justice. A tea worker stated, “*Panchayat* is the most problematic part of tea workers community”. He says, “we do not get any benefit from *Panchayat*. We do not get any money from the *Panchayat*’s fund, although we regularly deposit money in the fund”. *Panchayat* members have good connections with the *Shahebs*. They use this connection for their own benefits like they get funds from the *Shahebs* to build brick rooms and most of the time authority overlook their faults in any sort of disputes. *Shahebs* always favor the *Panchayat* members and maintain a good relationship with them because they

know that *Panchayat* hold the power to start a movement and stop every function of the tea garden.

Panchayat is supposed to lessen problems and ensure the rights of tea workers. But it is piling up more difficulties for the tea workers. Because of *Panchayat's* corruption the workers' rights which they are entitled are not met. Government should understand that only organizing the *Panchayat* election cannot ensure the rights of tea workers. This discrepancy in *Panchayat* is responsible for social inequality within the tea workers community. Authorities' negligence and *Shahebs* favor to the *Panchayat* members has worsened the situation. An institution or organization that should have been a blessing for the tea workers is now have become a curse for them. *Panchayat* could represent collective voices and like any functioning union could help worker to ensure basic rights, better pay and working condition. Due to greed of the leader the only political institution miserably failed.

Chapter: Five

Contributors of Marginality

In a capitalist society, the working-class people are the marginalized people who can do nothing but sell their labor. But, tea workers position in the society is worse than that. They are not only alienated from their work but also, they are alienated from their origin. It is the 4th generation of the tea workers who migrated in this region. They do not even know their own ancestors or their origin. The system tied them so tight with labor line that they cannot even imagine their life outside the tea estate. The price they paid for a tiny room in labor line and food to eat cannot be compared. Hence, their wages are 102 tk. per day if a worker can collect 23kg leaves and if he or she is a permanent worker.

British traders enforce such a disciplinary and manipulative system in tea estate that produce a labor force that is docile, submissive and re-productive. First thing they did to produce this slave like labor force to transplanted them to a new land that is far away from the land of their origin. They left with no choice but living in the labor line. The sad part is this almost 200 years old slavery like system have not changed much till to the present day. Tea workers cannot sit in front of the *shahebs*. They cannot wear hat and shoes in front of the *shahebs*. If a *shaheb* choose a woman from labor line and tell her to spend the night with him, that woman does not have any choice but to do. When I was doing my ethnography a *shaheb* told me “আমরা ওদের বাবা-মা, আমরাই ওদের ভগবান। আমাদের সম্মতি ছাড়া ওদের জন্ম, মৃত্যু বা বিয়ে কোনটাই সম্ভব না। (We are their parents; we are their gods. Without our permission their birth, death or marriage nothing is possible). This statement shows how much power the authorities hold over the tea workers. Literally tea workers cannot get married without the permission of the *shahebs* and not only that, the *shahebs* decide when a tea worker can get married. They cannot even build a partition on

tiny room where a tea worker spends their whole life without the permission of *shaheb*. According to the *shaheb*, “tea workers actually have a good lifestyle since they do not need to find works everyday like *Bede* and *Manta*”. He also says, “tea workers are lucky that they have a work where they can work 6 days and get a 1-day holiday”. According to him, “the tea workers cannot make any progress on their life (generation after generation) only because they drink too much”.

A person who earns 102 tk., per day cannot have any saving left for his or her future. He or she can barely cover their and their family’s food expenses. On the top of it they need to loan money frequently within in four to six months in order to fulfill their other needs. They do not even allow them to do extra work outside the labor line. An interlocutor told me “সাহেব ক্ষেইপা যায় যদি চা-বাগান এ কাজ না থাকলে বাইরে কোথাও কাজ করি। তারা বুঝতে চায়না যে এই টাকায় আমাদের পোষায় না। (*Shahebs* become furious if we do work outside the tea garden in leisure. They do not try to understand that we cannot afford the expenses with the money we earn)” In this way after working whole life in tea garden when a tea worker take the retirement, he become disqualified to live in the room of labor line and he does not left with much financial and physical ability to start a new live outside the labor line. So, in this situation the authority offers them to live in the labor line in exchange the tea workers have to pass their jobs to their children or other family member. In this way it creates a circle of slavery like system where some group of people stuck in for generation after generation. The *shaheb* of the tea estate justified this situation of the tea workers by saying that this is the lifestyle the tea workers deserve since they are lower caste Hindu and their ancestors did not have any money to build a better future for them.

Ethnic minority groups are always suppressed by the majorities in a democratic capitalist society. They are the one who always suffer in the fight of right. Here the tea workers are

marginalized among the marginalized. Tea worker spends most of their life time in the tea estate. Except for going to the market, they do not get in touch with the people outside tea estate. People outside the tea estate do not want to get in touch with the tea workers. Because of being lower caste Hindu people treats them like untouchable. If a tea worker somehow leaves the tea estate and start living outside, they face more difficulties than before. People out cast them from the society. People do not talk to them. They do not establish any kinship relationship with them. They prefer their houses far from the house of former tea workers.

So, the society is putting the tea workers in system because of their identity which is turning the tea worker in to a docile and submissive body and capturing them in a slavery like system generation after generation. They have no choice but following their ill fate. They cannot go against the authority because the authority has full control over their lives. Their rooms in labor line are nothing but a cage for not only them but also for their full family line.

After liberation war, government declared tea workers as citizens of Bangladesh. But the tea workers never get their rights as a citizen. Private tea estates along with the tea estates own by the government still runs by the British introduced bondage system. There is no initiative to change it. Government provides a primary school and a medical center in every tea estate. But managers are the heads of these schools and medical center. There is no one to follow up whether the school and medical centers are providing the service. Government gave the tea workers national identity cards and before the national election government gives them rations but in between the election government does not launch any programs for the tea workers. Government organizes the *Panchayat* election but later there is no one to see how much the *Panchayat* members are doing for the tea workers. These initiatives are nothing but a façade. It can only help to keep the tea workers in marginalized position they are already into.

Conclusion

Identity has always been a flux. It never ended well when one tried to give it a concrete shape. British first tried to give the identity of subcontinent people a concrete shape through census which later resulted in communal conflict and we are still suffering from the consequences of this step. Labeling people on the basis of geography, skin color, religion, language etc. can bring disastrous chaos in among the community and in the lives of people.

Tea workers are the main source of force of our tea industry. They are keeping the tea industry alive and in return they only want acceptance and better living standard. Manager of tea estates do not count them as a human being. They are trained to look at the tea workers as a component that needs to be disciplined in order to keep the tea estate running. The authority feels that they are doing a favor to the tea workers by giving them works and place to stay since people outside the tea industry will not accept them.

While I was conducting the interviews in the field, I noticed that manager's perspective regarding the workers is extremely negative. They think tea workers are very dangerous and they can be more dangerous than "hill-men". Later I got to know that the managers get 3 years training in the tea estate before start working there. It would be interesting to know what kind of training they got that give them negative perspective about a community that he never met before entering the estate. Again, identities of tea workers are a broad subject it needs more time and focus. I would like to explore other aspects of their identities in my future research.

However, the government accepted the tea workers as a citizen of Bangladesh but there is hardly any initiative to include them in polices or projects. Government owned tea estates also run in the British systems. There is no initiative to change it. NGOs are providing their service in

the education sectors in some tea garden. But these steps are not enough to overthrow this bondage system.

Social acceptance can change this scenario. Along with social acceptance the most important thing tea workers need are education and gender equality because without these two things no community can change its condition and prosper. Change cannot be brought in a day. But it needs initiatives to start the changes. Question remains that who is taking the initiative and how long it is going to take.

Moreover, only changing the title from *coolie* to tea workers cannot make them less vulnerable than they are. Without their own ethnic traditions and culture, they have become the lost bird from its flock. It makes them exposed to the exploitative world. Without their origin, their history they cannot establish that trust or the connection that can assure themselves that they can also lean on someone whenever they need to. On the other hand, their caste system and *Panchayat* is widening social and class differences among the tea workers community. Day by day they are becoming more and more alienated from the outside world and even from each other which restricting them to raise a collective voice that change their condition.

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