Intersectionality and Spaces of Belonging: Understanding the Tea Plantation Workers in Dooars

Supurna Banerjee

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Abstract

The tea plantation being a bounded space, there is a tendency to view the women workers within it as a homogenous category of marginal workers vis-à-vis the managerial class. Though historically constructed this class identity, however, is neither absolute nor concrete. The workers are both men and women of different cultural, tribal, ethnic or caste origin. Like any other social space the tea gardens form a context for a maze of relationships where different aspects of their identity—religious, ethnic, caste etc. coincide, collide and coexist. Using data from extensive fieldwork conducted in two gardens of Dooars, India, the paper explores the perceptions of the women workers regarding identity and belonging in that space. The women form work-groups and it is through their formation and functioning the paper seeks to understand how relations of dominance and subordination are not random but can be traced to specific discourses around class, gender, ethnic, race and kinship relations. In determining the aspects of identity on which belonging to the groups is predicated, often more fundamental aspects of identity seemed to become less significant than relatively minor features. Finally the article explores the role of self-interest in the way identity plays out to determine belonging to a group.

INTRODUCTION

'The culture of Bengal is not only the culture of Kolkata; our culture, our dance, form an essential part of this culture. We are denied this space of recognition or acceptance. Ill feelings and a feeling of alienation are born from this. It is by ignoring North Bengal for so long that separatism has emerged here...The fault

1. Assistant Professor, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata

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lies with the government and other politicians in the way they term people living here as foreigners. In their speech and action they give a sense that the people here do not belong to this country but are actually foreigners' (Kajiman Goley Kaalka, 21 October, 2012).

The words of Kajiman Goley, a tea-plantation worker and a trade union leader, convey an understanding of identity and its recognition. His sense of injustice points towards the larger problems of intersectional identities in the tea plantations of Dooars, India. Using certain labour practices of the women workers in the tea plantation of Dooars, this paper challenges the uni-dimensional portrayal of the workers and shows how they are composites of intersectional identities.

Identities collated, clashed and constituted the women workers both as individuals and as collectives. Tribal in a non-tribal society, women in a patriarchal society, residing in a region historically ignored by the state government and exploited as cheap and docile labour, the women were constituted by multiple subordinate identities. By deconstructing the homogenous construction of women workers, this paper will illustrate not only the complexities of multiple identities but also how they are managed (McCall 2005). After a review of literature followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and methods, I will delve into the ethnography.

LITERATURE REVIEW

India has two primary tea growing belts—in the south and in the north-east. The north-east tea belt consists of Assam, Darjeeling, Dooars and Terai and the south includes the Nilgiris, Anamallai and various parts of Kerala and Karnataka. Tea plantations began in Dooars around 1865 as a colonial enterprise (Griffith, 1967). The difficult conditions of work, low wages in the plantations as well as alternative cultivation opportunities for the indigenous peasants made them refuse to work in the tea plantations posing a labour supply problem (Chatterjee 2003). By the late 1860s an organised system of labour recruitment, combining private

contracting and the government run system, brought two-thirds of total plantation labour from Chotanagpur Plateau. The tribal society here was in turmoil with growing hinduisation, expropriation of tribal lands by the *dikus* or moneylenders, increased impoverishment and drought which threatened them with imminent destruction (Bhowmik, 1981). Deprived of their livelihood they formed a pool of unemployed, a catchment area from which the plantations could draw their labour supply. There were multiple tribes in the Chotanagpur region who were recruited as labourers to the plantations. Once in the plantations they came to be known as a homogenous group the *Adivasis,* a term which continues to be used by them as well as by others to identify them. This also differentiate them from the Nepali workers. In the 1950s with the signing of the India Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty there also began a recruitment of Nepali migrant workers in the tea plantations (Meena and Bhattacharjee, 2008: 16).

Plantations are not just work-places but they also encapsulate within it the domestic. The labour villages where the workers lived were also located within the plantation area, thus making it an extremely interesting site of study. Plantations are thus not just spaces for production of tea and resultant profits but also sites for production of discourses, meanings and practices. They are social spaces where the residents live their lives, make sense of it, form relationships. They will have to be understood as socio-economic spaces.

The plantation system is characterised by a rigid social hierarchy and a high degree of centralisation. The roles of the labouring and employing classes are sharply distinguished. This hierarchy is evident in every stage of the plantation right from the recruitment process. The plantation hierarchy is divided into four categories: manager, staff, sub-staff and workers. Movement between the ranks is extremely difficult with very little provision for promotion. Moreover in North Bengal ethnic division maps onto this hierarchy. The tribal and Nepali workers could rise to the level of sub-staff and staff but rarely beyond (Bhowmik, 1981).

Beckford (1972), Graham and Floering (1984), Daniel, Bernstein and Brass (1992), DasGupta (1994), Raman (2010), have detailed the development of the plantation system as an economic system of production, with its history of development as industry, its labour management and labour practices and finally the labour force. The labour force, thus, is locked in a class analysis and portrayed as a nameless, faceless passive mass alienated from the multiple aspects of their identity. People's identities are not homogenous but are multiple and intersecting. The workers do not just constitute a class but they are constituted by their gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion among other things.

INTERSECTIONALITY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Crenshaw (1991:139) defines intersectionality as the multi dimensionality of marginalised subjects' 'lived experiences'. Challenging the concept of universal sisterhood intersectionality unearths the complex, varied and often contradictory effects which ensue 'when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 76). For analytical convenience I approach intersectionality through the notions of identity and belonging.

Identity

To understand how the social world is constructed, there is a need to account for the multiplicity of identities. Identities tend to become naturalised which homogenise social categories (Yuval Davis 2006a: 199). Through the use of categorical attributes the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion are then drawn, through which behaviour is regulated and evaluated, resources are distributed. Thus, the interlinking grids of different positionalities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, stage in the life cycle, etc., create hierarchies of differential access to a variety of economic, political and cultural spaces and resources (Yuval Davis 2006a: 199)

These hierarchies are fluid and contested (Yuval Davis 2011: 12–

13). Leaving aside contextual specificities, the varied social identities through which social relations are organised and understood are mutually constitutive as well as reinforcing and naturalising the other (Shields 2008). No person is a passive product of their identities but actively engages in each aspect of it. Not being a set of discrete identities, they are relationally defined, understood and performed. In the concrete experiences of oppression, however, the social identities are always intermeshed with each other (Yuval Davis 2011). A woman worker's gender identity interacts with her identity as working class, tribal, etc., to determine her social position and lived reality. But any attempt to essentialise her 'tribal origin' or her 'womanhood' or 'class' as a specific form of concrete oppression results into fragmentation.

Belonging:

Though distinct concepts, belonging is constructed through narratives of identity (Yuval Davis et al. 2006). People experience belonging or non-belonging to a space on the grounds of varying intersectional identities. Thus, belonging within a space becomes part of naturalised everyday practice which becomes articulated, politicised, and significant only when threatened in some way (Yuval Davis, 2006b, 2011). Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are often spatial—conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed (Rowe in Yuval Davis, 2011: 10). But space of belonging, does not only refer to physical material places. The process by which individuals endow a space—physical or conceptual—with meanings and feelings give them a sense of place (Rose, 1995). This subjective attachment to the space is related to people's identities. Moreover, belonging can be experienced in regard to multiple spaces simultaneously (Yuval Davis et al. 2006). All people belonging to a space do not belong to it in the same way. Correspondingly non-belonging or exclusion can also be experienced in multiple ways. Belonging is often achieved through struggles and negotiations. Even when individuals belong to a certain group or space, this does not preclude conflicts and struggles within it. Sibley (1995:72) points out that, spaces are both the medium and outcome of practices that they organise.

Intersectionality draws out aspects of non-belonging in a space which is perceived as 'home' and the internal exclusions and marginalisation which problematises one's belonging in that space (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality research has debated the position of individuals or groups with multiple subordinate group identities. The women workers of the tea plantations, belonging to a tribal origin and lower caste, possess multiple subordinate identities that might not correspond to the stereotype of their respective subordinate groups. This leads to intersectional invisibility (Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach 2008: 383). Such people experience misrepresentation, marginalisation and disempowerment. The intersections within the margin might not always be in relation to the centre but to other marginalities (Rao, 2005a: 362). Thus, I map the women workers' relative positioning within a chain of subalternity. Through various subtle practices the women workers' experiences, perspectives and needs fall out with the prevailing social representations and discourses and their multiple intersectional identities are rendered invisible.

Intersections within the self?

'Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)...such stories often relate, directly or indirectly, to self and/or others' perceptions of what being a member in such a grouping or collectivity (ethnic, racial, national, cultural, religious) might mean. The identity narratives can be individual or they can be collective, the latter often a resource for the former' (Yuval-Davis 2006a: 202).

The self is not a singular entity; it is constructed and reconstructed through the collapsing and forming of various identities. Not all these aspects of belonging remain constant or of equal importance to the individual. The way these identities play out might go beyond the established categories of ethnicity, caste, religion and age to form identity intersections among the women workers. The women comprise a collation of identities. In specific instances certain aspects of the identity assume

dominant form while other aspects are downplayed. In that configuration, at that moment, the woman collaborates with some and clashes with others. Some aspects of identity like gender, caste, religion or ethnicity are not usually challenged in the day-to-day life of the plantations and by challenging them in this specific context not much can be learned. There are other aspects like work group affiliation, marital status, generational perception which are interrogated on a more everyday level. Thus, while no part of an individual's identity is cast in stone, there are some which are more fluid than others. The narratives of identity are not consistent and at instances can be even contradictory.

Gender is socially constructed and it encompasses a wide range of different and often contradictory experiences, identities and social locations which cannot neatly fit into a master category (McCall, 2005). The actual social location of the women workers identified initially through the class category of workers and gender category of female can be understood along multiple axes of differences. My research subjects were tea garden workers, women with a distinct ethnic, caste, religious identity, residing in a definite area in North Bengal. At the same time they were mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, mothers-in-law, friends. The challenge is to conceptualise the woman as a constituent of these multiple identities which construct their selves and personhood.

METHODOLOGY

The paper comes out of ethnographic research conducted in two tea plantations in North Bengal, Daahlia and Kaalka. My research participants were mainly the women of the two tea plantations, though I spoke with the men, the management, staff, trade-union leaders to get a holistic picture. The main methods employed were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, oral histories and transect-walks. Rather than me asking questions and the women answering them, the fieldwork developed as a process of mutual exchange and learning.

Gaining access was a central part of data collection. This did not just imply access to the field-sites but also to my research

participants. To conduct an in-depth and uninterrupted stint in the field-site I had to obtain support from both the management and also (more importantly) acceptance from the workers. In Daahlia I obtained permission from company headquarters in Kolkata which was further ratified by the manager. In Kaalka my point of access was an NGO named Svatantra which worked with the plantation workers in Dooars. While this sorted out formal access to the field-site, the bigger question then was to gain acceptance among the workers. How would the workers, especially the women workers, perceive a Bengali middle-class, high caste woman studying abroad who had come to research on their lives for her degree and possible furtherance of her career?

The process in both the plantations was one of long wait and patience. I accompanied the women to their work and sat there striking up conversations with them. Taking advantage of their curiosity about me I told them about myself and my research. I went uninvited to their houses (which was perceived as a sign of warmth), took their photos and tried to insert myself in their everyday lives. After their initial misgivings, they accepted me as a guest; gradually, they began to treat me as a friend with whom they could share the joys and sorrows of their lives. The process was not always smooth; I faced mistrust as some feared that I might be a spy for the management while for others it was their distrust of the Bengalis or some other part of my identity which came up. By hanging around them, showing interest in their lives, sharing their food, taking their photos, trying to help them through different means I was able to establish a relation of trust with most of them and with some an even deeper relation of empathy and friendship.

Much like my research participants, my identity was not homogenous but had multiple facets to it. Throughout the process of my data collection I had to be conscious of how my positionalities related to that of the women I was working with. Hailing from West Bengal I had assumed that my role would be precariously balanced between that of an insider and outsider. But evaluating the self and the insider status critically, I found that in effect my position was much more that of an outsider than an

insider. The tea plantations were a very separate world from the city world of Kolkata that I hailed from and in spite of physical proximity they were culturally quite distinct.

As a non-tribal woman coming from an urban middle class family there were certain in-built biases and limitations in me and also in my research subjects' perception of me. These might have worked both ways in shaping their responses towards me as well as shaping my interpretation of their behaviour and perception. Added to this was the need to constantly guard against a potential power relation that might result from my position as a privileged, educated and urban woman researching poor, mostly illiterate, women.

Spending quality time in the field with the participants, asking them to elaborate on their responses, keeping a research diary and going back to check the data with them were methods I used to address the bias in the research. As I continued to stay on in the field for lengths of time and the participants got used to my presence accepting me as a part of their daily lives these issues became less important and my presence became more natural. My fieldwork thus, was a process of mutual learning. Instead of a researcher-researched relation, I made every effort to form a co-researcher relation—a relation based on a sense of mutual respect and empathy.

While the contextual and interpersonal nature of my research methods, made it possible to unravel the multiple strands of cross-cutting identities evident in the everyday life of the women, it was not unproblematic. Being dependant on greater human engagement and attachment, it had the potential to put both the researcher and research subjects at a much greater risk of manipulation and betrayal. Having been privy to illicit activities and affairs the researcher is often placed in a situation of inevitable betrayal of the research subjects (Stacey, 1988: 26). The life, love and loss that the participants shared with me were ultimately data. In spite of all the claims of being collaborative research, the danger of establishing inequality and betrayal had the potential to make this method counter-productive. Rather than submitting to

these lacunae I decided to address and recognise them within my research. While accepting the collaborative aspect of my research I took the responsibility and to some extent, the ownership of the final product. While grounding my research in the context of the women's everyday lives through recording their experience, language and voice, in the final product I give a greater space to my authorial voice. This is not to downgrade the contributions of the participants'. Rather it is to take the responsibility of the limitations of my work on myself and establish it as my interpretive account.

The ethical guidelines that I started off with served as pointers rather than an instruction manual. Throughout the research, I remained sensitive to my respondents and careful that I did not cause them any harm or distress. To ensure an ethical research I kept an on-going dialogue with the participants, with myself and in many instances with other researchers who had worked in similar social settings. By ensuring a relation of mutual respect, non-coercion and non-manipulation, I balanced my research interests with those of the researched.

Mapping multiple identities is a complex process. In pulling out the different aspects of identity, there is a danger of essentialising one at the exclusion of others. In order to understand how the different identities play out at various points, I have mapped these through the women's lived experiences. I use the work-group formation, its loyalties and dynamics as an analytical tool to map the shifting ideas of identity and belonging. Tracing inter-sectionality through the specific phenomena of group formation might lead to glossing over issues observed in other spaces within the plantations. But in any case it was impossible to cover all of this in the finite time period of fieldwork. The group formation and functioning provided rich insight into at least one aspect of intersectionality operating in the tea plantations and shows how different identities gain primacy at different instances within the work-groups.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In my analysis, I adopt an intracategorical approach (McCall 2005). While questioning the boundaries and the processes through which categories are made up, I accept the analytical utility of the categories in question. The homogenous portrayal of the women workers, thus, can be problematised by deconstructing it through the categories of ethnicity, caste, religion and location. Instead of then accepting these as sacrosanct, I have explored how these categories themselves are further broken down by other aspects of their identity. By focussing on the neglected points of intersection between people whose identity crosses the boundaries of traditionally constructed groups (Dill 2002: 5) this approach permits an unearthing of the complexity of lived experiences within this group. Thus, without denying the importance of categories, I explore the processes by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced and resisted in the everyday life of the tea plantation women.

RESEARCH   CONTEXT

Daahlia is a prosperous tea plantation owned by a big company. It is located away from the townships in a cluster of tea plantations, all owned by the same company. Kaalka, in contrast, was closed for over ten years from 2000 and reopened only in 2010 after being purchased by a small company in Siliguri. Located at the borders of the small township of the same name, it is surrounded by a few plantations on either side. The two plantations are a contrast in terms of location, ownership, prosperity and production.

The workforce in both the plantation is mixed ethnic population consisting of *Adivasi*s and Nepalis. In Daahlia, the proportion was 60 per cent Nepalis and 40 per cent *Adivasi*s. In Kaalka, the numbers of *Adivasi* and Nepali workers were roughly equal. The workers are mostly members of the lower castes (many of them falling within the government's classification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), though there were some Brahmins among the Nepalis. Among the *Adivasi*s the common caste/tribal groups

are Munda, Oraon, Kujur. Among the Nepalis some of the common ones were Rai, Gurung and Lama.

INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN THE TEA PLANTATIONS

'They are not only workers and women being two marginalised categories; they are women workers in the north of Bengal, an area ignored by the different governments. On top of that they are tribal and lower caste. So you can imagine what their plight is.' (Bhavani Nandy, 17 November, 2011)

Nandy, a social activist, argues that the plantation workers are marginalised not just as workers or women. There are several other subcategories which constitute them and their lived experiences. The academics working in this area, the social activists and the grassroots party workers of both the governing and opposition parties accuse the state governments of indifference towards the tea growing belt of North Bengal. Chatterjee (2008) writes about two parallel crises in North and South Bengal in 2007. While there were widespread uprisings in protest of the police atrocities in Singur Nandigram[2], the reports of starvation deaths and closure of plantations in North Bengal did not elicit the same kind of outraged outburst[3]. This silence, it has been argued by scholars and activists alike, is typical to the fate of North Bengal.

Intersectionality can be a powerful analytical tool which unearths how identities overlap and their intersections have an impact on

2. The Singur-Nandigram crisis formed a very significant protest against the then Left Front Government's economic policy of giving agricultural land to the industrial powers for building new industries. The policy and its accompanying violence resulted into a mass outburst of protest against the then government.

3. The 1999–2000s saw a crisis in the plantations in the entire country though Dooars, Terai and Darjeeling were the worst sufferers (Dasgupta 2009). It lasted for almost ten years till 2010. In Dooars, 16 of its total 158 plantations closed down, causing around 10,000 workers and their families to lose their jobs (Dasgupta 2009: 5–6). Unemployment, further impoverishment and starvation death were the inevitable results of this crisis.

understanding positionality and belonging to a space. But in order to usefully understand the women without fragmenting them to a point where no kind of broader understanding is possible, I have focussed on certain key indicators which emerged during fieldwork. Within these, the other aspects of identity often had effect and were manifested while at other times there seemed to be no significant variations within that indicator category. At a primary level the intersectional identities seemed to be gender, ethnicity, caste, religion and locational factors. Using the work group, I will examine how these and other identities play out in shaping not only the women's interaction with each other but also their sense of belonging and non-belonging.

Work Groups

The plucking in the plantation is done in different plucking-sections. The workers working in that section divide themselves into work-group. These groups consist of three to seven women. They generally work together and in the same segment in the work section, assisting group-mates to meet their task if they fall behind, covering for them in their absence, taking *mela*s[4] together and in general helping each other out. Through chatting and sharing problems, thoughts, food and forming a team the groups also have a social function.

'I notice all the three women of Aradhana's group put their leaves in one bag. When I ask them why, she explains that if one of them has a deficit it will be met by the surplus of the other. That way none of them will get into trouble.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 25 May, 2011)

There is no system of group yield in the garden. Wages are based on individual yields. When there is no task[5], the women of

4. The rows in which the bushes were planted.

5. During the season time (April-November) the pluckers have to pluck a set minimum quantity of leaves to get their regular wages. This was called the task or *thika.* Anything that is more than the task is calculated as their overtime and added to their wages. November-March there is no task.

a group often weigh their leaves together with the logic that those who have plucked less within the group that cannot be individually identified by the *sardars* (supervisors). The groups function in a way to promote the group members' self interest.

There is no official process of group formation. The women form these groups by themselves. What interested me was how these groups are formed. What prompts them to choose the other group members, what are the points of identity that make them relate to each other? Do boundaries operate between groups?

Boundaries

'Another big group comes and sits. Though the groups were sitting close to each other and there were interactions and joking between them, they were distinctly separate. The most obvious indicator of this is the food sharing which is done commonly within one group and does not spill over to the next.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 08 May, 2011)

While the groups are formed quite loosely and there are interactions between groups, there are invisible boundaries marking the inside and outside of groups. While a degree of social interaction is evident between different work-groups, when it comes to the functional level such as sharing their lunch, or taking joint responsibility of work the groups work as individual units. This was not an expression of antagonism, but rather a code of conduct, a convention where the women sit to eat lunch with their group mates.

At times, however, the operation of these boundaries were sharper often laced with suspicion or even antagonism.

'My sister-in-law and her friends were my first group and they gave me guidelines. They said don't talk to everyone with an open heart. You have come here to work, work and stay with us.' (Sunrita, Daahlia, Nepali, Hindu, married, 2 April, 2011)

As Sunrita indicates, not everybody can belong. To protect one's

interest, boundaries have to be established. These could operate in both evident and often antagonistic way but also in more invisible ways. Therefore boundaries are a feature of work-group operation. Group formation, however, were not defined only by boundaries but also by commonalities.

'I ask them how they form these work-groups. At this they seem a bit surprised at first and then say that it is formed by people who like each other. It is on the basis of friendship.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 23 March, 2011)

Most of the groups that I ask this question say friendship is the basis of the group formation; one forms a group with those she can relate to. Commonality of a particular aspect of identity often forms the basis of group formation. Exploring the boundaries between and commonalties within groups, it might be possible to gain an insight into the workings of multiple intersecting identities albeit in a microcosm.

Location

'Laughing and chatting we were making our way back to the village. The crowd thinned as the women reached their homes and made their way in. I asked Madeeha whether their groups are always formed by people staying close by. She says, "Not necessarily, Kavitadidi stays closer to my house than Urvi but the former is not a part of our group whereas the latter is. But the group-members are usually from the same village."' (Daahlia, field-notes, 24 November, 2010)

In developing such relations, locational proximity seemed a common factor. In case of Daahlia the locational proximity mapped on to common ethnicity and sometimes even kinship. The importance of location in work-group formations made practical sense. The groups start functioning much before the workers reach the field. They gather and come to work together ensuring that everyone knew the correct section to go to. If someone faced a problem and could not go to work, she told her group members before they left for work, so that they could either

excuse her to the *sardar* or in certain occasions cover up for her by plucking extra. Living in the same village made this cooperation easier as the women were then already aware of the problems that their group-mates were facing and thus, in a better position to function as a group. Locational proximity also meant that the women had pre-existing social interaction which could then be carried over to the work-site.

This acknowledgment of location as facilitating functioning of groups was also seen in Kaalka even at the management level. The workers' teams for a section were formed by women based in adjacent villages.

'There are two divisions one of the women of Gore-village and Thana-village and the other of the Gudam-village and Kamar-village. This helps the women also and helps us to organise them better for work as well'. (Manu, Kaalka, 23 May, 2011)

The *sardar's* opinion clearly recognises the importance of locational proximity. The first set of villages Gore-village and Thana-village are close to each other just as Gudam-village and Kamar-village are close. Forming the workers' teams based on the location naturally promotes locationally proximate group formation. In both the plantations the worker-groups reflected and encapsulated the characteristics of the labour villages where the workers lived.

The centrality that the women themselves gave to locational proximity became evident in cases where the women fought or manipulated to ensure that none from their village were left alone in another team. The following example of Ruma is one such case in point.

'Ruma (*Adivasi*, Hindu, early 20s, married) has joined work not too long ago. I ask them how she could start off working in the *foot* section at the first instance given that most workers are expected to first work in the *jungli* section and then come to this one. Kaki (*Adivasi*, Christian, late 30s, widow) says that there was no one from their village in the *jungli* section. Hence they

went and told the *sardar* to take her in the foot section. They told him it is necessary to train new workers to carry on after they retire. They would train her so that she can carry on the skill when they retire.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 15 September, 2011)

Foot-plucking was a more specialised and skilled form of plucking and usually done by workers only after having gained some expertise in plucking. *Jungli* was more unskilled and usually the workers had to first gain some experience in this before graduating onto the foot-plucking. This usually took three to four years. It was therefore expected that Ruma on joining work will work in the *jungli* section till she gains sufficient expertise to go to the foot section. But given that there were no one else from their village in Ruma's work section, it was difficult for her to access the advantages that locationally proximate work-groups offered. In order to ensure that she was not left to fend for herself, some of her village neighbours such as Kaki manipulated to bring her to their section. Here we can see the evidence of a pre-existing group relation which is then translated onto the worksite. The mental compatibility and friendship that the women spoke of as being necessary for forming the group membership necessitated a certain degree of commonality which could arise from being in the same neighbourhood where interactions outside work also occurs. That shared context was an important element in making work-groups functional.

'P: We are in the same village and we have to stay together. If friends are from far then it is difficult to say what will happen, getting their news is also difficult. Hence we move around with people from our own village…. We look after each other's convenience and inconvenience. When I have a problem I will tell the *sardar* and also my friends, my group-mates. If I need to take a holiday for illness, etc., they will look after me (my work). They will speak on my behalf.' (Poonam, Kaalka, *Adivasi*, Hindu, late 30s, 19 September. 2011)

In many cases, especially in Daahlia, caste or religious groups in the same area or within the same village had social intercourse and commonality which made it plausible for them to form groups

at work. This was also evident in sharing kinship ties. In these instances, locational proximity coincided with socio-cultural similarities to lead to the formation of the group. Looking at these socio-cultural categories even within this microcosm gives an understanding of the plantations as a social space.

Kinship

'From the time I started work I worked with my mother. We were in the same group and she taught me how to pluck.' (Kaalka, Aradhana, 16 September, 2011)

The workgroup members are often not just from the same village but share kinship ties. The workers from the same family, immediate or extended, if working in the same place often form a group.

'We are all related here, Binita (*Adivasi*, Hindu, late 40s) is my aunt-in-law. Again my niece is also a member of this group. But Binita's daughter is not a part of this group, she has her own group.' (Mamata, Daahlia, *Adivasi*, Hindu, late 30s, 17 January 2011)

While kinship ties were an important factor of group affiliation, it did not seem to be as consistent as locational identity which defined every group-identity. Though it was common for sisters-in-law or mother and daughter to be in the same group, there were instances where this did not happen. Women also formed groups with other women in spite of their family members being present in the same work space.

'Madeeha and her aunt were not in the same group. On asking Madeeha the reason for this she says, "Auntie had started working before me and had her own group. When I joined work I too formed my own group. We are both comfortable in our own groups."' (Daahlia, field-notes, 14 June, 2011)

Madeeha's aunt's group consisted of her friends from the village with whom she had started work. They were thus considerably older than Madeeha and her group-mates who were all relatively

young. The factor of age played out in different groups differently, while Aradhana became a part of her mother's group, Basanti's daughter and Madeeha both preferred to have their own groups overriding kinship affiliation.

While the divisions here were not due to animosity, there were occasions when the commonality in terms of location and/or kinship actually hindered the women from forming groups. Nilima is a middle aged woman-worker in Daahlia. A few years after her son was born her husband left her and married another woman with whom he now lives outside the plantation. Since this incident the location had become deterrent to Nilima's ability to form groups or even social relations with her neighbours. Most of the neighbours were in some form related to her husband and they had withdrawn from her. The commonality of ethnicity, religion and in many instances caste did not automatically mean that she could form relations with others sharing these traits. Even at work, there was a reproduction of the difficult kinship relations, which curtailed her ability to form automatic work-group affiliation. She had to go beyond these to forge new relations, emphasising different aspects of her identity.

'I: The friends you have, are they from your work, your neighbourhood or are there no such friends?
N: In the village? No, no one. At work I have some like Bina. In the neighbourhood also I have some like Nirupa, Ujjal's wife (Nepali, Hindu, married); they are my friends, sister. But not many from the village. They have all taken my husband's side and avoid contact with me' (Nilima, Daahlia, 12 April, 2011)

Thus the women could not always automatically access the aspects of their identity available to them and use it to their advantage to form networks and loyalties. Nilima had to go beyond her locational and kinship identities to forge new relations, where other aspects of her identity had to be fore-grounded. Within a set of constrained conditions she had to exercise her agency by rendering invisible some aspects of her identity. It is as a woman, a mother and a separated wife that she formed her networks, her work group similarly reflected this.

The intersection of identity at one plane might break certain traditionally conceived moulds of kinship relations.

'Basanti (*Adivasi*, Hindu, married, late-early 30s) is my niece. But once in the field we are like friends joking, teasing each other and chatting about everything. There is no conception that she is my relative or she is elder to me so certain jokes or conversation should be avoided. Within the group and at work everyone is like a friend, a group-mate to be joked with. The others agree to this saying the family relations are not replicated at work.' (Binita, Daahlia, 10 January, 2011)

Sometimes the hierarchy of elder and younger, the proper codes of behaviour within the family space are, if not broken, at least relaxed in the identity of co-workers. Women joke without inhibition with those who in another plane of relation would have called for a very different code of behaviour. Though sometimes the relations change in the domestic space but in most cases the camaraderie and informality persists and the household/kinship relations get altered in this mould. The kinship hierarchy, which would have been otherwise evident within the family, breaks in this shared identity of group-mates. Therefore often commonality of workgroup identity results into reframing kinship identities.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity is another significant element in work-group formation, Tea plantations have historically been characterised by feelings of distrust and suspicion among the *Adivasi* and the Nepali communities. The present political climate in Dooars with frequent clashes between the two ethnic parties, Adivasi Bikash Parishad (ABAVP-Association for the Development of the *Adivasi*s) and the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM-Platform for the independence of the Gorkha people) has further deepened this sense of distrust between the two communities.

In playing out of the ethnic identities both commonalities and boundaries were visible. In many cases (especially in Daahlia) this was not just about sharing a common ethnicity but also keeping out those who don't.

'Not all workers do their work properly. Otherwise the garden would not be in such a bad condition. There is differential attitude here towards us the *Adivasi*s and the Nepalis. While the former work hard, the latter gets away with everything. If they ask for half days or off, they easily get it. On the other hand when we make such requests we are turned down' (Medha, Kaalka, *Adivasi*, Married, Hindu, 24 June, 2011).

The account given by Medha, reiterates this centrality of ethnic boundaries in group affiliation. She does not identify the exploitative managerial class or even patriarchal structure as the cause of their disadvantaged position. Rather it is ethnic differences which form the core of her understanding. In her analysis, the *Adivasi* workers are disadvantaged in comparison to the Nepali workers as the latter get preferential treatment from the managerial staff. This perception of being discriminated against is not isolated but can be traced back to a history of suspicion and distrust. This has led to stereotypes for both the communities which are then invoked time and again to explain the boundaries. While the *Adivasi*s in both Kaalka and Daahlia accuse the Nepalis of being dishonest and violent, the Nepalis portray the *Adivasi*s as lazy and foolish. While the ways these boundaries are invoked are naturally different in the two plantations, it goes onto show ethnicity is a significant marker of commonalities as well as boundaries in the work-group formation.

In Daahlia the two communities had separate work-sections and labour-villages. In their daily life, whether at work or in the neighbourhood, there was hardly scope for regular interaction as the villages were usually quite far apart. There was not much scope of conversation, communion and inter-relation.

'It seemed like I was in two plantations within the same space, there were similarities but there was distinctiveness too... Each division had its own staff and workers. All of them were ethnically of a single community. The labour-villages too were similarly separate, though some located on two sides of the crossroad, accessed the same shops…It was an existence not so much of antagonism (though antagonism was often there) but of mutual exclusion.' (Daahlia, field-notes, 25.11.10)

In Kaalka, by contrast, there were no separate work divisions with both the Nepalis and the *Adivasi*s working together. The labour-villages where they lived also reflected this inter-mixing.

'Each group finds a shade to sit down and rest. Most of the groups had both Adivasi and Nepali members, eating, chatting and working together. Most of the women conversed in a mix of both languages... I remark that the Adivasis and the Nepalis here do not seem to stay separately. They say that there are no differences between the two communities. "We are all working in the same place, facing the same difficulties then why should we be divided? Here there are no such divisions we all stay, work, eat, and laugh together"'. (Kaalka, field-notes, 26-28 May, 2011)

This apparent lack of ethnic seclusion made these boundaries difficult to decipher. At a superficial level, the workers in Kaalka lived their lives on more inclusive terms. The mixed groups were a common feature irrespective of age, marital status, caste or religion. Within the groups there also seemed to be an acknowledgement of their common class position overriding all other divisions, an aspect which seemed to completely absent in Daahlia. This recognition, however, was not deep-seated.

As I became more familiar with the people and places I realised that under the apparent communion there were fissures. Unlike in Daahlia where the segregation was more everyday, in Kaalka the identities did not collide on an everyday level. It was usually at moments of interrogation or of crisis that the cracks were exposed. In effect the differences were really no less fundamental than that in Daahlia though the boundaries were set more subtly. The cracks in conviviality were evidenced mostly in instances of crossing over. It was at this point that one's ethnicity (and other relevant identities as will be seen in the later sections) was most critically interrogated.

'I ask Aradhana and Shiano that given the close proximity in which the Nepalis and Adivasis live whether there have been incidents of inter-community marriage. They say that there have been such incidents. But for this to be accepted in the society, the panchayat meets and the families have to pay a fine. Even after that, the bride or the groom from the other community

cannot take part in any of the *pujas* (worship). They remain in some sense still ostracised by the society. Aradhana gives examples from the work-section, pointing out to a couple of Adivasi women she tells me that they married outside their community (one to a Nepali and the other a Bengali). People tend to gossip about them.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 03 August, 2011)

In spite of an apparent negation of ethnic identities, at critical moments not only do these become relevant but fundamental in determining group relations and their acceptance within the space, functioning powerfully in deciding who does not belong. The ethnic identities become central not to those who subscribe to them but rather to the ones who try to cross-over.

Caste:

As there is no formal recognition of caste in the official records, it was difficult to get a definite figure for the caste groups. Thus I observed intersections along the lines of caste more as an overarching phenomenon rather than exploring how the specific relations between different caste-groups operate. Caste was more prominent among the Hindus but permeated to the Christian and Buddhist groups as well. Irrespective of religion, ethnicity or even age, caste remained subsumed under other identities in the everyday life of the workers and did not seem to play a pivotal role in their social interactions. At a superficial level different people within the same ethnic community had regular social interaction, visiting each other's houses, sharing food, making caste groupings seemingly marginal in the gardens.

But it represented a fairly consistent intersectional identity in specific moments asserting itself when people transcended boundaries or participated in festivals and other special occasions. Thus the caste identities did not serve as lines of segregation on a day-to-day basis. There were boundaries beyond which, however, these collaborations could not extend. Perceptions about inter-caste marriages expressed this.

'My father disowned me when I married outside my caste. So many years have passed but he still does not talk to me or look at me even. Even if I meet him on the road he ignores me. He

could not forgive me for marrying into a lower caste.' (Naila, Daahlia, Nepali, Hindu, married, 12 October, 2011)

Given the peculiar nature of plantation labour, the social and kinship relations in the domestic life often finds reflection in the work group affiliation. Naila started working after marriage. She became a part of a work-group sharing her marital caste-identity rather than trying to align with her friends from before. This did not mean that they had rejected her for marrying outside her caste. Rather it seemed easier for Naila to form a group with people who shared her present reality and identity. While caste commonality by itself does not seem to be a currency of work-group formation, transcending caste norms even in one's domestic sphere can become a significant boundary in work-group affiliation. While Naila did not face ostracism in the workplace for her marriage, the social realities surrounding her marriage prompted her to seek affiliation of those sharing her caste identity.

Religion

Much like caste, religious cleavages did not seem to govern the everyday interaction of the women. Both the plantations were heterogeneous in terms of religion. The table below gives a rough estimate of the different religious groups in the plantation.

Table 1: Religious division of the workers

Religion	Daahlia		Kaalka	
Hindu	Adivasi	70%	Adivasi	60%
	Nepali	65%	Nepali	60%
Buddhist	Adivasi	-	Adivasi	-
	Nepali	35%	Nepali	35%
Roman Catholic	Adivasi	30%	Adivasi	35%
	Nepali	-	Nepali	4%
Protestant	Adivasi	-	Adivasi	-
	Nepali	-	Nepali	1%
Muslim	Adivasi	-	Adivasi	5%
	Nepali	-	Nepali	-

Based on rough estimates from fieldwork data.

As can be seen from this table while there was presence of various religious groups, both the plantations were dominated by the Hindus. There were also a significant number of *Adivasi* Christians (Roman Catholics) and Nepali Buddhists. In Kaalka there was a presence of a very small number of *Adivasi* Muslims and Nepali Protestants.

On the level of daily functioning, there was not much antagonism between the different groups within the neighbourhood as well as workspace. It was the minority groups for whom the religious divisions were significant. Charges of favouritism and partiality towards other religious communities were quite common among the minority groups. The Muslim workers in Kaalka formed their own workgroup which was homogenous in terms of religion, ethnicity and also location (as all of them stayed in the same village) and mostly kept to themselves.

'We are given holiday during Independence Day, Republic Day, Christmas, Diwali, Holi and Durga puja. But the company does not give any holiday during the three Eids. For our festivals we have to take holiday from the company'. (Amina, Kaalka, *Adivasi*, Muslim, married, 25 May, 2011)

The Muslim workers formed such a small proportion of the total plantation workers that they often felt that their identity became subsumed within the bigger groups and was lost. The company recognised their specific festivals but these holidays were not plantation holidays but granted only to them, heightening their sense of isolation.

The Protestant Christian women in Kaalka, on the other hand, emphasised on their exclusivity and stressed on their religious superiority vis-a-vis the other religious groups. They did not form a homogenous work-group by themselves, but in their own groups there were instances of friction when issues of religion came to the foreground. Their emphasis on purity and criticism of 'dilution of faith' was present in their dealings with the women from the other communities.

'Shanti (Nepali, Hindu, widow) takes out the *prasad* (offering) gives it to both of them. However Anjudidi (Nepali, Protestant, married) refuses saying that she will not have *prasad* because she is Christian and does not take *prasad* from other religions. Surprised I tell her that other Christian women used to take *prasad*, she scoffs and says that there are two different sects of Christianity and in theirs it is not allowed to eat *prasad* from other religions... "While we remain strict to our religious codes the Roman Catholics do not have such strict adherence hence they accept *prasad* from other faiths, wear *sindoor* (vermillion), etc. None of these are allowed in Christianity and by doing things of this sort they are diluting their faith."' (Kalchini, fieldnotes, 23 April, 2011)

Their refusal to be involved in inter-religious exchanges seemed to be a part of their quest of being recognized as distinctive from their numerically dominant counterparts. This did not however extend to social relations where they showed the same interrelation that was evidenced between the other communities. It was only when their religious identities came to be summoned or interrogated as in the case of other minority groups that they drew exclusionary and sometimes even conflictual boundaries around them. Religious identities had different implications for different groups. For the majority of the Hindu, Buddhist and Roman Catholic workers, religion did not seem to form an important point of commonality as far as work-group formation was concerned. There were plenty of examples of mixed religious groups. It was, however, very prominent in case of the workers belonging to the minority religions in the plantations. For them religious commonality was often at the core of forming work-groups. But equally significant was the notion of the boundaries through which they felt excluded from what they perceived as mainstream socio-religious life of the plantation.

The work groups, thus, form a microcosm which captures some of the ways in which intersectional identities play out and affect the way the women form collectives. While commonalities of shared identities determine belonging to a group, sometimes clashes are evident between group members. Such differences

cannot be always mapped onto their intersectional identities but rather to a clash of self-interests. Self-interest, thus, becomes a powerful factor often even overriding commonalities of identities.

Self interest and (re)interrogating identity?

'Janaki (Adivasi, Hindu, married) asks her group mates to help her with her plucking as they were ahead of her, but they refuse telling her that there is quite a bit left of their task which they have to complete. She tells me if all of her friends lent her a hand by doing little bits of her task then she would have finished and could have joined them working together. But they are selfishly rushing to complete their own work...A sense of betrayal and anger was expressed by her. Her group mates' behaviour in her eyes subverted the accepted norms of group behaviour and the group code of conduct whereby each assist the other in completing their task.' (Daahlia, field-note, 10 April, 2011)

In this particular instance the group clashed with Janaki's individual interest and there were resultant tensions. Given the commonality of the group members on the basis of other indicators such as ethnicity, religion and even age, this was not a clash of identities. Rather it demonstrated how individuals' interests often collide in spite of commonalities of identities.

This also happens when the members of the group set different goals from work for that day. While some may intend to just pluck enough to meet the minimum amount they are set for the day, others within the group might be looking to pluck extra to earn *doubli* (overtime*).* These different goals make it difficult for the group members to work together and collaboratively. This again results in frictions within the group. Thus the shared identities on which the work-groups are formed do not preclude difference of opinion and clash of interest between the group mates.

Like any other social groupings, power hierarchies work within these groups too. These were expressed in varying forms in different groups.

'Mala (Adivasi, Hindu, divorced, hearing impaired) is soon sent off

by Anjana (Nepali, Christian, married) to get a packet of biscuits. Though the two of them spend a considerable time together and to some extent Anjana protects her, she also orders her about and takes advantage of her dependence... On several occasions Anjana ensured that Mala is a part of her group by including her in conversation and giving her a sense of belonging. In return she demands services from her such as fetching things for her, weighing the leaves in the middle of her lunch, etc. Doing these services for Anjana seems the price that Mala had to pay for membership into one such group.' (Kaalka, field-notes, 07 May, 2011)

Mala had hearing and speech impairment and hence might have found it difficult to become a full participant in a group. Anjana by translating what was being said into sign language and making sure that she got her share of assistance within the group took the role of her protector. This placed her in a superior bargaining position vis-à-vis Mala which she used to her advantage. In this case their difference in terms of ethnicity, religion, age or marital status did not seem to play a role in their friendship. It was, however, Mala's physical impairment as against the able bodied Anjana that defined their relationship and positionality within it. In a way the relationship seemed to work to both their advantage. While Mala was able to access the advantages of being in a group through Anjana's assistance, the latter could also sometimes get Mala to do her share of chores within the group. While Mala's dependence on Anjana resulted into a position of power for the latter, Mala also wrested some advantage from this situation.

DISCUSSION

Scott (1986) spoke of the necessity to introduce gender as an analytical category, feminism as a theoretical perspective, and male dominance as a major social institution to counter the neglect and misrepresentation of women's experiences. As we can see here, however, such categories of analysis are not sufficient. The multiple ways in which identities play out cannot be neatly categorised into gender and class as has been done in

much of plantation literature (e.g. Bhowmik, 1981; Graham, 1984; Bhadra , 1992; Kanaimpady, 2003 etc.). Identities, then, are often portrayed in a way that they become default masculine identities (Rao, 2005a: 728). Conversely, the women workers also often do not identify their gender identity as their primary identity vis-à-vis their ethnicity, caste, location etc. Cross-cutting identities of kinship relations, marital status, ethnicity, educational status lead women to oppose other women (and men) in making competing claims (Rao, 2005b: 356).

Understanding the women workers through the multiplicity of their identities thus is an attempt to negate the broad-brushed portrayal of plantation workers through their class and gender identity. Rather than just focussing on the category of gender and the idea of male dominance, it is multiple identities and the complex processes subsumed within which give specific shape to the women's sense of belonging and lived experience. Their position in the social hierarchy on the basis of their gender, caste, ethnicity etc., influenced conditions of their existence. This could be called a chain of subalternity whereby the women negotiated through multiple subordinate identities to frame the terms of their belonging.

The multiple entwined and constitutive identities of the women express themselves through their distinctive practices. The identities often formed a boundary of exclusion. But the recognition of the differences does not automatically come with hostility. Antagonism, however, is expressed and the boundaries become markers of inviolability when people cross over through inter-caste marriages, inter-religious relationships, etc. Though they had rejected the identities by crossing over, their transcendence make these identities central to the way society interacted with them. Some of this can be evidenced in the everyday operation of the work-groups as can be seen above.

The singular identity of women workers is framed by multiple other identities often clashing with each other. At times these identities overlap too e.g. location, kinship, caste and religion could all coincide in the formation of a group. While the work-

group demonstrates how belonging can be predicated on different identities at different points, it also illustrates how aspects of one's identity considered relatively minor, such as location might outweigh more fundamental aspects such as religion in determining the currencies of belonging and non-belonging. Interestingly the idea of friendship and mental compatibility comes up time and again in the women's explanation of their alliances. It is through the interplay of these identities that friendships are formed, loyalties are displayed and common interests are identified. They recognise the commonality of certain aspects of identities which forms a conducive site for development not only of shared identities or shared sense of belonging, but also of a relationship of sharing, of friendship.

Among the multiple identities that the women possess, what becomes primary and what secondary at a given circumstance is often determined by a calculation of self-interest. People have multiple identities and strategically prioritise one or more depending on the context. My fieldwork illustrates this was often guided by a calculation of self-interest. Calculation of common interest of the group members is a motive force in forging the groups. A clash in self-interest within the group causes fissures. This shows that self-interest often becomes the rallying point around which commonalities are defined and boundaries are set. The role of agency perpetuated through self-interest has been ignored in much of intersectionality literature. It, however, forms a powerful organising principle through which to understand the interplay of different identities.

CONCLUSION

The work group formation among the women workers is just one of the ways of demonstrating the interface between identity and belonging. The work-group forms a microcosm of the plantation society. It encapsulates within it multiple cross-cutting identities clashing and collaborating with each other. At the same time it also reflects power hierarchies and stratifications within and between these identities. The master categories of ethnicity, class, caste, though important are not the only identities which

define these groups. Sometimes micro-categories, as has been demonstrated earlier, combine with or even contradict a master category in defining the women's identity and belonging in particular moments and spaces. Finally what aspects of a composite identity come to be focussed on and what are underplayed can be read as expression of agency directed by self-interest.

While the concept of intersectionality is useful, it has the danger of breaking down identities to such a level that a singular identity becomes difficult to conceptualise. A worker is broken into its gender components, the woman worker is further broken along the categories of ethnicity, caste, religion, region and age. Even this can get disaggregated further to location, positionality and many other micro-categories. Therefore while understanding that the constituents of identity are important, the real usefulness of intersectionality lies in recognising how the multiple strands of identity frame these women as individuals and as groups and what these spell for the inter-relations between them. While a focus on understanding differences is useful, this has to be combined with a search for shared interest rather than shared identity (Cole 2008). Through this intersectionality can be a powerful tool to understand social interaction and the generation of groups and boundaries in a complex social space such as the tea plantations.

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