

Sexual Violence and Stigma associated with Tea- tribes Women

Miss Monika Gogoi

Faculty

Darrang College, Tezpur, Assam

gogoimonika46@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper seeks to understand the kind of sexual violence, related social stigma before and after sexual violence and its impact on the life of tea garden women worker of Assam by using the concept 'intersectionality'. Their identity as women, tea tribe and poverty are interrelated with each other. The kinds of sexual violence experience by women are different across class, caste, and ethnicity, place and so on. Sexual violence includes any sexual act targeting a person's sexuality or gender identity which may not only be physical but also mental, such as sexual harassment, stalking, voyeurism etc. On the other hand stigma is an attribute that conveys devalued stereotypes. Millions of stigma is associated with women, belonging to tea garden worker added it.

Key words:

Sexual violence, Stigma, Intersectionality, identity, tea tribe women

Introduction:

The history of tea tribes in Assam is associated with the discovery of tea plants by British in 1823. British first started tea cultivation in Assam and they importing large number of workers from various parts of India as indentured labor. The British brought them from Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. They are multi ethnic group of tea garden workers including many tribes notably Santhal, Kurukh and Munda and their descendants. They are brought to the tea plantations of Assam by the British planters in several phases from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century. Today tea tribes are mainly found in Darrang, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Nagaon, Golaghat, Karimganj, Cachar, Hailakandi, Tinsukia and other districts of Assam. The tea tribes also claimed themselves as 'Adivasi'. With time the migrated tea workers established themselves in Assam permanently and became parts of Assamese society. Tea tribes have their own folk culture but they are also assimilated with the wider Assamese society. Their Culture contributed a lot to Assamese culture. They celebrate different festivals; Karam puja, Tusu puja, Sahrai parab or Dewali or kali puja are notable.

From the past the socio- economic condition of the tea tribes are not very good. They were continuously exploited by the tea estate management. At the same time The Indian government gives less attention to them. Their literacy and health position is one of the lowest in Assam, particularly among women and girls. The Tea tribe's families are also patriarchal. Women have lower status in the private as well as public life. They are extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation and early marriages. Also some stigmas are associated with tea tribes in general as well as for women. On the other hand as belonging to tea tribe community who are considered as marginal in Assam their experience of sexual violence and stigma is different from other women. Also their economic status added on it. Therefore this study will seek to understand the kind of sexual violence and stigma associated with tea tribe women by using the concept of intersectionality.

Sexual violence is any unwanted sexual act, sexual comments or advances, or acts which is directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in

public as well as private setting. (Krug, Dhalberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002) So sexual violence includes any sexual act which is against a person's will may cover sexual violence by intimate partners or non partners, child abuses, sexual jokes or comments , sexual touch, rape etc. Unlike men women are more vulnerable to sexual violence. One of the main reason of sexual violence against women is social stigma associated with women. Social Stigma is an attitude or belief about a person or group of people that highlight difference between people who are considered as lower than the people who are considered as higher. It is a social and cultural experience. In a society there are 'normal' who are not affected by stigma and there also who suffer bodily, tribal or character stigma.

Sexual Violence and Stigma associated with women in general: Sexual violence against women is common in all society, but the rate is different from society to society. Because of the patriarchal mindset of people women are considered as object of pleasure. After marriage husband believes that he has absolute right over his wife, so he can engage with sexual act whenever he wants. This creates intimate partner sexual violence. In the workplace women experienced sexual violence very often. It may be from senior members or from colleagues. In their way to work, school and market and anywhere women experienced stalking, sexual comments etc, which makes them uncomfortable. In public transportation women and girls are often victim of sexual abuse. Sylvia Walby discusses violence as a form of power over women. The male patriarch used sexual violence as a weapon to continue patriarchy.(Walby, 1989). Rape is used by patriarchal men as a weapon to show their masculinity. In any war or riot women body is targeted. Women in India routinely experienced sexual violence and it became a part of their life. In every aspects of their life they experience the fear of sexual violence. Sexual violence against women is a result of unequal power distributions against men and women and it is also strongly influenced by cultural factors and values. Some negative attributes, attitudes, belief etc are related with women (Kalra & Bhugra, 2019).

In our society some stigma is associated with women. It's mainly associate with women's sexuality. Women's body is stigmatized as sexed body. Women's body is objectified by men as well as women. Because of their identity as women stigma is created by society and people internalized it. Stigma related with women's food, cloth, colour etc. The reason behind is the gender gap exist in society. In our society it is a stigma to discuss about sexual violence against women.

Sexual violence and Stigma associated with tea tribes women in Assam:

The women and girls from tea tribes are often uneducated and know little about their rights. Most of them work as daily wage labor under the supervision of men. In the family also women are considered as 'commodity' and their wives are often referred to as 'kept' by their husband. The overall socio- economic positions of tea tribe women are lower than men. In such condition they experienced sexual harassment in their workplace as well as in home.

Simanta Mazumdar in "Sexual Harassment of Women Tea Garden Workers: Case Study in Barpani Tea Estate, Assam" discussed about sexual harassment of tea garden workers in Workplace. He found four kind of sexual harassment experienced by tea garden women workers at workplace. These are-Non verbal forms of sexual harassment such as stalking, lewd comments, songs and repeated request for sexual favors, Physical forms of sexual harassment like unwanted physical touch, Quid Pro Quo means repeated requests for sexual favors, in lieu of better salaries and jobs and visual forms of sexual violence, where he mentioned that sometimes mobile phones are used to perpetuate sexual violence at work place. He gave one instance where the Assistant Manager of the tea estate send a boy to gave the victim a mobile phone and force her to speak to him at the phone. He also said that sometimes the harasser constantly stopped the women at her way to home or work. So tea tribe's women suffered a lot of sexual violence and it also led to stigmatization. He said "In Situations of Quid Pro Quo, they felt extremely pressurized and scared when these requests were being made. They feared loss of livelihood or being vilified by the harasser and his cronies for denying the request, leading to stigmatization and ostracization from the community."

The writer also mentioned about some situation in which the victim women reported to their husband about their sexual harassments and in most of the cases the husband beat their wives instead of supporting them. Also their community did not come out with any support regarding such issues. So it reflects the kind of stigma associated with women who are sexually violated. (Mazumdar, 2016)

This study focuses on three main cases of sexual violence against tea tribe women in Assam from three different districts. The first case is about Laxmi Orang. When she was 24 year old in 2007, she joined a rally for the right of Assam states ‘tea tribes’ to be included in a federal list of scheduled tribes. That was her first time in Guwahati, the capital of Assam. Three people suddenly surrounded her and stripped her naked, thrashed and paraded her in the daylight. The perpetrator belongs to so called mainstream Assamese. When the protesters marching back from where they had started, a local youth on his motorcycle injured a woman protester. The protesters’ asked the biker to take the girl to a hospital but he refused. Therefore angry protesters took over the road and smashed few cars parked in the roadside. As a react a mob of local youth gathered and reacted violently. Quickly they started beaten up everyone in the road who remotely resembled a ‘coolie’. At that time Laximi was brutally thrashed, kicked and striped. She was running on the road looking for help. But no one helped her instead local residents laughed at her. (Chetia & Hussain, 2013)

The economic condition of Laxmi’s family is also not good. After the incident she cannot went to work as people passed lewd comments against her. Earlier she seems to be a worker at tea garden and helped her family. But after the incident she said “I can’t go and work because people pass lewd comments and I feel as traumatized as I was when the mob attacked me. I am just confined to the four walls of my house and rarely venture out. The trauma will only end with my death.”(Bisht, 2012)

In 2013 another tea tribe girl from Bihubar tea estate in Sivasagar district was raped by five person when she was way back home from a Christmas programme in the evening at around 7 p.m. The victim claimed that she was forcefully dragged to a nearby paddy field by the five men by taking advantage of the darkness, they assaulted her sexually. Though she was threatened to not to complaint in the police, but she complained by getting confidence from a local women’s organization. (Tea- tribe girl raped in Jorhat,2013)

In August 2019 a 21 year old girl was recovered by garden workers at Barbaruah tea estate in Dibrugarh. Family members and local residents alleged that the girl was raped before she was murdered. The Assam Tea Tribes Students Association threatened to launch a mass agitation if the culprits are not arrested in 24 hours and said that the crimes against tea tribes have been rising. This girl work as domestic help and in that they she went to her work from her residence. Then she was found among the tea bushes, with a noose around the neck.(Woman’s body found in Barbaruah tea garden,2019)

These three incidents of sexual violence reflect the sexual violence experienced by tea tribe’s women. From the incident of Laxmi Orang we know about the kind of sexual violence and stigma associated with tea tribe women. She was molested by so called mainstream Assamese mob to show their hypocrisy. Also the local mob selectively beaten up protesters based on their identity. It reflects the stigma associated with tea tribes in the mind of Assamese people. The second and third incident described how tea tribe’s women are not safe in their own locality. We can say that the sexual violence is caused because of the stigma associated with women. In the second incident that girl was raped by the perpetrator to show their masculinity and dominating women. This is because of the stigma that women have no right to go outside after darkness. After the sexual violence the stigma experienced by women created many mental problems in them. Instead of supporting them society blame on their character. Society is still in support of men instead of women.

Intersectionality of identity and Sexual violence:

Intersectionality is an approach to analyze how social and cultural roles identities and categories intertwine to produce multiple axes of oppression. Identities are socially constructed and each identity has different socio cultural history. Based on it different attitudes, stigma etc are related with different identity. The concept of intersectionality was emerged from Black feminist. According to them experience of a black, poor, transgender women in different from that of the white, middle class straight women. The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by the feminist legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in her article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," in 1989. Black Feminist standpoint is all about expanding the boundaries of feminist theories where every ones voice can included. In this paper I used this concept of intersectionality to discuss how sexual violence and stigma is associated with tea tribe’s women because of their belongingness to certain identity as tea tribe, women, and poor.

Issues of women are inextricably associated with issues of power, social class, religion, caste etc. The Tea tribes are one of the exploited communities in Assam There social, economic, political status is lower than the mainstream Assamese society. Though they are assimilated to the broader Assamese society, they are still considered as ‘different’ from Assamese society. A woman belonging to tea tribe has to face greater problem than a mainstream Assamese rich woman. The so called Assamese people passing jokes on their physical appearance use sexual violence as form of dominance. Women are sexually assaulted or harm by the people not belonging to their groups to symbolically show their hypocrisy. Women are considered as pride of a community. So rape and other kind of sexual violence are used as tool by other communities to symbolically lower their status. All of these occur because of the stigma associated with the perpetuated community towards the victimized community. Tanika Sarkar(2003) in “Semiotics of Terror: Muslim Women and Children in Hindu Rashtra” said “Patriarchal order that designates the female body as the symbol of lineage and community purity, would designate the entire collectivity as impure and polluted, once their woman is raped by an outsider” . In the case of Laxmi Orang we saw the racism, sexism and power used by the so called “Assamese society” towards Tea tribe. As she is belonging to tea tribe community so her case did not get much attention in terms of its gravity. The reason is because she was not ‘Assamese enough’ in the mind of the people in power as well as she is from a poor family. As mentioned above when Laxmi run naked seeking help, the local people laugh at her. They get pleasure by seeing a tea tribe women running naked. They are internalized by the idea that a woman from marginalized group is destined to be sexually assaulted. It is their faith.

Conclusion:

Sexual violence against tea tribe women is ritualized in society. Because of their socio economic position they are always victim. This community is less powerful than other advanced communities. Because of their poor economic condition they could not fulfill their needs. To fulfill their needs they have to work by ignoring the sexual violence they experienced from their ‘boss’. They hesitate complain against them in fear of losing their livelihood. Because of their illiteracy they are not aware about their rights. Also they cannot maintain to go for court as it requires a long process which requires money. So their identity as tea tribe led to sexual violence. People have stigma towards Tea tribe women as wear colorful dress, accessories, easily available, black, alcoholic etc. Also after sexual violence the society blames the women’s character. The trauma of violence and stigma remained in their mind and created physical mental problem among them.

References:

1. Baksi, P. (2014). Sexual violence and its discontents. *Annual Review of Anthropology* .
2. Bisht, A. (2012, July 31). Retrieved from The weekendleader: <http://www.theweekendleader.com>

3. Chetia, M., & Hussain, B. (2013). *Remembering laxmi Orang: The Predicament of the Gender Question in Assam*. Retrieved from <http://nsi-delhi.blogspot.in>
4. Desai, M. (2016). Gendered violence and India's body politics. *Nwe Left Review*99 .
5. Elizabeth, A. A., Krut, M. G., & Johnson, L. (2018). Silence, Power, and Inequality:. *Annual Review of Sociology* , 99-122.
6. Goffman, e. (1990). *Stigma Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin Groups.
7. Kalra, G., & Bhugra, D. (2013). Sexual violence against women understanding cross cultura intersections. *indian J Psychiatry* , 244-249.
8. Mazumdar, S. (2016). *sexual harassment of women tea garden workers: Case study in Baroani tea estate , Assam*.
9. Misra, U. (2007). Adivasi Struggle in Assam. *Economic and Political Weekly* .
10. Robinson, R. (2005). *Tremors of violence: Muslim survivors of ethnic strife in western india*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd.
11. Sarmah, P. (2018). Tea Tribes of Assam: their migration& assimilation to Assamese Society. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* , 5 (4).
12. Sharma, I. (2018). Tea tribes of Assam: Identity politics and search for liberation. *Economic and Political Weekly* , 74-78.
13. Tea tribe girl raped in Jorhat(2013, January 6),Times of India. Retrieved from <http://m.timesofindia.com>
14. Walby, S. (1989). Theorizing Patriarchy. *Sociology* , 213-234.
15. Woman's body found in Barbaruah tea garden (2019, august 18), Telegraph India. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraphindia.com>