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History of tea industry and status of tea garden workers of Assam

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Abstract

The tea cultivation of Assam is a century old practice. It was first started by the British and has continued till date with full glory. In fact Assam alone produces more than half of India's total tea produce. Such is the glory of Assam Tea. However the people working in the Tea gardens live a life full of misery and sufferings. These tribal people have been exploited since the ancient times. No Industry can flourish if the engine that fuels its growth is not nourished. Likewise the Tea industry has seen a lot of ups and downs in recent times. Hence a study on Tea industry is essential. This paper explores the origin of Tea cultivation in Assam and the status of the tea garden workers. Finally suggestions are put forward for the upliftment of this downtrodden section of the society.

Keywords: Assam, tea garden, labourers, education, health

Introduction

The Indian Tea industry is one of the largest in the world with over 13000 gardens and a total workforce of over two million people. The Indian Tea industry earns a substantial foreign exchange and provide sizeable amount of revenue to the Government. The turnover of the Indian Tea Industry is Rs 9000 crore. India is an important exporter of tea accounting for around 12 to 13% of the global tea exports. In all aspects of tea production, consumption and export, India has emerged as the world leader because it accounts for 31% of the global production. During 2015, India exported 199.0 million kilograms of tea. The CIS countries are the largest importers of Indian tea. CIS countries share of Indian tea exports was 22.4% followed by the Iran (12.5%), the US (9.1%), the UK (8.8%), UAE (7.0%) and Germany (5.6%) respectively. India is the second largest tea producer in the world. India is also the world's largest consumer of black tea with the domestic market consuming 911 million kilograms of tea ^[1]. Assam is a state in northeastern India. Located south of the eastern Himalayas, Assam comprises the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley along with the Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao districts with an area of 78,438 km². Assam, along with Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya, is one of the Seven Sister States. Geographically, Assam and these states are connected to the rest of India via a 22 kilometers strip of land in West Bengal called the Siliguri Corridor or "Chicken's Neck". Assam shares an international border with Bhutan and Bangladesh ^[2]. As per 2011 census, total population of Assam was 31205576. Out of which the male population stands at 15939443 and the female population is 15266133 ^[3].

Tea cultivation in Assam is more than 160 years old. The Tea Industry of Assam plays a vital role in the State as well as in the national economy. The Tea industry of Assam also possesses a significant reputation in the global economy. Assam alone produces more than half of India's tea production. The total area under Tea Gardens in the State is 322 thousand Hectares. Assam alone produces more than half of India's total tea production. The estimated production of tea in Assam was 629.1 thousand tonnes in 2013. The tea industry in Assam also provided average daily employment to more than 6.86 lakh persons in the State, which is around 50 percent of the total average daily number of labour employed [on an average 11.1 lakh labour employed per day] in the country ^[4].

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¹ www.indianmirror.com/indian-industries/2016/tea-2016.html

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam

³ Statistical handbook Assam, 2013

⁴ Economic Survey, Assam, 2014-15

Realizing the tremendous potential of the tea industry, a study of the origin of tea industry as well as the status of the tea garden workers becomes essential.

Literature review

Saikia, S, *et al.* has found that only 27% of the total population of Sarusarai Tea garden is employed in the tea garden as permanent and casual labours. Majority of the workers engaged in manual jobs are unskilled female. They receive a minimal wage of Rs 90.50 irrespective of gender. The rate of school dropout is high due to poverty. Proper medical facilities are not available. The workers use firewood for cooking. They enjoy the Public Distribution System facilities from both the tea planters and the Government. Permanent labour of the garden receives PDS for the whole family but the casual labour receive for himself/herself only. They do not have proper sanitation and water supply facility.

Kurmi, P. (2014) in the study on Derby Tea Estate found that there are two lower primary schools and one middle English school managed by the Government of Assam. There is no higher secondary and college within the jurisdiction of the garden. The only high school (venture) is situated at a distance of 4.5 km from the tea estate managed by the local people with no trained teacher. The daily wage of a male labour is Rs 48 per day. The wages of the casual labour and child labour varies and depends on the wishes and good will of the management. Ration at subsidy rate are being provided to labour. The permanent labour gets either 3kg rice/wheat at subsidy rate. Lack of facility for education in and around the garden is a major factor for apathy. The willing but financially weak guardian cannot send their children outside for higher study. Ignorance and prejudices among the labour community is responsible for educational backwardness. Early marriage system and lack of mother tongue as a medium of instruction are other causes of backwardness.

Devi, P.,(2014) has concluded that majority of the women working in the tea garden of Sonitpur district are in the age group of 30 -40 years. Most of the women are illiterate and majority of those who are literate are engaged in activities of tea garden other than labour. 87% of women workers in tea garden have nuclear family while 13% belong to the joint family in the sample tea gardens. 63% respondents have pucca houses and 37% have kuccha type of housing facilities.

Borghain, P., (2013) found that more than half of the workers in Marangi tea estate are temporary workers. The permanent workers received a wage of Rs 57.14 and the temporary workers got Rs 54.86 as daily wage. The workers in the tea estates of Marangi and Hajua live in their own kuccha houses. The permanent employees live in Assam type quarters. The Marangi tea estate has a hospital inside the garden but Hajua tea estate has none. Drainage is poor and water pass out of the houses through drains cut in the ground in both tea estates. The workers face numerous hazards in the form of Physical hazards (heat, cold, rain, light), Mechanical (cuts and injuries), biological (insect bites, fungal infection), psychosocial (pay, recognition, status etc) and health problems (body pain, anemia, high blood pressure, respiratory diseases, cough, malaria etc.)

Sarma, G., (2013) has found that tea garden labourers enjoy most of the puja festivals. Even though their income is very much limited they still spend Rs 3000 on an average per

annum for various festivals. The general living conditions of the labourers are poor and unhygienic. They live inside huts and use open space for toilets. They use river water for drinking and spend money on liquor and intoxicants.

Medhi, G.K., (2007) found that poor nutrition among the tea garden adolescents may be attributed to various growth limiting factors. Tea garden adolescents have to take various household responsibilities since both the parents are engaged as manual workers in the industry which adversely affects their health and nutrition. Increased requirements of diet due to rapid growth during adolescence are not realized and the tribal adolescents consume diet much below the recommended level. Poor nutritional status of adolescents, especially girls have important implication in terms of physical work capacity and adverse reproductive outcomes.

Objective

- To study the origin of tea industry in Assam
- To study the condition of tea garden workers in Assam

Materials and Method

The present study is a theoretical work and is based on literature review only.

History of tea industry in Assam

The origin of tea bush has been widely argued upon by scholars. It is native to certain areas ranging from the interior of Southern China to the border of Assam. Assam tea is manufactured specifically from the plant *Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica* ^[5]. The tea plantation industry of Assam is over 160 years old. The tea bushes were abundantly available in the jungles of Upper Assam. The initial attempts to encourage tea cultivation in India were made by Governor General Warren Hastings in 1776 ^[6]. In 1821 Robert Bruce an Englishman discovered the tea plants from the Upper Assam jungles with the help of Beesa Gam a 'Singpho Chief'. In 1824 his younger brother Charles Alexander Bruce (C.A. Bruce) planted tea plants in front of his bungalow at Sadiya Upper Assam on an experimental basis for the first time. In 1828 imported tea seeds were germinated in Joypur and later on at Dinjoy (Chabua) in Upper Assam ^[7].

Bruce sent First sample of tea leaf to the first commissioner of Assam David Scott. This proved that the first tea cultivation on commercial basis was carried on 1835 at Chabua area in Upper Assam ^[8]. The collapse of the trade agreement between the British and China finally led to the introduction of tea cultivation in India. The British East India Company had the monopoly of tea trade with China, which was discontinued in 1833. Thus the company was forced to look for alternatives. Hence indigenous tea seeds were cultivated in Chabua. The Bengal Tea Association was formed in 1838 by some rich people of Bengal and some Europeans with a share capital of Rs.10 lakhs ^[9]. But they faced difficulties like shortage of labour, technical know-how, machines and tools as well as transportation problem. At the initial stages the tea planters had to face many problems, as the local people were greatly depopulated due to Burmese incursions perpetrated several times and the

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org>

⁶ shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>bitstream.pg-1

⁷ ibid pg-2

⁸ shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>bitstream. pg- 3.

⁹ ibid pg-3.

remaining people being agriculturists were unwilling to work in tea gardens. The rural economy was primarily agricultural economy. The labourers had to be brought from Chota Nagpur and other adjoining surplus provinces of British India. The tea planters had to appoint "sardars" who were made responsible for bringing labourers from other parts of the country by any means even they had to resort to false tactics and false promises also ^[10]. The labourers came to Assam with the intention of going back to their respective homes after their work in the tea gardens was over. But they had to settle here forever assimilated with the local people accepting the cultural economic social and political set up of the people of Assam. In 1836 Mr. Bruce dispatched a small quantity of samples of manufactured tea and Lord Auckland approved the first sample as good quality tea. In 1837, Mr. Bruce had dispatched another consignment of 46 chests of tea. But on transit through river waters and exposures, half of the tea were spoiled and as such, was rejected. Again another consignment of 350 pounds of tea in 8 chests was dispatched to London in 1838. The whole lot was sold at a very high price in an auction and was bought by Captain Pidding a rich merchant ^[11]. In 1839 Mr. Bruce had dispatched 95 chests of better quality tea in a better packed which was sold in auction. Again he had dispatched 130 chests of tea to Calcutta in 1841 of which 35 chests were produced by Singpho Chief Ningroola. The rest was produced in the Government held gardens under the Supervision of Mr. Bruce. The high ambitious Mr. C. A. Bruce started plantations in quick succession at Din joy, chota Tingri and Hukanpukhuri. Colonel White had deposed the Ahom King Purander Singha in 1839 and Assam came under direct British Government. In the same year, some merchants of Calcutta had formed the Bengal Tea Association and a Joint Stock Company was formed in London. These two companies got combined and formed the first Indian Tea Company called the Assam Company which happens to be the first Joint Stock Company in India. In subsequent years, Maijan Tea Company was formed. Lt. F. S. Hanny established the Maijan tea estate in 1851 near Dibrugarh. Production of tea was gradually increasing after 1838 ^[12].

During the 6th decade of the nineteenth century scores of new tea gardens were established by legendary Williamson Brothers. They acquired vast areas of land to be brought under tea plantations. They had applied indigenous methods of cultivation and planted indigenous tea bushes. They made a remarkable success. The Jorehaut Tea Company was formed and incorporated in 1859 ^[13]. This was the second tea company established in Assam. This company purchased Cinnamora, Oating and Kaliabor from Williamson Brothers and from Henry Burkinyoung the Numalgarh tea garden. In 1859, there were 51 tea gardens but during next few years unprecedented expansions took place ^[14].

In 1861 Lord Canning framed the Wasteland Rules for easy acquisition of land by the Britishers. The Wasteland Rules were made as liberal as possible to encourage tea plantations. The rates of revenue for Wastelands were kept below those of traditional cultivation in the region in order to facilitate large-scale acquisition of wastelands. Tea

companies, with or without land, sprang up overnight without taking into account the specificity of environment and the interplay of forces guiding the plantation economy. Companies were floated in London and Calcutta. The planters who were involved in tea cultivation during those days had no prior experience in the field. They were Army or Navy officers, Engineers, Steamer Captains, Policemen and the like. As a result, the industry could not achieve its targets. Many ill-founded enterprises were launched and mismanagement was common. The tea industry confronted an obvious setback during the latter part of the 1860s. The banks located in Assam viz Quomilla Modern Bank, Nath Bank, Imperial Bank, Guwahati Bank etc. were the main source of finance to the tea plantations from the middle of the nineteenth century on the security of "Fee Simple Title Deeds". But, suddenly tragedy followed the tea plantations in 1865 as a bolt from the blue and crack started quickly mainly speculative ventures. The mortgaged landed properties were transferred to the bank as those planters could not repay their loans in time ^[15]. Those who could prudently manage their gardens were survived but others could not survive. Having no other alternatives some gardens were closed, some discharged their workers and some others were compelled to live in temporary huts leaving aside their belongings. The crisis continued up to early part of 1870 and fortunately the crisis gradually disappeared from the early part of 1870 and the process of recovery started. By 1872 almost all tea gardens viz. Gotonga Cinnamora Rangajan Bokahola Chaikota Dhekiajuli Daphalating Sakala tenga Numaligarh Halmora Oating Balijan Negheriting Chaulkhowa Singirijan Panitola Moran Maijan Rongagara Borborooa Chabua Mohunbaree Tipuk Naharani and Halman to name only a few were re-opened. The tea companies now began to be very cautious in the recruitment of the management staff, kept a vigil on their estates and gave special attention to other shortcomings ^[16]

The Planter's Association was formed in 1859 for the purpose of recruitment of labourers from outside Assam. The Association depended upon the unscrupulous Calcutta contractors for recruitment of labourers. The contractors were using most unethical brutal means to acquire labourers to be sent to Assam.

The shrewd contractor's enticed poverty stricken tribals very frequently resorting to kidnapping threatened them by taking thumb prints on contracts at the time of drunkenness or intoxication. The recruits were sent to Assam by worst possible manner. The labourers had to live in very unhygienic environment, paid little, fed too less and the magnitude of human exploitation was beyond imaginations. The British people were successful in building up the Indian tea industry by applying their qualifications, knowledge, skill, experiences, ability and farsightedness. The land and labourers were two pre-requisites for the expansion of the tea plantation industry. The land was not a problem for them, as very little formalities had to abide by them. Within 1870 the British people were successful in consolidating the Indian tea industry by bull dozing all obstacles.

¹⁰ ibid pg-5.

¹¹ ibid pg-7.

¹² ibid pg-8.

¹³ shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>bitstream pg-8.

¹⁴ ibid. pg-9

¹⁵ ibid. pg-9

¹⁶ ibid.pg 10

Current status of Assam tea industry

The present status of the Assam tea industry can be understood clearly with the following table.

Table 1

Year	Tea Estates	Total Production (in '000 kg)	Area under tea cultivation (in hectares)
1999	30942	437324	258455
2000	39151	449219	266512
2001	40795	453936	268983
2007	65422	511885	321319
2008	760	487497	321437
2009	760	499997	321687
2010	760	480286	322222
2011	78856	589110	322210
2012	78856	590120	322210

Source: Tea Industry Handbook and Statistical handbook, Assam, 2013.

From the table it is seen that the number of tea estates have been steadily increasing with each passing year. In the years 2008, 2009 and 2010 the number of tea estates is only 760. This is the count of the number of small tea estates; the data for the number of big estates was not available for those years.

The total production has shown an increasing trend and the area under cultivation is also seen to be increasing over the years.

Condition of tea workers of Assam

The Tea Garden Workers of Assam are a mixture of both tribals and backward caste Hindus who were brought by the British colonial planters as labourers from the predominantly Tribal and backward castes dominated regions of present day Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Telangana and Chhattisgarh to Assam during 1860-90s in multiple phases for the purpose of being employed in the tea gardens industry as labourers. They are found mainly in the districts of Kokrajhar, Udalguri, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and almost all the districts of Assam. The total population of the community is estimated to be around 5.5-6.0 million or about 20 percent of total population of Assam. Santhali speakers are also found in parts of Kokrajhar, Baksa and Bongaigaon districts^[17]. The adivasis are among of the most marginalised communities in Assam today. They get a fixed wage of Rs 71.50, nearly half the government-fixed minimum wage of Rs 130. Sundays are considered unpaid holidays.

The Plantation Labour Act 1951(PLA), which regulates the wages of tea-garden workers, their duty hours and the amenities that the management is supposed to provide such as housing, drinking water, education, health care, child care facilities like crèche, accident cover and protective equipment, has not been implemented. Amenities, where provided, are of very poor quality^[18].

Except a handful who works in the tea processing, all workers are considered unskilled. They do not get dearness allowance, provident fund or gratuity. Arrears due after every wage agreement are seldom paid. In several gardens, wages have not been paid for 2-3 years; in many others, it is irregular. Since legal provisions pertaining to wages,

working hours and amenities apply only to permanent labourers, tea companies have been taking on more employees as "casual" labourers, sacking permanent workers for petty reasons. Needless to say, these "casual" labourers are paid far less.

About half the workforce comprises women, whose nimble fingers are considered better at plucking, pruning, Khulni (cutting dead wood), Thalli (weeding), etc. Women workers are paid "chukri hazira" (girl wages) which are less than the men, get no maternity benefits forcing many to continue to work during pregnancy and after giving birth. Since there are no crèches, the women often bring along their children into the fields where the latter help pluck, weed, hoe, and do nursery work. The labourers live in dilapidated houses in squalid "coolie lines". When they retire, they are turned out of the garden. Those who have saved some money, buy land nearby. However, these land holdings are too small to provide them with an adequate living. Those who do not have the money to buy land are pushed into absolute destitution. Lately, the recession has led many tea gardens to close down, rendering hundreds of workers, who are not efficient in any other trade, without any job.

Despite having lived Assam for more than a century, adivasis have not integrated into Assamese society. In many cases it was the tea-estate management's deliberate strategy to keep them isolated from local communities. Being a minority in the area, the adivasis wield little influence in the panchayats and frequently denied their entitlements under government schemes. Worryingly, cases of migration and trafficking of women have increased^[19].

The Government of Assam has taken numerous measures for the welfare of the tea garden labourers. In addition numerous nongovernmental organizations have also come forward for the upliftment of these depressed class of people. UNICEF, WHO are some of the organizations who have employed professionals to help the tea tribes live a decent live and teach them the importance of education, nutrition and a clean surrounding. They are also provided aids of various kinds by these organizations.

The Government of Assam continues to implement various welfare programmes for social and economic development of the weaker sections of the society. The salient features of some of the major activities in this area are given below.

Welfare of Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes

The Directorate for Welfare of Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes, Assam, established in the year, 1983 for the welfare of the Tea Tribes Community has been implementing various Schemes in the State as follows.

Family Oriented Income Generating Scheme (FOIGS)

The main objective of the scheme is to provide assistance in the form of Government Grants-in-aid to the Tea Tribes families living below the poverty line with a view to enable the families to enhance their annual income. Under this scheme a total of 7182 Nos. of Tea Tribes families have been assisted by utilizing an amount of Rs 281.00 lakh upto 31.3.2003.

Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarship

Under this scheme, economic assistance is provided to poor Tea Tribes students who are pursuing Pre-Matric and Post-

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea-tribes_of_Assam

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ <http://www.actionaid.org/india/what-we-do/assam/rights-tea-garden-workers-assam>

Matric Courses and encourage them to pursue their further studies. Under Pre-Matric scholarship altogether 1, 18,664 Nos. of students were awarded scholarship utilising Rs 237.86 lakh and under Post-Matric Scholarship 1,779 Nos. of students were awarded scholarship with an amount of Rs 15.85 lakh upto 31.3.2003.

Grants for Non-Government Educational Institutions

The objective of the scheme is to create educational environment amount Tea Tribes Students Educational Institutions by providing financial assistance to such Institutions for purchasing reaching instruments, books, furniture and major repairing as well as extension of the school building. An amount of Rs 40.45 lakh have been utilized for providing assistance to 670 Nos. of such Institutions upto 31.3.2003.

Grants for Cultural Activities including Education Tour

Under this scheme, financial assistance is provided to the Cultural Organisations of Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes for development of their cultural heritage, which includes purchase of musical instruments, holding of cultural functions and exchange of cultural troops etc. An amount of Rs 7.9 lakh have been utilized for providing assistance to 261 Organisations upto 31.3.2003.

Grants for Non-Government Organisation

The purpose of the Scheme is to assist the Non-Government Organisations such as Mahila Samiti, Association, Clubs, and Libraries of Tea Tribes Community, which are rendering services for all round development of the community. As amount of Rs 7.00 lakh has been spent for providing assistance to 2002 Nos. of Non-Government Organisations upto 31.3.2003.

Grants to Patients suffering from T. B. and other malignant diseases

Under the scheme financial assistance is provided to poor Tea Tribes Community people suffering from various malignant diseases like Cancer, Tuberculosis etc. for their treatments. An amount of Rs 1.80 lakh has been spent for providing assistance to 184 Nos. of patients' upto 31.3.2003.

Grants for Purchase of Text-Book and Uniform

Under the scheme, financial assistances is provided to poor Tea Tribes students for purchase of their School uniform. An amount of Rs 3.40 lakh has been utilized to provide uniform to 2510 Nos. of students' up to 31.3.2003.

Conclusion

Thus we see that the tea industry is expanding in terms of area under cultivation and output. However the most important people responsible for this growth of the tea industry i.e. the tea garden workers are the worst sufferers. They do not get proper wages, no medical facilities and no proper house to live in. Thus there is a high incidence of maternal mortality as well as infant mortality in the tea gardens of Assam. The Government of Assam has taken various measures to help this deprived tribe but the tea garden workers are yet to experience the fruits of development. Hence a very concentrated effort is essential to bring this backward section of the society into the mainstream.

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