



Socio-Cultural Life of the Tea Plantation Workers in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Tea plantation industry of Assam covers a large number of areas and occupies the top position in the arena of Indian economy. In 1833, Robert Bruce, a young British officer played a role in discovery of tea in Assam. Gradually, the European planter class opened many tea gardens in the entire part of Assam. As we know that the tea industry is a labour-oriented industry which requires a large number of workers. The British government brought a large number of adivasi ethnic groups to Assam for working in the tea gardens from different parts of India which had their own social and cultural characteristics. With the passage of time, the tea garden workers community had developed a new socio-cultural identity and contributed to the growth of a new composite society. These cultural features make them as a distinct community within a new environment.

Key words: Tea, Industry, Economy, Adivasi, Labour, Community.

Introduction

The Tea industry is an important research area in the academic discourse of Assam. The tea industry is an agro-based labour-intensive industry. Assam covers approximately 51 percent of the total land devoted to tea plantation in India.¹ Hence, Assam produces around 55 percent of the country's total production of tea, which is considered to be the backbone of the state's economy.² The tea industry plays a significant role in fulfilling the domestic consumption as well as an important source of export in India. Historically, the tea plantations are a product of colonialism. In fact, the expansion of tea plantation in the Brahmaputra and the Barak valleys opened the course of tremendous inflow of indentured workers who were mostly landless Adivasi peasants.³ In course of time, a large number of the tea plantation workers were brought to Assam for expansion of the tea industry during the colonial period. The imported tea workers had in course of time settled permanently in the tea gardens of Assam. They constitute a major segment of the present day society in Assam. Therefore, it is also noted that the labour based Tea industry is not only an economic sector, but also a component of the socio-cultural formation of a society. So, it is necessary to study the exact condition of their standard of living, settlement pattern,

culture and their socio-cultural adjustment and interaction with the Assamese society.

Review of Literature

There is hardly any specific work on my proposed paper, entitled “Socio-Cultural Life of the Tea Plantation Workers in Assam: A Study from Historical Perspective”. However, the life of the plantation workers of Assam has been studied by many scholars from different perspective. The most important and earliest work on the tea plantation workers is “*The History of Indian Tea Industry*” by Perceival Griffiths published in 1967 which contains important information on the development of Tea plantation economy in various parts of colonial India. It also deals with the workers problem faced by the industry in Assam and also the wage structure, condition of workers etc. during the colonial period. One of the pioneering works on the history of the Tea plantation workers in Assam is “*The Tea Labourers of North East India: An Anthro-Historical perspective*” (2009), edited by Sarthak Sengupta, contains twenty two research articles covering subjects like- migration of the workers in tea plantation sector in the North East India, their identity, ethnicity, socio-economic condition and their life and settlement there. Another book of similar, “*One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political, Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam*” (2014) by Rana P. Behal is a book on the history of tea plantations in Assam during the colonial period. Rana P. Behal examines the links between the colonial state and private British capital in fostering tea plantation in Assam for growing world market. This book also focuses on the tea labour mobilization and social relations within the plantation complexes in Assam. Rana P. Behal used the official statistical data to study the growth of the tea industry and labour employment in Assam. “*The Ex – Tea garden Labour Population in Assam*” (1984) by Umananda Phukon is the most significant work on the socio – cultural and economic life of the plantation workers in Assam. The study is perhaps only research works on the life of the ex-tea garden workers of Assam. Amalendu Guha’s book “*Planters Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*” (2006, first published in 1977) is a path-breaking work as regards the discussion to problem of plantation workers and non-plantation workers. Kangkan Deka’s Ph.D thesis, entitled “*Social History of the Adivasi Migrants in Assam*” (2010) deals with the socio-cultural life of the tea garden workers. This research examines that the tea workers society came across several set of changes during the colonial period and their life in the tea gardens greatly contributed to the growth of a composite Adivasi society. “*Chah Bagichar Banua*” by Nakul Chandra Bhuyan is one of the most significant Assamese works which depicts the socio-religious and cultural life of the tea plantation workers. This book is very useful for understanding labour relations and management in the tea plantations.

Thus, all the literary works deals with only a few aspects of the Tea communities in Assam. Therefore, an ample scope exists to study of this paper.

Objectives of the paper

The present paper has the following objective-

I. To highlight the various aspect of the socio-cultural life of the tea garden workers, e.g., occupation pattern, community life of the tea workers society in Assam.

II. To analyze the impact of the plantation life on various socio-cultural changes within the tea workers society.

III. To highlight interaction and adjustment of the tea garden workers with the larger local Assamese Society.

Research Question:

In order to analyze the objectives, the following research questions have been formulated for investigation during the course of this research:-

I. To what extend does 'change' reflect in the socio- cultural adjustment of the tea plantation workers in Assam?

II. What are the problems faced by the tea garden workers in the context of adjustment with new socio-cultural and demographic environment?

Methodology:

The present study is based on historical and analytical method. The data or facts have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included both the published and unpublished written documents in the archives. Secondary sources have been used to supplement the primary sources. They include various books and articles written by different scholars on the tea plantation workers, etc. Both participatory and non-participatory observation techniques have been used for this research.

Socio-cultural life of the Tea Garden Workers Society :

The tea garden workers came from diverse social, ethno-lingual, and economic background from various places of Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh. The process of immigration began during the colonial period and continued in post independence period. It is well known that plantation systems thrived on some specific structural components like immigrant labour, low wages, and extra-economic power invested on planters over the labour process etc. Plantations have strictly a managerial set up which exerted severe control over its labour force.⁴ However, with their introduction to the tea plantations sector of Assam, the tea community had some significant changes in the traditional role and socio-cultural patterns of their society.

Growth of a composite tea gardens society:

The tea gardens in Assam have been the areas where the immigrant tea worker population constitutes the majority. It may be noted that the tea plantation workers society is inherently heterogeneous. A new society emerged after complex interaction among the different ethnic communities. Various tribal and caste groups had formed the composite tea garden society of Assam. The main tribal groups who were brought to Assam from various place of India for working in the tea gardens are those of the Mundas, Santhals, Bhumij ,Bawri, Ghasi, Kols ,Sonars , Binjhia, Birjia, Birhor,

Chero, Chik Barik, Dhanwar, Gond, Gorait, Ho, Kandh, Kanwar, Karmali, Kharia, Kurmi, etc. They migrated to the tea plantation sector of Assam from Varanasi, Mirzapur, West Bengal and Bihar. Similarly, some Hindu caste groups who were also settled in the tea gardens of this region are constituted the composite tea workers population of Assam. They are belonged to Ahir, Arya Malla, Barhi, Barui, Kamar, Koiri,, Patra-Tanti, Rajbhar, Sadgop, Telli and Tanti etc.

Occupational life among the tea garden workers:

The tea plantation industry played a significant role in the evolution of social life in the tea plantation society. The most visible change in social life of the tea gardens society took place in their occupation. The process of migration and recruitment as plantation workers in the tea estate changed their occupation from the peasant economy to that of the industrial set up of the plantation labourers. The recruitment of the tribal groups in the tea plantation sector as workers led to ejection of their rural and agricultural character. It is due to the fact that their daily life was regulated by the everyday activities in the tea gardens which were totally opposite to their life in the places of origin. They were needed to adjust themselves with newly industrial set up environment. Now-a-days, their daily life has been regulated by the management of the tea garden. It is observed that a person can enter the residential areas of the Tea Garden only after the permission of factory and other officer. The workers are forced to confine themselves within the tea garden activities.

Community life among the tea garden workers:

Of course, Occupational life and modes of living has been regarded characteristic of the tea garden workers society. Most important point is that the tea industry had brought a remarkable change in their community life. In the colonial period, different tea garden communities were put together in the same plantation environment which provided little scope to maintain their social customs and community practices in the original forms within their own social category. It resulted in the separation of the family life from the larger community life. It is also found that the family life of the tea garden workers society has undergone a remarkable change. Traditionally, their economy demanded joint family. But with the Globalization and introduction in the industrial set up of the tea plantations sector, family structure in the tea garden society has changed into nuclear family. It may be noted that women in the tea garden society face fewer restrictions to their female counterpart outside the tea plantation due to their economic independence. It is also found that the children start to working in the tea gardens at an early age. It generally brings a change in the family life. Naturally, the decline in the extent of control of elders caused the penetration of new ideas and new ways of life.⁵

Moreover, most significant area of maintaining ethnic boundary is marriage system. The caste groups in the tea plantations society had seem to maintain rules of endogamy. They have socially recognized marriage system which basically prefers

endogamy. Unlike their traditional forms of marriage system, intercommunity marriages are also common in the tea garden society.

Development of some degenerating trends among the tea garden workers could be observed. Addiction of alcohol is a common habit in the tea gardens of Assam. Alcoholism as one of the shortcomings and as signing it as a reason for social backwardness of the labourers in the province. The Census Report of 1931 states, "...as a class , they are much addicted to liquor.⁶ It is also observed that both male and female are addicted to alcohol in the sample tea garden of this study.

Religious life of the tea garden society:

The religious life of the tea tribe's society has experienced a remarkable change in the course of their plantation environment. No doubt, they were successful in maintaining their own religion, custom and belief systems during the Colonial period. The Santhals, the Mundas and the Oraons and other ethnic groups had their own Gods and Goddess. The Supreme Being is termed as Thankur or Sn Banga, the giver of life, rain, crops and other necessities of life.⁷ But later on, the spread of Christianity among the tea tribes society in the tea gardens of Assam has been remarkable. A section of the tea garden workers was brought under the influence of Christianity by the missionaries prior to their migration to Assam. The coming of Christianity has changed the foundation of tribal life. Hence, the educational and other philanthropic activities of Christian missionary had undoubtedly been of immense benefit to their converts and had indirectly benefited the unconverted as well.⁸ However, most significant point is that not only Christianity has influenced upon the tea garden society but a few tea garden workers has belonged to Jullah Muslim. No doubt, throughout the post- colonial period, the tea workers society of India has witnessed a drastic change in their social life.

Language pattern of the tea garden society:

During the colonial period, the Tea plantation workers who were brought to Assam were comprised of different ethno-linguistic groups. They faced with a difficult situation with regard to preserving their linguistic identity. The social composition of the tea plantation workers was multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic in nature. From the official records, it is revealed that living together within the garden forced diverse ethnic-lingual groups to develop a composite language called as *Sadri or Sadhri* for inter-ethnic communication. In fact, this was possible through an admixture of all language. Sadri language is the admixture of Hindi, Bengali, Oriya and Bhojपुरi languages.⁹ There are various sub-dialects in *sadri* language. There are Madoni/Sadri/Khorta and Kurmali etc.¹⁰ However, the impact of the dominant regional language, like Assamese acts a powerful influence in the process of bilingual and multi-lingual in the tea garden society in Assam.

Festival and songs of the tea garden workers society:

Similarly, some festivals like Karam Puja, Sahari Parab etc. and art forms like Jhumur dance, Tushu Songs etc. are now identified as the cultural expressions of the whole tea garden workers society. These Hindu religious festivals permeated into the religious life of the tea garden workers through the process of acculturation. The folk songs like *Karam* songs, *Tushu* Songs etc and group dances like *Jhumur* dance which performed in the course of the celebrations gradually became common cultural tradition of the entire tea garden worker community.¹¹ The following Jhumur is still very popular in almost all the tea gardens:

Sardar bole kam kam

Babu bole dhari an

Saheb bole dibo pither cham

Re Jaduram

Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam.

(The Sardar asks for more work. The Babu abuses and the Sahib threaten to peel the skin of the back. Alas Jaduram, you sent me to Assam by deceiving me.)¹²

This form of folk tradition reflects the immigrant's painful experience of their recruitment and harsh lives on the tea plantation sector. Every year the tea garden management had to arrange dance performances of professional female dancers generally called *Baiji Nach* during the Durga puja and Kali puja festivals for the entertainment of the labourers.¹³ The Karam puja is also performed in the tea garden society.

Belief in witches and the practice of Witch-hunting:

It is already stated that the tea gardens society believed in the existence of various kind of spirits and evil practice. It may be noted that both sickness and disease are considered to be the evil effects of certain spirits or supernatural power. Also the tea garden workers society has a strong belief in the existence of witches that can bring on disease or other calamities to individuals, families or to the villagers as a whole. In fact, the belief in the existence of witches is an integral part of their religious and cultural tradition.¹⁴ Almost all the tea worker groups believe in the witches and witchcraft. According to their belief such witches exist in every village.¹⁵ The word *daini* used to refer to witches. Moreover, women members of tea worker societies are tortured or killed by co-tribesmen on suspicion of being witch. Sometimes, male member identified as witch by an *ojah* are tortured or killed by the co-villagers. However, such kind of witch hunting incidents took place amongst the tea garden workers of Assam. The witch hunting is a grave problem plaguing the tea tribes or *Adivasi* population in Assam and such incidents are steadily on the rise.¹⁶

Adjustment with the Assamese Society:

The process of interaction and adjustments with Assamese society had started as soon as the tea garden workers came out of the gardens and settled in the of outside the tea garden as ex-tea garden labour. But these societies maintained social

distance.¹⁷ The Assamese people have used the term “*bongali*” for understand the ex tea garden labour population. Another term which is now formally obsolete was commonly used to mean both tea garden and ex tea garden population. This was the word “*coolie*”. This word was now formally replaced by the Hindi word *mazdoor* and the Assamese word *bonua*. It is also found that in informal situation, these words are still being used even by educated Assamese people. In fact, there are superiority feelings in the Assamese society in general and inferiority feelings in the tea garden society. However, a separate culture of the tea garden worker society has been recognized. Moreover, they are influenced by native culture of their new environment. Their socio-cultural and religious identities make them as a distinct community which becomes inseparable part of the Assamese society.

Conclusion

The present research paper is revealed that the growth of the Tea industry opened up new area for the development of Indian economy. It may be noted that Assam plays a leading role in the production of tea. Similarly, the tea industry provides a good number of employments in the tea industry

The present paper is also revealed the process of socio-cultural changes among the tea workers in the tea plantation sector of Assam. They have to interact with a dominant cultural group in the process of their socio-cultural adjustment within a new environment situation. Moreover, the tea plantation workers have faced with the problem of assimilation and accumulation with the native people. In fact, the tea garden workers came from outside to Assam where they faced with a different situation with regard to preserving their identity. Their identity as a distinct community has received rude shock and new dimension. However, the tea garden workers have made serious attempt to assimilate with the native culture by identifying themselves with new socio-cultural environment of it's the surrounding areas.

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