

An Evaluation on the Socio-Cultural Life of Tea Plantation Workers in Assam With Respect to Its Historical Perspective

Bhabajyoti Saikia^{1*}, Homeswar Goswami²

^{1} Research Scholar, Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce & Management, Assam down town University.*

² Professor, Emeritus, Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce & Management, Assam down town University.

ABSTRACT:

Assam's tea plantation industry encompasses a wide range of activities and ranks first in the Indian economy. Robert Bruce, a young British officer, was instrumental in the discovery of tea in Assam in 1833. The British planter gradually established many tea gardens throughout Assam. Everyone knows the fact that, the tea industry is a labor-intensive industry and requires a hefty number of workers. Workers on tea estates are crucial to our civilization. They are an integral part of our society and cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is crucial to research the socio-economic situation in this specific area. The British government during their rule brought a large number of adivasi ethnic groups from various parts of India to Assam to work as workers in these tea gardens, each group having their own social and cultural characteristics. The tea garden workers' community had developed a new socio-cultural identity over time, contributing to the growth of a new composite society. These cultural characteristics distinguish them as a distinct community within a new environment. This paper attempts to investigate the importance of tea plantations and the people associated with them in the socio-cultural evolution of Assam. Both the primary and secondary sources of data have been obtained and used in this study such that a proper conclusion can be made.

KEYWORDS: *Assam, Tea Gardens, Socio-Cultural, Tea Industry, Plantation, Workers.*

INTRODUCTION:

The tea industry can be considered as an important field of research in Assam's modern academia. The tea industry is a labor-intensive agrarian industry. Assam covers approximately 51% of the total land devoted to tea plantation in India (Bezbaruah, 2001). As a result, Assam produces approximately 55% of the country's total tea production, which is regarded as the state's economic backbone.² In India, the tea industry is a major source of domestic consumption as well as an important source of export. Tea plantations were historically the result of colonialism. Indeed, the expansion of tea plantations in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys paved the way for a massive influx of indentured workers, the majority of whom were landless Adivasi peasants (Baruah, 1994).

Throughout the colonial period, a large number of tea plantation workers were brought to Assam to help expand the tea industry. Over time, the imported tea workers became permanent residents of Assam's tea gardens (Behal, 2014). They are a significant part of Assam's current society. As a result, it should be noted that the labor-based Tea industry is not only an economic sector, but also a component of a society's socio-cultural formation (Dutta, 2006). The exact state of their standard of living, settlement pattern, culture, sociocultural adjustment, and interaction with Assamese society must therefore be considered for research.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

While carrying out the literature review, it was found that no specific work related to this area have been carried out so far. However, the life of the plantation workers of Assam has been studied by many research scholars giving their opinions from various perspectives. The most important and earliest work on tea plantation workers is Perceival Griffiths' "The History of Indian Tea Industry," published in 1967, which contains important information on the development of the tea plantation economy in various parts of colonial India. It also addresses the workers' problems faced by the Assam industry, as well as the wage structure, working conditions, and so on during the colonial period.

"The Tea Labourers of North East India: An Anthro-Historical perspective" (2009), edited by Sarthak Sengupta, is one of the pioneering works on the history of the tea plantation workers in Assam. It contains twenty two research articles covering topics like the migration of the workers in the tea plantation sector in North East India, their identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic condition, and their life and settlement there. The history of tea plantations in Assam during the colonial era is covered in another book of a similar nature, "One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political, Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam" (Behal, 2014).

In order to support tea plantations in Assam for the expanding global market, Rana P. Behal investigates the connections between the colonial state and private British money. This book also focuses on the social interactions within the Assamese plantation complexes and the mobilization of the tea labor force. Behal examined the expansion of the tea business and labor employment in Assam using official statistical data. The most important study on the socio-cultural and

economic life of Assam tea plantation workers is "The Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam," by Umananda Phukon, published in 1984.

The study is possibly the sole investigation on the Assam tea garden workers' lives. In terms of the consideration of the issue of plantation workers and non-plantation workers, Amalendu Guha's book "Planters Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam" (2006, first published in 1977) is a ground-breaking study. The socio-cultural existence of the tea garden laborers is the subject of Kangkan Deka's doctoral dissertation, "Social History of the Adivasi Migrants in Assam" submitted in the year 2010.

This study looks at how the tea workers' way of life underwent a number of modifications during the colonial era, considerably influencing the development of a composite Adivasi civilization. One of the most important Assamese works that portrays the socio-religious and cultural life of the workers on tea plantations is "Chah Bagichar Banua" by Nakul Chandra Bhuyan. Understanding management and labour relations on tea plantations is made much easier by going through this book. Thus, a minimal amount relating to the tea community in Assam is discussed in most of the literary works. Therefore, a plenty of scope can be seen in this area of research and much of the study can be carried out easily.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The following objectives have been studied:

- i. To draw attention to the numerous facets of the socio-cultural existence of tea garden workers in their patterns of employment and communal existence in Assam.
- ii. To examine the effects of living on a plantation on numerous socio-cultural changes within the community of tea workers.
- iii. To emphasize on the engagement and adaptation of the tea garden employees with the greater Assamese community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The following research questions have been developed for analysis such that the objectives can be examined:

- i. To what extent does the socio-cultural changes has been reflected in the tea plantation workers of Assam?
- ii. What challenges do tea garden workers encounter as they get accustomed to the new socio-cultural and demographic environment?

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The historical and analytical methodology supports the current study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used to gather the information or facts. The written records in the archives, both published and unpublished, were among the primary sources. The primary sources have been supplemented by secondary sources. They contain a range of academic works on the

tea plantation laborers, such as books and journal articles. This study employed both non-participatory and participatory observation methods.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE IN THE SOCIETY OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS:

The laborers in the tea gardens came from a diverse range of social, linguistic, and economic backgrounds, and they were from different regions, including Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. Immigration started during the colonial era and continued after a country gained its independence. It is common knowledge that certain structural elements, such as immigrant labor, low salaries, and extra-economic power invested in planters over the labor process, allowed plantation systems to flourish. The management structure in place at plantations exerts strong control over the labor force.⁴The traditional roles and social patterns of the tea community, however, underwent some substantial alterations as a result of their entrance to Assam's tea farms.

DEVELOPMENT OF A MULTICULTURAL TEA GARDENS SOCIETY:

Assam's tea gardens have traditionally been dominated by an immigrant tea worker population. It should be noted that the tea plantation workers' society is inherently diverse. Following the complex interaction of the various ethnic communities, a new society has emerged. Assam's tea garden society was made up of various tribal and caste groups. The Mundas, Santhals, Bhumij, Bawri, Ghasi, Kols, Sonars, Binjhia, Birjia, Birhor, Chero, Chik Barik, Dhanwar, Gond, Gorait, Ho, Kandh, Kanwar, Karmali, Kharia, Kurmi, and other tribal groups were brought to Assam from various parts of India to work in the tea gardens. They moved to Assam's tea plantation sector from Varanasi, Mirzapur, West Bengal, and Bihar. Similarly, some Hindu caste groups who settled in this region's tea gardens comprise Assam's composite tea workers population. They are the property of Ahir, AryaMalla, Barhi, Barui, Kamar, Koiri, Patra-Tanti, Rajbhar, Sadgop, Telli, and Tanti, among others.

WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE TEA GARDENS:

The growth of social life in the tea plantation community was significantly influenced by the tea plantation industry. The change in their line of work was the most obvious in the tea gardens society's social life. Their employment in the peasant economy was shifted to that of the industrial set up of the plantation laborers through the process of migration and recruitment as plantation workers in the tea estate. The tribal communities' rural and agricultural characteristics were banished as a consequence of their recruitment as laborers in the tea plantation industry. The reason for this is that, in contrast to how they lived in their places of origin, their daily lives on the tea gardens were governed by routine activities. They had to become accustomed to the increasingly industrialized atmosphere. Today, the management of the tea garden controls their day-to-day activities. It has been noted that only with the approval of the factory and other

officers may a person visit the residential portions of the Tea Garden. The workers are compelled to stay inside the tea garden's operations and carry out only the activities assigned to them.

COMMUNITY LIFE AMONG WORKERS OF THE TEA GARDEN:

Occupational life and methods of livelihood have, of course, been regarded as attributes of the tea garden workers community. The most important point is that the tea industry has made a significant difference in their communal living. During the colonial period, different tea garden communities were clustered together on the same plantation, with little opportunity to preserve their social customs and community practices in their original forms within their own social category. As a matter of fact, the family life was separated from the larger community life. It has also been discovered that the family life of the tea garden workers society has changed dramatically. Whereas, their economy has historically insisted joint family. However, as a result of globalization and the introduction of industrialization in the tea plantations sector, the tea garden society's family structure has changed into a nuclear family. Due to their economic independence, women in the tea garden society face fewer restrictions than their female counterparts outside the tea plantation. It has also been discovered that children begin working in tea gardens at a young age. It typically results in a change in family life. Naturally, the decline in the extent of elders' control resulted in the penetration of new ideas and ways of life.

The marriage system is also a key component of maintaining ethnic boundaries. In the tea plantation society, the caste divisions appeared to uphold the endogamy laws. They have a socially accepted system of marriage that essentially encourages endogamy. In the tea garden society, intercommunity weddings are just as common as their conventional forms of marriage. It was possible to see certain deteriorating tendencies emerging among the workers in the tea gardens. In Assam's tea estates, alcohol addiction is a frequent habit. Alcoholism is listed as one of the problems and a contributing factor in the province's laborers' social backwardness.

RELIGIOUS PRACTISES IN THE TEA GARDEN COMMUNITY:

In the context of their plantation surroundings, the tea tribe's religious life has undergone a striking transformation. They undoubtedly succeeded in preserving their own religion, traditions, and belief systems during the Colonial era. Other ethnic groups, such the Santhals, Mundas, and Oraons, each had their own Gods and Goddesses. Thankur or SnBanga, the provider of life, rain, crops, and other requirements of life, are names for the Supreme Being. But over time, there has been a notable expansion of Christianity among Assamese tea garden society's tea tribes. Prior to their migration to Assam, the missionaries converted a portion of the tea garden workers to Christianity. The foundation of tribal life has transformed as a consequence of the arrival of Christianity. Therefore, Christian missionaries' charitable, educational, and other endeavours surely helped their converts much and indirectly helped the unconverted. The most important fact is that some tea garden workers are members of the Jullah Muslim faith, in addition to how much Christianity has influenced tea garden life. Without a question, the Indian tea workers'

population has seen a significant transformation in their social life during the course of the post-colonial period.

TEA GARDEN CULTURE'S LANGUAGE PATTERN:

Tea plantation workers brought to Assam during the colonial period came from various ethno-linguistic groups. They were in a difficult situation in terms of retaining their linguistic identity. The tea plantation workers' social composition was multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic in nature. According to official records, living together within the garden compelled diverse ethnic-lingual groups to develop a composite language known as Sadri or Sadrhi for inter-ethnic communication. This was made possible by the admixture of all languages. Sadri is a language that combines Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, and Bhojpuri. The sadri language has many sub-dialects. There include Madoni, Sadri, Khorta, Kurmali, and others. However, the Assamese language, which is the most widely spoken regional tongue, has a significant impact on Assamese society's bilingual and multilingual development.

FESTIVAL AND MUSICAL COMPOSITIONS OF THE CULTURE OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS:

Some festivals, such as Karam Puja and Sahari Parab, as well as art forms such as Jhumur dance and Tushu songs, are now acknowledged as cultural expressions of the entire tea garden workers community. Through the process of acculturation, these Hindu religious festivals permeated the religious lives of the tea garden workers. Folk songs such as Karam songs, Tushu songs, and group dances such as Jhumur dance performed during the celebrations gradually became a common cultural tradition of the entire tea garden worker community. This type of folk custom captures the tough lifestyles and traumatic experiences of immigrants working on tea plantations. Every year, the management of the tea garden was required to organise dance performances by professional female dancers, often referred to as Baiji Nach, for the labourers' amusement during the Durga puja and Kali puja festivals.

THE PRACTICE OF WITCH-HUNTING AND THE BELIEF IN WITCHES:

The tea gardens civilization held to the notion that numerous types of spirits and evil practices existed. It should be highlighted that both disease and sickness are viewed as the negative results of particular spirits or supernatural power. The community of tea garden workers also holds a firm conviction in the presence of witches who are capable of inflicting disease or other misfortunes on particular people, families, or the villagers as a whole. In actuality, their religious and cultural traditions are fundamentally based on the notion that witches exist. Nearly every group of tea workers believes in witches and witchcraft. Such witches, in their view, can be found in any village. Witches were previously referred to as daini. Furthermore, women members of tea worker societies are tortured or killed by co-tribal members on suspicion of witchcraft. Male members who have been identified as witches by an ojah are sometimes tortured or killed by their co-villagers. However, such witch-hunting incidents have occurred

among Assam's tea garden workers. Witch hunting is a serious problem afflicting Assam's tea tribes or Adivasi population, and such incidents are on the rise.

TEA GARDEN WORKERS ROLE IN THE ASSAMESE SOCIETY:

The journey of interaction and adaptation of tea garden workers with the Assamese society began when the tea garden workers started leaving their gardens and settled outside the tea gardens as ex-tea garden labor. Even so, a minimal amount of social distance has been always maintained in this societies.¹⁷

The Assamese society used the term "Bongali" to describe these tea garden labor workforce. Another term that is now formally defunct was the term "Coolie" used to address both the tea garden and ex-tea garden workers and was commonly and interchangeably used. However, this term was replaced with a Hindi word "Mazdoor" and also with an Assamese word "Bonua" and these two words were used formally since then. It has also been discovered that in case of informal context as well these two words were being used continuously in the Assamese society. However, the society of tea garden workers has been acknowledged as having its own distinctive culture. Furthermore, they got influenced by the local Assamese culture and started adapting themselves towards their new surroundings. Due to their distinct socio-cultural and religious identities, they have grown to become an integral component of the Assamese society.

CONCLUSION:

According to the current study, it is evident that the expansion of the tea sector allowed the Indian economy to expand in new directions. It should be emphasized that Assam is a major player in the tea industry. In a similar manner, the tea industry also supports in creation of a sizable amount of employment. The process of socio-cultural changes among the tea workers in Assam's tea plantation industry been discussed in this research study and it was found that in order to make a socio-cultural transition inside a new context, they must interact with a dominant cultural group. Furthermore, the tea plantation workers faced the challenges of integration and adaptation with the indigenous people. As a matter of fact, the tea garden workers came from other regions to Assam, where they faced a different situation in terms of safeguarding their identity. Their identity as a distinct community has been disturbed and given a fresh dimension. However, the tea garden workers have made a deliberate effort to integrate into the native culture by identifying with the new socio-cultural environment of the surrounding areas.

LIST OF REFERENCES:

1. Baruah, A., (1994), *"Sah Silpar Kotha Aru Asom"*, Hithouri Publication Pvt. Ltd, Jorhat.
2. Baruah, R., (2004), *"Seuji Pator Kahini"*, Bani Mandir, Nalbari.
3. Behal, R. P., (2014), *"One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political, Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam"*, Rai Publications, Kolkata, p. 245-277.

4. Bezbaruah, Sh. J., (2001), "*Asomor Chah Mazdur Samajar Sanskriti*", Bose Publication House, Kolkata.
5. Bora, K. L. (2018), "*Asomor Chah Janagosthir Samaj Aru Sanskriti*", Nandini Publication, Dibrugarh.
6. Bora, S., (1940), "*The American Baptist Missionaries amidst the Tea Garden Workers in the Brahmaputra Valley (1886-1936)* in Sarthak Sengupta (Ed.)", pp. 32-33.
7. Deka, K., (2010), "*Social History of Adivasi Migrants in Assam*", Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Gauhati University, p.11 – 16.
8. Dutta, J. M., (2006), "*Seuj Silpar Sandhanat*", Assam Chah Karmachari Sangha, Jorhat.
9. Goodwin, L. & Suri, S. Kr., (2011), "*Witch Hunting amongst the Adivasis or Tea – Tribes of Assam: A Case Study of Sivsagar District*", in Proceedings of NEIHA (Thirty Second Session, Tripura), p.431.
10. Goswami, Ch. T., (2004), "*Chah Janagusthir Jivan Charya*", Natun Sahitya Parishad, Guwahati.
11. Goswami, P., (2000), "*Language Change Among Tea Garden Labourers: Case Studies of Dikorai and Pertabghur Tea Gardens of Assam*", Unpublished M.Phil Dissertation, NEHU, p.35.
12. Kar, R. K., (2009), "*Anthropo-Historical Perspective of the Tea Labourers-With Special Reference to North East India, in Sarthak Sengupta (Ed.), The Tea Labourers of North East India*", Mittal Publication, New Delhi.
13. Phukan, U., (1976), "*Socio-Economic Problems of the Ex-Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam*", Ph.D Thesis, Gauhati University, p. 265-281.
14. Rai, M. S., (2011), "*Adivasi Bhasa O Sanskriti: Prasnga Nadia Jela*", Mandira Publication House, Guwahati. pp. 225 – 241.
15. Vidyarthi, L. P. & Rai, B. K., (2014), "*Tribal Culture of India*", Jharna Publication, Guwahti, pp. 240-265.