

Tea Garden Community of Assam A Study of their Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

Tea garden community of Assam itself is a heterogeneous group consisting of diverse castes, groups who spoke different dialects, practiced different customs & professed different religions. They were originally brought to the state in the middle of the 19th century. But while working together in tea garden for many generation they emerged as a homogenous group which came to be known as tea garden community despite of having their lingo-cultural & religious differences. The present paper which is titled as "Tea Garden Community of Assam a study of their Past, Present and Future" is an attempt to analyse the process of migration of tea garden workers & assimilation with that of Assamese society. It also deals with the present socio-economic condition and future of tea garden community. The paper also dealt with the relative state of their backwardness and also makes a study on political mobilization of tea garden community which makes a considerable degree of influence on contemporary politics of the State.

Keywords : Tea garden community, Relative backwardness, Political mobilization.

Introduction :

Tea industry is one of the India's oldest and most organished sector, which has been an integral part of the economic development of the country. The tea produced in India is among the finest in the world because of its geographical factor, heavy investment in tea processing units, continuous innovations and supported by strategic market expansion. India's leading states in respect of tea industry in India are Assam & West Bengal. But basically it is the Assam which

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is world famous for its production of finest tea. Tea plantation in Assam dates back to the colonial history. The tea industry has become a part of Assam's way of life with major contribution in the socio-economic sphere of the state. It is the sacrifice, hard toil of the workers of the tea community at large which gives shapes to the present day tea industry of India and gives recognition to India to be the proud processor of tea in the world. So, in this backdrop, it is envisaged that an in-depth study need to be made on the past, present and future of the tea community of Assam. Because the most important change in the socio-economic history of Assam was the foundation of the tea plantation industry in Assam. Therefore it creates a necessity to study the origin & background of tea community of Assam which becomes itself as class in Assam and also to study the present condition of this community including their future which is based on present condition of the community.

Therefore major objective of the paper are-

1. To study the process of migration and exclusionary treatment meted towards the tea garden community during colonial and post colonial India.
2. To study the socio economic condition of tea garden community in post Independence India.
3. To study the political mobilization of tea garden community through trade union and student origination

Methodology :

Historico analytical method has been adopted to prepare the present paper. Data for the paper have been collected from the secondary sources which includes books, research studies, journals.

Discussion :

The tea plantation in Assam is dates back to the colonial period. Though tea plants grew widely in the hills and forest of Assam since the time immemorial and people belonging to Singpho tribe had been making use of a tea since long. But the formally the history of tea industry is associated with the discovery of indigenious tea bushes in the Mishirni hills of upper Assam of the Brahmaputra

valley by Robert Bruce in 1823 (Saharia, 2005). The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and it can traced back to 1837 A.D. as the first experimental tea estates in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua (Cha-tea, bua - to grow) in Dibrugarh district in upper Assam. But latter on first tea company, namely the Assam tea company started production of tea on a commercial basic in Assam and it is followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. Tea cultivation in Barak valley of Assam (Cachar district) was started in 1855-1856. Now tea in not only the most important cash crop and a major source of revenue and employment, but is also the most important industry of Assam.

The unique feature of the tea industry is the employment of huge labour force in all sphere of work in the tea estates and it is true about 20 lakhs of people of Assam are estimated to be directly or indirectly dependent on the tea industry presently. As the tea industry is labour intensive and it requires to be planted manually which need to be supported with large scale of labours. It required to planters to hire huge amount of labour force for which the locals were in adequate & unsuitable. This phenomena led to the import of labourers from other state of colonial India and the labourers were recruited from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages from other provinces. Different groups were recruited from different places, e.g. the Mundan & gonds from Bihar, Santals, Tantis & Bhumij from Bengal & Bihar, Oraons from Bihar & Orissa, Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh & Uttar Pradesh and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005). The tale of the workers who were recruited in the tea plantation of Assam were the tale of torture, exploitation, inhuman treatment, deprivation till India attained freedom in 1947. Condition of recruitment were inhuman during the period of two years from 15th December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam company brought 2,272 recruits from outside of whom 11 percent died on the way (Guha, 1977). Poor & deprived of people of other parts of colonial India become the easy victim of forced labourers who were migrated to the tea plantation in Assam. It is all a history of colonial exploitation of India by British imperialism. These migrated labourers were subjected to slave condition when they settled in the North East tea garden mostly situated far away from their native places. The culturally and economically uprooted labourers were the easy victim for exploitation. Guha

(1977) condemns the management worker relationship as the worst form of serfdom found in the tea garden of Assam.

In order to maintain the stability & immobility of the imported labourers, the colonial planters imposed various draconian contracts on the labourers which become one of the prime symbol of plantation and houses were constructed for the settlement of the contract labourers with one element of 'unfreedom' to this community. In order to exclude the migrated plantation labourers with the mainstream population, the colonial planters induced the segmentary policy i.e 'protective policy'. This isolationist policy speaks of the long history of economic and cultural explanation of these migrant tea garden workers. But even after independence what they have earned as a reward to their sincerity and hard work in the last more than 150 years is an imposed derogatory 'trade-stigma' names like tea tribe, coolis, Bongali, Bagania & so on (Derengel et.al, 2009). Process of migration and assimilation go together in human history. But in case of history of tea garden community though they were forced migrated to plantation industry in Assam & other part of North East tea garden estates, but the process of assimilation with the main stream society is not satisfactory. These heterogeneous migrant labour groups have been exposed to a different but common type of economy, administration and society (Kar, 2005). They began to cultivate a common socio-cultural life as members of a single tea labours community and has developed a common language which is known as 'Sadani' (linjua franca) or Bagania bhasa some of them has also accepted different practices of Hindu Religion. Even some of them began to follow Mahapurukhia dharma of Assamese society. But there is also exists an stratification not only between different groups, but also sometime within the same group on the basis of their religion, food habits & other antecedents. These, tea & ex-tea labourers in Assam who share many things in common appear to maintain dual identities. But when it come to the social interaction with the local Assamese communities, it appears to be very limited nature. Though there are some interaction which took place on economic & political aspects. As mentioned in R.N.Kar in one of his article 'Ethnicity in Assam' has referred to the host of thinkers who maintain that they live as members of a single community subscribing to a common socio-cultural life (Kar, 2001). Tea garden community

have accepted the Assamese culture & get associated with the greater Assamese society. But from the part of mainstream Assamese society tea garden community is always considered to be of inferior in terms of socially, economically & culturally. Once remarked by the census commissioner of Assam of 1931 census had observed that, "In Assam a collie is always a collie, whatever he works on a garden whether he has left the garden & settled down as an ordinary agriculturalist, his social position is nil." This observation on the social status of tea garden community has not changed yet even after many years of independence.

As the tea garden community come from various ethnic heritages of different states began to constitute a significant segment of the present population of Assam and gradually they came to know as tea garden community as a whole. But the isolationist policy of Britishers was perpetuated by the local people of Assam which led to very minimum cultural assimilation with main stream Assamese society. As a result in the post independent Assam, the tea garden communities though share the common composite culture, at many times overtly & covertly asserted for their independent ethnic identity by trying to enlist themselves in the scheduled tribe list.

The suffering, deprivation & exploitation of tea garden community does not end with the end up of colonial period. Because even after half a century of independence, the great majority of the working population in tea industry are living in a plightable condition. When it comes to draw a picture of socio economic condition of tea garden community it includes the various aspects of their life like education, health, economic condition which describes a different picture. At present they are seems to be most back word, downtrodden & poorest of the poor community including other backward tribals of Assam. They are not only socially & economically backward but also mostly illiterate & vulnerable to all kinds of diseases. According to one estimate in the plantation of Assam out of total 845 tea garden there 34,000 children studying in 666 tea estate school, while there 89,598 child labourers employed during the year 1994 (Kar, 2005). Education in the back bone for a community but in case of children of tea garden community are either deprived of basic education or engaged themselves in plucking of tea leaves in tea garden even at a tender age. When it comes to scenario of health

because of the unhygienic condition & also due to be poverty and malnutrition they suffer from a number of diseases. Another factor which makes their life deplorable in the low wage earning which hardly able to meet the basic needs of a family. Various acts were enacted over the years for the welfare of tea garden works after independence of India. The plantation labour Act, 1991 provides for the welfare of the labour engaged in tea plantation & regulate the condition of work. In spite of that no satisfactory result has come out in improving socio economic condition of tea garden workers. With the age old suffering of tea garden community, economic and educational backwardness, political deprivation and most importantly emergence of educated elite gradually led to the development of a wave of socio-political conscious among the tea community of Assam. From colonial serfdom to electoral battle a long way for the tea community in Assam. Though during the freedom struggle of India wave of political consciousness among them was seen. But it could not bring them any change. A political mobilisation of tea garden community germinates in the formation of & role played by the organization like Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) a strong trade union of tea garden community and role played by the Assam Tea Tribe Students Association (ATTSA).

In the post independence period, for the political parties the votes of tea garden community become very important. There are about 35 assembly constituencies itself in the Brahmaputra Valley where tea community played a vital role in election. Most of the leaders who contested and even won election from tea garden community used the platform of ACMS and ATTSA. But despite these it is a matter of concern that the upliftment of tea garden community took the back seat for the political leaders who used the community as vote bank for shaping their political career. But even though the role of ACMS & ATTSA in generating political consciousness among tea garden community cannot be denied. Since the beginning of the sixties of the last century, being influenced by the movements carried out by the diverse ethnic groups of the state, the ATTSA also gradually began to perceive the need of certain constitutional safeguards to protect, what they called, their legitimate interests (Thapa, 2001). As a part of their strategy for safeguarding their legitimate interest the ATTSA started to identify the tea

(labour) community with a novel nomenclature i.e; tea tribes' & ex-tea tribes (Thapa, 2001). Therefore ATTSA has raised its demand to include tea garden community into the scheduled tribe list. They justify that their ancestors were recognized as the & + in the original lands for which they also deserved to be recognized constitutionally as scheduled/ tribe. In addition to the demand for recognition of the tea garden community as scheduled tribe, All Adivasi Students Association of Assam (AASAA) made appearance with demand to give new identity to tea garden community as 'Adivasi'. Again AASAA have raised a demand for the creation of a separate state viz 'Adivasi land' on the plea that the ethnic identity of the Adivasis could well be protected only in 'Adivasi land' not in Assam (Thapa, 2001). Therefore as a matter of fact tea community of Assam have gradually emerged as a conscious political force in the state on the basis of their identity and numerical strength for the cause of their all round development.

Findings :

From the above discussion of three basic objectives of the paper the major findings that can be derived is that as tea industry of Assam is dates back to colonial period. During the first half of the 19th century, the planters faced acute problem of labourers to start industry Therefore the process of recruiting labours from the poverty ridden areas of colonial India has started which results into large scale migration of labourers from different backgrounds started living in Assam. But it was pitiable to state that the tea workers who were recruited and brought to the plantation were in humanly treated. They like slaves for the Britishers. Ironically the tea workers who were brought to Assam somewhat forcefully living their native places and are contributed to the economy in the state but today a socially degraded lot living in a most miserable condition. Due to the isolationist policy of Britishers for the tea garden community makes a considerable distance in the process of assimilation with that of mainstream Assamese society. Though they constitutes a sizeable group of population but for mainstream Assamese society they are Collie, baganias or bongali and they are not considered to be the integral part of Assamese society even after independence of India. The overall position of the people in their regard in by and large the same even in twenty

first century which is clearly reflected in the analysis of second objective of the paper. Even though they are neglected socio economically but ironically tea garden community is considered to be crucial determinant of politics of Assam. The third objective of the paper which is mentioned as the political mobilization of tea garden community has clearly spelt out the gradual rising of political consciousness among them. Here the four basic factors namely emergence of educated elite, educational backwardness, economic exploitation and political deprivation has resulted into growth of socio political consciousness among the tea garden community. Active role played by ACMS, ATTSA, AASA for political mobilisation of tea garden community of Assam is highly considered to be important. Their various demands for upliftment of socio-economic status and along with the inclusion of scheduled tribe list is need to be considered seriously. Therefore analysis of third objective mentioned above shows the process of political mobilization of tea garden community and emerged as politically cohesive community which is dealt in the paper.

Conclusion :

The proceeding discussion serves as indication and proofs of innumerable problems of exploitation and injustice right from the period of labour migration from the different parts of colonial India to plantation field of Assam. The inhuman treatment meted out to tea garden community has made them to develop as poverty ridden, backward group of people who consider their culture, language and tradition as inferior to others. The past history as well as the present socio-economic condition makes them more backward. Politically they do not have any influential representation although their votes are crucial determinant or deciding factor for the political parties. It is because of the lack of capable leaders and political consciousness tea garden community is lagging far behind the other communities of Assam. Even though trade unions and student organization are exist as a platform to raise their various socio-economic & political demands but they are also not free from the cudgels of political parties & its politics. Within the limitation of the present discourse, it may be concluded that the in view of the relative backwardness of tea garden community is socio-economic, political

spheres, it should be considered to give special attention to improve the life of tea garden community. Further the unity and identity of Assamese culture should be viewed with conglomeration of all ethnic group resides in Assam including the tea garden community & consider them as the integral part of the Assamese society.

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