A Historical Review of Tea Plantation

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Abstract: The first discovery of the tea plant growing wild in India (upper Assam) in 1821. In 1835 the first tea garden was opened at Lakhimpur district in Assam. In 1838 the first twelve chests of tea from Assam were received in England. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the historical growth of tea industries in India. Observing great progress and interest in tea cultivation, the British government had to frame definite rules for the grant of land for tea cultivation. Since 1869 the tea industry has continued to prosper steadily. An attempt has also been made to analyze the measures taken by the British government in this regard. The study is based on secondary data and sources of material collected from different official and individual publication. The most encouraging development of the tea sector of the state is the participation of unemployed youths as small tea grower and thereby helping to increase the tea production in the state. The tea industry is also playing a vital role in the economic development of the state. It has become one of the most important foreign exchange earning industries in the country. However the tea industry of Assam, which is considered as main stay of the state’s economy, is now facing crisis. As the tea gardens in Assam are becoming age old, the productivity of these old gardens is declining. The conditions of tea estates in the state are not as productive as in the past. A considerable number of tea gardens of the State have gone sick over the period due to lack of infrastructure, modernisation and efficient management. Another serious problem faced by the tea industry in Assam is the general fall in the price of medium and plain tea. For some time there were no buyers of such tea. In the prevailing general climate of globalisation and dismantling of tariff barriers, Assam tea has been facing open competition. The sustainability of tea gardens thus depends on different factors like improvement in quality, cost effectiveness, control of diseases and pest attacks, increase in domestic demand, identification of newer export market etc.

Keywords: Tea gardens, Market, Globalization, Employment, Gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

The state of Assam was brought under the British dominion in 1828. The tea industry played a vital role in the economy of the state. Assam tea was not restricted in the state alone; it was exported to other parts of India and outside of it. Many got their livelihood through tea though initially they suffered much. Tea was discovered in Assam along with the grant of land, which was then found abundantly. Capital was invested by the European planters. With these land and capital, labour came as ‘coolies’ from northern, eastern and southern part of India. This made the state of Assam economically rich. The present state of Assam is comprised of three physical divisions, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the Hill range. The Brahmaputra Valley, which forms northern part, is the largest in size comprising 71.7 percent of total geographical area of the state. On the other hand the Barak Valley region, which forms the southern part, is comparatively smaller in size.1

Significance of the Study

The paper throws light on the chronological growth of tea cultivation in the state. The paper also highlights the measures adopted by the British government. The progress made and the crises faced by the tea industries have also been analyzed in the paper.

Pre Colonial Period

Pre colonial Assam had a feudal economy. The peasantry had no private property as there were plenty of land available with a sparse population, there was always a tendency of the Assam peasantry to shift their cultivation sites. The mode of business was barter because money was not in vogue. The people were self sufficient and agriculture was the main occupation. Though the kingdom of Kamrupa (ancient Assam) has international trade practice, Ahom government did not encourage much trade practices with the outside world and foreigners were frowned upon. The revenue collection of the Ahom administration was based upon khel system. The entire male population except of the artisans, fisherman, gold washers and other non agricultural professions was divided into khel or clans numbering 1000-1500 men in cash. The system was based on personal service and an article of produced rather than monetary taxes. The khels were subdivided into different gots or units. Each got consisted of three or four pikes or individuals. The pikes were the lowest units of khel system. But with annexation of Assam and the introduction of British revenue rules and regulation of land rights


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to the peasants slowly disintegrated the khel system and the British established the cash or money system of payment.

The Wasteland Grand Rules, 1838 was formed to attract foreign capitalists. The Assam Company, the first Indian Tea Company was flouted in 1839 in London and was granted about 33665 acres under Wasteland Grant Rules. Later it was modified to suit the British and the European tea planters and they slowly became the biggest land owners in Assam by paying least revenue per acre land. Many tea planters encroached land belonging to the Assamese people. The ownership of Assam’s lands right was transferred from Ahom king to the British. By 1901, about one fourth of the total settles area of Assam Proper, i.e. about 62184 acres came under the tea gardens. Though the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation of 1868 were introduced in Assam with their intention of regularizing the land rights to Assam peasantry who practiced shifting cultivation, the British became the absolute land owner. The pre colonial system of cultivating anywhere was stopped. The Assamese learnt about the value of long term land leases when vast tracts of land which were allotted to tea cultivation 2.

Though Assam was annexed in 18926 and wild tea plants were discovered in 1823 by Robert Bruce. Chinese tea was to be imported to England by the East India Company and was a monopoly trade. The Charter of 1833 stripped the monopoly business of the East India Company but allowed Europeans to hold land on a long term lease outside the Presidency town which opened the colonial plantation economy in Assam. When Assam tea was auctioned in London in 1839 it created the Assam Tea Mania. Since 1840’s, the next few decades witnessed a global investment in far off remote Assam in the tea sector which gradually destroyed the Ahom’s feudal institutions and economy and led to the growth of capitalist economy. The British introduced the monetized economy in Assam. The tea industry identified Assam with the commercial map of the world. The huge capital investment did help to the growth of modern capitalist economy in Assam by the turn of 19th century.

The growth of the tea industry necessarily led to the growth of communication and infrastructure network. The opening of the frontier land and the global investment led to an economic boom in Assam. European tea planters flocked in Assam in 1860’s. The transition of the pre colonial feudal economy to a modern capitalist’s economy was too fast for the Assamese people to adjust to new system. The tea planters made huge profit because the land tax was very nominal for them and the tea labors were poorly paid. The economic transformation of Assam witnessed the demographic shift in a big way encouraged by the colonial masters. Assam’s present economy is simply a continuation of British colonial period. 3

II. PROGRESS IN TEA PLANTATION IN ASSAM

Tea is India’s oldest industry in the organized manufacturing sector. It has continued to maintained its position as the single largest position employer in this sector. India is the largest producer of the tea in the world, producing around 790 kg annually (Tea Board 2004). India is also the world’s largest consumer of tea. It is a labour intensive industry. Tea drinking was widely practiced in China in the 6th century. In 793 AD the drinking of tea became so popular that it spread to Japan quickly. Choudhury’s study (2010) describes that the British wanted to explore the tea cultivation in their colonies as it was too expensive for them to procure tea from China by exchanging gold coins.

The tea industry in India began with the founding of the Assam Company in 1839, although the potential for growing tea was discussed earlier, in 1824 by Major Robert Bruce when he came across indigenous tea bushes in Assam (ITA 1933 cited in Bhowmik 1981). Since then, the industry has seen continuous expansion and consolidation during the colonial period. In Chabua, about 25kms east of Dibrugarh in 1837, the first English tea garden was established. The East India Company had a monopoly over the tea trade until 1840 when the Assam Tea Company began the commercial production of tea in the region, run by indentured servitude of the local inhabitants. Beginning in 1850s, the tea industry rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracks of land for tea plantations. 4

Assam is generally separated in two regions i.e. Assam Valley and Cachar. Among the districts of Assam, Dibrugarh district with the large area under tea has maintained the highest rate of increase of area under tea with 44.65 percent. The small tea growers in Assam are now an economic force for the state. According to the ‘Survey Report and Data Bank on Small Tea Growers’ published by the state Industry Department recently, Assam has 68,465 small tea gardens. These small tea growers accounts for about 25 percent of the state’s total tea production. According to the Tea Board of India, there are more than 4300 small tea growers in Assam producing about 9 percent of the state’s total annual production 5.

Tea industry was doing well in the beginning of the 20th century and was recognized as one of the major manufacturing industry in Assam with an enormous potential. In India, tea production, certification, exportation, and all other facets of the tea are controlled by Tea Board of India. The scientific name for the tea

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3 Ibid

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plant is Camellia sinesis. The Assam variety is known as Assamica. In 1838, the first Indian tea from Assam was sent to the United Kingdom for public sale. This discovery ended China’s position as the world’s pre-eminent supplier of the beverage. Assam tea industry is India’s largest tea industry and second largest tea production region in the world after China.

The tea productivity growth rate of Assam was higher than the national growth rate. It has been observed that although the production of tea depends on the area under tea, it is also affected by factors like old tea bushes, heavy cost of production, unskilled workers, financial constraints, etc. Assam tea is not officially recognized as a brand or variety of tea by the government due to the bureaucratic red tape, depriving the beverage of an exclusive label. As such this industry suffers from an identity crisis in the world market in the absence of the official recognition as a unique variety. India’s largest tea research centre managed by the Tea Research Association is located in Jorhat. This centre which was started in 1911 at Tocklai (Jorhat) has made significant contributions towards Tea Attributes. Some of the major tea estates in Assam are tea estate of TATA Group of Companies, Williamson Tea Estates, etc.

Assam is the single largest tea growing region in the world. It is blessed with a high potential for development of resources and demand based industries and produces more than 50 percent of the tea produced in India and about one sixth of the tea produced in the world. The low altitude, rich loamy soil conditions, ample rainfall and a unique climate help it to produce some of the finest Orthodox leaf teas. It is these unique environmental conditions that give the teas their special quality, reputation and the character and helps orthodox Assam tea to qualify as a Geographical Indication. The Assam Orthodox teas are defined as ‘teas grown and manufactured out of the basic Camellia Sinenses var. Assamica and other variants in tea estates located in Brahmaputra or Assam Valley in North East India.

Bio Tea in Assam

Presently, the demand for organic tea in the international market is around 3 million per kg year and growth rate is 10 percent per annum. However, the demand for organic tea is likely to be increased incredibly as preference of people shifting from conventional tea to organic tea. Singhpo people have been playing a key role in the tea industry in Assam and perhaps they are the first one to have been introduced the concept of organic tea in the tea segment of the state. The technique used by the Singhpo people has inspired more and more youths towards organic tea in Assam and other adjoining North eastern States. Recently Singhpo community has developed ‘Tea Coin’ with the brand name as ‘Phalap’.

Problems of the Small Tea Growers

1. **Unorganized growth**-Green leaf production from the small tea growers is not able to harmonize with the requirements of tea market. Moreover, the entire production process of green leaf is not properly channelized to tea processing amenities. It was observed in many cases, for tea cultivation, incongruous land is used affecting the quality as well as productivity of tea.

2. **Land Patta and title**-Most of the small tea growers do not have land patta and they are deprived of being registered with Tea Board. As a result, they could not avail the benefit of plantation subsidy scheme and bank loan. Although, there is a provision for issuing provisional registration to the small tea growers with annual patta, normal land, etc. based on certificate holding for tea plantation.

3. **Technical backup**-There is a wide technological gap between trained and untrained small tea growers. Small tea growers may be imparted training in certain areas like drainage, manuring, weed/post control, pruning, etc.

4. **Ecological Imbalance**-The growth of small tea plantation has reported a large scale ecological problem by way of clearing village wood lots. The commercial forestry (bamboo plantation, etc.) has vanished and crops like orange, pineapple and sugarcane have been replaced by tea.

5. **Climate Change**- is bound to have major impact on the tea industry in Assam. Rising temperature, flood, drought and minimum temperature are the factors reducing yields and alternating the unique essence of the most popular drink. The changing taste of Assam tea is a serious concern for tea growers and the changes will sharply slow down the demand for this variety of tea board.

**III. MIGRATION OF LABOURERS IN THE TEA PLANTATION IN ASSAM**

In Assam, the British planters wanted to engage Assamese speaking, non tribal people in the expansion, but they were not willing to work in tea cultivation. Only tribal people belonging to the Bodo and

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Sonowal Kacharis tribes were available as plantation workers. First the workers of Chinese origin were brought to Assam from Kolkata and gradually recruited thousands of laborers from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and newly formed Chota Nagpur and Jharkhand were gradually recruited. They were lured to migrate as they were poor and illiterate. Baruah (2008) states that in the agrarian region of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, famine, drought and flood and epidemics coupled with excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless laborers by the big landlords and zamindars were common. These factors led to the migration of huge bulk of population to Assam in search of livelihood. Apart from these ‘push factors’, certain ‘pull factors’ like false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land available for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam.

**Issues of Gender Discrimination**

Sexual division of labour is highly prevalent in the tea plantation system. Scott and Marshall (2009) define sexual division of labour as a term referring to the specialized gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife. Again within Marxist feminism, domestic labour is sometimes referred to as ‘reproductive labour’. Such division of labour is considered and important basis for inequality between sexes, entailing some degree of exploitation of women by men.

According to Samarsinghe (1993), in China, history narrates that women who were involved in plucking tea, their hands and fingernails were carefully scrutinized to ensure cleanliness. Body oils, perspiration and heat were believed to contaminate the quality of leaf. Notions of purity, contamination and feminine virtue were associated with brewing of tea.

According to Choudhary (2010), when migrant workers in thousand reached Assam, the local workers along with the tea workers of Chinese origin were surprised to see that women would also be working for the first time in the plantations. Managers have a satisfactory look since these would be used like slaves and would be paid much less than the Chinese counterparts. They would be submissive and could not threaten to stop work, like the Chinese and local workers were used to do.

The women and children were the worst sufferers. Varma (2005) shows that Assam Tea Gardens was not a new avenue for the employment of women’s labour and women constituted almost half the workforce. The work in plantation had very neatly spelt out gender specific domains where the crucial labor intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be ‘quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers’. The preference for ‘families’ in gardens of Assam was most clearly premised on the payment of what was called as the ‘family wage’ ensuring not just a body of cheap reproducing workforce but also effecting controls over the labour and sexuality of the large number of women coolie under the patriarchal structures of the family.

The subordination of the women workers are found in almost all the sectors of work, according to Chatterjee (2001). The patron system is understood to be extremely patriarchal in nature as the planter-manager-sahib symbolizes the father figure. The women’s work i.e. tea plucking is usually underpaid. The plantation system dwells in the underlying belief of subordination of women workers.  

**IV. WOMEN, WORK and EMPLOYMENT in TEA PLANTATION**

Women’s work has been traditionally divided into the area of production (both economic and social) and reproduction from time immemorial. With the intensity of specialization, women’s work became more segregated and sexual division of labour became a dominant agenda. Their participation in the economy and contribution to the household income became more evident. Such participation has however added more to their burden of work with less increase in wages recognition especially in the organized sector.

Women’s labor is central to the economies of production; more so in case of production of plantation commodity such as tea. Quite plausibly, planters saw women adapting well to the plantations’ most tedious and prolonged labour of tea picking (Chatterjee 2003). Thus one of the important features of tea industry in India is proportionately higher level of female employment in cultivation and production. Engagement of women’s labour is higher in tea plantation because of their gendered attributes to the task of picking tea leaves in particular and for maintaining a steady social reproduction of labour.

The decline or work participation rate of women in tea plantations across states is evident from the gender disaggregated data (2000-2008) across the tea producing states in India. As all the India level show, similarly from the larger tea producing state i.e. Assam there has been a significant drop by 18.65 percent of women in employment from 2000 to 2008.

Ramifications of the crisis period witnessed by international competitiveness, un-renumerative prices, closures and abandonments of tea estates appear to have hit employment of women. Work Participation Rate (WPR) per se has substantially declined for women workers in the tea plantation sector. Sumitha (2012) argues

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that the plantation sector which generated large number of jobs especially for women has presently become economically and socially unviable due to eroding international competitiveness. Also the concern is whether supplementary jobs available for tea plantation workers take care of their livelihood concerns since employment days available in tea plantation is relatively less. Such changes multiply vulnerabilities along factors of age and gender.

Studies such as Rasaily (1998) have noted that the increasing pressure of earning in order to run the hearth is vested with the female member of household. So much so, that this burden of earning gets exacerbated where in daughter-in-laws become the soft target to enter into employment through the system of replacement. It has been observed that during pregnancy and post natal period, women continue to engage in hard jobs. Most allegations of child labour in the tea industry involve the function of plucking, weeding, hoeing and nursery work.9

The Reverse Migration

The transportation of the workers to these estates, covering sometimes a distance of 800 kms without any road or rail link was a hazardous task. The long journey mostly caused sickness and high mortality. After reaching the tea estates, the migrant laborers mobility was restricted within the vicinity of the tea garden and factory alone and was completely isolated from the outside world. They were consciously made dependent on the basic facilities provided in the estate. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurance of good pay and better facilities that was used to procure their blood and sweat in order to earn massive profit from tea production. There was and still exists excessive exploitation of workers by the owners of the estates.

Welfare schemes provided by the management of the tea estate should ideally housing, subsidized rates of ration and tea, Provident Fund, medical benefits, firewood, bonus, blankets, umbrellas for the workers as per Plantation Labour Act, 1951. A casual (temporary) worker does not get any of the other benefits except the ration at the nominal rate. They stay in a permanents workers house who might be a relative or a member of the family. In reality, one third of the tea estates in Assam fail to provide the workers with even the basics necessities like life saving drugs. Education lags behind in the labor settlements as the management is unable to provide with schools for the workers children. Hence there is illiteracy and ignorance among workers and their future generations are also likely to remain in the same dungeous and darkness. Field study conducted in selected tea estates from Dibrugarh, Sonitpur, Jorhat districts shows that a meager amount of Rs. 71.50 daily wage also limits their chance to uplift themselves from rampant poverty. In times of crisis, bosses would not be bothered o low pay if bad health hits workers due to low pay as long as there are others to take their place.10

Important measures taken by Union Government

The incident of the death in Bhuvon Valley tea estate reveals the tip of the iceberg of prevailing abject poverty and malnutrition among the tea workers of Barak Valley vis-à-vis Assam. The whole gamut of this industry is in doldrums due to the attitude of the planters to extract super profit through extraneous means and depriving the workers and the skewed vision of the Government policy makers as well as the laxity of administrative inspection regime. An all out effort need to be organized to ensure smooth functioning of the industry as well as to establish the rights of the workers to build a wide struggle with a future vision of just society. This workers being the largest section of total workforce in Assam, will decide the fate of the working class and democratic movement in Assam.

New Dimension in Union Movement

The Asom Mojuri Srameek Union, an outfit of unorganized, rural, tea and other industrial workers, and affiliated to New Trade Union Initiative, added a new dimension to the tea workers union movement. On the one hand this Union is supporting the identity and linguistic rights of the tea community, struggling for the implementation of NREGA and facilities of PRI and pressurizing the Government authority to discharge their responsibility in case of closure of the garden and to take against the defaulting planters in making their due payment of PF, wage, bonus etc and the Union, on the other hand, is striving hard to build the workers movement for enhancement of wage, for minimum wage and for their implementation of the provision of Plantation Labor Act 1951, (with new amendment). The first cluster of issues will give the workers the necessary space for mobility to enable them to assert working class rights. That’s why, the planters, the established union bosses and the lower bureaucracy dipped in corruption are averse to NREGA –implementation in tea gardens. Not only the casual workers, the family of the permanent workers are also entitled to get jobs by which the family members other than the permanent workers can demand NREGA work. Though the tea gardens areas have been brought under the jurisdiction of PRI (Panchayati raj Institution), the tea garden owners call the shot through NOC (Non Objection Certificate) system which enable the garden owners to control the PRI schemes as well as the selection of beneficiaries.11

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11 http://swabhimanngo.blogspot.in/2012/02/tea-industry-in-barak-valley-vis-vis.html

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Limitation of the Study
The major data available is secondary data.

Direction for Future Research
The focus for the research should be to bring reform improvement in the working conditions of informal sector. The reach for SHG should to be easily available. The policies implemented should be enacted in goal reaching objectives.

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The funding for this publication is self funded and single authored.

V. REFERENCES