

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF HISTORY AND PEOPLE OF TEA GARDEN WORKERS IN ASSAM

1.1 Introduction

The hot sip of tea which brings freshness to our mind has a long story behind. The Tea garden worker undergoes uphill battle on a daily basis to produce such stimulant beverage. As per the Tea Board of India¹ report, 89 percent of the people have tea taking habit daily, 8 percent of people prefer tea as refreshment and 3 percent people rely on tea for overcoming hunger. According to the report of Tea board of India on the domestic consumption of tea published in 2007, over 80% of the total population likes to have tea at least once a day. Further a large chunk of population in eastern part of this country considers tea as any time drink of the day. Generally, there are two known Legends about Tea. **Indian Legend:** Once upon a time, there was a Buddhist monk; he cut off his eyelids because he used to get disturbed, because of his sleep during meditations. It is said that ten tea plants grew out from his eyelids. Therefore, when the tea leaves were added into the warm water and drunk, it minimizes our sleep. **Chinese Legend:** There was a Chinese emperor who had a habit of drinking boiled water. He used to boil water on firewood. One day while he was boiling water coincidentally some leaves fell into the boiling water. He appreciated the delicious taste of the tea leaves. This is how tea was discovered in China.²

¹ Tea Board of India takes care of all the Tea industry in India. It works under Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

² NCERT, Textbook in English for Class X, First Flight, Chapter 7(Glimpses of India), part III, Tea from Assam, Arup Kumar Deka.pp-94-98

1.2 Background of the Tea Workers

About 3,000 years ago tea drinking trend was originated in China. The word 'Tea' derived from the Chinese Fukien dialect 't'e' (Baruah, 2008). The history of tea plantation in India is enthralling. In 1840 the production of Assam tea started for consumption by British Market. Till then, China was the lone provider of tea to British (Behal, 2014). In 1823 the wild tea plants were discovered growing in Assam. Since time immemorial the indigenous people of Assam prepared tea using their traditional methods which had medicinal standards and values. In popular narrative Robert Bruce is accredited for discovery of tea in Assam in 1823. Bruce was enlightened on Tea by Maniram Dewan by introducing him with the Singpho Chief, Beesa Gaum. After the death of Robert Bruce his younger brother C.A. Bruce came in touch with the singpho chief and got the plant and seeds from him. He then handed over the tea plants and seeds to David Scott (the Agent to Governor General in Assam) and Scott forwarded it to Dr. Wallich, Botanist working for East India Company. Wallich identified that the tea in Assam belongs to Camellia family, and was different from the species of the tea plant which was found in China (Baruah, 2008).

The tea garden workers in Assam are originally from present day Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. Since the workers got recruited on a family basis; the workers got settled in Assam. Even though the tea gardens are a labour driven industry, the labours live a pitiful life and there is a high degree of dependency on the owners of the company. In addition to that the workers have to follow stringent rules. The demand for tea garden labourers increased with the increase of tea industry in Assam. Agents were appointed by the planters to recruit

labourers from different part of India. The labourers were hired under the Workman's Breach of Contract Act 1859³.The labourers migrated because, they were alienated from their lands, as land tax was collected by the British government and they did not have money to pay land tax, also they were starving.⁴ Mukesh Kumar (2015) in his pioneering work "Coolie Lines: A Bentham Panopticon Schema and Beyond" maintains that

Faced with labour shortage the planters had find workers elsewhere and they recruited them mostly from present day Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh etc. as indentured labour in slave like conditions. They were uprooted from their land and livelihood by the Permanent Settlement 1793 meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial regime. Impoverished by it they had no choice but to find other sources of livelihood. In the absence of alternatives, they were forced to follow the labour contractor and become indentured labour on the land that the Assam indigenous communities had lost to the tea gardens under the same colonial processes. They were at first recruited through professional contractors who were notorious for abuses and exploitation. The tea garden community folk songs have passed details of such exploitation down from one generation to the other. This labour force is popularly called 'tea tribes' and 'ex-tea tribes'.⁵

The workers during the colonial periods were not allowed to flee from the plantation area. They were forced to follow the terms and conditions of the colonial planters.

³ The labourers' lives were controlled by the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act (1859). Under this Contract strict surveillance were kept on the workers, who tried to flee from the gardens, were got arrested with the help of locals. Notices were hanged on railway stations and ferry ghats to keep eye on the escaping labourers. Person who helped the planters to catch the escaping labourers were rewarded with money by deducting wage from the escaping labourers (Kumar, 2015).

⁴ Topno, W. (2012). Struggles of Adivasis of Assam. *Adivasi Awaz* .

⁵ Kumar,M. (2015). A Bentham Panopticon Schema and Beyond. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. 344-355

Colonial rule exploited the available resources by discovering tea in Assam. The British rulers brought labourers from other states which created discontent among the indigenous people of Assam. Most of the tea garden workers have been brought to Assam forcefully several generations ago. Despite the fact that the tea estates is a labour driven estates, the labourers lack the bargaining power and are forced to work the way the managers and owners want them to work. They sell themselves and their work on the terms and conditions made by others, that too of those whose only goal is to accumulate maximum profit. They were forced to work, and were unable to break their social ties with their native states but they failed to escape because punishment was severe when caught (Chatterjee & Das, 1981). They have to face different type of problems. They are caught in a circular web of discrimination and oppression, coming out of which is not very easy.

1.3 Migration and Cultural Practices of the Tea Garden Workers

India's population is estimated to be 1.355 billion people⁶. The population of Assam in 2018 is estimated to be 35.0184 Million⁷ and the tea tribe covers about 17% (6 million) of its total population and this 17% of the population contributes to the 1/4th of the total economy of Assam(Arya, 2013). Once the Tea garden workers got settled in the garden quarters, they started recognizing and adopting each other's culture among themselves, as the workers originally belongs to different socio-cultural backgrounds. They adopted common dialect which is a mixture of their native dialect, Assamese, Hindi and Bengali, which we denote it as Sadani or Sadri. Along with common language, the workers started rejoicing some mutual festivals such as Kali

⁶ World Population Review.
Retrieve from worldpopulationreview.com

⁷ IP26(2017, August 22). India Population of Assam 2018
Retrieve from indiapopulation2018.in

Puja, Manasha Puja, Tusu Puja, Durga Puja, Karam Puja and so on. Common words spoken among the Assamese and tea tribes are Murgi means Chicken, Sada means tobacco, Hariya is home-made liquor and so on. Some Tea garden workers started adopting Assamese culture by engaging themselves in the 'Naam ghar'⁸ and singing 'Naam'⁹. Women workers also wear Sadar Mekhla¹⁰ and they make use of Assamese Gamusa (Magar & Kar, 2016)

Image No. 1: Workers in Assamese Attire



Source: Personal collection from the fieldwork.

We can see in the picture that, the old man and two women (sitting) are wearing Assamese Gamusa. The woman in white dress is wearing Assamese Mekhela Sadar.

⁸ Prayer house of the Assamese people

⁹ Devotional songs

¹⁰ Traditional Assamese dress

Durga puja festival is deeply rooted to the tea tribes' culture. They eagerly wait for the Durga puja bonus and enthusiastically celebrate the festival. The Jhumur dance is the traditional dance of the tea garden workers of Assam. Apart from Assam, this dance form is performed in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Orissa as well. This dance is performed in spacious ground¹¹. This dance is performed in harvest as well as festive seasons.

Tusu Puja is an important festival of the tea garden workers of Assam. They worship goddess Tusu Devi. As per the folk legends, Tusu was daughter of the Kurmi king of Gujrat. Tusu Devi is the beloved goddess of the Tea tribes which symbolizes Sacrifice, Virtue, love and kindness (Gogoi, 2012). This puja is celebrated by the tribes of Bengal, Jharkhand, and Orissa as well.

Pallabika Sarmah in one of her prominent work, "Tea Tribes of Assam: Their Migration & Assimilation to Assamese Society" she maintains that

Tusu puja is celebrated in the Makar sankranti (14th and 15th of January.) Tusi puja is basically associated with women folk of the society. The idol of Tusu Devi is brought on the first day which is known as Uruka. On this day the people of tea community sing and dance for the whole day and on the next day the idol is immersed in the nearest river.

Karam festival is one of the main festivals of the Tea Community. It has both social and religious significance and it is mainly agricultural base and associated with fertility belief. karam puja is cherished by colourful dance, songs and lot of eating and drinking. It is celebrated on the month of 'Bhada' (15th August- 14th September) for 7 days, started on the 'chaturthi tithi'(4th day) & ended on the 'Ekadashi Tithi' (eleventh lunar day) of the Bhada month. The Karam puja is

¹¹ "Jhumur-The Tribal Dance of Assam". India Vivid, <http://indiavivid.com/jhumur-the-tribal-dance-of-assam/>

celebrated in three ways. They are in three different seasons of the year- Jatiya Karam, Ras Jhumoir and Budhi Karam. There are seven or five (odd numbers) girls are needed for the puja and they are known as Karamatis. The Bedi(altar) of the puja is constructed with two stems of one tree, which represents f Karam Raja(Shiva) and Parvati respectively. The priest selected the karam tree and offers betel-nut and vermilion to Karam Raja. Priest, Dhakuwal (The Drum beater), Katuwal (The tree cutter), and one Kahani Bura (story teller) play an important role during the puja.¹²

Karam Puja symbolizes sisterhood, friendship and cultural unity. They worship Karam Devta, god of power and youth. This is an agricultural based festival celebrated by the tea tribes in Assam as well as in Jharkhand, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. It is named after the tree called “Karam” and regarded as the icon of Karma Devta.

Kamal Kumar Tanti (2017) in his work “Why the mainstream should respect Adivasis in Assam” said that:

Our ancestors came to Assam from different parts of the country. While coming to Assam, they brought with them their culture like dance forms, songs, festivals, folktales, etc., kept these elements among themselves and passed them down from generation to generation. Their languages were different. In the course of time, excellent communication and unity came to be developed among them. And, a smooth blend of those diverse elements gradually developed a rich mass culture in the state which can well be termed as Adivasi mass-culture¹³.

Throughout the interview, I got to know that there are certain Rituals that are gradually fading away.

¹² Sarmah,Pallabika. “Tea Tribes of Assam: Their Migration & Assimilation to Assamese Society”. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*,2018,pp. 125-128

¹³ Tanti,Kamal. “Why the Mainstream should respect Adivasis in Assam”. *Youth ki Awaaz*, 2017, <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2017/02/in-searching-and-making-a-new-identity-for-the-adivasis-of-assam/>

Kishore (name changed) said *earlier there was a ritual name **Boitha Khana**, In this Ritual the elderly members bless the bride and groom for the better future with songs on their marriage day. This is similar to Assamese Biya Naam¹⁴. Now-a-days this customs are diminishing*

Sumit (name changed) said *there was a custom named **Natua**, in this custom the **Natua** would dress like a King in the marriage. The **Natua** perform dance holding Sword in one hand and Shields (Dhal) in the other. Such dance performance has vanished today.*

Even in dressing we can see some noticeable transitions in the Tea Tribe culture. Purnima (name changed) said *Earlier in Karam Puja there was a proper dress code that women should wear half sleeves red blouse with White Saree (with red bordered). But, the new generations due to modernization has brought change in this customs. In case of gamucha(cotton towel), the tea tribes' pattern of gamucha is originally with checked stripe of red,green and orange colour. But now-a-days these Tea Tribes uses Assamese Fulam Gamosa in their Rituals. In most of the rituals the dressings are gradually changing, In case of man there is transition of dressing from dhoti and Kurta to Jeans and Shirts. The elderly members denotes this as an impact of modernity.*

There is also transition in the dance form. Suresh (name changed) is a dance master, He says, *Earlier in Jhumur the flute and Nagara plays a vital role. But now, there is minimal use of such musical instruments in Jumur. The beats in Jhumur has become so fast that an aged person would not be able to dance". He added, "In kali puja Like Assamese Husori¹⁵, we too visit our family and friends singing and dancing with our*

¹⁴ Wedding songs of Assam

¹⁵ Husori is an indispensable part of the Rongali Bihu. It is one of the several functions celebrated in the Rongali bihu festival. It is sung on the first day of the Goru(cow) Bihu. On that day, at night, the

traditional cloths. But, now we see boys wearing Jeans and Shirts leaving behind their native attire Dhoti and Kurta.” He further said, “During my childhood, every evening the elder section teaches our traditional customs and cultures. Now, there are no such teachings prevalent in the Tea Tribe society, neither the children are interested to know.

Image No. 2: Jhumur team of Chabua Tea Estate



Source: Personal collection from the fieldwork.

In the interview when asked them about the impact of Assamese culture.

Meera(name changed) said *We women use Assamese Jewellery like Gam kharu,*

Keru and Moni.

youngmen, under guidance of the elders, go away from house to house singing a kind of Bihu song known as Husori.

Kishore (name change) said *we do Bihu dance¹⁶ and sing Assamese Songs. We also rejoice the festive season of Bihu¹⁷*

Sanju (name changed) said *In Assamese culture the Assamese give saki bati(Lamp and Wick) under the Tulsi plant¹⁸ and we do the same. In this case our custom is similar to Assamsese custom.*

Deepak (name changed) said *In our culture before we performed Pala¹⁹ which is similar to Assamese Bhaona Nitya²⁰. But, now this culture among Tea Tribes has diminished.*

Image No. 3: Ashok Nag has played a vital role to Preserve his Culture and Jhumur Dance



Source: Personal collection from the fieldwork.

¹⁶ Assamese indigenous folk dance.

¹⁷ Bihu is the main festival in the Assam.

¹⁸ Holy Basil plant

¹⁹ Pala is still prevalent among the Odia community.

²⁰ Religious messages given to the people of Assam through entertainment.

We can say that the Tea tribes are gradually leaving behind the Cultural legacy of their forefathers. It is very important to follow one's culture as it helps in socialization. It also gives a sense of social belongingness which ensures social security. It is important for us as an individual to be aware of our past and draw inspiration from it.

The festival celebrated by the tea tribes in Assam is similar to that of festivals celebrated by different tribes in Orissa, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh etc. However recent development shows that the young generations have tilted more towards Assamese culture and some of their own indigenous cultural practises are fading away with time which I would denote the metaphor "Melting pot"²¹. On the other hand the older section of the tea tribes claims to be a "Salad Bowl"²² as they have preserved their culture and diversities. Therefore, being immigrant it becomes very complex to retain ones culture and identity without assimilating with the native cultures of the migrated State.

The literature review is helpful to bridge the literature gap. The next chapter deals with the literature review.

²¹ In melting pot, people of diverse cultures become standardised members of the society.

²² In Salad bowl, people retain their diverse identities and behave more like vegetables in a salad, where their diversities and creativity are preserved.