

TEA TRIBES OF ASSAM: THEIR MIGRATION & ASSIMILATION TO ASSAMESE SOCIETY

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Abstract: Migration is a habitual phenomenon in human society. It has immense contribution in the formation & the development of human society. Tea plants were discovered in Assam in 1823. Later on, the British started tea cultivation in Assam for which large number of workers were needed. But the unwillingness of assamese people towards tea cultivation led the British to take various programmes to make tea an economic crop. British started importing workers from other parts of India to Assam. With time migrated tea workers establish themselves in Assam permanently and they play a vital role in the formation of greater assamese society. Social life of the tea tribes are enriched with folk songs, folk dances, folk tales, folk beliefs, traditional customs, festivals etc. Down the ages, tea tribes got settled in Assam, assimilated with the assamese society and contributes a lot of elements to the greater assamese culture enriching it.

This paper attempts to analyse the history of migration of tea tribes into Assam, their culture, spoken language & the process of assimilation to the assamese society.

This paper is basically prepared on analytical method based on secondary sources of data such as books, journals, magazine, newspaper and internet.

Index Terms: Migration, Tea-tribes, British, Assam, Assamese, Culture and Assimilation.

1.0 Migration is a habitual phenomenon in human society. People may migrate from one place to another due to in various factors. Livelihood, poverty, war, food safety and natural phantasm, are predominantly considered to be the essential part of migration. In the history of Assam during the pre-independence British era changed Assam to progressive track but also has a great hand in shaping the history of migrants in Assam.

2.0 The East India Company formally undertook the administration of Upper Assam in 1839 from the last Ahom King Purandhar Singha though they occupied the whole of the Ahom Kingdom in 1826 by the treaty of Yandaboo. (1) The British migrated the people from various regions of india to Assam to work in tea garden established by them. With time social, political, economic & cultural co-ordination occurs between these migrated workers & indigenou people of Assam. The tea garden community as distinct by the name are the inhabitants of the tea gardens and its adjacent villages stretched throughout both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of the present State of Assam between 89° & 96° East longitude and 28° & 26° North latitude. (2)



Tea-gardens of Assam

2.1 Tea plants were discovered in upper Assam in the year 1823. Discovery of the indigenous tea in Assam is credited to Robert Bruce, who was introduced with it by the Singphow Chief Bisa Gam in 1823. Prior to this, Mandelo has written about tea in 1640. Sir Joseph Bank tried to grow it in 1788 with foreign seeds. Beside, the people of Assam had a habit to drink 'Fanap' which was actually tea, noticed by Col. Letter in 1815. After the annexation of Assam by the East India Company in 1826 probability of tea cultivation was confirmed and Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General allowed to cultivate it in experimental basis under the Government initiative in 1834. A few boxes of the produced were sent to London in 1839 for its taste. The result was satisfying. So, by 1852, European planters began to rush into Assam for tea cultivation. There were 20 tea gardens in Assam in 1851, which increased to 883 in the next 50 years. Now, the tea industry of the North-East produces 77 percent of the total tea production of the country. The value of tea crops in this area is more than 600 Crores. It earns Crores of rupees a year and contributes in the major part of the foreign exchange of the country. (3)

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2.1.1 As soon as the demand of Chinese tea product increased in the global market, the British also focused in tea cultivation in Assam. But the unwillingness of the Assamese people towards tea cultivation led the British to take various programmes to make tea an economic crop. Tea plantation in Assam was growing and the demand of such cheap labourers equally increasing. Uniform recruitment procedure of transporting labourers advised by the Government became lucrative business under unscrupulous contractors, appointed by the Planters Association. The 'Indian Emigration Act, 1873', passed by the Government to recruit labourers within the British colonies was applied in case of the recruitment within the country. (4) By implementing the rule 'The Old Assam rules-1938, 'The Wasteland Great Rules-1954', 'The Free Simple Grant-1861', the British colonial government decided to hand over the fertile lands to the tea companies. In the year 1937, the British established the first tea estate in Assam with the help of local people. Although they started with the local people later on to meet the scarcity they started importing workers from other parts of the country. The early immigrants in to the plantation were the Kol, Santhal and other tribes from the Bengal province under the Chhotanagpur plateau. The first batch of 652 people recruited by the Assam Company from Hazaribag in 1840 met with disaster and decease and how many of them could reach their destinations is unknown. (5) Those, tea tribes who went against the exploitation and colonialism were sub divided into different classes and were migrated to Assam forcefully. At the same time the British force them to become servants or workers by sacrificing their ancient traits. The British imported a lot of tea workers in to Assam by cheating the people of middle India. Mostly, they were from West Bengal, Madhya-Pradesh, Orissa, Madras etc. These migrants later on started living in Assam permanently. Giving rise to a new tribe called the tea tribes with time they assimilated with local people & contributed to the formation of greater assamese society. The tea garden labourers; now constituted as a community are the descendants of those poor immigrants, whose fate forced them to come to the tea plantations of Assam; victimized by bribery, coercion and deceit. The immigration continued for more than a century; from 1841 to 1960; i.e., even after independence in 1947. In 1859-60, 2049 workers were imported from Chotanagpur and Medinipur which continued thereafter. (6) The depiction of the cheatings and exploitation by the British can be found within their folk songs :

Tea Tribe's Dialect

i. 'Chal Mini Assam Jaibo,

'Desh Boro Dukhre

Assam Deshre

Cha Bagan Hariyal ('Come lets go to Assam my girl/as there is great misery in our country/let's go to Assam the land of Lush green tea plantations.')

ii. ki bolibo dukher katha

are bolile je gow lage betha

mazdur salan karile assame

railgardi sole ghane ghone

mator char saka

are raigardir dah saka

phaki diye Assam anile. (What to speak about misery/ if we speak it's sadness us/ Imported Workers to Assam/ Train runs frequently/ Car has Four Wheels/ Train has ten wheels/ brought us to Assam by telling lies.)

2.1.2 With time those migrated tea workers started establishing themselves in Assam permanently and introduced themselves as the tea tribes of Assam. Tea tribes played a vital role in the formation of greater assamese society. There are different subtribes within them & includes they are Munda, Chaotal, kol, Kharia, Bhumij, Ghatowar, Baraik, Sabar, Gauda, Skandha, Baiga, Bheel, Saora, Bhuia, Paharia, Urang, Parja, Mali, Teli, Dom, Rajput, Than, Mal, kandapan, Hari, Sarban, Hoo, Nowar, Napit, Patra, Sero etc. .The tea tribes are living in various districts of Assam such as Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Darrang, Nagaon, Morigaon, & North Lakhimpur. They carried Austric and Dravidian culture into assamese community.



people of tea community

2.1.3 Tea tribes migrated to Assam from various region of the the country & carried various dialects. So, to communicate among themselves & with local people they started using connecting language known as Bagania or Sadani language. The vocabulary prevailing among tea tribes has enriched the store house of Assamese lexicon. Among these Haria(Wine), Mini(small girl), Nana(Grandfather), Sardar(Group-leader), Mazdur(workers), Madal(Drum), Talap(Pond), Dena(Loan), Kamani(Income), Naukri(Job), Khoraki(Dowry), Mahina(Month), Boksis(Tips), Bonos(Bonus), Saradin(whole-Day), Chota(small), Sokra-Sokri(boys& girls), Hamara(our), are notable.

2.1.4 Tea tribes also have their own folk songs, folktales, folk talks. Their culture contributed a lot to the greater assamese culture enriching it. They celebrate different festivals amongst which karam puja tussu puja and sahraib parab are the popular ones. Although these festivals are agriculture based, they are associated with their rich folk culture and tradition. Both karam puja & tussu puja are religious festivals. Karam festival is One of the main festivals of the Tea Community.it has both social and religious significance and it isis 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 celebrated in three ways. they are in three different seasons of the year- Jatiya Karam, Ras Jhumoir

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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.



Karam puja

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.



Tusu puja celebration

Faguwa is celebrated in the month of Fagun (15th March and 14th April). The festival is celebrated on the day of the Purnima (full moon). In this day, all the people of a specific area gathered for feast but Women are not permitted to go there. On the next day people played colour with mud and water and worshiped the ancestors and take their blessings from the seniors. Kathi dance is performed in this festival.

In the month of April the Tea Community celebrate another festival name phul puja, an agricultural based festival. On the day of the puja they clean their homes, keeping unwanted materials in a baskets and keep fasting before puja. The basket is decorated by different flowers & worshipped, called Phul puja. Various people gather along with their baskets and worship the dangariya(God) . After the puja women throw the baskets in the jungle and which is known as 'Jobra pela'. They prayed to protect them from all types of disease, natural calamity etc.

Charol parab/ sahrul parab is the spring festivals of tea tribes. It is celebrated on the 5th, 7th or 9th tithi(day) of Chaitra(March) month. Different sub-tribes celebrate this puja on different tithi(day). Munda and khoria sub-tribes cherished this puja mainly in the month of bohag (April). Maroi puja & Phool utsav are also celebrated during charol parab. Mundari sub-tribe celebrates 'Gos Rowa' and 'Babole Rowa' during the month of Ahar(June-July). Like Mundari, different subtribes celebrate their own different festivals.

Although these festivals were mainly celebrated by tea tribe people, they cross the boundary & influence the other assamese people & as a whole the greater Assamese culture. Several characteristics are observed between the ancestors of tea tribes and ancestors of mongoloid origin assamese people. Animal sacrificing in front of God idol, Deo utha, non-vegetarian diet taking chicken and pork, drinking homemade rice beer, belief on souls after death, jhoom cultivation, pre-wedding relationship etc are some similar thinkings between tea tribe and Mongoloid origin Assamese people. Apart from these festivals like durga puja, janmastami(birthday of lord krishna), holi, Kali puja, diwali are celebrated both by tea tribes and assamese people.

Like many other societies tea tribes also have numerous folk songs among them. They express their feelings and thinkings through these songs. They sing many of these songs during karam puja and tussu puja. The jhumur songs mainly sing in karam puja reflects their history & life story.

The Jhumur dance, a peculiar dance form is very popular among them. It is group dances where both male and female take part. Like the Bihu dance of Assam, Jhumur dance steps also showcased the natural sexual attraction between male and female. Now a day Jhumur dance is not bound only to tea tribes' festivals but also staged in other cultural programmes and festivals of Assam. Jhumur songs are mixture of beautiful lyrics & music orchestra using various folk instruments like flute, drums etc. They wear traditional dresses and ornaments during jhumur dance. They also enjoys various traditional games like Kukura Juj(cock-fighting game), Koni Juj(egg-fighting game).



Jhumur dance

2.1.5 The folk song, folk dance, folk fest occupy a special positions in the society of tea tribes. It has a big contribution to the greater Assamese culture. Plots of the great Assamese novels like 'Seuji Patar Kahani', 'Dawar Aru nai', 'Ejak Manuh Ekhon Arayna' and famous Assamese feature films like 'Chameli Mamsahab', 'Kesa Xoun', 'Trikal Badhu', 'Arjun' etc. are based on the life style & culture of the tea tribes. Throughout ages the tea tribes have contributed a lot to strengthen the base of the Assamese culture and society.

Instead of introducing themselves as a class of people imported by the British in order to establish capitalism and colonialism in Assam they have adapted themselves as the tea tribe of Assam. Their entry to Assam ended the paik system and a new class of workers emerged in Assam. Together they made a huge change in economic and political scenario of Assam. By giving up their ancestral address the tea tribes have been trying continuously to blend with Assamese society.

Politicising religion as usual has influenced the tea tribe immensely. A section of them is following Hindu faith and another section is following Christian faith. Because of which they also celebrate New Year and Christmas with flying colours. Tea tribes residing in upper Assam has established Namghar(Temple) and is following vaishnavite religion(Hindu faith). They also take part in old Assamese religious drama known as Ankia nat and cherished Janmastami as a holy fest. [The process of interactions and adjustment with Assamese society had started as soon as the tea-garden labourers came out of the gardens and settled in occupations outside the plantations as ex- tea garden labourers. But these two society maintained social distances. This however, does not mean that there were complete absence of interchange of cultural elements. The ex- tea garden labour had modified many of their festivals and rituals in line with the Assamese festivals and rituals. (7)

3.0 Assam's economy took a new turn with the migration of tea tribes. Assam tea is world famous now. By keeping Assam's nature evergreen, they beg the same credit as other indigenous Assamese people in enriching & showcasing the Assamese culture. In fact without their contribution the progression of Assamese, economy & politics is unthinkable.

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