

Historical Background of the Tea Industry in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Plantations are most systematic system of the production in the agricultural sector. It is noted that the most organized industry in India is tea plantation industry. Moreover, the British colonial government gave a serious attention to development of this industry. It is an agro-based labour-intensive industry. The plantation of tea cultivation had begun by the British planters in Assam. Moreover, Assam covers approximately 51 percent of the total land devoted to tea plantation in India. Hence, Assam produces around 55 percent of the country's total production of tea, which is considered as the backbone of the Indian economy system. Therefore, this research paper attempts to highlight the historical background of the development of tea industry and migration of tea labourers into Assam.

1. Introduction

The British colonial rule was a long history of the systematic exploitation upon Assamese people by the colonial hegemony. It that also began a colonial relationship of domination and dependence between the colonial authority and Assam .After the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the British East India Company occupied the whole land of Assam to their empire. The British authority now began to drain away the economic surplus from Assam to England in different ways. In this way, the British company began tea plantation industry in the different part of Assam. Moreover, the discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam in 1823 was of profound commercial significant to the British colonial government. The British company gained a huge amount of profit from this industry. In fact, Assam becomes the "**Cradle of tea industry**". Therefore, we take a very quick glance at the history of the tea plantation in Assam.

2. Objective of the paper

Drawing an interdisciplinary approach, this research paper tries to understand the history of tea industry in Assam .Therefore; the main objectives of the proposed paper are as follows:-

1. To understand the role of the British colonial Government for opening tea industry in Assam.
2. To analyze the historical process of migration of Tea Plantation workers to Assam,
3. To examine recruitment process of tea labourers in the tea gardens of Assam.

3. Research Questions

In order to analyze the objectives, the following two research questions have been formulated for investigation during the course of this research paper:

- I. What are the problems faced by the tea planters in the recruitment process of the tea labourers in the tea estate?
- II. How did the tea labour immigration take place in Assam?

4. Methodology of the paper

The present paper is based on historical and analytical method. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for the research. The sources included articles published in different journals, articles collection in the form of books, books written by Scholars etc. All of the data or facts are subjected to critically analyze before used it.

5. Discussion

The land of Assam is the pioneer of the tea industry in India. Therefore, Assam is called as the "**Garden of Tea of the World**". From the evidence, it is found that there is a long history of the tea industry in Assam. It had been traced back to the regime of the British capitalism. We know that Tea has been a popular beverage in Britain right from the seventeenth century. Historian **Rajen Saikia** mentions that, "The Assamese have no such long memory of tea. There is a vague conjecture that some people used the extract of dry pounded leaves of tea growing in the wild. However, people in general took to the habit of drinking tea as a matter of daily routine only in the mid-nineteenth century. However, tea could not conquer the opium addicts of Assam. It soon became a respectable component of Assamese culture."¹

6. Discovery of Tea Plant in Assam

The discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam was an event of profound political and commercial significance to Britain. However, the discovery of the tea plant in Assam was an important event of profound political and economic significance to the British colonial imperialism in India. It is found that in 1815, Colonel Letter who was working in the British East India Company had noticed the tea drinking habit among the Assamese tribes. Moreover, the **Singphoo** tribes of Assam called it as "**Fanap**".² Similarly, David Scott who was then the political Agent of Assam had too interested in producing tea in Assam. Later on, the British East India Company had interested to study about different species of flora of the Brahmaputra Valley. However, Major Robert Bruce, a British East Indian company officer came to Assam. In 1823, Major Robert Bruce learned the existence of tea plant in Assam. Hence, he made an agreement with a **Singphoo** Chief for supply of the tea plants to the British Company. It was claimed that Major Robert Bruce discovered the tea plant in

Assam.³ The matter was taken up by Major Robert Bruce's brother C.A. Bruce. It may be noted that C.A. Bruce was the first European who visited the tea tract in Sadiya region. He discovered about 120 tracts of indigenous tea plant. It was the leading steps for the tea plantation industry in Assam.

Accordingly, the then Governor General Lord William Bentinck appointed a Tea committee in 1834 with Dr. Wallich as the secretary to study a plan for introduction of tea culture in India and for its superintendence of execution.⁴ Later on, British government appointed a scientific commission comprising Dr. W. Griffiths, J. McLelland and Dr. Wallich to select a place for planting tea. Finally, the commission had selected Assam as a favourable place for tea plantation. Mr. Gordon who had been sent to China for tea seeds helped in raising nursery at Calcutta.⁵ These tea plants were used in number of plantation in different place in Assam such as Jaipur (Lakhimpur) and Chabua (Dibrugarh). Moreover, C.A. Bruce who was appointed superintendent of Tea culture of Assam contributed a lot to introduction of tea plantation in the Brahmaputra Valley comprising from Jaipur to Namrup along with the hill areas. Historian Sir E.A. Gait therefore remarks, "In 1837, Bruce packed forty six boxes of tea, but owing to defective packing much of it was damaged and only eight boxes could be sent to England."⁶ However, the British East Indian Government had taken the first experimental tea plantation in Lakhimpur in 1835. Thus, the tea planters began to export tea into England.

Therefore, the period between 1815 and 1852 was known as the period of experiment in the tea plantation sector in Assam. It is found that the tea gardens of the British east India Government was established on a sandbank near the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Kundil rivers. As soon as, the tea plants removed into Jaipur areas where the British Government had opened the new tea garden in 1837. It is also found that the Assam Tea company was the pioneering tea company in India. In 1839, the first tea company, namely The Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858.⁷ It may be noted that there were the 51 tea gardens in Assam owned by private individuals or private farms till 1859.

It is interesting note that Maniram Dewan, a leading freedom fighter of the Great Revolt of 1857, was the first India tea planter. It was Maniram Dewan who started tea plantations at Cinnamora near Jorhat and Singloi near Sonari was followed by other Assamese tea planters namely – Roseswar Barua and Hemdhar Barua.⁸ Roseswar Barua started about six to seven gardens of which Laidegarh, Neginijan, Madhpure etc were prominent.⁹

Then, the success of the tea plantation in the upper Assam encouraged the British capitalists to make rapid strides in Cachar. Captain Fisher himself was very much interested about the cultivation of tea plantation in Cachar. Thus, the "**tea mania**" had a solid grip over the minds of European Capitalist entrepreneurs as well as Indian businesspersons. It is interesting to note that the British East India Company had taken the policy of discrimination towards the Indian local tea planters. It is found that Maniram Dewan who had established

two tea estates in the Upper Assam, became the victim of the discriminatory policy of the British East India government. It may be noted that the promulgation of old Assam Rules in 1854 which introduced very liberal terms for grant of Waste Land to obtain waste lands for the cultivation of the plantation in Assam. Therefore, by 1859, the tea planters occupied 204,859 acres of lands for the purpose of tea cultivation in Assam out of which 11,599 acres were cleared for actual cultivation of tea.¹⁰ In the Brahmaputra valley the total land occupied for tea cultivation in 1858-59 was 54,860 acres out of which only 7599 acres brought under actual cultivation.¹¹ Thus, the British capitalist class began to cultivation of tea in Assam.

7. Labour Recruitment in the Tea Industry of Assam

Initially the tea industry came to face various problems in Assam. It may be noted that the British capitalists required a huge labourers at the beginning stage of the tea industry for clearing jungle, making the land suitable for plantation, plucking, manufacturing and finally dispatching to different place. But most important point is that the requirement of labourers in the tea plantation sector was an important problems before the British capitalist class. Without labour not a single tea plant can survive as no baby can survive without mother.¹² The British tea planters needed a large number of labourers for working in the tea garden at a cheaper rate. Therefore, the tea planters initially planned to require their labourers from China. Unfortunately, the experiment with use of the Chinese labourers in the tea plantation industry proved a complete failure because of the high cost of requirement and difficulties in their management. Therefore, in 1843, the tea planters had totally abandoned the idea of recruitment of Chinese labourers in the tea industry. Now, they fully concentrated upon acquisition of local labourers. In the initial period, the planters thought that the local labourers who were belonged to the kachari tribes would be sufficient to meet the requirements. However, the local labourers were found lazy and unwilling to work hard. The planter's authority was compelled to think in terms of importing labour from other areas of India. Further, the British capitalist's attempts to import labour from various parts of India for the tea gardens of Assam had started since 1841. In 1858-59, a large number of workers numbering nearly 84,915 were brought to Assam. The major portion of tea workers were drawn mostly from the tribes inhabited regions such as the greater Chotanagpur plateau, Santhal parganas of erstwhile Bengal Presidency, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odissa. Under the Immigration Report of 1879, it was highlighted that free labourers were much cheaper and more satisfactory to the tea planters than those brought by the garden sardars and the contractors.¹³ Most important fact is that the recruitment of labour and their dispatch to the tea gardens in Assam was the most gigantic task during the colonial period. For smooth running of the business, several recruiting association founded. There were Longai Valley Employers Association, The General Coolie Recruiting Association.¹⁴ The indentured emigration to Assam was organized under a free system with little control of Government. The tea industry of Assam now has surplus labourers in the tea gardens. However, the most of the tea plantation workers, who came to Assam during the colonial period never returned to their original home places. It may be

noted that they were planted into a different socio-economic and cultural environment. Now- a- days, the tea garden workers in Assam are popularly known as "**Bagania**", "**Banua**" or "**Cha Mazdoor**" and the ex-tea garden workers as "**Bongal**".

8. Conclusion

A historical perspective of tea industry in Assam has thrown insight into complex relations between the beginning of tea industry and the system of recruitment of tea labourers in the tea estate. The paper has shown the background of discovery of tea in Assam and how the British officers like

Robert Bruce and C.A Bruce has contributed a lot to discovery of tea in Assam. The paper has also shown how the tea industry has sustained the capitalist system and world tea market in the colonial period. The paper is revealed that the migration of tea labourers to Assam during the colonial period was an event of historical consequence to the socio-economic and cultural life of Assam. In the course of time, the tea garden labourers had to give up many of their own traditional habits and customs. The tea garden society in Assam had passed through a drastic change in various aspects of their life under the industrial environment.

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