

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED BY TEA GARDEN COMMUNITIES IN ASSAM

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Abstract: Migration occurs often in human civilization. It has made a significant contribution to the creation and advancement of human society. Over time, people of different ethnic groups and races arrived in Assam. This flow of migration to Assam has been seen in the pre and post-independence periods. Socio-economic condition or status is the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. Examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, and issues related to privilege, power and control. Socioeconomic status is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others. In Assam, tea plants were first found in 1823. Later, the British began cultivating tea in Assam, for which a sizable workforce was required. So, the tea garden people were imported from the modern-day states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. They were sent to Assam as indentured labourers by the East India Company. In Assam, the descendants of these labourers are today referred to as tea tribes. They now form a part of the larger Assamese society. Tea garden community of Assam itself is a heterogeneous group consisting of diverse castes, groups who spoke different dialects, practiced different customs and professed different religions. They are facing many problems in the social, political and economic spheres which

tend to receive low priority from the government. This article is going to discuss the migration history of the tea tribes and the problems they faced over the decades.

Keywords: Tea garden communities, socio-economic aspects, problems

Introduction: Human migration refers to the movement of individuals with the intention of settling, either permanently or temporarily, in a new geographic area. The migration may have occurred as a result of several causes, including economic, cultural, and political ones. Tea industry is one of the India's oldest and most organised sectors which has been an integral part of the economic development of the country. In Assam, tea plants were first found in 1823. Later, the British began cultivating tea in Assam, for which a sizable workforce was required. So, the tea garden people were imported from the modern-day states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. They were sent to Assam as indentured labourers by the East India Company. In Assam, the descendants of these labourers are today referred to as tea tribes. They now form a part of the larger Assamese society. Tea garden community of Assam itself is a heterogeneous group consisting of diverse castes, groups who spoke different dialects, practiced different customs and professed different religions. They are facing many problems in the social, political and economic spheres which tend to receive low priority from the government. This article is going to discuss the migration history of the tea tribes and the problems they faced over the decades.

Objectives: The major objective of the paper are-

- To trace the history of migration of Tea tribes to Assam.
- To discuss the various socio-economic problems faced by them.

Methodology: Historical and exploratory methods are being here. The article is based on the secondary source which includes books, research studies, journals.

Review of literature:

Phulmoni Das, in her article titled "*Tea Garden Community of Assam: A Study of their Past, Present and Future*" stated that even though they are neglected socio economically but ironically tea garden community is considered to be crucial determinant of politics of Assam. She also enunciated that 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. In order to improve their present conditions her paper suggested to uplift their socio-economic conditions by formulating effective policies for them.

Aritra De, in his article titled "*Exploitation of Tea-Plantation Workers in Colonial Bengal and Assam*" talked about the deplorable condition of migrated tea tribe people. Migrated labourers from different parts of the country considered the job as a boon for them despite severe exploitative measures adopted by the owners of tea plantation. He also pronounced that there was absence of workers' movement despite severe deprivation of them by the owners. He explained the exploitative nature of tea garden owners during the colonial period with reference to recruitment and working condition of labourers remained unchallenged.

Dr. Pallabika Sarmah, in her article titled *“Tea tribes of Assam: their migration & assimilation to Assamese society”* has talked about the settlement of tea tribes in Assam, their assimilation with the Assamese society and their contributions to the greater Assamese culture enriching it. In the article she speaks briefly about the need to address their socio-economic issues.

Gadapani Sarma, in his article titled *“A Historical Background of Tea in Assam”* pronounced the colonial history of the tea community as well as the tea company.

Paresh Borah, in his article titled *“Colonial State, Hegemony, History and The Identity of Tea Tribes in Assam”* explained how the tea tribe identity in Assam became a product of the colonial plantation under colonial state processes, an authoritarian state system based on the exploitation of migrant workers, with a rigid hierarchy on ethnic and caste lines.

Navajit Saikia, in his article *“The History of Migration of Tea Tribes into Assam during Colonial Period”* has explained how the migrant labourers’ mobility is restricted within the vicinity of the tea garden and factory alone and is completely isolated from the outside world. He considered this as the problems which need to be addressed.

Ananda Das Gupta, in his article titled *“The Socio-economic and Health Challenges of Labourers in the Tea Gardens of Assam”* has talked about the problems in their life such as non-education, poverty, addiction of males to country-beer, poor standards of living and health facilities and so on.

Sarat kumar Nath, in his article titled *“Socio-economic status of tea tribe: with special reference to Assam”* has explain about the socio-economic condition of Tea tribes. He says that the community is facing various socio-economic dimensional problems like poor human development, poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, social isolation health crisis etc.

Discussion: Assam is one of the oldest and perhaps the most famous among tea-growing regions of the world. The tea industry originated here in the late 1830s by the colonial planters after the annexation of Assam in 1826. The credit for the discovery of tea in Assam goes to Major Robert Bruce who discovered the potentiality for growing tea in Assam in the year 1823. In the same year, tea growing wild in Assam got recognition as the real tea plant, and the British planters extensively started to cultivate tea in the virgin tracts of Assam which were found to have most suitable agro-climate for its growth. Origin of tea tribes was very excruciating story in the history of Assam and in order to understand the immigration and settlement of tea tribes, it is very important to understand their origin and who and how they brought to this state. The Gradual expansion of tea plantation in Assam during the British period compelled the authority to recruit a large number of workers to achieve the highest scale of productivity. During that period, Britishers thought that this would be managed locally, through the labour force available. However, their observation pertaining to the availability of the local labour went on different track. In the succeeding time, the British administrators cum planters faced the shortage of labour in the increasing tea plantation. It was observed that the local labours were found indolent, hopeless and lazy and hence the plantation work began to suffer. Consequently, shortage of labour became a crucial problem for the planters. Under existing condition and grave demand of the labour, the supreme Government decided to bring labour from the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and other places. As the tea industry

was labour intensive and it required to be planted manually which needed to be supported with large scale of labours. So 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. 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, Rajput, Than, Mal, kandapan, Hari, Sarban, Hoo, Nowar, 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.

Socio-economic condition or status is the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation. Examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, and issues related to privilege, power and control. Socioeconomic status is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others. In respect of tea garden laborers, the socio-economic conditions and their dependent are very pathetic. The working class in the tea gardens of Assam is perhaps the most exploited class in the organised sector of economy. Low wages, poor housing and lack of avenues for social mobility have been a recurring theme since its inception in the early 19th century. In tea tribe areas, most schools lack basic infrastructure, including minimal learning materials and even minimal sanitary provisions. Due to the lack of immediate economic return from education, tribal parents prefer their children to be engaged in remunerative employment. Due to **economic backwardness and insecure livelihood**, the Tribals face health problems, such as the prevalence of disease, like **malaria, cholera, diarrhea and jaundice**. **Due to poverty, illiteracy, ignorance** their life becomes more miserable than their original habitats. Till today they are deprived in different circumstances and faced numerous problems like poverty, homeless, illiteracy instead of their hope of economic prosperity for which they leave their home land. Rights ensuring minimum necessities of life for human existence are referred to as economic, social and cultural rights. Generally economic, social and cultural rights are the rights to adequate food, clothing shelter, right to work, right to social security, rights to enjoy benefits of scientific progress and its application, rights to social security includes free consent to marriage, rights to education, rights to take part in cultural life, social insurance, condition of work, equal pay for equal work, maternity relief, adequate standard of living rights to rest and leisure etc. But in case of tea communities, they are not equally enjoying economic, social and cultural rights in comparison to others, as tea garden labourer are not aware about these rights provided by the Indian constitution.

Following recommendations are to be taken:

1. Government should make regulation to safeguard tea garden labourers from exploitation of authority.
2. Tea Garden authority should increase salary as well as basic amenity of life for workers.
3. Special attention needs to be given to improve educational attainment of tea community in the tea gardens.
4. Government plan and policy should be implemented properly for development tea community in the tea gardens.
5. Tea Garden authority should look after problems of labourer and try to solve their problem in a concrete manner.
6. Tea community should not be socially excluded rather measures should be taken to include them in wider society.

Conclusion: Tea tribes are being subjected to a long process of socio-political deprivation and discrimination in the state. Their presence has a significant impact on the socioeconomic life in the state. Therefore, there is a pressing need for the government evolves suitable policy to improve the quality of life of tea plantation people. Tea garden labourers are still lagging behind in terms of socially, economically and culturally. It is the duty of the society to make them literate, culturally reach and economically stable so that they can live in this beautiful world happily and peacefully.

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