

## CLIMATE CHANGE, WORKER'S RIGHTS AND TEA INDUSTRY IN ASSAM- AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*Tea plays a significant role in rural development, poverty reduction and food security in developing countries and is one of the most important cash crops in the world. The 'cup that cheers' is under a lot of heat, quite literally. Climate change, erratic rainfall, high temperature, high carbon dioxide, among others has had a serious impact on the tea plant, which experts otherwise classify as 'self-adapting'. Climate change is an important environmental issue and impacts greatly tea on growth and production as tea is mainly grown under rain-fed mono-cropping systems and weather conditions determine optimal growth. The effects of climate change on the tea economy and the mitigating measures that should be adopted are not yet well understood.*

*Tea production is labour intensive, and the industry provides jobs, especially in remote, economically depressed rural areas. Tea trade and distribution are dominated by a few international companies that benefit from stable retail prices. Therefore, the researcher aims at highlighting the effect of climate on the production and rights of the workers in Assam.*

**Keywords:** *Low Productivity, Climate change, Worker's Right, Rainfall, Assam*

## INTRODUCTION

The tea tribes of Assam are one of the most exploited and backward community in Assam. Though young generation of the tea tribes is comparatively literate and in the present day there are few intellectuals, academics and professionals in various fields also emerged among the tea tribes. The tea tribes, being basically constitute the labour force of the tea industry in Assam are settled in the villages inside tea estates. These villages are situated in such remote places which induced to the backwardness and made possible for exploitation over them by their masters. The tea tribes are live in very hazardous places and lead the life of impoverishment and usually die in obscurity. The tea companies usually exploit the tea tribes in every possible way and hence their conflict with the management becomes very common. There are instances in which the tea companies didn't even supply the lifesaving drugs when workers were dying out of epidemics. Welfare officer who have been appointed because of the compulsion from the Government of India in each tea estate of Assam, are mostly seem to be showpiece. Poverty, Illiteracy, addiction of male and a few of females to country beer, poor standard of living and health facilities are the invariant problems in the lives of tea tribes.

The tea tribes have been facing numerous problems since the very beginning of their settlement in Assam as stated in the previous chapters. They had been kept in distance from any relations with the people of nearby villages that such exploitation over those labourers remains unknown for everyone. The villagers were also not allowed to enter into the tea garden areas and to meet the labourers. These labourers presently known as tea-tribes were blocked within the tea garden because the planters were in doubt that the labourers might have been advised by the people of the villages and may became cleaver as well as the people might have shown sympathy to their condition which did not conducive to the interest of the tea companies. Hence, the planters arranged all the necessary facilities within the tea garden areas as because the labours would not feel the necessity of going outside. For instance, the planters established weekly marked inside the tea garden that the required food and other commodity could be availed inside the garden.

To understand the present condition of the tea garden labourers, one has to trace the history to identify their aspirations for the future and the type of support they need in their effort for liberation. Their present can be understood only in the context of the Permanent Settlement

1793 (Farnandesh, 2003) and Assam tea Plantation. Crucial to this process is the fact that the Permanent Settlement broke the link between the common property resources and these communities as well as weakened their cultural identity and economic security linked and impoverished them. In Assam, the British rulers enacted the Assam land Act 1834 followed by the Wasteland Grant Rules 1834 in order to get land easily for the tea estates. As discussed in the previous chapters, the Britishers thought that once deprived of their livelihood, the Ahom, Koch and Boro land owners of Assam would work in the plantations (Goswami, 1999). But they were not ready to become wage labourers on their own land alienated unjustly from them. The planters could not satisfy with the Chinese workers also (Guha, 1977). Subsequently, the tribals of Orissa, Jharkhand and Chattisgarh became the successive choice of the tea planters. Consequently, these people were bound to migrate to the tea garden of Assam due to impoverishment they had in their homeland. (Chatterjee, 1990). Thus, there were continuous flow of indentured labour that helped the worldwide expansion of the plantation complex (Sen 1979). Therefore, the dilemma of the tea garden labours or tea tribes of Assam can be understood only in reference to this system and by comparing their history with others displaced people in the extra economic Diasporas of the 19th century were pushed towards the plantation complex.

Hence, originated from the exploitations over them by the Britishers and landlords, they have been suffering from different socio-economic and political problems. Various socio-economic and political problems prevailed among the tea tribes can be discussed as the following heads.

### **POOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CONDITION**

The Assam Human Development Report was published in 2003 with a picture of tea garden labourers plucking tea leaves, but it does not contain any section on the poor development conditions among the tea garden labourers. The report has only incorporated the Tea Board of India estimates on tea production in the state, while avoiding inclusion of the human development index of the tea labour community. The tea labour community, which accounts for an estimated 20 per cent of the total population in the state, thus lives and works in very

poor human development conditions, which also affects the development index of the entire state.

The Assam Human Development Report, 2003 revealed that most of the women workers are found in the tea gardens which account for the predominance of women workers in large scale private sector establishments. Moreover, the Field Works Performance Report (FWPR) of women in the tea industry revealed that the women who are being worked in the tea companies are not empowered women. Although the overall FWPR in Assam is high, as bulk of women labour are either not paid or poorly paid and most of them are unskilled labours. The tea garden cooli lines known as labour colony in Assam has a distinctive identity. The labour colonies are neither an urban industrial nor a rural area. However, it constitutes a distinct stratum of the economy of the state, which must be accorded high priority for development. In contrast, while the tea business has been growing steadily since independence, the living standards of the tea garden community have remained virtually stagnant.

Although the production and cultivation of tea in Assam have been growing substantially over a period of time but the conditions live of the tea tribes have been worsening. The welfare schemes for the labourers in the tea gardens are also in a terrible state as these are only seeming to be implemented in pen and paper only. The conditions of labourers in the tea gardens do not even adhere to the basic levels of decent human existence except in case of a few tea gardens which are managed by the big multinational companies. A majority of the tea gardens lack the facilities of drinking water, proper health and sanitation facilities and electricity connections. However, in recent years, due to the implementation of the Sarva Shikhsa Abhiyan (SSA), many tea garden labourers have been getting free mid-day meals and other facilities. But since the labour colonies do not fall under the purview of the Panchayati Raj system, the tea tribes being settled in the tea estates have been depriving from many benefits of many development and welfare programme of Central government as well as State government.

## **POVERTY**

Poverty remained constant problem of tea tribes in Assam. They were migrated to the land of Assam because of the poverty however; their conditions remain unchanged after the consistent

hard work in the tea gardens of Assam. Poverty is defined not only as income poverty, but also as human deprivation in terms of health and education, shelter, water supply and sanitation. Economists have found that calculating the poverty is a very difficult task. Measuring deficiency and lack of access is even more complicated. In an endeavor to assess the poverty, the idea of a minimum standard of living has developed. There is broad agreement that the minimum should comprise of nutritionally suitable diet, a rational standard of housing, clothing, other prerequisites and access to a minimum level of healthcare, sanitary, education, clean water supply and good environment.

It is a well known fact that the tea tribes are basically workers in the tea garden and their livelihood largely depends on the small amount of wages earned out of the vigorous manual labour. The tea tribes who are being worked as unskilled labourers in the tea garden of Assam are entitled very less remuneration. Numerical, tea production, tea garden and labour population in post independent India have been increasing. However, there has been hardly observed any improvement in regard to the socio economic and living condition of the tea tribes in Assam. They are still under the below poverty and most of them are being suffered from malnutrition, insufficient food, cloth and shelter etc. As a result, the tea tribes are poor and hence they are also powerless, resource less and frustrated. The constant exploitation by the tea companies is revealed as the most central reason of their poverty.

## **ILLITERACY**

Studies signify that the educational scenario among the tea tribes is also very pathetic. H. Toppo, an intellectual among the tea tribe community elucidates that from 845 tea gardens there were 34,400 children had studied at 666 schools at tea estates but during the time there were 89,598 child labourers in 1994.<sup>1</sup> Only maximum limit of 27% of children of tea tribes' pass percentage is observed in the matriculation results of different years.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Toppo, H. 1999. 'Violation of Human Rights in the Tea Plantations of Assam And West Bengal.' In Thomas Pulloppilli (ed). *Identity of Adivasis in Assam*. Delhi: Indian Publishers Distributors. Pp. 129-156.

<sup>2</sup> Interim Recommendations Part IV (2006) Assam Administrative Reforms Commission

With the goal of Education for All, the Government of India established the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in 2001 which is planned to guarantee zero school dropouts by the years by 2010. The SSA is being executed in corporation with the governments of the states. SSA endeavor to endow with quality primary education consisting life skills. The SSA has a unique focus on the education for girls and children with special needs. SSA also planned to impart computer education to conduit the digital divide. However, a survey conducted by SSA Mission, Assam during 2002 confirmed that 25% of children in the age group of 6 to 14 are out of school in entire Assam, while 43% are among the tea garden. It is further observed that among the government schools in the tea estates only 11.82% of tea tribes received education in the Barak valley while in Brahmaputra there are only 2.04% among the tea tribe's children able to study in the government run schools. Hence, it is revealed that illiteracy among the tea tribes is very high and the lack of educational facilities and pathetic economic condition further induced the problem of illiteracy.

### **LACK OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The tea garden laborers today are primarily descendents of those who brought to Assam by the British, and have become a subculture in Assam. Over the years, their various languages have been adapted into a mixed language, but the people have retained the last names of their ancestors. They also hold festivals celebrating their original cultures. After India's independence, tea garden labour slowly unionized. Eventually they gained fair representation in the Assam state legislature and in the Indian parliament. Along with the tea tribes of Sonitpur district also play significant role in the state politics particularly the electoral politics. They have also pleasing number of voters in some constituencies of the districts that any of the political parties have to turn their eye to tea tribes. Almost all the political parties whether national or regional always ready to offer a ticket to a tea tribe to contest election. They have also been playing a very important role in the society and politics of Assam.

Despite of the above endeavor of the civil organizations, political leaders still able to succeed to conspire with the narrow political game in the tea-tribes populated areas. No doubt, there are several influential leaders and politician as well as intellectual people among the tea-tribes

however if the whole tea tribes are taken into consideration than in average their number is very few. Hence, it is revealed that the majority among the tea tribes in Assam is illiterate and suffering from poverty and many other socio-economic and political problems are mostly socially and politically not aware. For instance, it is also mention that during the election only Botol, Kombol and Money is taken as very important equipment to won the election. Majority of the people does not vote to a particular candidate after careful judgment of the political ideology or quality of a particular candidate rather they vote to that candidate who provide more money and others during the election campaign.

## **SUBJECT OF EXPLOITATION**

Truly speaking the tea tribes are remains being exploited by their masters and consequently they might be the most backward community in the state. However, the contemporary generation is relatively become more educated and there are a few intellectuals and professionals of various fields among the tea tribes are also come up. The Tea tribes usually settled in the villages located inside the tea estates which are established by their masters These villages are situated in such a remote area and which led to a chance to the planters to exploit the labourers and consequently induced continuous backwardness. The tribes mostly survive in such a situation in which Babu class mainly the higher officials of the tea companies look for chance to exploit them. The tea tribes are unnaturally compelled to live just for the fulfilment of the requirements of their masters. Therefore, it is obvious that they lead a life which is very low standard mainly because of the extensive exploitation by their owners. Hence, their mind does not function beyond their hungry stomach. The place they entitled to work are so interior that it was very difficult for them to go outside and maintain any relation with others which is one of the most important reason that led to their backwardness in the sphere of social, economy and politics.

Dominations and powers of the Tea Industry Association are largely reflected in the wage agreements. The tea tribes are mostly unskilled workers excluding a few workers who work in the processing unit of the tea factories. Most of the workers remain unskilled as no skill training is imparted to these workers in the tea companies. Every worker, young or old, inexperienced

or experienced, permanent or temporary receives the equal wage and is classified as a daily wage worker. There is almost absence of dearness allowance (DA) and also sometimes it is variant accordingly the scale of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The tea tribes who are workers in the tea garden are not paid any wages on Sunday. The amount overdue or arrears due after every wage agreement are hardly ever paid.

## **DEPRIVATION FROM LAND RIGHTS**

The tea tribes or ex tea tribes' lands and for a time their villages where they have settled and cultured for more than 30 or 40 or more years are usually grabbed by big tea companies and transformed these into tea gardens. By and large, some of these things are done very sensibly in collaboration with the government officials. However, land is very important part of the very identity of Adivasis or so called tea tribes and hence deprivation or isolation from land means alienation from their tradition, culture, religion, nature and many more.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the deprivation from land caused several major agitations, struggles and movements among tea tribes.<sup>4</sup> Tea tribes are alienated from their land for various reasons like grabbing of Adivasi lands by non adivasis by fraud means and even the use of force and threats as well as they are also displacement by government for projects. At the present time, the tea tribes are like any other are also displaced from their land because of the powerful impact of the process of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization.<sup>5</sup>

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION**

Inbuilt prejudices and perceptions about the tea labour community are still very much extant among the influential sections of Assamese society. Yet it cannot be denied that in all these years, ever since the first batches of indentured labour were brought into Assam in the 1860s from present day Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, there has

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<sup>3</sup> Barla, E (2005). Right Over Land: Major Source of Adivasi Revolt in Jharkhand: Aboriginals' Right over Land, *Sevartham* 30, p 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Doongdoong, Anthony (2007). *The Kherias: Identity And Modernity*, Ranchi: S.J. Ranchi Province.

not been any major clash involving the tea labour community and their immediate Assamese neighbours. But the absence of conflict between these communities was mainly due to the fact that interface between the two communities was relatively marginal, with the management actively preventing tea workers from mixing with the local population. This is very much a true fact in many gardens even today. Thus, for the average Assamese, the community of tea tribes has remained very much the other, and it is only in recent years that there has been a noticeable change in perception about the Tea Tribes. Their contribution not only towards the economy of but also to Assamese literature and culture become very significant.

## **HEALTH HAZARD**

Health has been a major problem among the tea tribes. The majority of the workers suffer from anaemia, malaria and tuberculosis. There are tea gardens where at least one in every family is being suffered from tuberculosis. The most terribly affected by these diseases are women and children. Only a few among the tea tribe population is considered active after the age of 60 years. The mortality rate among the infant in tea garden areas are also very high which is above the national and state averages. The mortality rate among the tea tribe is also very high (Prasaneswari, 1984). It is being observed that the health system of the tea companies has completely distorted. No doubt, there are garden hospitals and dispensaries but equipped for treatment of only minor injuries. Failure of tea garden health policy has also been understood from the incident of death of around 600 people in the tea garden of Assam in the year 1998 just because of the gastro enteritis. The repentant are that such incidents did not create ripples neither in the administration nor in political circles.

A Study on health problems and nutritional status of tea garden population of Assam inferred that high rate of malnutrition and infectious diseases subsist among the tea tribe's population of Assam. Problems cause by malnutrition such as underweight among children, thinness among adults, and micronutrient deficiency disorder like anaemia are widespread in the tea garden areas where tea tribes' population is basically settled. Thus, the study has shown acute problems of health among the tea tribes in Assam.

Plucking of tea leaves is regarded as most labor intensive task which is actually subtle action which is habitually regarded as the work of women. Women who pluck tea leaves usually bring their young children along with them which may be given few child care alternatives. The tea tribes' women are also not availed any maternity benefit and it is observed that the women work strenuously in the tea garden during the pregnancy and during the post-delivery too. They are also not provided the pre nursing care and compulsory leave in the post delivery period.

Child labor is another allegation against the tea companies. They usually employed the children in work of weeding, plucking, hoeing, and nursery. The children are also asked to remove manually the shrubs which may be harmful to the tea plants. It is again true that the take away of shrubs from the tea plants with naked hands. It is revealed that the children are asked to do such tough work such as plucking under very harsh climatic conditions; fertilization, they are assigned to nursery work, carrying of heavy loads and household work. The children are also compelled to work in the factories which are obviously against law of the land common in the tea garden.<sup>6</sup>

## **SUPERSTITION**

Apart from the above, various superstitious activities still prevalent among the tea tribes people mainly due to the poverty, addiction and most significantly due to the lack of adequate educational facilities etc. These actually induce the tea tribes' people to live with social stigma like witch craft known as daini pratha and black magic called Jado Tona etc. It is inopportune that the tea tribe people yet endure some superstitious belief and social stigma in this age of science and technology, globalization and privatization and after passing out of these long 70th years of independence.

It is very important to mention here that the education, health care facilities, proper road communication etc. are still a far-flung for the people who live in these isolated areas, whereas the State Government has often asserted cent per cent success of health sector in these interior areas. Various tea tribes of these remote tea garden areas breathe their last breath due to

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<sup>6</sup> Raman, Vasanthi, (1992). *Child Labour in the Tea Plantations of North East India*, New Delhi: UNICEF and Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Government of India.

diarrhea, malaria and jaundice etc. These areas are yet far from the fierce look of the media because of the acute ignorance among the tea tribes' people due to the lack of proper education. As the tea tribe people of this areas are not aware of the modern traditions of health and hygiene, various diseases easily infected among people of these areas without their knowledge and their means of treatment are still very much illogical and characterized by superstitious practices.

## **IDENTITY CONTESTATION**

After many generations of subsistence in Assam, it is quite apparent that the tea tribes have very much assimilated into Assamese society and consider Assam to be their homeland. Approximately all the families of tea tribes can speak fluent Assamese and Assamese become primary language of communication for most of the tea tribes even inside the family.<sup>7</sup> Traditions, culture and food habits have been by now almost assimilated with majority Assamese culture. Occasional clashes between the management and the tea garden labourers have been there in Assam Since the very beginning of the migration of tea tribes in Assam (Sanjay Barbora, 1999). Although the cause of their of clash with the management were largely concerning the issue of raising of wage and bonus however in the 90's their object got changed to other issues such development of the tea garden labourers in the state of Assam.

## **WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS – ABUSES AND VIOLATIONS OF RELATED ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS RIGHT TO HEALTH**

Most of the tea workers and their families live in a situation very similar to bonded labour, in precarious housing, many times exposed to the weather, and to contaminated water, in different degrees of food and nutritional insecurity. Both tea garden and domestic work are hard, extensive and unsafe, in particular for pregnant and lactating women. All these conditions

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<sup>7</sup> In conversation with tea tribe families in Rangapara area of Sonitpur district

increase the vulnerability to diseases, which in turn place an added nutritional burden and lead to further loss of working days and income. In breach of Indian law, medical facilities are either not available within the plantation or inadequate. Plantation hospitals and dispensaries are under-staffed, run-down, and do not provide proper treatment. Free medication is not provided to all the workers, and especially casual workers are discriminated against in accessing medical facilities. These situations further affect the ability of the workers to feed themselves, and therefore lead to further aggravation of health status.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Right to Education***

The majority of the families are unable to send their children to secondary school and higher education due to their inability to pay for costs associated with schooling. Furthermore, when schools are available, parents complained of their inadequacy.

### ***Right to Work***

On the one hand, malnutrition reduces the capacity to work and increases the risk of diseases, reducing even further the capacity to work. On the other hand, aside from the lack of adequate remuneration which allows dignified living conditions for the workers and their families (as explained above), in the absence of any alternative livelihood opportunities, aggregated by poverty, indebtedness, and lack of education, the right to freely chose or accept work is a distant prospect for most tea plantation workers. Non-provision of protective clothing and equipment as well as lack of washing facilities (water) in the field for those workers who are engaged in pesticides spraying do not only constitute a breach of the PLA provisions<sup>9</sup>, it has adverse and severe health impacts on the workers and therefore inevitably on the enjoyment of the workers' fundamental rights.

### ***Right to Water and Sanitation***

In some plantations, the burden of fetching water falls disproportionately on women and girls. The management often fails to provide toilet/latrines at the labour lines and at work. Mixing of chemicals is done near the tube well/water pumps, thus eventually contaminating the sources

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<sup>8</sup> A life without dignity- a price of your tea, available at [https://fianat-live-7318544636224c40bb0b0af5b09-745b6a8.divio-media.net/filer\\_public/86/15/8615d9ec-8c5e-45ff-8ad6](https://fianat-live-7318544636224c40bb0b0af5b09-745b6a8.divio-media.net/filer_public/86/15/8615d9ec-8c5e-45ff-8ad6), accessed on 14/08/2019.

<sup>9</sup> Project Labour Agreement provisions.

of drinking water, jeopardizing not only the right to water of the workers, but also their fundamental rights.

## CONCLUSION

The tea garden labourers of Assam known as 'Tea Tribes' led a ghettoized life under colonial regime, almost without any protest, though some trivial instances of resistance are reported in the writings of the colonial era. The Adivasi labourers who came to the Assam tea gardens after having faced a crisis in their life that threatened their survival back home responded to the employment opportunity that came their way with the expansion of tea industry in Assam. But after reaching at their new habitats they were subjected to various forms of torture and were kept under slave-like conditions. In addition to various forms of exploitation that they were subjected to, the British planters, in collusion with administration, had systematically grabbed the lands of the indigenous tribal population in Assam almost throughout the colonial period. The unholy alliance between the colonial rulers and the planters ensured steady recruitment and corresponding tortures of the tea garden labourers. However, having suffered injustices and oppression in colonial era, the tea-garden labourers have, in the post-colonial period, increasingly mobilized themselves at political level and have become conscious about their various rights.

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