

IDENTITY STRUGGLE AND THE ROLE OF EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS AMONG THE TEA PLANTATION LABOURERS IN ASSAM

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Introduction:

The Tea Plantation Laborers of Assam are mainly the immigrants or the decedents of immigrants from the diverse regions of the state and even neighboring states. This came about due to the unwillingness of the indigenous people of Assam to work in the plantation with low wages and isolation from the mainstream. An account of their immigration is usually dated back to early 18th century. The tea plantation workers were mainly the tribal of Bihar, Orissa and Madhaya Pradesh. In talking about the features of the plantation workers, Bhowmik has stated that the low wage, coercion and isolation were common among all the workers besides the indenture nature of recruiting. This might be the apparent reason why still the tea gardens are isolated enclaves and they have got their own type of plantation system.

The socio-economic conditions of the workers remained unchanged till the eve of independence of the country. After 1947, trade union movement starts in the plantations of Assam, Bengal and South India. With the enactment of the Plantation Labour Act 1951 and other subsequent labour legislation, the tea plantation workers started doing collective bargaining and at even the preset time all the agreement are being done by collective bargaining method. But on the other hand, the planters of the gardens had started declining, the number of permanent workers, especially after 1951 and during the early 19th century, more than 50% of permanent workers were regular workers while fifty percent workers were temporary and casuals to whom the benefits of various acts were not to be provided. ¹

1.1 Table: The tea Plantation Workers (1996)

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Sl. No.	State	Total workers
1	Assam	574088
2	West Bengal	259783
3	Total North India (other than Assam and Bengal)	18363
4	South India (Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka)	25043
Total		1102377

Source: CCPA, 1996

The table indicates that 77.0% of the workers were in the northern states while only 33.0% of them were in the southern states of Tamil nadu, Kerela and Karnataka.

1.2 Table: Tea plantation workers (1951-1996)

Year	Number of workers
1951	933497
1961	822834
1971	766593
1981	849206
1991	996735
1992	391704
1993	991019
1994	1028699
1995	1063801

Source: Tea digest: 1996:1-2

The above table indicates that the number of tea plantation workers had been growing substantially with the addition to the number of tea gardens in the country. Though the number of the labourers had increased year by year, but the socio-economic position of tea workers has continued almost unchanged for over a hundred years since the procedure of recruitment. This has contributed to a new social awareness and an awakening among them aimed at bettering their lot through acquisition of advanced training, and giving up of practices like alcoholism that kept them socially backward and retarded their growth.

Identity struggle among the Tea Plantation Labourers:

Historically, tea workers in the Brahmaputra valley have experienced a procedure of 'transplantation' from their native places in the plantation areas, and a lengthy period of acculturation in the plantation setting in inhospitable natural with the restrictions on individual freedom. The socio-economic situation of tea workers remained virtually unaltered for over a hundred years since the procedure of recruitment of migrant workers began in the mid-nineteenth century. The recent formation of a tea tribe identity in the valley is a product of the gradual political consciousness in the milieu of electoral democracy and constitutional provisions among the members of the labour community.

As regards the religious identity of the tea workers, they are pulled from different religions and reflect the diversity in religious beliefs that prevails in India. The huge bulk of the tea workers are drawn from tribal communities and from the lower Hindu castes. The members of Hindu castes have mostly retained their caste traditions and, in many cases, took over some of the local higher caste traditions. i.e. A section of the Panikas known as Kabirpanthis follow the teachings of Kabir. They are strict vegetarians and do not drink liquor. In some of the erstwhile Brahmaputra Tea Co. gardens (presently owned by the Assam Tea Corporation), such as Negheriting and Rungamatty, in the Jorhat-Dergaon area, Muslim tea workers, mainly Julahas (the weaver caste) from Bihar and U.P., are also found. A sizable part of the tribes among the tea workers has adopted Christianity, and the remainder is mostly Hinduized tribes who have kept many elements of their animistic faith. 'The people of the tea labour community follow mainly two religions: Hinduism and Christianity. Hinduism is professed by more than four-fifths of the total population and Christianity by one-fifth of the total population of the community. But basically the people of this community are animist.' ²

So far as language is concerned, it is found that among tea garden tribes, there are three linguistic elements, namely (i) Kolarian speaking groups like the Munda, Ho, Santhal and the Kharia, (ii) Dravidian speaking groups, like the Oraon, Kondh, Gond and the Malpahariya and (iii) groups speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi or dialects of these languages. Only a few of the tea workers have retained use of their native dialects, prominent among them being Oraons who speak Kurukh, and Mundas, Kharias, Turi and Mahali speak various dialects of Mundari.³

In the Upper Assam gardens, Assamese words are prominently used and in some cases Assamese has become the lingua franca within the home and outside. 'Because of mass illiteracy and exclusive tea labour settlements away from settlements of the host population, the process of linguistic adaptation has been rather slow. But the tea labour immigrants in their own way have adopted the language of the host population for the purpose of communication and social contact. In a sample surveys reveal that all adult persons including women can express themselves in Assamese to significant degree. They have developed this faculty on account of their contact with the tea garden ministerial staff consisting of host population and other host population from whom they procure goods in the weekly market.'⁴

The tea worker community's search for dignity and dignity became linked to Assamese identity, aspirations, which had been manifest in the writings and speech of the educated Assamese since the mid-nineteenth century.

The term Adivasi or Adibasi in the context of Assam generally refers to those native tribes who arrived from several regions of India, specially from the Chotanagpur region to figure out in the tea gardens and became permanent residents of Assam. Guha notes that 'the proportion of migrants from Chotanagpur was 44.7% in 1884-8S, which increased to 50% by 1889.⁷⁵ today it may be even more. Among the sixty-one tribes and forty castes in the tea gardens of Assam, the Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Hos, Kharias and other Chotanagpur tribals were the earliest recruits'.⁵

Role of emerging middle class among the tea plantation labourers in their identity struggle:

"The tea plantation industry is deliberately called as the largest organized industry in India employing the largest workforce. In West Bengal, there are 32 recognized unions. In Assam, the Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS) is representing the workers for the last 50 years, and is the only recognized union, though there are some more registered unions, some of them even affiliated to the central trade unions. Yet, there is not a single tea plantation where the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) is fully implemented. The wage agreements reflect more the domination and power of the tea industry associations. The workers are never considered to be skilled except a handful who works in the tea processing factories. Every worker, permanent or temporary, young

or old, inexperienced or experienced, receives the same wage and is classified as daily wage workers. There is no question of computing dearness allowance or variable dearness allowance according to the scale of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). They do not receive Sunday wage. For them Sunday is an unpaid holiday. Arrears due after every wage agreement are seldom paid. The collective bargaining process in the tea industry does not reflect the other necessary aspirations of the tea workers. The agreements are conspicuously silent on housing, healthcare, educational and other facilities.”⁶

The tea plantation labour community is represented by several labour organizations, namely Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Central Indian Trade Union (CITU), Assam ChahMazdoorSangha (ACMS), etc. Mostly the emerging middle class and the educated section of people among them are rise their voice regarding their identity issue under the banner of the different Labour organisations and Student Unions. They make different trade union, pressure group, etc. to pressurize the government to require appropriate steps for their upliftment. Among them, the ACMS has an extensive support based from the emerging middle class section of the community. Both the tea companies’ management and the government have negotiated with these trade unions for wage reform. In Assam, the ACMS has been representing the workers for the last 50 years, and is the only recognized union, though there are some more registered unions, with some of them even being affiliated to the central trade unions. Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) was organized in 1950. At present its members are 3, 25,000. Its head office is located in Dibrugarh district of Assam.⁷ It is affiliated under the India national Trade Union Congress (INTUC). At present Paban Singh Ghatowar, Ex- central minister working as its president. It has 850 member tea estate’s workers.⁸ It was formed by the Manabendra Nath Sharma, a congress leader from Dibrugarh with the help of a group of tea garden trade union leaders.⁹

As of 1998, there were 144 unions, which submitted returns to the Government in the plantation sector of which 111 were involved in tea plantation, and of the total registered membership of 609000, about 584000 were engaged in the tea plantation sector. The INTUC has about 17,000 members in the plantation sector, of which 54 per cent are located in Assam. The CITU has a

membership of approximately 38,000 in the plantation sector, of which 11 per cent is concentrated in Assam.¹⁰

There are many tea labour organizations exist in the tea gardens of Assam, yet the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, is not being fully implemented. The rise of political leaders from the tea plantation laborers has increased during the post-independent era due to the trade union politics in the tea gardens of Assam. Due to the disappointment the tea plantation labourers with the labour unions, the newly emerged student organizations of their community are now playing the role to control over the vital issues regarding the welfare of the tea plantation labour community in Assam. i.e creation of a separate department for the tea garden labour community, disbursement of yearly bonus, granting of tribal status to the tea garden community, the provision of electricity, drinking water and housing, among other things, to the tea garden labour lines etc. The student organizations are earnestly taking up these issues and conveying them to the government. Further, these students' organizations are demanding the amendment of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951, to include suitable methods for the welfare of the community. The rally that took place in Guwahati on November 24, 2007, and which was attended by the community in large numbers, was the outcome of these grievances that the community has been facing for the last hundred years.

The Tea Plantation Labourers are recognized as tribal almost all the parts of India, but not in Northeast. Although the demand for ST came in the later portion of the development during the independent era, but the movement get momentum with the issue of the campaign for securing social-economic growth of the community. It is mainly because the tea tribes of Northeast in general and Assam in particular have been suffered of underdevelopment which gives the leaders of the tribe to come together and form different organization. The names of such organizations includes Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA), Assam Chahh Janajati Yuva Chhatra Parishad, Assam Chah Janagosthi, Pragoti Samiti, Assam Labour Student Union, Assam ChaharuPrakthaChahJanajatiYuvasangtha, Assam ChahJanajatisamite, Assam Chah Janajati Mahila Samii, Chah Janajati Bhasa Samity Vikash Manch. Bit by bit, they began understanding the need to render constitutional protection of their linguistic interest.¹¹ The demand has been led by ATTSA, Assam Chah Mazdur Sangha, and the Adivasis council of Assam.¹² ALA, in due

course has passed a resolution in 15th November, 2015, recommending ST (P) states for the tea tribes and ex-tea tribes of Assam. Although nothing concrete was made out of resolution.¹³ During, 2000, the elected representatives of the community has submitted a memorandum to the government of India for the inclusion of the tea tribes and ex-tea tribes into the list of sixth schedule.¹⁴ Again, in 2004, August 5, the Assam Legislative Assembly submitted a report to Government of India pleading them to include the tea tribes and ex-tea tribes in the list of ST.¹⁵ Simultaneously, a demand for a separate homeland for the Adivasis has also mooted out in Assam. The demands are therefore made to organize a separate 'Adivasis Land'. This demand has been initiated by the All Adivasis Students Association of Assam (AASSA).¹⁶

In 1996, approximately 200 Adivasi lost their life due to the attacks by pro-Bodo NDFB militants in the districts of Bongaigaon and Kokrajhar. Nearly 4 lakhs people were internally displaced due to the attacks and clashes during the Bodoland movement.¹⁷ In 1998 again, 100 Tea Plantation Laborers lost their lives within the same area.¹⁸ In July 2002, NDFB militants massacred 9 Adivasis and injured 5 others in Kokrajhar district. The whole movement got a tremendous from when there was an incident of violence accrued in 2007, in the capital of the state of Assam. In the banner of AASSA, many members of the tea tribes and ex-tea tribes have come to the streets of Guwahati city to raise their demand for a ST status and were attacked by the local people of the city. Causing one person death and nearly 240 persons injured.¹⁹ In October–November 2010, thousands of Adivasis, including women and children, were forcefully evicted by Forest Department without prior notice from Lungsung forest area under Haltugaon Forest division in Kokrajhar district of Assam. The Forest department burnt down hundreds of houses in 59 villages in Lungsung forest area during the eviction drive and perpetrated various atrocities on the villagers. About 1200 to 1400 families comprising over 7000 persons were rendered homeless.²⁰ In all these incidents, trade unions of Tea Plantation labourers play an important role in demanding appropriate steps from the government side. But these organizations not in real terms do any changes in the government's attitude.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above demonstrates that their history and the exploitative plantation system have reduced their status inside the country. They take in slowly absorbed a low self-image and have for all practical purposes lost their tribal identity. That is the reason why they

want ST status within the province of Assam. Educated middle class people among this community has been playing a big role in their identity struggle movements. With the emerging new middle class of this community, now a day they are able to take part either directly or indirectly in the decision making process of the government. Now they have many writers, political leaders, intellectuals in Assam, who are basically belong to the middle class section of their community.

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