

LABOURERS IN TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO STATE OF ASSAM)

Dr. S. S. Das¹ and Keertika Singh²

The Tea Garden Community is still below poverty line. The tea plantation is a large agro-based and labour intensive industry. Tea can be placed both under agriculture and industry. It is industry in the sense that tea is a processed and manufactured commodity, which is subject to excise duty and cess. Unlike most other industries, technological advancement has not been able to reduce the importance of labour in tea industry. The real change and improvement to the status and condition of the community is still a far cry. Nevertheless, the problems faced by this community are not at all impossible to overcome provided if there is a political will and a determination.

Keywords: Tea Labour, Tea Garden Community, Plantation Labour, Tea Union etc.

INTRODUCTION

The 'Plantation Industry' which was developed over 150 years, has a colonial origin. It is now a valuable asset to the nation. Plantation industry is a branch of agriculture in a broader sense. The organisation of modern plantation relates more to the factory than to the farm. Generally, there is a specialization in one crop, which is produced on a large scale for export and for maintenance work. The output is continuous through out the year. The major plantation crop like tea, coffee, rubber, cardamon have now developed to a large extent.

Chinese varieties of tea were first introduced into India by the British, in an attempt to break the Chinese monopoly on tea. India

-
1. Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law, Centre for Juridical Studies, Dibrugarh University, Dibrugarh-786004, Assam, Contact No.- 91-9435594172, Email das77juris.ram@gmail.com/ssdas@dibru.ac.in
 2. Law Scholar, School of Law, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun-248007, Uttarakhand.

is the second largest tea producer in the world. We Indians cannot think about beginning our day without sipping our favourite cup of tea. ManiramDewan (1806 – 1858) was the first Indian tea planter, and it credited with establishing the first commercial plantations of the Assamese variety of tea. Tinsukia city is surrounded by many lush green endless tea gardens. Some of these tea gardens have been around from 1820's when the British first started tea cultivation in India. Today, tea contribute majority to the states' economy. The first tea garden started by the British in 1823 is called the Chabua tea garden in Tinsukia district- 20 Kms West of Tinsukia city. Chabua derives its name from 'chah' meaning tea and ' buwa ' meaning productions. There are 115 large tea gardens apart from 11,000 small tea – cultivators in Tinsukia district alone.

TEA AS A SOURCE OF REVENUE TO ASSAM :-

In so far as income from tea is concerned , only a portion of it is taken to be agricultural income under the Agricultural Income Tax in Assam. Agricultural income derived from land by the cultivation of tea means that portion of income derived from the cultivation, manufacture and sale of tea as is defined to be agricultural income for purpose of the enactments relating to Indian Income Tax. Income from tea is a mixed income which is derived from agricultural operations and manufacturing. Tea plantation in Assam, which began in 1899, has been the state's major revenue earner by way of agricultural income tax. With the tea industry having played a vital role in the state's economy, tea is rightly called the green gold of Assam.

DEVELOPMENT OF TEA INDUSTRY IN ASSAM:-

Assam is blessed with a high potential for development of resource and demand based industries and produces more than 50% of the tea produce in India and about 1/6th of the tea produced in the world. Tea industry has contributed substantially to the economy of Assam. Assam tea industry is India's largest tea industry and second largest tea production region in the world after China. About 17% of the workers of Assam are engaged in the tea industry.

In India, plantations account for 0.8% of the total cultivable land. They also contribute 5 % to the national income in agriculture. Besides they provide more employment per rupee of investment in the country than either agriculture or in industry. Plantation industry employs a large amount of labour force especially women workers which are highest compared to any industry. Moreover, this industry helps in the development of other industries. Among the different plantation crops, tea is considered to be the most important crop in our country. It is the second biggest foreign exchange earner and is exported to about 80 countries. Moreover it provides direct gainful employment to a large number of people and helps in providing indirect employment in various sectors like road construction, transportation, building of warehouses, manufacture of plywood tea chest, aluminium foil, tinsplate, metal fittings, paper, card board, fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, coal, iron, steel, etc. Apart, from its contribution to the economy of India, tea today provides to the common man a pleasant and stimulating non-alcoholic beverage.

TEA: AGRICULTURE AS WELL AS INDUSTRY :-

Tea can be placed both under agriculture and industry. It is industry in the sense that tea is a processed and manufactured commodity, which is subject to excise duty and cess. It is also an agricultural crop because it is grown on land and thus agricultural income tax is also levied on it. The number of tea producing countries in the world has been increasing since 1950 and at present there are more than 80 such countries. Among the principal tea producing countries in the world, India occupies the first place in terms of area. While the world tea area is increased by 186 %, India's rose by just 54 %. India's tea area as percentage to world tea area has declined over the years from 34.33% to 18.54%. The World's production increased by 264% during the period, while India's production enhanced by 133%. India's production to world production has substantially reduced from 41.60% to 25.65%. India is the largest exporter of tea in the world. However, Sri Lanka has been closely following India's footsteps. India's share in world export expressed in terms of percentage has declined at present. A considerable volume of tea is being exported from India and this has given the tea industry a place of importance

in the national economy of India as an earner of foreign exchange. Tea plantation industry not only occupies a very important role in the national economy as an earner of foreign exchange but it also provides gainful employment to a large number of people. This industry, which is largely labour intensive provides employment to a large number of female workers. Tea is a commodity which is subject to direct taxation in the form of excise duty, export duty, and cess, under Tea Act 1951. In addition to these, various state levies are also imposed on the tea industry and these varied from state to state.

TEA AS A SUPPORTER OF ALLIED ACTIVITIES :-

Tea is the mainstay of plywood industry in our country. Tea produced in different regions is mostly packed in plywood chests. Tea helped the coal industry. Huge amount of coal is required for running the factories. Of course, in recent times, instead of coal, gas is being used. Further, tea industry facilitates the fertilizer industry and forest industry. It supports the industries engaged in the manufacture of pesticides, insecticides and weedicides. It also add to the development of various industries like iron, steel, cement, aluminium foils, tin plates, metal fittings, paper, cardboards, transport and warehousing.

A short Overview of Tea Laborers of Assam

The tea plantation is a large agro-based and labour intensive industry. Situated in remote rural areas. It is the single largest employer in the country providing work to millions of labourers directly to which 50 percent are women. In every stage of agricultural operations (cultivation, plucking, manuring, irrigation, weed control, pest control, transportation of green leaves) and manufacture (withering, rolling, fermenting, drying, weighing, packaging) labour is an essential factor. Unlike most other industries, technological advancement has not been able to reduce the importance of labour in tea industry.

The beginning of British rule in Assam was also the date of industrial revolution in Assam. The British East India Company was eyeing the potential of this rich land and was looking for an

opportunity to exploit its resources. The Burmese invasion and internal conflicts gave them an opportunity and the colonial planters started tea industry in 1835. The evolution of tea industry in Assam is very interesting and S. Perceival Griffiths described it in a vivid way in his book *History of Tea Industry in India* (Griffiths, 1967). Some other historical studies of tea industry of Assam and process of recruitment of labour of Assam plantation are *Plantation Labour in India* (Das, 1931); *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (Guha, 1977); *Assam in the Day of Company* (Borpuzari, 1980).

The plant was indigenous to Assam but they did not know the process of manufacture. Therefore, when the British began commercial plantation of tea, they had to import Chinese expert and labour, both for cultivation and manufacture of tea. In the early years, tribes of China and Burma used a simple indigenous process of making tea. The early Chinese steamed the leaves, then dried it over fire and pressed it into cakes and crushed it into powder. In the experimental days, when Capt. Bruce took charge of the government plantation, he had only two Chinese black tea makers with twelve native assistants. Griffiths (1967) quotes at one place, "Bruce found himself much hampered by the lack of satisfactory local labour".

The tea industry, at the initial period required a huge labour force. Forest had to be cleared, roads and houses had to be built and planted areas had to be kept free from quickly growing weeds. The British had to do a lot for collecting the local labour. Local Assamese people were not willing to work in the gardens of Assam. The reason of local labourer's apathy to work in the gardens of Assam has been described by Goswami and Gogoi (1984) as follows. "The importation of people to work in the gardens from densely populated low wage areas, became necessary not because of general indolence of the indigenous people as is alleged by some writers, including Census Superintendents, but because of a number of factors such as depopulation of Assam caused by the civil wars and of the Burmese insurrections during the later half of the 18th and early part of the 19th century, the non-existence of a class of landless cultivators. Self sufficiency, and of lack of demand for cash, the inhuman treatment meted out to the garden labourers by planters etc.

The Kacharis were the only local people who came to work in British gardens. There fore, there grew a competition among the planters to recruit Kachari labour. They also got hold of some Nagas and Singpho labour to do some unskilled work in the gardens. Borpujari (1980) described in the following words- "Of the unskilled labour the planters had to depend at beginning mostly on Assamese and occasionally on Nagas and Singphos".

For such reasons mentioned above the planters imported Chinese labour from Singapore at very high expenses. With the growth of industry, supply of cheap labour from Indian sources became necessary to replace the costly Chinese. The Assam Company made an attempt in 1841 to recruit labour from Chotanagpur Division in Bihar. An outbreak of Cholera however resulted in failure of the project at the initial stage. Nevertheless, attempts made by them and others had continued sporadically since then.

The act of importing labour from other provinces was not so easy. There were practically no roads, and only elephants and country boat helped them. A country boat journey from Calcutta to Upper Assam took over four months. The condition of the working places were so bad that, there was a feeling in the country that it would be "better to go to Andamans (*Kalapani*) than to a tea garden (Awasthi, 1975)".

In 1859, a Tea Planters Association was formed to look after the recruitment and this was known as *Free Contractor* system. There grew a strong competition among the contractors for importing labour from outside. "Many of them were simple tribal people who were deceived with false promises by wicked contractors" (Gohain, 1992).

The only legislation found at that time, regulating the Managers and Labourers was comprised in Section 492 of the IPC and Act XIII of 1859 (*Workmen's Breach of Contract Act*). Since then a series of Act was passed to protect the recruits and the Act of 1914 put an end to contractor system and established what is known as the garden *Sardari System* of recruitment.

With the rapid growth of the industry, the demand for labour also rose and as a result of Act of 1932, the Tea District Labour

Association (TOLA) was formed for the purpose of recruitment of labour. The TDLA had a highly organised vast network of activities from Nasik to Tinsukia and recruited labour from six recruiting provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madras. In Guwahati, on the east of the present Assam State Transport Corporation there was huge depot with many European Officials and British Chief Medical Officer. The recruits came from various communities namely, Mundas, Chera, Kol, Kheria, Asur, Santai, Sawra, Oraon, Paidi, Odde, Gonds, Koya, Parja, Dam, Majhi, Godaba, Tanti, Mala, Turi, Telenga, Bhuiya, Kohar, Bawri, Kamar, Lohar, Kumar, Nayaks and many others. The last recruitment was in 1960 after which further recruitment was stopped as the industry became surplus. "The position of labour supply in the tea gardens in Assam had reversed from shortage to surplus and unemployment in the tea gardens appeared in the scene" (Phukan, 1984).

The TDLA depots all over worked for repatriation of labour, but vast majority refused repatriation and stayed back choosing Assam as their home. The successors of these tea workers have been happily welded into a tea community with its own culture and a sense of keenness, which we can proudly term as miniature national integration.

The condition of workers in the plantation sector was different from those in other industries. It was not possible therefore to fit plantation worker in general framework of the Industrial Labour Legislation. On the other hand there was however no comprehensive legislation regulating the condition of labour in Tea Industry upto 1951. The Labour Investigation Committee, therefore, recommended plantation areas and consequently the *Plantation Labour Act* of 1951 was enacted. The *Plantation Labour Act* is mainly welfare-oriented legislation covering the working and living conditions of the workers.

Another landmark in the history of tea labourers was the inauguration of *Assam Tea Plantations Provident Fund Scheme* (ATPPF). The scheme was introduced during 1955 for the millions of downtrodden dependent of Tea Plantations in Assam and this is one of the pioneering and extensive social security measures in the world.

However, the global trade regime has put more challenges

to the plantation sector and there is stiff competition in the international market of tea. The current trend of globalization is not very encouraging as far as the social security programmes for the upliftment of the poor working communities are concerned. Therefore, there are disputes, conflicts everywhere between management and workers. However, problems and difficulties should be dealt with greater understanding and compassion. Cooperation between them will no doubt bring competitiveness of tea plantations in the present global environment.

FRADULENT RECRUITMENT AND SUFFERINGS OF THE LABOURERS:-

The planters of Assam appointed their agents to collect labourers for their gardens. Generally, the agents were the local people of those places from where the garden labourers were collected. The agents were known as "Arakattis" (frauds) they were cheats, betrayers and most notorious in the labourer imparting purpose. At the time of collection the labourers were allured to a bright future by the frauds. In this way the labour collection went on. The recruitment through the agent was not changed. It is also called "fradulent recruitment". "Coolie" was a term used by the tea garden authorities to denote labourers (now considered derogatory by the community). They were not allowed to remain absent in their duty for a single day even when they were unwell. Even they were not allowed to meet labourer of another tea garden. Prior permission from the manager of the tea garden was necessary for marriage of the labourers. In addition to emigrants labourers, tea planters also forced labourers to increase the birth rate. So that each garden could garner enough labour forced. Abortion was strictly prohibited. In addition to this the tea garden manager heaped severe atrocities on them for mere personal pleasure. A tea garden manager in Darrang district caught a boy, in his attempt of burglary and he was beaten to death. His dead body was subsequently found with marks which showed that he had been most cruelly beaten. In Cachar district a boy was flogged to death only because he did not salute the European manager.

The worst among such incident was the shoot-out and which killed a tea garden labourer by the European planter of the Kharial tea

estate of cachar in 1921 due to refusal of the said labour to provide his daughter as a concubine to the planter for a night. Facing the atrocities many tea garden labourers often became insane

OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY OF THE TEA GARDEN WORKERS :-

The workers can be broadly divided into three (3) categories namely permanent, casual and self-employed. The permanent and casual workers are the ones who are engaged in the estates sector. While the small growers belong to the self-employed category. The permanent workers can be considered to be engaged in formal employment while casual and self-employed work status corresponds to engagement in the informal employment. Each of these employment statuses are characterised by different levels of vulnerabilities owing to the risks/insecurities related to jobs such as job security, income security and vulnerabilities related to condition of work. For instance, the casual worker does not have job security or income security, while the permanent worker is assured of both.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TEA PLANTATION LABOURERS :-

When it comes to the composition of labour force, they were four categories of workers; male, female, adolescents and children. However, now the employment of children below the age of 14 years has been prohibited in the industry under the Child Labour (Abolition and Regulation) Act of 1986, so there exists now only three categories of workers. In a country where the work participation of women is notably low, this proportion is comparatively much higher than the participation of women in other activities in the economy. Hence, it indicates the presence of feminized labour in the tea plantations. They earn their livelihood working in the gardens and that is the sole source of income.

ORGANISATION OF MANAGEMENT :-

The tea estate manager is a one - point contact for everyone involved with a tea garden. His area of activity encompasses production management, tea husbandry involving plant physiology,

entomology, industrial relations and a lot more. Staying in the tea garden, he has to look after each and everything taking place there. With the help of junior assistants and assistant managers, depending on the requirement of the garden, he has to supervise plantation work, from planting to plucking, processing to packing and transport of tea to auction houses. A tea garden manager is a person wholly and solely responsible for running a tea estate. He even has to oversee purchase of materials, do financial management, cost management, collective bargaining with unions, factory managements, etc.

ROLE OF TEA BOARD OF INDIA :-

The Tea Board of India is a state agency of the Government of India established to promote the cultivation, processing, and domestic trade as well as export of tea from India. It was established by the enactment of the Tea Act in 1953 with its headquarter in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). The Tea Board India is responsible for the assignments of certification numbers to exports of certain tea merchants. This certification is intended to ensure the teas' origin, which in turn would reduce the amount of fraudulent labelling on rare teas such as ones harvested in Darjeeling.

The Tea Board India's tasks include endorsement of the diverse production and productivity of tea, financial support of research organisations and the monitoring of advances in tea packaging as it relates to health beneficial aspects. It coordinates research bodies, ensuring the technical support of the tea trade in the global industry. Offices are located in Kolkata, London, Moscow and Dubai.

CONCLUSION

The trade union movement in the plantation industry must launch a vigorous movement to liberate the exploited labourers from the yoke of crude and primitive form of exploitation finally. The trade union must crush the prevailing feudal relationship between the planters and the labourers. The pro-monopoly role of the government must be exposed before the nation with regard to disparity in wages and service condition and should be fought out the labourers isolation from the working class movement must not continue any longer

and they must be effectively integrated with the main stream of the trade union movement. The existing localized character of the trade union movement in tea plantation industry must be changed and it must attain a real national character. The local potential of the united power and strength of the plantation labour must be pulled to wage long drawn movement to realize the due share of the wealth generated by the plantation labours and to ensure their better livelihood and decent life.

In fact, 90 per cent of the Tea Garden Community is still below poverty line. The real change and improvement to the status and condition of the community is still a far cry. Nevertheless, the problems faced by this community are not at all impossible to overcome provided if there is a political will and a determination. With this optimistic view, some recommendations are therefore put forwarded in the following to improve the overall situation of the labours of various tea gardens of Assam vis-à-vis the Trade Unions of tea gardens.

- Firstly, the tea workers should be educated to understand their legitimate rights and also their duties towards the tea industry and to yield better production.
- The tea workers should be conscious and aware of the facilities and privileges so that they can avail the maximum.
- The trade unions of the tea gardens should guard the workers against the exploiters by uniting them.
- The trade unions of the tea gardens should not let themselves influence, dictated by the ruling political party, and must always give first priority to the interest and welfare of the labourers for which the Union is raised.
- The trade unions must lead and guide the ignorant labourers at the time of election to choose the right candidate who is committed to the well being of the labourers.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings and observations are indicated below in brief

as follows :

- (i) Environmental pre-requisites for participative culture like mutual trust and confidence amongst all categories of workers working in the tea estates exists in the tea garden of North East India.
- (ii) Sincere attempts by various groups like the executives, union leaders and the workers can help in making participative culture a way of work life amongst the tea garden workers of the North East India.
- (iii) The existing participative cultural forums are being recognized as important communication channels and as vehicles for propagating industrial peace and prosperity of the tea estates.
- (iv) In the *Bichar* form of informal voluntary participation, we have seen that the participative cultural traits are more active.
- (v) It has very strong Collective Bargaining machinery, where the spirit of participative culture is effectively and efficiently used.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to make participative culture a way of work lite for the tea garden workers of the North East India, in particular and that for the entire tea industry in general, we may recommend the following steps :

- (a) Need for bringing about more direct involvement of the workers than at present, not only for solving their own social problems but also to solve their work related problems in the *Bichars*.
- (b) Securing an effective participation of workers in certain work related matters.
- (c) To develop a more effective participative culture in the tea estates of North East India so that its scope can be extended to implement through the forums like the *Bichars*, modern

management concepts like 'Quality Circles' 'Total Quality Management', 'Workers' Participation, in Management and such other concepts in the tea industry in particular and in all other industries in general, not only in India but also in any Third World Developing economy

References

- Barpujari, H.K., 1980, Assam in the Days of Company. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication.
- Bhadra, M., 1997, "Changing Family, Authority, Role and Status of the Tea Plantation Women Workers in Darjeeling District", in R.K. Bhadra and Mita Bhadra (Eds.): Plantation Labourers of North East India, pp. 229-246, Dibrugarh: N.L. Publishers.
- Bhuiyan, N.C., 1960, Cha Bagichar 83 nua, Jorhat Asom Sahitya Sabha.
- Bose, S.K., 1954, Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry. Bombay Chaudhury, T.K., 1982, Demographic Trends in Assam 1921-1971.
- Chakravorty, R.N., 1997, Socio-Economic Development of Plantation Workers in North East India, Dibrugarh: N.L. Publishers.
- Crawford, T.C., 1924, Hand Book of Castes and Tribes Employed in the Tea Estates of North East India, Calcutta: Indian Tea Association.
- Das, K., 1998, North East Sun, September 1-14, p. 18.
Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.
- Dey, S., 1981, Problems of the Tea Gardens in Assam. Calcutta: Research India Publishing
- Gadgil, D.R., 1971, Industrial Evolution of Indian Recent Times 1860-1937. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gait, E.A., 1926, History of Assam, Simla: Thacker Spink and Co. Griffiths, P., 1967, The History of Indian Tea Industry, London: Welden Feld and Nicolson.
- Goswami, P.C., 1970, The Economic Development of Assam. Bombay: Asian Publishing House.
- Guha, A., 1977, Planter Raj to Swaraj-Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947. New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research.
- Halayya, M., 1972, An Economic Analysis of the Indian Tea Industry and Public Policy, Dharwar: Karnatak University.
- Harlaka, S.S., 1975, Tea Garden Labour in Assam, Dhubri (Assam): People's Publishing House.
- Harler, C.P., 1964, The Culture and Marketing of Tea, London: Oxford University Press.

- Harler, C.P., 1964, *The Culture and Marketing of Tea*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hate, C.A., 1969, *The Changing Status of Women*. Bombay: Allied Publishers.
- Hugh, T., 1974, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of India Labour Overseas 1830-1920*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Hurlock B.E., 1981, *Developmental Psychology. A Life Span Approach*, New Delhi: Tata Mc Graw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd.
- I.L.O., 1938, *Industrial Labour in India, Series A, Industrial Relation, No.41*. Geneva.
- Jha, J.C., 1996, *Aspects of Indentured Inland Emigration to North East India, 1859-1918*, New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
- Jha, U., A. Mehta and L. Menon, 1998, *Status of Indian Women: Crisis and Conflict in Gender issues*, New Delhi :Kaniska Publishers Distributors.
- Kar; R.K., 1981, "Tea industry in Assam: A Chronological Account" *Man and Life*, 7: 131-150.
- Lowie, R.H., 1929, *Primitive Society*, London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd.
- Misra, S.R., 1986, *Tea Industry in India*. New Delhi: British Publishing House.
- Moore, W.E.. 1969, *The Impact of Industry*. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India
- Naik, K.C..1973, *Tea Population of Dibrugarh*, Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing House.
- Parsons, T., 1954, *Essay in Sociological Theory*, New York: Free Press. Phukan, U., 1984, *The Ex-tea Garden Labour Population in Assam*, Delhi: B.R Publishing Corpn.
- Phukan, U., 1984, *The Ex Tea Garden Labour Population in Assam*.
- Poddar, M.1980, *The Trade Union of Assam*. Calcutta: Calcutta Publishing House.
- Quinn, N., 1977, *Anthropological Studies on Women's Status*, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, pp. 181-225, Durham: Department of Anthropology, Duke University.
- Ranadive, K.R., 1982, *Accumulation, Employment and Labour Aristocracy: Towards Understanding Working Class Reality in India*. Bombay: Tata Institute of Social Sciences.
- Roy Burman, B.K., 1968, *Socio Economic Process in Tea Plantations with Special Reference to Tribal Labourers*, Delhi: Census of India, 1961, Vol. 1, part VIIA.
- Sullerot, E., 1971, *Women, Society and Change*, London: World University Press.
- Thompson and A. Finalyson, 1953, "Married Women Who Work in Early Motherhood," *British Journal of Sociology*, 114:150-68.
- Tripathy, J., 1999, *Women and their Work Environment*, in Sharada Rath and Navaneeta Rath (Eds.) *Women in India: A Search for Identity*, pp. 129-147, New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt. Ltd.