

Tea Plantations and Socio-Cultural Transformation: The Case of Assam, India

Chandra Kala Magar^{†*} and Bimal Kumar Kar[‡]

Abstract

The tea plantations of Assam, which constitute the country's 53.97 per cent tea area, 49 per cent tea worker population, and 52.04 per cent tea production, occupy an important place in the economy, culture and polity of the state. The onset of tea plantations during British colonial rule has not only changed the landscape of the upper Brahmaputra valley through green tea bushes being nourished by tea tribes from east-central India, but also evolved a distinct tea culture. Although formation of small tea growers has added a new dimension to the growth of tea industry of Assam in recent times, the culture that emerged due to the long continued interaction of British planters, tea worker tribes and indigenous Assamese is well reflected in the language, way of life, work culture, food habits and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates in the state. In fact, the impact of tea culture is so penetrative that it has been able to bring about development in the form of tea festival, tea tourism, tea folk songs and dances, etc. in the state. An attempt is made in this paper to explore the role of tea plantation and the people associated with it to the socio-cultural transformation of Assam based on both secondary data and primary data through field study. The primary data have been collected from selected tea estates, tea garden worker colonies, tea-tribe villages and urban dwellers.

Key words: Tea Plantation, Tea Tribes, Tea Culture, Ethnography, Interviews, Assam, India.

[†]Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, B.Borooah College, Guwahati, Assam, India,
Email: chandrakala_magar@yahoo.in

^{*}Corresponding Author

[‡]Head, Department of Geography, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India, Email: bimalkar@gauhati.ac.in

©2016 Magar and Kar. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

Tea occupies a very intricate place in the economy and lives of the people of Assam as it not only has the largest acreage under tea contributing to more than half of tea produced in India, but it is also quite popular all over as breakfast and evening drink. It is not only used as refreshment during our day-to-day life but is also consumed at social events and many formal ceremonies have been created for tea. Tea culture in Assam is very rich as it involves all the intricate activities related to tea right from tea production and its history of origin to tea brewing, tea arts and ceremony, tea festival and all the health aspects including the simple process of preparation to consumption of tea. Further, the impact of growing tea tribe population along with the continued socio-cultural interaction, and embracement with the host community has had significant bearing in forming the present social fabric of the greater Assamese society. With this background and with the help of primary and secondary data, the present study assesses the role of tea in various spheres of life and the socio-cultural transformation of the people associated with it.

The history of tea in India began with the plantations of tea in the lowlands of Assam during the late 1930s by the British after its discovery by Robert Bruce and Maniram Dewan in the hills of Assam. Today, due to the recent inclusion of small tea growers the tea plantations in Assam have grown and mushroomed to such an extent that it has become one of the largest tea growing regions of the world producing 52.04 per cent of India's tea, constituting 53.97 per cent of the country's tea area and providing employment to 49 per cent of the tea worker population. Further, the tea tribe population being extremely diverse in terms of religious and linguistic composition, is intricately associated with tea plantation, processing and production, and bears immense significance to the socio-culture and economy of Assam. They are mostly rural in nature, live in almost every district of Assam, and their density varies according to the number of tea plantations. Hence they are more numerous in

upper and central Assam than lower Assam. This population today constitutes about 20 per cent of the total population of Assam and their long going socio-cultural interactions and assimilations with the greater Assamese society has added a new dimension not only to the growth of tea industry but also to the culture of Assam which is well reflected in the language, way of life, work culture, food habits and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates. Though few works on tea industry in Assam have so far been taken up (Baruah, 2008; Sengupta, 2009; Kurmi, 2007; 2010), yet, there has not been any remarkable in depth study of the tea tribe community and its socio-cultural transformation, and therefore, the present study bears significance.

Background

Socio-cultural transformation is a highly complex, dynamic and universal process. The change may be termed as endogenous, if the force enables from within the social structure or exogenous, if they arise due to forces impinging on society from outside. These structural changes can be in terms of demographic, familial, stratificational, economic and political spheres of the society (Yamamoto, 1999). Historically, the society of Assam has been continuously subject to socio-cultural change due to the influx of outsiders as well as due to the internal growth of the population. One such influx of population occurred when the British started the tea plantations in Assam in 1837 and recruited huge number of cheap, hard pressed and illiterate labourers (Money, 1883) belonging to lower and downtrodden communities such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Khond, etc. from famine and poverty-stricken areas of Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal having diversity in respect of their language, tradition, culture, religion and social background on false promises such as higher wages, better life, better living conditions and at the end of contract period they would be free to go (Guha, 1977).

After the discovery of tea in Assam in 1823 by Robert Bruce and the success of the first experimental tea estate in Chabua, Dibrugarh, there was a tremendous growth of the tea industry in Assam during the last three decades of the 19th century due to the continuing immigration of cheap labour force, rising demand of British for Indian tea, easy availability of large tracts of cheap virgin lands due to Wasteland Rules¹ and opening up of auction centres in different parts of India. Further, the inclusion of small tea growers during the 1980s enhanced the growth, production and spatial distribution of the tea gardens so much so that today among all the states of India, Assam is the major producer and grower of tea (52.04 per cent of production and over 53.97 per cent of area) in the country (Tea Statistics, 2014).

The new plantation economy which was enslaved by foreign capital and immigrant usury brought about a radical transformation within the local society itself by modernising the fast-growing sectors such as plantations, coal mines, oil fields and transport and communication on one hand and the overall multi-structured economy on the other (Guha, 1977). However, the most significant of all these phenomena is the culture that emerged due to the long continued socio-cultural exchange, interactions and assimilations between the British planters, the indigenous Assamese society and the tea tribes. These can be well interpreted in the tea drinking habits and food habits, language, way of life, work culture, and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates in the state. In fact, the impact of tea culture is so penetrative that it has been able to bring about development in the form of tea festival, tea tourism, tea folk songs and dances, etc. in the state (Baroowah, 2006).

¹ To make the wastelands available for tea cultivation, a set of rules were framed by the British Government on 6th March 1838 known as Wasteland Rules, through which only the Europeans could avail themselves of reclamation of wasteland at minimal concessional rates while it excluded the local people from all local grants (Guha, 1977).

Taking these backgrounds into account, this study is taken up to present the origin and growth of tea plantations in Assam, to understand their socio-cultural transformation with regard to tea drinking pattern, dietary system and to analyse the transformation and diffusion of the tea workers' community in the state and their relationships with greater Assamese society.

Database and Methodology

The study is based on research conducted using interviews, ethnography and archival research. The necessary archival data have been obtained from sources such as statistical handbooks, ABITA (Assam Branch Indian Tea Association) centre, government offices, Tea Board of India, etc. Primary data have been collected through schedule-cum-questionnaire interviews by personally visiting the selected tea estates and their surrounding areas towards understanding the tea production processes and associated issues, and socio-economic conditions of the tea garden workers. The data collected are processed and analysed using appropriate statistical techniques. Necessary map and suitable tables have been prepared by using appropriate cartographic techniques to illustrate a clear exposition of the problem.

The Study Area

With a total area of 78,438 sq.km, Assam is located in the hot and humid monsoon region of tropical latitudes (24.3°N to 28°N) and eastern longitudes (89.5° to 96.1°E), and is bordered on the north and east by Arunachal Himalayas, on the south by Meghalaya Plateau and hills of Patkai-Manipur-Arakan Yoma (Figure 1). Assam is mostly a plain region drained by the mighty river Brahmaputra in the north and river Barak in the south and in between the two river valleys there lie the Karbi Plateau and North Cachar Hills. The temperature varies between 6°C and 8°C during cold arid winter to 35°C and 38°C having hot and humid rainy summer. It enjoys a heavy summer rainfall with average precipitation of 250-300 cm annual rainfall extending over 9 months and a frost-free winter. Hence, this region provides a suitable physiography and

climate for its unique malty taste and therefore, the tea plantations are largely concentrated in the relatively rolling highlands areas of the upper Brahmaputra and Barak valleys.

Though tea gardens can be found in almost all the plain and hill districts of Assam, its concentration is mostly high in Upper Brahmaputra valley than the lower Brahmaputra or Barak river valley. Hence, to make a comparative socio-economic analysis of the tea gardens in different high and low

concentration areas of Assam, the districts selected for the present study are Dibrugarh and Sonitpur having high concentration of large and small tea gardens, Karbi Anglong being a hill district and Kamrup with low concentration of tea gardens in the Brahmaputra valley and district Hailakandi in Barak valley. From each district, two tea gardens one large and one comparatively small along with two small tea gardens was randomly selected for understanding the prevailing problems and prospects of tea production.

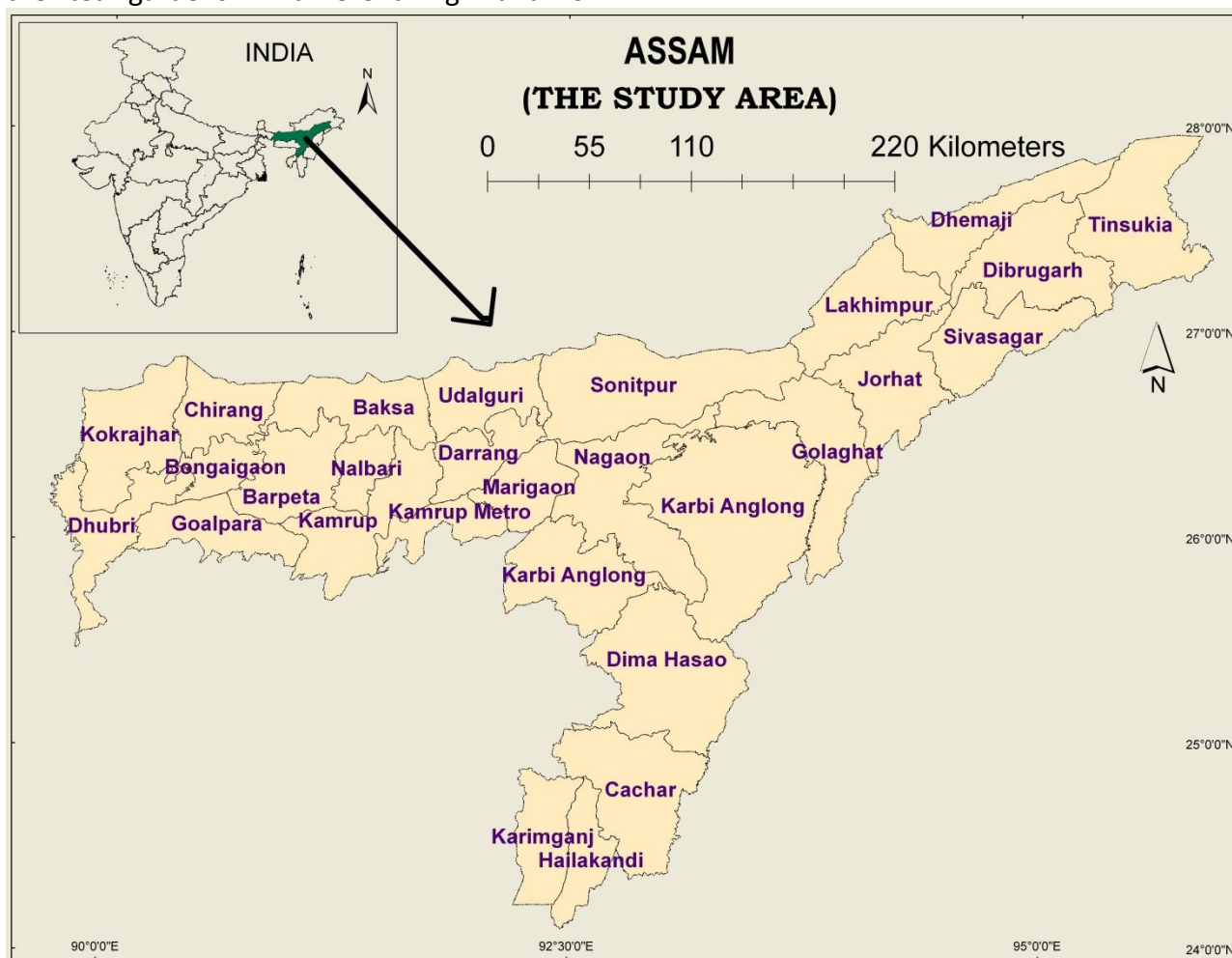


Figure 1: The Location Map (Source: Authors)

Origin and Development of Tea Plantations in Assam

Tea, a very cheap and stimulating drink is one of the most widely consumed non-alcoholic beverages throughout the world and is grown in more than 32 countries due to its refreshing, revitalizing and medicinal values. Although tea cultivation began in China about 4000 years ago, it was not until the 8th century A. D. that the Japanese discovered it and later others

(Kydd, 1921; Yee, 2013). Tea cultivation started in India in the middle of 19th century when the plantations were established in Assam by the British (Baildon, 1882; Money, 1883; Anonymous, 1885). At present, India is the largest producer and consumer of tea in the world and accounts for around 27 per cent of world production (Khuller, 2006). However, due to the erratic weather condition accompanied by long period of drought and heavy

temperature, the tea production in India's largest tea-growing state of Assam during the two consecutive years 2014 and 2015 has witnessed a plummeting by 5 and 6 per cent compared to 2013 (Singh, 2015, *The Economic Times*). The major tea-growing areas in eastern India are Assam, West Bengal, and Tripura. Assam tea has a rich, deep-amber colour which is famous for its brisk, strong and malty character and it gained importance as breakfast tea as it is a perfect tea to wake up to. The second flush orthodox Assam Teas are valued for its rich taste, bright liquor and are considered to be one of the greatest in demand around the world.

The growth of tea industry during the beginning was quite remarkable due to factors such as easy terms of the government grants, low investment costs, leasing of land at minimum rate, availability of cheap labourers (Gruning, 1909), emergence of private entrepreneurs, operations of daily steamers and opening of railways in Assam and establishment of Calcutta Tea Traders Association. However, due to the two world wars there was a slump in growth from 1918 to 1939. Nonetheless, from 1939 to 1950, the tea industry in Assam witnessed a short period of prosperity due to further extension in tea agreement, Tea Board and establishment of auction centre in Cochin. The introduction of Five Year Plans in the country led to a moderate growth in tea industry of Assam mainly due to participation of private entrepreneurs in the tea industry. Thus, during 1951-56 there was a tremendous growth in export of tea and higher value in export of tea (Antrobus, 1957; Guha, 1977).

The establishment of Guwahati Tea Auction Centre on 25th September, 1970 and introduction of Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA) in 1973 for diluting the foreign equity capital and quickening the process of Indianisation of tea industry, the industry witnessed an all-round development during Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plans Period. The year 1977 to 1978 proved to be a turning point in the history of Indian tea industry, when rise in prices of tea recorded abnormally high in all

auction centres in India and abroad. It was during this period that the small tea growers started contributing generously to the total tea production of the state, thereby, bringing a new revolution to the agricultural system of Assam (Baruah, 2008). The development of tea industry of Assam has not always been smooth since its establishment, having faced with major difficulties such as shortage of labour, labour recruitment, price fluctuations, dissatisfaction of labourers, changes in ownership, ageing of the tea gardens, etc. Further, at present due to the growing global competition from other tea producing countries, such as Kenya, Sri Lanka, China, Vietnam, etc. has resulted in declining prices in domestic as well as international markets (Magar, 2016). However, the industry has been successful in overcoming such difficulties and still occupies a very important part in the economy of Assam.

Place of Tea in the Culture of Assam

Tea as a Symbol of Cultural Norm in the Society

Tea culture is defined by the way tea is made and consumed; by the way people interact with tea, and by the aesthetics surrounding tea drinking. Tea is not only commonly consumed at social events, but it is also a part and parcel of Assamese society. As one of the world's largest tea-producing regions, Assam is a state where tea is quite popular and offering tea to visitors along with biscuits, *pithas* (made of a mixture of jaggery and fried sesame seeds wrapped in home baked rice bread) and typical Assamese sweets prepared from a mixture of cane sugar and sesame seeds or coconut flakes known as *larus* is the cultural norm in the homes of Assam, offices and places of business. Almost all the tea consumed in the state is of CTC variety (Crush, Tear and Curl) and only the upper middle class can afford the orthodox variety of tea. Usually, tea in Assam is prepared traditionally by boiling the CTC variety tea in water and milk, sugar and sometimes spices such as ginger, cardamom, black pepper, bay leaf or cinnamon are added according to taste and boiled again to produce plain milk tea or spiced tea which is commonly called as

gakhirsaah. Sometimes, red tea is also prepared by boiling tea along with a mixture of sugar, bit of salt and spices locally known as *rongasaah* or *lalsaah*. In most of the tea garden colonies of Assam as well as among the daily wage labourers, red salt tea *nimakhsaah* is consumed in great amount which is prepared by just boiling tea and some amount of salt, although spiced milk tea is considered to be the most special of all the tea types and is consumed on special occasions. In Assam, tea is drunk throughout the day right from bed tea to mid-day tea, afternoon tea, mid evening tea and sometimes tea even after dinner.

The streets, roadsides and alleys in the urban landscapes and villages of Assam are dotted with tea stalls and roadside tea stands and they remain open right from dawn until late in the evening, while some of them even remain open 24x7 (Figures 2 and 3). Mostly men and sometimes women hang out in the tea stands or pavement stalls with low tables and stools chatting, exchanging news, gossips and even jokes while enjoying hot glass of tea. Moreover, the busy bus stops and railway junctions and terminals have several tea stands serving tea, and during the bus and train journeys the hawkers even jump aboard with kettles serving tea to passengers.

Tea as a Component of Regular Dietary System

In order to understand the place of tea in Assamese culture and its role as a component of regular dietary system in Assam, a sample household survey was carried out in different parts of Guwahati city by preparing a schedule-cum-questionnaire comprising of different communities such as Assamese, Bengalese, Non-Assamese Muslims, Hindi speaking, Scheduled Tribes² and Nepalese. The household survey questionnaire contains nine attributes of

tea drinking pattern such as x_1 (Tea as a regular drink), x_2 (Tea preferred to more than one drink), x_3 (Tea offered to guests), x_4 (Tea consumed with milk and sugar), x_5 (Red Tea), x_6 (Tea consumed for Health benefits), x_7 (Tea consumed as a cultural practice), x_8 (Tea consumed as a regular drink outside home) and x_9 (Average no. of times tea consumed daily). The data so obtained is analysed using one-way ANOVA and two-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance)³ including F-test and t-test carried out to determine the significance of variance.

The one-way and two-way ANOVA proves that the attributes vary with regard to tea drinking habits among different communities of Assam, as the tea drinking is more frequent among Assamese and Bengali community than other communities (Table 1). Though people today in Guwahati city prefer coffee and other chilled beverages outside home, yet the intake of tea is high among the Assamese and Bengali communities and frequency of tea drinking ranges from two to three cups or more per day is also quite high among them. Whereas, the communities such as *Marwaris'* or Hindi speaking people besides tea consumes milk, fruit juice and other drinks, while intake of milk is high among the Nepalese and besides milk and tea, the adults in Scheduled Tribes households also consume some amount of alcohol in their daily diet. It is also observed that offering tea to the guest is cultural norm of the Assamese society and as such almost every household prefers to serve milk tea to the guests along with other forms of refreshments and snacks. Though milk tea is treated special in the Assamese households, but due to health problems, non-availability of good quality milk and other related problems many people nowadays also prefer to take red tea as is revealed by the findings (Magar, 2016).

² The Scheduled Tribes (STs) are official designations given to various groups of historically disadvantaged indigenous people 'castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within castes, races or tribes' in India by the Government of India Act 1935 via article 342 in the Constitution of India, who during the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent were known as the Depressed Classes (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2016).

³ Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a statistical analysis tool that separates the total variability found within a data set into two components: random and systematic factors. The random factors do not have any statistical influence on the given data set, while the systematic factors do. The ANOVA test is used here to determine the impact independent variables have on the dependent variable in the regression analysis (Table 1) (Gupta, 1969).

$$F = \frac{\text{Mean Sum of Squares Between Groups (SS}_{\text{between}})}{\text{Mean Sum of Within Groups (SS}_{\text{within}})}$$

t-test

$$t = \frac{\bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2}{\sqrt{\frac{s_1^2}{n_1} + \frac{s_2^2}{n_2}}}$$

Where,

- \bar{x}_1 = Mean of first set of values
- \bar{x}_2 = Mean of second set of values
- S_1 = Standard deviation of first set of values
- S_2 = Standard deviation of second set of values
- n_1 = Total number of observations in first set
- n_2 = Total number of observations in second set.

$$S = \sqrt{\frac{\sum(x - \bar{x})^2}{n - 1}} \quad \text{Where,}$$

x = Values given

\bar{x} = Mean Value

n = Total number of observations.

Further, t-test has been carried out against the number of observations and each attributes (Table 2).

Table 1: Tea as a Component of Regular Dietary System in Assam, 2015

Community	No. of Sample Observations (N)	Tea as a Regular Drink	Tea preferred to more than one drink	Tea offered to guests	Tea consumed with milk and sugar	Red Tea	Tea consumed for health benefits	Tea consumed as cultural practice	Tea as Regular drink outside Home	Average No. of times tea consumed daily
Assamese Hindu	35	35	31	35	31	4	25	29	23	3.5
Bengalese	25	24	19	24	16	9	21	22	15	2.8
Non-Assamese Muslim	17	13	9	13	13	2	6	10	7	2.7
Hindi Speaking	13	9	4	5	10	0	5	2	0	2
Scheduled Tribes	10	6	5	2	8	2	3	1	2	2.5
Nepalese	20	9	7	17	18	2	4	3	3	2.6

Source: Authors

Table 2 : Examining the Number of Observations Against Each Attributes (Using t-test)

	x ₁ (Tea as a regular drink)	x ₂ (Tea preferred to more than one drink)	x ₃ (Tea offered to guests)	x ₄ (Tea consumed with milk and sugar)	x ₅ (Red Tea)	x ₆ (Tea consumed for Health benefits)	x ₇ (Tea consumed as a cultural practice)	x ₈ (Tea consumed as a regular drink outside home)	x ₉ (Average no. of times tea consumed daily)
	23	27	67	4	27	22	81	68	12
t-test	0.5130	0.2158	0.5357	0.5241	0.004	0.1152	0.1770	0.0482	0.0053
	5% level of significance								

Source: Authors

Socio-Cultural Practices of the Tea Worker Community

Tea and ex-tea tribe community is a heterogeneous mixture of more than one hundred aboriginal Indian tribes⁴ and castes⁵ who hailed from different parts of central India. They were composed of three different distinct linguistic elements such as the Kolarian speaking (Ho, Munda, Santhal, Kharia, etc.) group, Dravidian speaking (Oraon, Khond, Gond, Malpaharia, etc.) and the Group speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. After settling in the close quartered tea garden colonies of Assam, due to extremely limited interaction with the outside world, bearing interior location, language barriers and dissimilarity in physical outlooks, they were insulated from the local population and as a result, the multi-tribe, multi-caste and multi-lingual society slowly

started interacting among themselves embracing different lingo-cultural background tea tribe population in order to unify the different ethnic groups and minimise the communication gap and solidarity, hence, adopted a new but common language which is basically an admixture of their own aboriginal dialect, Assamese, Hindi and Bengali which is today popularly known as *Chah Bagisar Asomia* (Tea Garden Assamese Language) or *Sadani* or *Sadri* (Tanti, 2002).

Traditionally, their religion like any other aboriginal tribes of mainland India was based on worship of village Gods and deities, their ancestors and the evil spirits. Today, majority of the people of the tea tribe community in Assam is composed of Hindus, while only a small section of approximately 10 per cent population of the total tea and ex-tea tribes comprise of Christian population. The tea workers' community has not only diluted their individual identity largely by practising a common language but they also have started celebrating a host of common festivals. This community celebrates festival such as *dangoria puja*, *baghut puja*, *dharma puja*, *karam puja*, *manasha puja*, *sarun puja*, *kali puja*, *durga*

⁴ A tribe is a social group of distinct people, dependent on their land for their livelihood, who are largely self-sufficient, and not integrated into the national society (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2016).

⁵ The caste system in India is a system of social stratification which is divided into four primary groups namely *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras* (Ambedkar, 1916), having pre-modern origins, and is today the basis of reservation in India. The tea tribes mostly belong to the downtrodden class 'Shudra or tenant farmers and servants' as was transformed by the British Government.



Figure 2: View of a Roadside Mobile Tea Vendor (Source: Authors)



Figure 3: View of a Petty Roadside Tea Stall (Source: Authors)

puja, *tusu puja*, *madula puja*, etc in almost every month of the year with their own traditional customs and systems. Karam puja celebrated on mid-August for mother earth accompanied with '*Jhumur Nritya*' and *tusu puja* dedicated to folk goddess similar to *Kali puja* celebrated during the month of January and February are the most popular ones among them. During the times of birth, death and marriage ceremonies too the whole society joins hands together and observes them with various songs and music.

Though the tea tribes of different ethnic groups live together, in a colony 'labour line', their social and caste system have not been obliterated and in many areas of Assam, they retain their individual caste and ethnic identity. However, among the present generation the social relations are gradually being transformed into open community relations, where caste system does not stand much as a barrier. Hence, today numerous inter caste or intercommunity elopement or marriages between the tea tribes and indigenous population such as Kacharis, Assamese, Misings (Miri), etc. are observed frequently among them in tea growing areas of both the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys unlike their traditional norm. Although divorce and widow remarriages are not uncommon in the tea tribe community dominated areas, polygamy, especially bigamy, is prevalent among men and are legally accepted by the society though it was made illegal and punishable under sections 5 and 17 of the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 (Mehta, 1987). The family relations of the tea tribe women workers are not always cordial as occasional family quarrels with physical assaults on them by their drunken husbands and sons is a regular feature of the tea garden colony line as men generally spend a substantial amount of their earning at the cost of their family's needs on country liquor (Joseph, 2009; Roy, 2005). These findings bear resonance to the earlier studies where these tea garden women like their Assamese counterparts and also women living in other parts of the world suffer from domestic violence mainly because of poverty and existent patriarchal norms (Vauquiline,

2015; also; Das et al., 2015; 2016). Nevertheless, the findings reveal that, majority of the tea tribes suffer from indebtedness mostly due to insufficient income and excessive expenditure habits.

Tea Plantation and Socio-Cultural Transformation in Assamese Society

The tea and ex- tea tribes of Assam are considered an integral part of greater Assamese society and they have been contributing towards the enrichment of the arena of literature, political and economic fronts. After settling in the tea gardens for generations, slowly, the children of the old generation left behind their native heritage and developed their new one and over the years they became a part of the local society. The freedom movement of India further forged the bond between them and the mainstream Assamese society as many freedom fighters belonged to the tea tribes and many leaders emerged from the tea tribe community such as first female martyr Mangri alias Malati Mam of Tezpur and martyr Badhana Orang of Assam Agitation movement. Many leaders, cultural activists and Assamese writers from Assam such as Omeo Kumar Das, Bishnu Prasad Rabha, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, Bhupen Hazarika and many others played active roles to raise the downtrodden conditions of the tea tribe community and their assimilation into the mainstream Assamese society. The tales of the joy and sorrows of the early workers found expression in music and literature such as in the works of writers like Bina Baruah, Mulkraj Anand and musician Dr. Bhupen Hazarika.

The tea tribes, on their part slowly emerged and assimilated with the Assamese society so much so that a new dimension was added to the Assamese culture by the tea garden tribes, where along the zone of contact between the tea tribes and the indigenous population, progressive interaction between them has resulted in the fusion of linguistic elements on both the sides. As a result a number of common words spoken among the tea tribes such as

'*Murji* (chicken), *Sada* (tobacco), *Madol*⁶ (cylindrical drum), *Hariya* (local home-made liquor), *Jhumur* (tea tribe dance), *Sarap* (local wine), etc. seen to enter the linguistic culture and literature of Assam (Kurmi, 2010). Assamese language is known in almost all the regions of the Brahmaputra valley by the tea tribes and they regard it as a communicative or connecting language. Hence, a language change is taking place among the tea garden tribes leading to the development of bilingualism, multilingualism as well as shift to other languages. The tea tribe community has willingly adopted Assamese language and literature and has gained proficiency in the language, as it not only enabled them to gain government jobs but also raised their status in the society.

Today, the tea tribes are involved in all spheres in the development of culture in Assam right from writing and singing Assamese songs, making cinemas, creating serials, cassettes, theatres etc. A significant number of tea garden and tea tribes' related movies have also been made such as *Erabator Sur* in 1956, *Kechasun* in 1959; *Chameli Memsaab* in 1975, etc. are worth mentioning. In *Bihu* songs mentions are made about the lives and practices of the tea tribe communities and these songs have won a lot of popularities in the state as well as in the country. The tea-tribes have also started celebrating *Bihu* dances actively in the community functions. The local organisations and indigenous communities have also started supporting and promoting festivals such as '*Sirish Festival*', the first ever integrated festival dedicated to the 'shady trees in the tea gardens' in a bid to promote the unique cultures and traditions of the tea tribes of Assam (The Telegraph, 28 January, 2015).

Today, a number of eminent writers, poets, academicians and politicians from tea tribe community have emerged. Some of the important literary contributions made by them are such as (*Sahitya kriti samuh*) like '*Khaluk*

Bachan, Panke Dathi, and Sahrai,' by Meghraj Karmakar; (*RasanaRaji*) like '*Chah bagisar Puja Parab and Chah Bagisar Akhomiya Khabda Sambhar*,' by Deuram Tassa; published books such as '*Banuwar Sanskritik Jibonot Ebhumuki*,' by Narayan Ghatowar; '*Sah Bagisar Jibon Aru Sanskriti and Sah Bagisar Akhomiya Sanskriti*,' by Sushil Kurmi; '*Chah Janagusthir Luka-Sanskritir Ek Jhalak*,' by Ganesh Chandra Kurmi and '*Chah Bagisat Khikhar Prasar and Shatabdir Argha*' by Prahlad Chandra Tasa are worth mentioning (Kurmi, 2010). All these have contributed to popularise and enrich the Assamese language and literature. Poets such as Sananta Tanti's '*Tuponite Ketiyaba Barikha Ahe, Khobdatta Athoba Khobdahinatat and Nijor Biruddhe Khekh Prastav*,' and Sameer Tanti's '*Seujiya Utsav and Ei Andhar Ei Puharor Tanmoyata*,' also occupy significant places in poetic literature (Kurmi, 2007) and thereby, enriched Assamese literature and culture. The Assamese elites and litterateurs have also recognised the contributions of the tea tribes to Assamese literature, culture, economy and politics, and this has been reflected in the writings of various Assamese intellectuals (Sharma, 2015).

Impact of Modernisation and Local Socio-Cultural Element upon the Tea Worker Community

Socio-geographical factors in terms of location of the tea gardens, the residential patterns of the labour lines, the location of the market centres and the urban areas, spread of education and other such factors have played significant roles in the process of socio-economic transformations which the tea workers have experienced in recent years. The tea tribe youths of new generation have progressively adopted the Assamese language and the process of linguistic adaptations is operating at various levels among them which were termed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala as '*Na-Asamiya*,' or neo-Assamese. Attempts have been made by various tea tribe organisations to promote Assamese language by making it compulsory in the school curriculum and government offices so that the educated tea

⁶ A double-headed musical cylindrical drum, slightly bulging at the waist, held horizontally and played double-handed.

workers can read and understand the official instructions and communications.

Every society has their own socio-cultural practices and traditions and tea tribes are not different. Despite having their own socio-cultural norms and practices, the tea tribes of Assam today are divulging into the Assamese culture to such an extent that they have become quite different from their ancestral race that had originally migrated here. Many people of the tea tribe community have also accepted the *Sankari Dharma*⁷ or religion and are living in the *satras* such as *Kuruwabahi* and *Na-Kachari satras*.⁸

In some parts of Assam, the tea tribes have started adopting some cultural practices from the Assamese society which were not found in their ancestral tribes. For instance, the women among the tea tribes have started taking part in the *namghars* and started singing '*naams*' along with the women of greater Assamese society in Chinamora and Khapekhati tea gardens while in some parts of upper Assam, tea tribes have started celebrating the first marriage of the girl child on attaining the puberty (Kurmi, 2007). Women, besides wearing saree, also wears *Chador-Mekhela*⁹

⁷ It is also known as *Ekasarana Dharma* or Shelter-in-One religion, which is a panentheistic branch of Hinduism founded and propagated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th century. Most of the adherents of this religion today live in the Indian state of Assam. Instead of performing rituals this religion simplified the form of worship by just uttering the name (*naam*) of God in the form of Krishna or Hari (Subba et al., 2003).

⁸*Kuruwabahi satra* in Golaghat district and *Na-Kachari satra* in Jorhat district are institutional centres that are unique and special to the *Ekasarana* tradition. These centres generally maintain a prayer house (*Namghar*), few to hundreds of celibate and non-celibate *bhaktas* (monks), lands and are repositories of religious and cultural relics and artifacts.

⁹*Chador-Mekhela* is the traditional Assamese dress worn by women of all ages, and in some cases by the little girls too (especially in Saraswati Puja and in some schools from year eight). There are two main pieces of cloth that are draped around the body. The bottom portion, draped from the waist downwards in the form of a sarong (very wide cylinder of cloth) is called the mekhela and a long length of cloth that has one end tucked into the upper portion of the *Mekhela* and the rest draped over and around the rest of the body is called as *chador* (Figure 4)

(Figure 4) and men have started wearing the *Gamosa*¹⁰ (Figure 5) just like the Assamese youths. Besides, some people of the tea tribes also celebrate and take part in the socio-cultural dramas of Assam such as *Ras*¹¹ and *Bhaunas*.¹²



Figure 4: A Tea Tribe Woman in *Mekhela Chador*

¹⁰ The *Gamosa* is an article of great significance for the people of Assam. It is generally a white rectangular piece of cloth with primarily a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth (in addition to red, other colours are also used). Although cotton yarn is the most common material for weaving *gamosas* some are also made from *Pat* silk for special occasions (Figure 5).

¹¹*Ras* in Assam refers to *Rasa Lila* (also known as *Raas Leela*) or *Rasa* dance performed in northern India, which is a part of the traditional story of Krishna described in Hindu scriptures like *Bhagavata Purana* and *Gita Govinda*, where he dances with Radha and her *sakhis* (friends).

¹²*Bhauna* is a traditional form of entertainment containing religious messages, created by Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva in the early sixteenth century and is generally staged at *satras* and *namghars* in Assam. He created the form to convey religious messages to villagers through entertainment.



Figure 5: Gamosa worn by a Tea Tribe Man

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions, it is clear that the culture of Assam has been highly enriched by the different elements surrounding tea and the tea-tribes. This is observed through slow but significant assimilation of socio-cultural elements among the tea tribes to the greater Assamese society. This diffusion and transformation is mostly confined to the highly concentrated tea areas of central and eastern Brahmaputra valley due to prevailing caste and creed differences in establishing matrimonial relations between them and the mainstream society as well as their existing physical difference inherited through ancestral racial stock. However small, these socio-cultural transformation is a positive indication of the decreasing gap between the mainstream populace and the downtrodden tea tribe masses towards achieving a balanced socio-

economic development of the region. It is therefore high time to initiate all necessary efforts towards upliftment of the tea tribes in socio-economic front irrespective of any social discrimination.

References

- Ambedkar, B.R. (1916). *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1. Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, (eds.) by Frances W. Pritchett 1979, pp. 3-22.
- Anonymous, (1885). *The Tea Planter's Vade Mecum: A Volume of Important Articles, Correspondence, and Information of Permanent Interest and Value Regarding Tea*, Compiled by the Editor of the 'Indian Tea Gazette', P.S. D'Rozario and Co., 1885, 12 Waterloo Street, Calcutta.

- Antrobus, H. (1957). *A History of the Assam Company*, Edinburgh: Private Printing by T. and A. Constable, pp.380-388.
- Baildon, S. (1882). *Tea Industry in India: A Review of Finance and Labour and A Guide for Capitalists and Assistants*, W.H. Allen and Co., 13 Waterloo Place, S.W. Publishers, London.
- Baroowah, G.P. (2006). *Tea-Legend, Life and Livelihood of India, in Red River* by LBS Publications, New Delhi.
- Baruah, P. (2008). *The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development*, EBH Publishers, Guwahati, Assam. ISBN-81-903834-6-2, Pg.1-318.
- Das, T. K., Bhattacharyya, R., Alam, Md. F. & Parvin, A. (2015). Causes and Contexts of Domestic Violence: Tales of Help-Seeking Married Women in Sylhet, Bangladesh, *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, 9 (2), 163–176, doi:10.1111/aswp.12055
- Das, T. K., Bhattacharyya, R., Alam, Md. F. & Parvin, A. (2016). Domestic Violence in Sylhet, Bangladesh: Analysing the Experiences of Abused Women, *Social Change*, 46(1), 1-18, DOI: 10.1177/0049085715618561
- Gruning, J. F. (1909). *Recruitment of Labour for Tea Gardens in Assam*, University of California, Shillong.
- Guha, A. (1977). *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947*, Tulika Books Publications, Pg. 1-336.
- Gupta, S.P. (1969). *Statistical Methods*, Sultan Chand and Sons, Delhi, ISBN-978-8054-739-3, pp. 2-1425.
- Joseph, M. (2009). 'Women Workers in Tea Plantation: A Brief Appraisal', *The Tea Labourers of North East India : An Anthropo-Historical Perspective*, Sarthak Sengupta (eds), Mittal Publications, New Delhi, pp. 295.
- Khullar, D.R. (2006). *India: A Comprehensive Geography*, Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi.
- Kurmi, S. (2007). *Asomor Chah-Shramikar Avadan*, (in Assamese), published by Dr. Rafiqz Zaman IAS, Secretary, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati-781021.
- Kurmi, P. (2010). 'Akhomiya Sahityaloi Sah Janagusthir Sahityikar Abadan', *Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika: Samanbyoy Bikhekh Sankhya, 64th Year*, A journal of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Hakacham, U.R (eds), Fourth Issue (March, 2010), published by Dr. Paramananda Rajbongshi, General Secretary, Assam Sahitya Sabha, Chandrakanta Handique Bhawan, Jorhat-I
- Kydd, J.C. (1921). *Tea Industry*, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, Calcutta.
- Magar, C. (2016). 'Place of Tea in the Culture, Economy and Polity of Assam: A Geographical Analysis', an unpublished Ph.D dissertation submitted to the Department of Geography, Gauhati University.
- Mehta, R. (1987). *Socio-legal Status of Women in India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, pp.139.
- Money, E. (1883). *The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea*, W.B. Whittingham and Co., 91, Gracechurch Street, Calcutta, Thacker and Co., pp. 10-12.
- Roy, S.K. (2005). *Tribes Education and Gender Question*, Northern Book Centre, New Delhi, pp.165.
- Sharma, D.P. (2015). 'Contribution of 'Tea Tribes' to the Development of Assamese Identity', *Prajna: The Annual Journal of Gauhati University Teachers' Association*, Bibha Bharali (eds), Maliya Offset Press, Mirza, Guwahati, Vol.XXIV, 2014-15, ISSN-0976-9072.
- Singh, B. (2015). Tea Production to Decline in Assam This Year, *The Economic Times*, 1st November, 2015, 3.45 pm, IST.
- Subba, T.B. and Ghosh, G.C. (2003): *The Anthropology of North-East India*, Anthropological Survey of India, North Eastern Hill University, Orient Blackswan Publications, pp.320.
- Tanti, S.K. (2002). 'Chah Janagosthir Bhasa Samporka', (in Assamese), *Amar Asom*, 4th March, 2002.
- Vauquiline, P. (2015). Socialisation Process, Power Relations and Domestic Violence: Marginal Voices of Assamese Women, *Space*

and Culture, India, 3(2), 54-71, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20896/saci.v3i2.155>

Yamamoto, T. (1999). *Philosophical Designs for a Socio-Cultural Transformation: Beyond Violence and the Modern Era*, (eds.), 1 Mar 1999, Pg. 860.

Yee, L. K. (2013). Tea's Wonderful History', *The Chinese Historical and Cultural Project*, (1996–2012), <http://chcp.org/virtual-museum-library/teas-wonderful-history/>, retrieved on 14 June 2015.

Others: Tea Board of India (2013-2014). *Tea Statistics*, (2013-2014), Under Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

The Telegraph (2015, 28 January). A festive brew of culture, downloaded on 20th March 2015 at 9.00 am, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1150128/jsp/northeast/story_10306.jsp#.

Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, downloaded at 8.40 am, 2nd May 2016, <http://tribal.nic.in/Content/NationalCommissionforScheduledTribesOrganisations.aspx>.