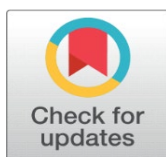


FROM COLONIAL SERVITUDE TO CONTEMPORARY MARGINALISATION: EXPLORING THE STRUGGLES OF ASSAM'S ADIVASIS AND TEA GARDEN WORKERS

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2540](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2540)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the social stratification and segmentation observed in Assam, focussing on the marginalised groups that face numerous challenges. It specifically addresses the conditions of labourers who were brought to Assam during the colonial period and who have continued to experience conditions resembling servitude within the industry. Despite having lived in Assam for multiple generations, these labourers continue to struggle for recognition of their rights and identity. Often identified as Adivasis or Saah Bagantias, they remain side-lined by the indigenous communities of Assam. This research aims to bring attention to these issues, examining how these labourers remain confined by colonial-era

Keywords: Stratification, Segmentation, Adivasis, Saah Bagantias, Servitude, Marginalised, Labourers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tea garden community in Assam, India, is a diverse group made up of tea plantation workers and their descendants, often known as the tea tribes. Recognised by the Assam government as part of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), they constitute about 20% of Assam's population. These communities live in close-knit settlements around the states over 800 tea gardens. They play a vital role in Assam's economy, given that the tea industry is a major economic driver for the state. Despite their critical contributions, the tea tribes remain one of Assam's most marginalised groups, facing numerous social challenges. The community is multi-ethnic with a variety of castes, dialects, customs, and religions. Their origins in Assam trace back to the mid-19th century.

Tea plantations in Assam date to the colonial era, and the tea industry has since become integral to the state's culture and economic development. The progress of India's tea industry reflects the dedication and labour of the tea community

workers, who have been essential to its expansion and to establishing India's global reputation as a leading tea producer. Given these factors, there is a significant need for a comprehensive study examining the historical, current, and future circumstances of Assam's tea community. This research is important because the establishment of the tea plantation industry marked a significant shift in Assam's socio-economic history, leading to the emergence of a distinct social class within the state. It is equally crucial to assess the current situation of this community and consider their future prospects, which are closely tied to their present conditions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The History of Indian Tea Industry," penned by P. Griffiths and released in 1967, presents crucial insights into the emergence of the tea plantation economy throughout various regions of colonial India. The book extensively discusses the challenges encountered by the industry in Assam, providing a detailed examination of issues such as labour problems, wage structures, and the overall working conditions prevailing during the colonial period. Griffiths' publication serves as a comprehensive exploration of the historical evolution of the Indian tea sector, offering a nuanced comprehension of the economic and social factors that influenced its development during this significant era.

"One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political, Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam" (2014) by Rana P. Behal provides a thorough examination of the historical narrative surrounding tea plantations in Assam during the colonial period. Behal critically explores the intricate ties between the colonial administration and private British investments in promoting tea cultivation in Assam to meet the demands of the expanding global market. The book places significant emphasis on the mobilization of labour within the tea industry and the complex social dynamics within the plantation setups in Assam. Utilizing official statistical data, Behal investigates the evolution of the tea industry and the trends in labour employment in Assam.

Exploring historical ties to servitude, academic works in the tea sector, specifically by Raman (2010), Brass and Bernstein (1992), and Post (2003), emphasize the persistent inter-generational immobility among tea garden labourers. Factors like limited mobility, insufficient asset ownership, and challenges linked to ethnic identity contribute to constrained occupational diversification. The shared constraints rooted in historical legacies and pressures for casualization delineate labour relations in the context of globalization.

Minakshi Gogoi's (2016) research explores the socio-economic realities of migrant tea laborers in Assam, highlighting that employment within the tea plantations is often passed down through families, with jobs being inherited across generations. Even though there are fixed daily wages and chances to earn extra through overtime, these earnings are minimal, and workers experience financial instability due to seasonal income variations. Housing is linked to one's employment status, and the limited agricultural land available to workers only meets basic subsistence needs. The study calls for improvements in wages, housing policies, and broader economic opportunities to better the conditions of tea plantation workers.

Gait.E, he penned down the overall and the beginning history of the discovery of tea plantation in Assam by Robert Bruce named 'A history of Assam'. History, as interpreted by individuals, centres on the events and aspects that captured the historian's attention. In the current context, the availability of numerous archives allows for scrutiny of the accuracy of recorded events. Edward Gait, Assam's inaugural historian, extensively referenced earlier writings to craft the history of the region. Despite potential limitations as an outsider, Gait demonstrated a genuine interest in establishing a historical tradition in Assam. His systematic organization of chapters unveils a unique approach where myth and history are intricately linked, encouraging further exploration of this less-explored realm for a global audience.

The Das and Vulli's study aim to examine the socio-economic history of women labourers in Assam's tea garden industries, emphasizing their historical marginalization. Drawing on theoretical frameworks related to marginalization, gender relations, and patriarchy, it critically analyses aspects such as wage structures, living conditions, and gender-based recruitment variations. The investigation highlights the significant role of state hegemony and economic imperatives in formulating policies that contribute to the marginalization of women within the tea garden workforce.

3. DISCUSSIONS

Tea plantations in Assam have their origins in the colonial era. While tea plants had been growing naturally in Assam's hills and forests for centuries, and the Singpho tribe had been utilizing them for a long time, the formal history of the tea industry began in 1823 with Robert Bruce's discovery of indigenous tea bushes in the Mishirni hills of Upper Assam's Brahmaputra Valley (Saharia, 2005). The recorded history of tea cultivation in Northeast India is nearly 170 years old, starting in 1837 with the establishment of the first experimental tea estates in Chabua, located in the Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam. Following this, the Assam Tea Company initiated commercial tea production, and the Jorhat Tea Company followed in 1858. Around 1855-1856, tea cultivation also began in the Barak Valley of Cachar district. Today, tea is not just Assam's most vital cash crop but also a major source of revenue and employment, making it a cornerstone of the state's economy.

The tea industry is characterized by its heavy reliance on a vast labour force, involving approximately 2 million people in Assam, either directly or indirectly. Since tea cultivation is labour-intensive and requires manual effort, a significant number of workers were needed. Indigenous labour proved inadequate and unsuitable, leading to the recruitment of labourers from other regions of colonial India. These workers came from a variety of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, including groups such as the Mundas and Gonds from Bihar, Santhals from Bengal and Bihar, Oraons from Bihar and Odisha, Goals from Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, and Bogas from Tamil Nadu (Kar, 2005).

The history of these labourers in Assam's tea plantations is marked by severe hardship, exploitation, and poor treatment, conditions that persisted until India gained independence in 1947. Recruitment practices were harsh; between December 1859 and November 1861, approximately 11% of the 2,272 recruits brought by the Assam Company died en route (Guha, 1977). The vulnerable and impoverished from other parts of colonial India were easily exploited, serving as forced labourers in Assam's tea estates. This story illustrates the broader theme of colonial exploitation under British rule. These migrant workers endured conditions similar to slavery, far from their native regions, isolated in the tea gardens of Northeast India. Their cultural and economic displacement made them especially susceptible to exploitation. Guha (1977) describes the management-worker relationship as one of the most oppressive forms of servitude seen in Assam's tea gardens.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the migration process and the exclusionary practices experienced by the tea garden community during both the colonial and post-colonial periods in India.
2. To analyse the socio-economic status of the tea garden community in India after Independence and in the present day.
3. To explore the political mobilization of the tea garden community through trade unions and student organizations.

5. METHODOLOGY

The historical-analytical method was employed in the preparation of this paper. The data used in this study were gathered from secondary sources, such as books, research papers, and academic journals.

FINDINGS: Based on the discussion of the paper's three main objectives, the following conclusions can be drawn: The tea industry in Assam has its roots in the colonial era. During the early 19th century, planters encountered severe labour shortages, which led to the recruitment of workers from impoverished regions of colonial India. This caused a significant migration of labourers to Assam. Regrettably, these workers were subjected to harsh conditions, resembling slavery under British rule. Despite their contributions to Assam's economy, they faced dire living conditions and social marginalization.

The British policy of keeping the tea garden community isolated resulted in their continued separation from the mainstream Assamese society, a situation that persisted even after India's independence. Although they form a substantial demographic, they are often viewed as outsiders by the broader Assamese community.

The paper's second objective indicates that, despite being socially and economically disadvantaged, the tea garden community plays a vital role in Assam's political landscape. The third objective demonstrates the growing political

consciousness within this community, influenced by factors such as the rise of an educated elite, educational deficiencies, economic exploitation, and political marginalization. Organisations like ACMS, ATTSA, and AASA have been instrumental in mobilising political support for the tea garden community, advocating for improvements in their socio-economic conditions and their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list. The analysis shows that the tea garden community has developed into a politically cohesive group.

TEA TRIBAL COMMUNITY: The tea tribal community's history is intricately linked to the establishment of the tea industry during the colonial era. Initially, the industry relied heavily on skilled labour from China and other Asian countries known for their tea cultivation expertise. However, as the cost of these foreign workers became increasingly prohibitive, colonial authorities sought to replace them with a more economical solution.

To address this, they began recruiting labourers from various regions within India, including Orissa, Bihar, and Jharkhand. These areas were chosen because the workers from these regions were seen as both cost-effective and hardworking. These labourers, often from lower socio-economic backgrounds, were brought to work in the tea estates, where they have remained for generations. During this period, the working conditions were harsh. The labourers were paid meagre wages and were subjected to long hours and demanding tasks. Women played a crucial role in the tea industry due to their ability to perform delicate tasks such as plucking and sorting tea leaves, which required finer dexterity. The presence of women in the workforce was significant, with their numbers often exceeding those of men because their physical and biological attributes suited the intricate work involved. Despite their essential contributions, women faced severe exploitation. They were frequently subjected to harsh conditions and were sometimes enslaved, working as domestic servants and for other purposes in the homes of the estate owners. This exploitation extended beyond the workplace, reflecting broader patterns of inequality and abuse prevalent during that era.

The Tea Garden Tribes are a crucial segment of Assamese society, with their population around 6 million. These tribes, including the Santhals, Oraons, Mundas, and Gonds, were relocated to Assam from different regions of India to work in tea plantations. Despite their displacement and long-term separation from their original homelands, they have preserved their distinct cultural identities, languages, and traditions. These communities have historically faced significant socio-economic disadvantages. They typically live in isolated labour lines associated with tea estates, where access to education, healthcare, and other essential services is limited. This isolation has resulted in high illiteracy rates and widespread health issues such as malnutrition, alcoholism, and occupational diseases, underscoring their marginalisation despite their essential role in Assam's tea industry. To address these issues, both government and non-governmental organisations have initiated various programs aimed at improving educational opportunities, healthcare access, and skill development. Increased political representation has also enabled members of these tribes to advocate more effectively for their rights and needs within the legislative framework. Culturally, the Tea Garden Tribes have made significant contributions to Assamese society through their unique traditions, festivals, music, and dance. Events such as Karam Puja, Sarhul, and Jhumur dance have been incorporated into the broader cultural landscape of Assam. However, these tribes strive to maintain their distinct cultural heritage even as they integrate with the wider Assamese community. Examining their integration through theories of acculturation and assimilation offers valuable insights. Acculturation theory explores how these communities balance their traditional practices with influences from Assamese culture. Assimilation theory, on the other hand, investigates how these tribes become part of the broader socio-economic and political life of Assam, potentially affecting their cultural uniqueness over time. Understanding these theoretical perspectives is essential for recognising the challenges and opportunities related to social cohesion and integration. It highlights power dynamics and potential inequities faced by the Tea Garden Tribes, enabling policymakers and researchers to craft strategies that promote inclusive development while preserving the tribes' cultural heritage and facilitating their integration into Assamese society.

CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATION: The Tea Garden Tribes of Assam, descendants of tribal communities brought to the region during British colonial rule to work in tea plantations, face numerous challenges that impede their full integration into Assamese society. Social discrimination remains a pervasive issue, rooted in deep-seated stereotypes and prejudices based on ethnicity and socio-economic status. This discrimination often results in social exclusion, where Tea Garden Tribes are marginalised and denied equal opportunities to participate in societal, economic, and political activities. These communities are frequently viewed through a lens of bias, which affects their interactions with the broader Assamese society and limits their social mobility.

Language barriers compound these difficulties. While many members of the Tea Garden Tribes are bilingual, speaking both their native languages and Assamese, differences in language can still create significant communication gaps. These gaps can lead to misunderstandings and create obstacles in accessing education, healthcare, and other essential services. Language barriers can also restrict their ability to advocate for their rights and needs, further entrenching their social and economic marginalisation.

Economic disparities are another major challenge faced by the Tea Garden Tribes. Despite their vital role in Assam's tea industry, many tea garden workers receive low wages and endure harsh working conditions, which contribute to their overall socio-economic vulnerability. This economic hardship limits their access to quality education, healthcare, and basic necessities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. The economic inequalities between the Tea Garden Tribes and other Assamese communities exacerbate social divisions and hinder efforts to achieve equitable development.

Living conditions for many members of the Tea Garden Tribes are often poor, characterised by inadequate housing, a lack of proper sanitation, and insufficient infrastructure. These conditions not only degrade their quality of life but also expose them to various health risks, including communicable diseases and malnutrition. Although government welfare programs have attempted to address some of these issues by providing housing, education, and other forms of assistance, the efforts have not been sufficient to tackle the deep-rooted, systemic problems these communities face.

Healthcare access remains a critical issue for the Tea Garden Tribes, with many communities lacking adequate medical facilities and services. This lack of access results in poor health outcomes and heightened vulnerability to diseases, which is exacerbated by lower literacy rates among Tea Garden Tribes compared to the general population. Limited health literacy further restricts their ability to navigate healthcare systems and understand health-related information, leading to poorer health and well-being.

Addressing these complex challenges requires sustained efforts and comprehensive policy approaches that go beyond temporary or surface-level solutions. There is a need for targeted interventions focused on improving social inclusion, economic justice, and equitable opportunities for all members of society. This includes ensuring fair wages and decent working conditions in the tea industry, enhancing access to quality education and healthcare, and promoting social and cultural integration. Only through holistic and inclusive development strategies can the barriers facing the Tea Garden tribes be dismantled, leading to meaningful and lasting improvements in their lives and enabling their full integration into Assamese society.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND RECOMMENDATION: The tea industry in Assam has a rich history that dates back to the 19th century, originating during the British colonial period. During this time, the plantation system was set up, relying heavily on migrant labour. Over the years, various policies were introduced to regulate the industry and protect the rights of the workers. Notable among these is the Plantation Labour Act (PLA) of 1951, which requires employers to provide workers with basic amenities and social security benefits. Another important piece of legislation is the Minimum Wages Act of 1948, which aims to ensure fair wages for workers, although its enforcement in Assam has often been inconsistent. The Interstate Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 also plays a vital role, protecting the rights of migrant workers who make up a significant part of the workforce in Assam's tea plantations. However, despite these policies, their inconsistent implementation has resulted in ongoing problems, such as poor living conditions, low wages, and limited access to essential services.

Today, India's tea plantations are confronted with several challenges. Worker welfare remains a significant issue, with many workers still living in inadequate conditions despite the PLA's provisions. Wages often do not meet a living standard, leading to widespread poverty and occasional social unrest. Environmental challenges, including deforestation, soil degradation, and water scarcity, are prevalent due to unsustainable farming practices. Moreover, Assam tea faces stiff competition in the global market, particularly against regions like Darjeeling, Sri Lanka, and Kenya, partly due to a lack of modernisation and mechanization. Labour shortages also pose a serious problem, as younger generations are increasingly reluctant to work on plantations because of poor working conditions and low wages. This reluctance has led to a growing reliance on migrant labour, which presents its own set of issues.

Addressing these challenges requires several key steps. Strengthening the enforcement of existing policies, such as the PLA and the Minimum Wages Act, through regular monitoring and imposing stricter penalties for non-compliance is crucial. Improving living conditions for workers is also essential, which can be achieved by providing better housing, healthcare, and education facilities, possibly through public-private partnerships. To protect the environment, the industry needs to adopt sustainable agricultural practices, such as reducing the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides and investing in reforestation projects. Modernisation and mechanisation are also necessary to improve productivity and quality, helping Assam tea to be more competitive in the global market. Finally, to address labour shortages, the industry must focus on improving wages and working conditions while also ensuring the protection of migrant workers' rights.

RESEARCH DEBATES: The migration of various tribal communities to Assam during British colonial rule and the subsequent period presents a rich tapestry of cultural exchange, integration, and challenges. This historical narrative significantly shaped Assamese society, influencing the ways in which tribal communities adapted and were absorbed into the broader social fabric over time.

During British colonial rule, tribes from regions such as Jharkhand, Bihar, and Odisha were relocated to Assam primarily to serve as labourers in the burgeoning tea plantations. This influx of new populations brought about a significant demographic shift, transforming Assam's cultural and economic landscape. Initially, these tribes were perceived as outsiders by the native Assamese population, leading to tensions fuelled by historical distrust and competition for resources.

Post-independence, the process of integrating these tribal communities into Assamese society began, which was neither straightforward nor uniform. It involved a gradual adoption of Assamese customs and traditions by the tribes. Over time, these communities started participating in local rituals and festivals, such as Assamese weddings and Bihu celebrations, creating a blend of cultural practices. Culinary traditions also merged, contributing to the hybridisation of Assamese culture.

Despite these cultural exchanges, the path to full assimilation was fraught with difficulties, particularly regarding social acceptance and economic inclusion. Many tribal members continued to work in tea plantations and domestic roles, where they faced marginalisation and limited opportunities for upward mobility. Although their contributions were vital to India's economy, they were often undervalued, reinforcing their marginalised status.

Resistance from certain segments of the indigenous Assamese population added another layer of complexity. Deep-seated historical grievances and fears of economic displacement perpetuated the view of these tribes as perpetual outsiders, complicating efforts to achieve social cohesion. This resistance underscored broader issues of identity and power dynamics within Assamese society.

Over time, however, shifts in attitudes and government policies aimed to promote greater integration. Initiatives focussing on cultural harmony and socio-economic development helped bridge the divide between tribal and non-tribal communities. Efforts included expanding educational opportunities, launching awareness campaigns, and implementing legal protections for tribal rights, all of which contributed to a more inclusive societal approach.

Despite these efforts, the journey toward assimilation remained uneven and challenging. While some tribal traditions found acceptance and were integrated into Assamese culture, others faced exclusion or were pushed to the periphery. This uneven progress highlighted underlying disparities in power, identity, and socio-economic opportunities across the region.

In conclusion, the assimilation of tribal communities into Assamese society following colonial-era migrations was a complex and multifaceted process. It was characterised by cultural adaptation, resistance from indigenous groups, and various socio-economic challenges. Although steps have been taken towards integration and mutual cultural exchange, persistent challenges indicate the intricate interplay of historical legacies, identity politics, and socio-economic factors that continue to shape Assam's social landscape. Addressing these issues will be crucial for building a more inclusive and cohesive society in Assam in the future.

6. CONCLUSION

The historical legacy of Assam's tea industry, established during British colonial rule, has significantly influenced the social and economic dynamics of the region, particularly for the Adivasi and tea garden workers. These labourers, brought from other parts of India, have been integral to Assam's economic development through their hard work in the tea plantations. However, they have faced systemic exploitation, marginalisation, and harsh living conditions, issues that persist even after decades of independence. Despite their substantial contributions, these communities continue to experience economic hardship, social exclusion, and a lack of political representation. Their struggle for recognition and better living standards reflects the long-standing impact of colonial policies that have left them trapped in cycles of poverty and marginalisation. To address these inequities, there is a pressing need for comprehensive reforms aimed at improving their socio-economic status, ensuring fair wages, access to quality healthcare and education, and safeguarding their cultural rights. Additionally, fostering a more inclusive societal framework that acknowledges and respects the unique identities and contributions of these communities is essential for building a just and equitable future for all of Assam's residents. Only through sustained, inclusive efforts can the historical injustices faced by Assam's Adivasis and tea garden workers be genuinely redressed, paving the way for their full integration into the social and economic fabric of the state.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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