

Colonial State, Hegemony, History And The Identity Of Tea Tribes In Assam

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Abstract: Identity can be constructed and represented in different ways. If identity is constructed out of social relations it is an arena of power and symbolism where relations of domination, subordination and solidarity take place. The study would emphasise upon identity not only as a natural category but political, social and economic as well. The tea tribes of Assam are one of the most backward tribes in North east India. They were brought to Assam as indentured labourers by the East India Company mostly from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. The descendants of these labourers are now called tea tribes in Assam. Assertion of identity and aspiration of the tea tribes, in revolt against their perceived socio-economic and politico-cultural deprivation, had begun during the colonial period. They were brought to Assam by the colonial planters giving them false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay etc. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurances given by the colonial planters, and hence they started to agitate against the exploitation and to form an identity of their own in Assam. The primary focus of the paper is to understand the colonial factors leading to the construction of tea tribes identity in Assam and its later day crisis.

Keywords: Assam, Colonial state, Identity crisis, Migration, Tea Tribes.

1 Introduction:

Identity is constructed through a close historical interaction between the individuals and society. Identity is not an inherently attained trait neither does it have a fixed or determined structure, rather it is open. As a social construct, every type of identity (religious, ethnic, etc) undergoes change along with a change in the socio-psychological and politico-cultural sphere over a period of time (Singh, 2006: 205-220). In general, the term 'identity' manifests a combination of group sentiments and emotions rooted in their tradition generating a sense of belongingness among its members (Rosenthal and Bogner, 2009). However, generalization of the notion of 'identity' may amount to the simplification of its complex underpinnings often implicitly driven by the notion of power and ideas governing inclusion and exclusion. Identity can be constructed in different ways. As stated above identities are not fixed rather identity construction is a process, "a continuing argument in which identities are constructed by assertion, negotiation and imposition" (Borgohain, 1997: 10). Identity formation is seen as a process that takes place in a "time context and its coherence and intensity depends on the cumulation of overlapping symbols of assimilation and inclusion essential in the formation of group consciousness" (Ibid, 1997: 10). Thus, identity is a process evolving through time where identities acquire their style, organization, substances, legitimating, etc. If identity is constructed out of social relations it is an arena of power and symbolism where relations of domination, subordination and solidarity take place. The study would emphasise upon identity not only as a natural category but political, social and economic as well.

The tea tribes are the backbones of Assam's tea industry. According to Walter Fernandes, Assam's tea industry is dependent on about 30-40 lakhs of the 'tea tribes' that is present and past tea garden labourers who are estimated to be approximately 60 lakhs in Assam (Fernandes, 2003: 1-3). Almost all of them were brought to Assam as indentured labourers by the East India Company from many parts of north India. The descendants of these labourers are now called tea tribes in Assam (Dasgupta, 1981: 44-46). The tea tribes are classified as other backward classes (OBC) in the central list and they are divided into 96 ethnic groups, like Munda, Oraon, Santhal and the other tribals of Jharkhand origin (Misra, 2007: 11-14). Presently they are mostly found in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Karimganj, and Tinsukia.

2 Migration of Tea Tribes in Assam:

Development of modern industrial capitalism and the consequent colonization of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world by the British triggered a massive mobilization of Indian agrarian communities across these diverse geographical localities (Behal, 2013: 2). The growing demand for raw materials and other tropical agricultural products in the West led to the establishment of large-scale plantations using European capital for the production of export commodities, for which a labour force was mobilized from different parts of the Indian subcontinent (Ibid, 2013: 2). It was mainly from 1839 onwards the British planters made elaborate arrangements for recruitment and transportation of labourers from different parts of India and its subcontinent.

Assam is one of the oldest and perhaps the most famous among tea-growing regions of the world. The tea industry originated here in the late 1830s by the colonial planters after the annexation of Assam in 1826. The credit for the discovery of tea in Assam goes to Major Robert Bruce who discovered the potentiality for growing tea in Assam in the year 1823. In the same year, tea growing wild in Assam got recognition as the real tea plant, and the British planters extensively started to cultivate tea in the virgin tracts of Assam which were found to have most suitable agro-climate for its growth. In 1839, the Assam Company was formed with tea holdings in Upper Assam marking the beginning of the tea industry in India (Tinker, 1974: 29).

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After the establishment of tea industry the major problem faced by the planters was shortage of labour. In the early phase of cultivation, the planters used the skilled Chinese labourers. As the skilled Chinese labourers import cost was very high and also they demanded the increment of their wages, the British government employed local Assamese and tribal people in the tea estates (Misra, 2007: 10-14). Between 1843 and 1859, the local people, mostly the Bodo-Kacharis, remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry. Peasants of neighbouring villages were employed in their slack season through contractors. However, because of increase in the numbers of tea estates it was impossible to work with minimum local labourers. In addition, most of the local labourers were unwilling to work in the tea estates. As Griffiths stated,

“The villagers enjoyed an economy which was almost self-sufficient and were therefore not much interested in the employment offered by the early tea planters, while the population of the more developed parts of Assam were, as a rule, neither inclined, nor compelled by circumstances, to leave home in search of work” (Griffiths, 1967: 267).

To overcome the shortage of labour problem and to pressure the local peasants to work in the tea estate, the colonial planters sought to uproot the local peasants from their land. They appealed the government to increase the land revenue so that the local peasantry around the tea plantations would give up their land and join work in the plantations (Ibid, 1967: 99). But this also did not work as most the local peasantry revolted and refused to pay the increase taxes. To deal with the situation the planters therefore resorted to bring indentured labour from other parts of India.

Gita Bharali states that because of the shortage of labourers the planters had to find workers elsewhere and they recruited them mostly from present day Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh as indentured labour in slave like conditions as most of them were uprooted from their land and livelihood, by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, meant to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial regime. Due to the impoverished condition the workers had no choice but to find other sources of livelihood. Finding no alternatives, they were forced to follow the labour contractor and became indentured labour in Assam (Datta, 2003: 251-264).

The first attempt to import of cheap labour from different region of India was started in 1853 and between December 1859 to November 1861, 2,272 labourers were brought in, of whom 250 labourers died on the way (Guha, 1977: 18). Agents were sent to collect labourers from different parts of the country. Two types of ruthless labour brokers, called Arkati and Sirdar were appointed as agents. They were engaged initially as commissioned agents in Kolkata to supply labour (Das, 2016: 3). The planters encouraged migration of labour to the plantation of Assam in groups of families rather than individuals so that the planters could utilize the services of all family members, man, women, children and also to ensure the reproduction of labour for the next generation.

Among the migrant tea workers more than 90% originated from east, central and south-eastern India including the Jharkhand area of Bihar (present Jharkhand state), northern and western Orissa, central and eastern parts of Madhya Pradesh including the present Chhatisgarh state, Warangal and Khammam districts of Andhra Pradesh and Mirzapur, Varanasi and Ghazipur districts of Uttar Pradesh (Bhuyan, 1977: 8). More than two-thirds of labourers came from Bihar and Orissa alone. A large section of the migrants to the tea gardens were drawn from the ranks of the aboriginal tribal groups from the Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Kols or Hos, Bhumij and Santhals, Kurmis and Murasis. The second most important group of migrants were from semi-aboriginal castes like Ghasis and Goraites, Bauris and Turi. Finally, a smaller number was drawn from among low caste Hindus like the Bhogtas, Rautias, Chamars, Dasadhs etc (Behal, 2013: 7).

According to Rana Behal colonial state intervention in the recruitment and labour system of the Assam tea plantations began in February 1863, when the Bengal Native Labour Act III was passed in order to control and regulate the recruitment and transportation of labour (Ibid, 2013: 5). In the middle of 19th century, the slave labour was replaced by indenture system in most of the plantations developed by the colonial planters. Indenture meant legally bound debt bondage which ensured that migrant workers could be forced to stay on in the plantations. The colonial government provided legality to indenture by enacting various laws that facilitated mass migration and availability of labourers in the gardens. The migration and recruitment of labourers from outside Assam was continuing up to the 1950s, but by 1959 it had been reduced to almost negligible proportions, and was practically discontinued in 1960 (Griffiths, 1967: 294).

3 Colonial Factors Leading to the Construction of Tea Tribes Identity:

The plantation was a product of modern colonialism and it was a major source of income for most of the colonial rulers. Plantation was characterized by resident of labour, who lives in block houses known as lines. This large labour force is migrant, having a different ethno-cultural identity from the indigenous people. Mc-Bride stated that the plantation was a form of landed estate usually established in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, with a large labour force kept in servitude (McBride, 1959: 148). In many ways the plantation was not only an effective tool for production and processing of crops, it also represented an entire way of life of the poor peasants based on colonial values and attitudes with many elements of rigid class hierarchy. With the decline of colonialism this system did not die away, but the same system was adopted to represent the labourer's life with nominal changes and continues in the post-colonial period (Sharma, 2002: 44).

The present-day socio-economic and politico-cultural identity of the tea tribes and their existence in Assam bears the historical impression of the colonial plantation. The British planters created a complex and systematic structure for tea production, closely resembling the plantation patterns that developed in many parts of the world under European colonial state processes, of which the recruitment of indentured migrant labourers was an integral component. The historical event of their migration and recruitment in the tea gardens of

Assam was a determinant or marker of their contemporary identity (Ibid, 2002: 47). Their contemporary identity is different from their respective native places of origin as well as from the host society in their areas of settlement.

Being determinants or as important factors of tea plantation worker's contemporary identity, let us discuss here about the historical event of their migration, recruitment and settlement in the tea garden of Assam under colonial state processes. During the early part of 19 century the tribes of east, central and south-eastern India were facing many serious problems. Many among them had been uprooted from their community held land by the Permanent Settlement, 1793, which was enforced to ensure regular tax collection for the colonial government. Famine, drought, flood and epidemic during the year 1896–1900, seriously affected the poor peasants of the region. Besides, to a great extent the 'tribal uprisings' in the region also affected the poor peasants. These factors forced to migrate a large number of tribal populations to Assam in search of better livelihood. Apart from these push factors, pull factors such as false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land available for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam (Baruah, 2008). Sometimes, the agents appointed by the colonial planters who lured and forced the innocent tribes to sign agreements. Catholic Mission Co-operative Society established in eastern India had also facilitated in recruiting labourers (Ekka, 2003). Two systems, namely 'thikedari' and 'sardari' were introduced to collect labourers. In Sardari system, a labourer who already conceded himself, went to different areas and brought more labourers. Vast majority of the 'Adivasis' recruited as labourers were brought from outside the province by Arkatis and Sirders as 'free emigrants', and then put on a longer Assam contract in Dhubri in Goalpara district. The entire process led to a clear case of constrained and forced labour. Once they conceded to the contract mean they were in absolute control of the manager, far away from the public gaze and lived virtually as slaves (Das, 2016: 4).

After having reached the tea estate of Assam the migrant tea labourers faced innumerable restrictions in their day to day life. They were ill treated and oppressed by their employer. Their mobility was restricted within the boundary of the tea estate, which remained completely isolated from the outside world. R. Behal stated that the freedom of movement of tea garden labourers is limited in a manner unheard of in any other industry. They are not allowed to go out of the estate whenever they want to do so. Planters appointed the night chowkidars to keep watch over the lines and prevent labourers from leaving the estates. This constant restraint on their right of free movement has reduced them to a state of slavery (Behal, 1984: 55).

Sometimes the migrant workers revolted against the management when situation became unbearable for them. But, whenever there was fight for the right of the workers, the planters suppressed the strike forcefully. There were many instances of this kind. In 1859, the workers of Negheriting Estate near Jorhat went on a mass strike under the leadership of a migrant worker, named Dube, demanding increase in wages. The planters suppressed the strike with military help. The leader was sentenced to 3 months in prison and others

were awarded 6 months' imprisonment (Kurmi, 2001: 241-256). Sometimes the labourers were even themselves approached the courts for redressal of their grievances, but even in the courts it was the planters' writ that ran the court's decision, as Debicharan Barua rightly said in 1886:

"...because the majority of the jury are selected from a class of men strong in race prejudices and ignorant of the first principles of jurisprudence - It mean the class of planters ... and this very system is one of the reasons why our poor coolies are so oppressed in Assam" (Guha, 1977: 56)

Lack of organization among tea workers was a serious problem. There were no such organizations to fight unitedly against the obnoxious abuses of the planters' power. Communication between the workers of the neighbouring tea estates was impossible except occasional meetings at weekly markets. Even, within the same garden workers were divided on ethnic lines, which were reinforced by the line system of residence (Sharma, 2002). The lines had a profound social significance in the life of the tea plantation workers that even seen in today's social relationship with other communities. The lines had two significant aspects for the colonial planters. Firstly, the labourers' lines were scattered all over the estate so that the workers could not unite against the management. Secondly, lines were allotted on the basis of caste or tribe, so that workers could live among their own people and preserve their customs and traditions to the extent possible on the estate. This also kept the workers divided on ethnic lines. This kind of social exclusion and subordination is still prevalent in the tea gardens of Assam (Barua, 1963: 222).

The plantation workers did not get any time to engage in social activities due to busy work schedule of the plantation. The diversity among the workers in terms of language, religion and place of origin made it impossible to interact among them. Even a common dialect among them took long to evolve, and a new migrant took time to learn it. In this situation the sardars were the sole medium of communication between the workers and management and often between workers of separate linguistic groups. Exclusion from the outside world and divided amongst themselves, the only mode of protest open to the tea workers was to engage in spontaneous outbursts of anger against some outrageous act of the planter, which resulted only in severe and exemplary punishment being meted out to the workers. Guha has appropriately said, "the worst form of serfdom was found in the tea gardens of Assam (Guha, 1977: 44).

Thus, there were different colonial factors that contributed to the construction of tea tribes identity in Assam. Their present exploitative situation, socio-economic as well as politico-cultural exclusion in the larger multicultural society of Assam was the contribution of colonial discourse that still the post-colonial Indian state is representing and constantly nurturing by using various disciplinary powers. The assurance of easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land for cultivation were popularised by the colonial discourse and injected in the body of the innocent tribals, mostly of Jharkhand origin which forced them to migrate to Assam as tea plantation workers. But these were all false assurances.

Instead of giving these benefits they were exploited, socio-economic and politically excluded and made them feel a sense of crisis of their identity. Thus, the present socio-economic and politico-cultural subordination and exclusion is a sign of representation of colonial discourse by the post-colonial Indian state.

4 Later day Crisis of Tea Tribes Identity:

As stated above, the tea tribes of Assam are among the most backward and exploited tribes in India. Being labourers, they live in villages inside tea estates established by tea planters. These tea estates are located in interior places and this contributes to their backwardness and exploitation by tea planters. The workers in a way have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. Violence and agitation of labourers against the management is common, where the state machinery normally protects the interest of tea planters (Sahu, 2004: 128). Lack of educational facilities, poverty, poor standard of living and health facilities are the basic problems of their life (Misra, 2007: 11-14). It is estimated that around 12% of Indian tribals lives in the North East India and almost all of them were included in the Schedule Tribe (ST) list of the constitution. But they do not include the plantation workers who were the tribals of Jharkhand origin. Their exclusion is a sign of subordination, their exploitative situation and their low status makes them different from both the Jharkhand tribals and their counterparts in North Bengal whose ancestors too came from Jharkhand (Fernandes, 2003: 1-3). They were bought to Assam by the British government giving them false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land for cultivation. After reaching the tea states, the migrant labourer's mobility was restricted within the boundary of the tea garden and factories (Mallick and Duara, 2012: 1-5). They were completely isolated from the outside world. Even the winds of the national struggle were not allowed to reach the tea gardens of Assam. The relationship between colonial planters and workers can aptly be described as that between masters and slaves in systems of production based on bonded labour. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurances of good pay and better facilities and that their labour was being exploited for massive profit gains by the tea planters (Misra, 2007: 12). In such an oppressive situation the workers agitation through strikes and riots against the management was common in the tea plantations in Assam since the 1840s.

In the first phase the workers started agitating at the individual level. The forms of struggle varied from place to place. Somewhere it was occasional nonviolent strikes and somewhere violent mass attacks on the planters. According to Amalendu Guha after their revolt against the British government, the Assam Labour and Emigration Act 1915 was passed where, further recruitment of plantation workers through thikedari system was made unlawful (Guha, 1984: 70-77). Their resistance and protest brought some new perspectives to them. However, there was lack of unity among the tea garden workers and therefore in the first phase they started collaborating with the Assamese people and later on themselves to form trade unions and socio-political organisations to preserve and protect their identity.

Presently many trade unions and socio-political organizations are working to preserve and protect the identity of tea tribes. Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Akhil Bharatiya Cha Mazdoor Sangh (ABCMS), and Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangha (ASCSS) are the three prominent trade unions, working for the welfare and empowerment of tea plantation workers. They have taken up various crucial issues to protect the working class identity, comprising disbursement of yearly bonus, creation of a separate department for the tea garden labour community, the provision of electricity, drinking water and housing to the tea garden labour lines and amendment of the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 etc. for the development of tea labour community (Toppo, 1999).

All Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (AATTSA) and All Adivasi Students' Association (AASAA) are the two most important students' organizations working for the protection of the interest and identity of tea tribes. Since the 1990s these two organizations along with many other organizations such as Adivasi Council of Assam (ACS), Adivasi Sewa Samity (ASS), Adivasi Sahitya Sabha (ASS), All Adivasi Women's Association of Assam (AAWAA), All Assam Santali Students' Union (AASSU) and Adivasi NGOs have been fighting for granting of Scheduled Tribes status to the tea garden community along with many other demands for socio-cultural and economic development of their community. Adivasi Council of Assam was the first Adivasi organization formed during 1955-1958 which started the movement for ST demand in an organized way. Subsequently, militant outfits such as the Adivasi Cobra Force (ACF), the Birsa Commando Force (BCF) (Misra, 2007: 13), All Adivasi National Liberation of Assam (AANLA), Adivasi Peoples' Army (APA) and Adivasi Dragon fighter (ADF) came into existence to safeguard the tribal culture of the plantation workers, rehabilitation of the displaced members of its community along with the ST demand.

5 Conclusion:

From the above backdrop it can be safely argued that the tea tribe's identity in Assam's is a product of the colonial plantation under colonial state processes, an authoritarian state system based on the exploitation of migrant workers, with a rigid hierarchy on ethnic and caste lines. The historical evolution of the tea industry in the sparsely populated areas and tradition-bound rural society in Assam under colonial state could be considered as the historical root of their identity. The historical event of their migration and recruitment in the tea industry of Assam was the marker of their present-day identity. Today, they are a settled population of Assam and have no connections with their original homes. Having no connections with their places of origin and intermingling with various cultures such as Oriya, Bengali, Bhojpuri, and even Assamese in the plantation setting, provides the background for growth of a composite tea worker community culture in Assam where the elements of tribal culture of the Jharkhand region are predominant. Although many differences exist among the tea tribes concerning language, religion, culture and ethnicity; they are trying to mobilised themselves at both individual and political levels for revival and recognition of their identity through socio-political movement and are trying to present themselves to the outside world as a single and united community.

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