
Immigration and Settlement of the Plantations Labourers in Assam**with reference to Tinsukia District****Mr Sanjay Das, Assistant Professor****Dept. of History, Margherita College****Abstract:**

Introduction of the tea industry in Assam opened a new chapter of the industrial development and thereon, the making of a working class began out of the people, whose traditional occupation was agriculture. Tea is an agricultural product, but to bring it to the stage of consumption, needed application of machines as well as sufficient number of manual workers. Thus, the tea planters, when began cultivation of tea, needed large number of manual labourers. They first appointed the indigenous people of the locality in the plantations but they found to be uninterested and left the tea gardens during the days of their paddy cultivation when it was also the high season for the plucking of the tea. The people were more interested with their traditional paddy cultivation than to work against wages.

The objective of this study is to focus on the immigration and distribution of the different races in the plantation areas. This study has been carried out through inductive, deductive and empirical approaches. In most cases relevant sequential data are not found even in the secondary sources, the inductive method applied to arrive at the definite conclusion. Likewise, situation made to apply deductive method in respect of some data which are found extravaganza.

Keywords: *tea industry, industrial development, occupation, immigration, plantation etc.*

I. Introduction:

Discovery of tea plant in Assam by Mr. Robert Bruce opened a new chapter of the socio-economic as well as socio-cultural life of the people of Assam. With the tea production the industrialization of Assam began by the initiative taken by the Company's Government. The tea plantation started by the Government, however, failed due to the poor and porous soil of the confluence of Brahmaputra and Kundil River. It was sold to the "Assam Company" in 1840 which had been formed in the previous year. The company had established two factories; one at Dibrugarh and another at the junction of the Burhi Dehing and Tingrai rivers. So, this company may be credited to be the pioneer of the tea production in Assam. There was temporary

depression of the tea production for a decade but after 1869 it began to flourish and opened in all directions which continued till the close of the last century.

The tea industry is an agriculture based industry, needed large number of manual labourers. Attempt to employ indigenous people for tea cultivation failed because they have no interest to work against wages. So, the flourishing industry needed huge work forces who continue to live in the plantation and could meet the demand whenever required. The tea planters were looking for such working force.

The “Assam Company” had already begun to import labourers in 1840 with the 652 coolies from Hajaribag district of Bihar out of whom how many reached Assam is unknown.

There were large numbers of downtrodden peoples who strolled beggars, lost their lands to the hands of the people who can pay taxes in cash to the Company’s Government. The Company’s Government advised the tea planters to recruit these poor people for their plantations.

II. Immigration of the Labourers:

Till 1863; there were no provisions of transporting people from one region to others. So, till 1863, the recruitment of the people was not a fare business. Middleman often used coercion and bribery to persuade a person to go to the plantation in Assam.

A series of legislation were enacted between 1863 to 1901, were related to ensure the employer, the services of the labourers imported by him for a period sufficiently long to enable him to recoup the cost of recruiting and bringing them to the garden. The provisions had also to protect the recruits from fraudulent recruitment and good treatment during the term of the contract. These provisions were not of interest of either to the planters or the recruiters. The nature of their transportation was criticized from various angles.

First systematic recruitment of labourers took place after the establishment of “The Planters’ Association” in 1859. This Association made the labour recruitment very lucrative business and unscrupulous persons entered in this business. The system, however, suffered with protests from various angles for its inhuman behavior. The “Indian Emigration Act of 1837” was applied to recruit labourers within the British colonies. The Transport of Native Labour Act came into being in 1863. This act was in favour of the planters, as compulsory works under legal provisions were imposed on the recruits. A number of Acts passed between 1863 and 1926 but

all of them were in favour of the planters as compulsory work in the plantation under legal provisions imposed on the recruits by these Act

These Acts actually legalized transportation of labourers to the other parts of the country. The Tea District Emigrants Labour Act of 1932 provided, for the first time, statutory rights to all the immigrant labourers to be repatriated from Assam with their families at the cost of the planters. But this Act hardly followed by the planters because of the demand of labourers increased in the plantations. The labourers who had completed the time of their agreements were forced to re-enter into with new names. In 1950 onwards, plantations began to suffer from labour surpluses and so restricted new recruitments. The ‘Industrial Committee on Plantation’ in 1960, declared recruitment of labourers outside Assam, illegal. Thereafter, labour recruitment was stopped.

The total number of labourers recruited from 1840 to 1950 is not clear. Different records show that between 1859 and 1910, the average recruitment per year was 30,000 which grew to 15.60 lakhs in this period. This number increased to 32.40 lakhs in 1950.7 In 1960, there were more than 100 registered tea gardens in the Tinsukia district, when the State had 800. All the immigrants were employed as manual labourers in these tea gardens.

The people brought before 1863, assume permanent settlements in the plantations and were out from any provisions of repatriation or settlements. The time expired labourers; who were not repatriated; either settled in the same tea gardens with new agreements or entered in the surrounding villages. They took up their occupation as cultivators. These newly emerged cultivators are named by the Government, as Ex-tea garden labourers after independence. Their population is double the population of the tea gardens. The total population of both the tea and ex-tea labourers may be estimated to 70 lacs at present.

III. Settlement in the plantation:

The tea gardens established in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, are in similar climatic and geographical conditions matched for other cultivation also. The peoples settled in these gardens and their adjacent villages living in same climatic and geographical situation which left some impact on their socio-cultural life. The economic life of this vast population is similar in the tea gardens throughout the State. This is because the “Plantation Labour Act of 1951” enforced in all of the plantations with the legal provisions for their safeguard in the plantation.

The workers collectively became member of a single trade union, developed after independence. The Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha established in 1958, an affiliated Trade Union to the INTUC is the only organization of the tea garden labourers negotiating with the managements for their grievances. The physical and climatic situation; the Plantation Labour Act 1951 and the single trade union system similar working conditions and settlement throughout the state, made them feel togetherness which helping their cultural assimilations throughout the State. The Tinsukia district organized in the year 1989 has no much difference than those of the other parts of the State. The tea garden situations throughout the State applicable to this district also. Thus, the discussions about the tea garden people of this district represent the tea community of the State. The Margherita sub-division, however, bears a special character due to the industries like, oil, coal and plywood developed with the tea plantation. But these industries could not make any difference in relation to their socio-cultural habits.

The planters were in need of labourers for their plantations in Assam. In the same time, in the other areas, like then Bengal and Central Provinces, the land policy of the Company's Government affected the people of the tribal areas, who were not habituated paying revenues in cash against their occupied land and the age old tradition of shifting cultivation. They were forced to pay the taxes or to evacuate their lands for those who could pay the revenues in cash to the Company's Government. The whole Chhotanagpur plateau fell under this policy and the poor tribal people became landless. They become helpless and were ready to do anything for a piece of bread for their children. The Company's Government neglected the situation. Traditional arm protests began in several areas under their tribal leaders. The tribal rebellions took place between 1813 and 1900 were such instances of these kinds of protests. The Company's Governments advise the planters to recruit these rebels and hunger stricken people and employ in their plantations in Assam. For the sake of a piece of bread people began to flow into Assam since mid-nineteenth century and the immigration continued till the close of the last century. Bribery, coercion were practiced to convince the immigrants better life in the plantation. By close of the last century the number of immigrated labourers into the plantations increased from 20 to 30 lakhs. After 1905, legal provisions were imposed for their repatriation at the cost of the planters. But there were increasing demand of manual labourers. The planters intentionally neglected the repatriation and forced the time expired labourers for new agreements. Those who did not enter

into the new agreements opened virgin lands surrounding the tea gardens. They did not know how to return to their home lands.

The people immigrated to the tea plantations of Assam were from different areas of the Country; especially of the rural areas, where indigenous people live. Most of these tribal areas were even untouched by the Great Mughals. They were isolated people from the main stream and their culture was different which they borrowed from unknown times. They carried their colorful traditions with their immigration into Assam and continued observing them in the plantations. The impregnable boundary of the plantation helped them to keep their traditions intact. Their brethren in their homeland met with many changes and alterations of their tribal habits with the changing situations. So, in the plantation, the original practice of some of their traditions kept intact.

The tea community comprise with two major groups - the tribes and the castes. The tribes are mostly belonging to the Chhotanagpur plateau including the hilly tracks of Orissa and Chahtisgarh. The second group consists of the castes; mostly from the plains of the present states of Orissa, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra etc. The approximate proportion of the whole community may be 40:45:15. The tribes specially comprise of the main groups of Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Sawra etc. with their several branches. The Castes, who belongs to the plains, were once the subjects of the Princely States of those regions before their immigration. Being people from the lower strata of the society they were divided in accordance to their occupations. The Karmakar or blacksmith, Kumhar or potter, Kishan or Agriculturists, Badhoi or Carpenter, Turi or basket weaver etc. were such occupations they continued to practice even in the plantations of Assam also.

Besides, there were also a few numbers of castes of upper strata, like the Mohanti, Prodhan, Pattanayak, Khondait, Karan etc. whose occupations attached either with the royal courts or the traditional temples. The whole family of the tea garden community comprises of 119 different sub-groups with their individual caste identification. These cultural groups of individual identity began to live in the boundary of the plantations after their immigration. Gradually they intermixed with each other and the assimilation resulted with the production of a common culture of the tea community. The intermixing became possible as some of their socio-cultural

habits were common to all of them. There are some rituals like Karam, Tushu, Sahrai etc., which once belong to individual family or group, become common to all. The plantation situation, which forced them to live twenty four hours with a similar type of lifestyle, made them to forget the traditional differences. The result was the development of the colorful new socio-cultural tradition. At present the total number of their population estimated to more than 60 lakhs in the State.

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