



TEA INDUSTRY IN COLONIAL ASSAM: LABOUR RECRUITMENT AND MIGRATION OF LABOURERS

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ABSTRACT:

Assam, one among the eight sisters in the North-Eastern region has been playing a vital role over the years in establishing a unique identity for India in the world scenario through its contribution in the production of tea. Although Assam was annexed into the British Empire in 1826, the British had made several detailed enquiries starting from 1778 about the resources of the region. The Britishers were keen to start tea cultivation so that they could compete with China which was the major explorer of tea during that period. In this context, the colonial government found the province of Assam the most suitable region to start the commercial cultivation of tea. As the tea plantations were highly labour intensive, the issues relating to labour gained high attention during that period. In due course of time, such requirement of labourers caused migration of labourers transforming the demographic structure of the whole society of Assam. Hence, through this paper an attempt has been made to study about the recruitment of tea garden labourers and how it led to the migration of labourers in colonial Assam. The current paper is basically a qualitative one based on secondary sources. Due to the laziness for working in the tea gardens by the local Assamese people and shortage of adult population, the tea plantations had to face the problem of shortage of labour. It is in this context that the colonial state provided a patronage and the migration of the black tribals i.e. the Adivasis started. The labourers were appointed mainly through two systems, i.e. Contractor system and Sardari system both of which proved to be brutal and inhumane. Moreover, inhumane practices were used in the whole process of transportation of labourers. After they reached the tea estates, the planters did not make proper arrangements for their living. Even after 72 years of independence, there is no marked improvement in the living standard of the tea garden labourers in Assam. The government, trade unions, media as well as the elite ones within the community have to play a positive role towards uplifting the condition of these people.

KEY WORDS: Assam, Community, Labour Recruitment, Migration, Tea Industry.

INTRODUCTION:

Explaining the significance and value of tea industry in India, B. M. Khaitan, the Chairman of the largest tea producing group of the world rightly remarked – “Tea is not a mere commodity for us. It is heritage based on the values and culture, full of sentiments and commitments” (Boroowah, 2007, p.1).

Assam, one among the eight sisters in the North-Eastern region has been playing a vital role over the years in establishing a unique identity for India in the world scenario through its contribution in the production of tea. Till 31st March of the year 2012, in the whole North Eastern Region (NER), there are 963 tea estates and 13,175 registered small tea growers out of which 830 tea estates and 4,966 registered small tea growers are in Assam. In the NER, the tea plantation covers 338,371 hectares of land till 2011 out of which Assam alone covers 322,214 hectares. Moreover, till the year 2011, the NER has produced collectively 521,085 kgs of tea out of which the share of Assam is 508,741 kgs (“Basic Statistics of North Eastern Region”, 2015, p.224). Accordingly, the data reveals that Assam is the largest tea producing state in India. At the same time, it has rightly claimed the title of ‘pioneering state’ in tea plantation in the country.

Although Assam was annexed into the British Empire in 1826, the British had made several detailed enquiries starting from 1778 about the resources of the region. These preliminary surveys were made in order to prepare for the annexation of Assam into British India and to exploit the resources of the region. The Britishers were keen to start tea cultivation so that they could compete with China which was the major explorer of tea during that period. Tea was extensively used amongst the people of Assam in a rudimentary form. The Asomiyas also used tea as a medicinal drink. It was a popular non-alcoholic drink having worldwide popularity. In view of the popularity of the commodity, they had seen the prospects of commercial cultivation of tea. In this context, the colonial government found the province of Assam the most suitable region to start the commercial cultivation of tea.

Robert Bruce, an agent of the East India Company along with his brother C. A. Bruce discovered Assam tea with the help of the Singpho Chief of the Singpho tribes. In the year 1839, the East India Company initiated the commercial plantation of tea in upper Assam. Gradually, it spread to all over Assam occupying a dominant place in the economy of Assam as well as India. As the tea plantations were highly labour intensive, the issues relating to labour gained high attention during that period. In due course of time, such requirement of labourers caused migration of labourers transforming the demographic structure of the whole society of Assam. Hence, through this paper an attempt has been made to study about the recruitment of tea garden labourers and how it led to the migration of labourers in colonial Assam.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Here, a few of the literature have been reviewed relating to the paper.

Sharma and Bhuyan (2016) have made some observations regarding the living conditions of the tea garden labourers of Maijan Rajgarh Borline. They have found their conditions very much pathetic. Their living environment is unhygienic, medical facilities are unsatisfactory and sanitation facilities are improper. They spend their money in drinking alcohol without thinking about the maintenance of their families which has destroyed their social life.

Panwar (2017) has tried to analyze the condition of the workers in tea plantation. Along with it, she has suggested some proper remedies for improving their living conditions. She has found that apart from the proper safety equipment such as gloves, shoes, hats etc. they are also suffering from proper sanitation facilities, water facilities etc. She has emphasized upon forming a separate body as well as labour union on the part of the government to take care of the rights of the workers. She has also urged for proper working hours, proper wages and equal wages for both men and women. However, she has given priority to the safety of women and children.

The Fact Finding Mission Report of Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition (2016) has investigated and accordingly analyzed the allegations of serious abuses of human right to food and nutrition and related human rights of the workers in tea plantation in India. During the investigation, it has found that the workers are suffering from insecurity of tenure, violations of women's rights and gender discrimination, insufficient wages and debt, abuses and violations of human right to food and nutrition as well as abuses and violations of related economic, social and cultural rights such as right to health, right to education, right to work and right to water and sanitation in the working and living conditions. In this regard, the report has provided certain recommendations to the government of India.

Borgohain (2013) has tried to examine the occupational health hazards faced by the tea garden labourers of Hajua Tea Estate of Sibsagar District and Marangi Tea Estate of Golaghat District in Assam. During the study, she has found that educationally the tea garden workers are very poor, health facilities are not sufficient and also they are far from the safety measures. Due to all these lacking, the workers have to face a number of work related accidents as well as a number of health problems.

De (2015) has discussed how the tea plantation workers were exploited in Bengal and Assam during the colonial period. The labourers were recruited through the agents and the contract system at a very cheap rate and any labourer breaking the contract had to meet with severe punishment. Wage of the labourers was very low. Their living conditions were very much unhygienic and inhumane which led them to suffer from severe diseases frequently. Their conditions were such that their lives were mortgaged in the hands of the planters.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The present paper is guided by one particular objective – to focus upon the various aspects regarding the recruitment of the tea garden labourers and to know how it changed the demographic structure of the society in Assam through causing the migration of labourers during the colonial period.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

The current paper is basically a qualitative one. For the effectiveness of the study, it has taken the help of various secondary sources. In this regard books, e-books, journals, e-journals, research work, governmental as well as non-governmental reports are mentionable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

As it has already been said that the tea plantations were highly labour intensive, the new plantation required huge labour force for the smooth functioning of the gardens. Initially, the local labourers such as Kacharies, Mataks, Kukis, Nagas and Singphos were employed in the tea gardens. But they were only casual labourers and preferred to work in the gardens only in the dry agricultural season. During that time, the economic condition of the Assamese people was very much self-sufficient and they preferred to lead an independent life. Moreover, the people of Assam had extensively used opium due to which they became very much weak and lethargic. It may be noted that the Assam Company had also smuggled some Chinese labourers who were experts in tea cultivation. But their numbers were too small and they were not in a position to cover all the areas under cultivation. Thus, the gardens were labour starved and the Company had to look for alternative avenues of securing permanent and adequate labourers for the gardens. “There was a very few landless labourers in Assam and people who have land naturally prefer the independence and ease of their positions as cultivators to the discipline and regular labour of the tea gardens. It was thus found necessary, at a very early stage, to seek for tea garden coolies elsewhere, and in 1953 the Assam Company had already begun to import labourers from Bengal” (Gait, 1926, p.341). Accordingly, due to the laziness for working in the tea gardens by the local Assamese people, the tea plantations had to face the problem of shortage of labour.

Another factor which also contributed in this regard was the shortage of adult population in Assam. Some years ago, Assam had to experience the devastations caused by two major rebellions, i.e. Moamoria rebellion (1770-1795) and the Burmese invasion (1819-1824) and the consequences of these two rebellions were still affecting the population of Assam in the subsequent years. “During the Burmese occupation, they had made constant raid on the helpless Assamese, carrying off thousands as slaves and reducing the eastern part of the country to a state of complete depopulation. As such, there was not enough adult population even to cultivate all the available lands to supply enough food grains to the state” (Gait, 1926, p.286). It is in this context that the colonial state provided a patronage and the migration of the black tribals i.e. the Adivasis started from the areas like Jharkhand, Chotanagpur, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

The migration of the black tribals i.e. the Adivasis started in the later half of the 19th century. They were alienated from their traditional land by non-tribals under the patronage of the colonial state. These people were very much poor and illiterate. These poor peasants and landless labourers were exploited by big Landlords and Zamindars. Along with such excessive exploitation, famine, drought, flood and epidemics had made their life very much pathetic. Moreover, many of the black tribals had lost their access to forest which was the source of their livelihood. It was because the forests were declared as reserved by the colonial government. It is in this context that the oppressed and impoverished tribals started migrating to the tea plantation in Assam. These migrating tribes included a number of groups which entirely were known as Adivasis. In this regard, Elizabeth Kaniampady FMA mentioned, “Different groups were

recruited from different places, e.g., the Munda and the Gond from Bihar and Orissa; Savara from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; Goalas from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh; Tanti from Bengal and Bihar; Lohar from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh; Khond from Andhra Pradesh; Boya from Tamil Nadu; and Parjha from Tamil Nadu and Madhya Pradesh. Various push and pull factors like desperate poverty, indebtedness and land alienation on the countryside, and false promises of “Less work and high wages” probably made available this huge supply of labour force” (Kaniampady, 2003, p.30).

The labourers were appointed mainly through two systems, i.e. Contractor system and Sardari system. In the initial period of tea plantation, Contractor system was followed to recruit the labourers in the tea gardens of Assam. It was also named as Free Contractor system as the contractors could supply labour freely to various tea gardens of Assam as well as India. Such labour contractors were known as Arkatis. The labourers were recruited to work for a definite period. After that they had to be given permission to go back to their native land. But these poor and oppressed tribals became the victim of the false promises of the contractors that they will be given high wages for less work. Therefore, to get rid of poverty and oppression, immediately they responded to the calling of the cunning contractors. It may be stated here that inhumane practices were used by the labour contractors in the whole process of recruitment. The system was inhumane because they were interested only in the healthy labourers and the sick and unhealthy labourers were left in the spot without any provision for food and medical facilities. However, later on in view of the report of various enquiry committees being the Contractor system as unsatisfactory labour recruitment system, it was replaced by a new system, i.e. the Sardari system.

The Sardari system did not recognize the role of contractor for the recruitment of labourers. Rather, in this system the planters gave the responsibility of recruiting new labourers to their trusted labourers already working in the gardens who were known as Sardars. About the process of recruiting labourers through Sardari system, Kar (1981) described, “Garden Sardars including both men and women were sent out by the planters every year in the recruiting season, which generally began in November and lasted for three to four months. They, too, used to induce men and women to come to the tea gardens in Assam, showing all the advantages of work and prospects of ultimate settlement in independent holdings. Some of the prospective emigrants desired to join their relatives already in tea gardens while others were forced to do so by poverty and scarcity at home. There were still others who came as adventurers. Planters preferred labourers to come with their families as in that case they were more likely to stay permanently on gardens” (pp.141-142). Each sardar could recruit twenty labourers for which they were paid commission.

Till the year 1915, the labourers were recruited through both these systems. But through the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1915, the Contractor system was abolished. After that various planters associations formed the ‘Tea District Labour Association’ in the year 1917 with their collective effort and since then this organization handled all the matters associated with labour recruitment in Assam. Accordingly, “by 1921-22 some 270,000 labourers were working in the tea gardens of Assam and by 1962 some 600,000 ex-tea garden labourers had been able to settle on government land. In spite of frank criticism of the less satisfactory features of the tea garden life, they regard emigration to Assam in many cases as an avenue of escape from destitution and even servitude” (Griffith, 1967, p.283). But such mad rush of labourers to the tea gardens of Assam had created various problems in this state such as unemployment, shortage of food as well as other essential goods due to which the Assam government thought about

the issue of recruitment of outside labourers and decided to discontinue it. It led to the reduction of recruitment of outside labourers since 1959 and final stoppage since 1960. It also resulted in the abolition of Tea District Labour Association. Since then the recruitment process became limited only within the unemployed ones in the state of Assam. Thus, from the year 1870 to 1960, a massive migration of labourers happened under the colonial patronage which was mainly done for the requirement of the commercial tea plantation in Assam.

It may be stated here that in view of the labour requirement in the tea gardens in Assam, the colonial state had made forced import of labour. It has been seen that although the migration happened basically in the interest of colonialism, but inhumane practices were used in the whole process of transportation of labourers. The labourers were transported through steamer boats and it took so many days. The steamer boats were overloaded with labourers in such a way that they could not even stand on the boat comfortably. After a miserable journey for long days, the labourers had to move on foot as no other means of transportation was available in that place where the steamer journey ended. It was very painful and difficult. The distance for the journey was too long during which they had to suffer from inadequate food and medical facilities. It was such a long miserable journey that many labourers became sick and lost their lives on the way. After they reached the tea estates, the planters did not make proper arrangements for their living. The tea gardens were almost like social prisons for the migrating tribes who were isolated from the rest of the society. Within the garden they were kept segregated and were not allowed to mix up with the planters as well as labourers of other tea gardens.

CONCLUSION:

The migration of the Adivasis gradually transformed the society in Assam. It changed the static demographic structure of the Asomiya society. Accordingly, the Adivasis have gradually become a part and parcel of the greater Assamese culture. But even after 72 years of independence, there is no marked improvement in the living standard of the tea garden labourers in Assam. The British planters in past and Indian counterparts at present have taken undue advantage of their illiteracy, ignorance and economic backwardness. Although technically they are citizens of the country, but in reality, they are living in very much deplorable condition. It may also be mentioned here that the Adivasis have demanded the status of scheduled tribe (ST) and a movement is going on for the achievement of the said status. But although, the tea garden labourers in Assam are very much poor, downtrodden and backward, surprisingly, the Assam government has not given them the said status. In this regard, Assam is the only state within India which has deprived ST status to these poor people. It is known to everyone that Assam has been able to achieve a place of pride in the national as well as international economy because of the tea production and it has become possible only for this section of population. But to protect them from inhumane atrocities and to uphold their human dignity is still a low priority issue in the political agenda of the state government. However, it will be oversimplification if we make only the government responsible for the overall state of affairs of these people. The trade unions as well as the elite ones within the community have also to play a positive role towards uplifting the condition of these people. The role of the media in addressing the issues of the tea garden labourers in Assam is very much crucial. While on the one hand, it is saying that efforts have been made to ensure universalization of human rights, but in reality, it is still a day dream only for this section of population. How can we expect human resource from these people? How can we assure that India is moving through the true spirit of participatory democracy? No, never, real development of Assam is never possible if

this large section of population lag behind. Hence, it is high time to look into the issues of these tea garden labourers so that they can enable the tea industries to survive in the global market.

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