

REFLECTION OF TEA GARDEN LABOURERS AS MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY: A STUDY

Deluar Hussain

Asst. Professor

Deptt. Of English

Hari Gayatri Das College

Azara. Guwahati, Assam

Abstract:

Tea plantation is one of the major industries of the world that requires a large number of workers. Tea plantations had been carried out in various places of Assam, India during the colonial rule. Assam produces more than 54 per cent of the annual tea produce. The British managed workers from various places of India for the Assam tea gardens. The workers were mostly tribal and backward Hindu by caste. They came to distant Assam tea gardens to work here to improve their conditions of life. But reverse happened as the life was rather difficult in the tea gardens. They were tortured and exploited. Their dream shattered. They could not leave the gardens too. Under these circumstances, they started living in the gardens and many generations had passed thus. The present paper portrays the picture of tea tribes who migrated to Assam and worked here under colonial administration. It also focuses the pathetic condition of these marginalized people and their voice in the British dominated estate. A glimpse on the present state of the workers has also been made.

Keywords- Tea plantation, colonialism, exploitation and marginalization

The commercial tea production began in India in the early part nineteenth century. The British East India Company took initiative at this. They converted vast area of land for the tea production. This task needed a lot of labours. Initially, the labourers were brought from china. Later on, they did not want to work in the Assam tea gardens. The local people of Assam also did not want to work in the plantation sites of Assam. It was this time the administration's eyes fell on the destitute tribal people. The estate authority appointed agents to recruit those people. The agents or the Sahukars brought these people to the estate and got commission from the authority.

The tea tribes were the aboriginal tribes of India who have been living in the areas remote from other cultures and traditions. They lived in the distant hills and valleys. But in the course of time, they migrated to various places inside of the country in search of food. Some

of them started living together in groups at a particular place and some kept on wandering from place to place in search of food. Their existence came to be known to the rest of the world only when outsiders intruded upon their territories. They were poor and insignificant people who were often exploited by the local Zaminders. They earned their livelihood mostly by working in the fields. But due to the cruel policy of the Zaminder, they lost their land and home. They were socially backward. They were also regarded as untouchable by the upper class Hindu. They were in last strata of Hindu caste system. Thus, the religious caste system and attitude of the rich made them marginalized in their own land. Their only fault was that they were poor and born to the lower caste family. They were then approached by British Tea estate agents who lured them to take up the job of tea plantations in Assam. The agents promised them better conditions of life and wages in the tea estate of Assam. They became hopeful and decided to work under them as bonded labour. They travelled to the distant land of Assam with their whole family and started living in the tea estate as coolie. These labours came from the states like Orissa, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh etc. They migrated to Assam tea gardens in between nineteenth and twentieth century from those central parts of India.

The tribal people were illiterate and backward. They could not think of the cruelty of the British made tea estate. They were simple and easy going persons who could easily be motivated by the Sahukars. Besides, the poverty compelled them to take up the job of bonded labour. They did not have any options before them but choose to work in the plantations sites of Assam. A large number of people were recruited by the British tea garden authority in Assam. This attempt was first made by the Assam Company in 1841. The company forcefully recruited almost seven hundred workers locally from the various parts of Assam to the plantation sites. But many of them died due to cholera and many fled the estates in the darkness of night. In order to ease out the labour scarcity, the 'Women's Breach of Contract Act' was passed in 1859. Accordingly, workers were recruited from the outside of Assam through contracts. The agents or brokers were appointed to recruit the labour from outside. Besides, the 'Sardari System' was introduced in 1870 to recruit labours. These act and system helped to manage labours for the tea estates without any difficulties.

The Assam Company successfully recruited thousands of labour from various regions of India. They brought more than two thousands labourers from outside of Assam in between the year 1859 and 1861. But unfortunately many died on the way to Assam. Again, almost three thousand labours were brought to Assam in two batches in between the year 1861 and 1862. They were brought from central India through the Brahmaputra river route. Between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 84,915 labourers were recruited, but 30,000 died by June 1866. From 1877 to 1929, 419,841 recruits entered Assam as indentured labourers. It included 162,188 males, 119,582 females and 138,071 children. From 1938 to 1947, 158,706 recruits came to Assam. They were brought to Assam through three riverine routes, two through **Brahmaputra** and one through **Surma**. *Debarken Depots* were used to carry the bonded labours. Some of the *Debarken Depots* in the Brahmaputra were **Tezpur**, **Silghat**, **Kokilamukh**, **Dibrugarh**, etc. *Debarken Depots* in Surma (Barak) were **Silchar**, **Katigora**, **Sylhet**, **Karimganj** etc. (Data Collected from- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tea-tribes_of_Assam, dt-29/01/2017, and 7.30 pm.)

The labourers were transported in ships in an unhygienic condition that was worse than animal transportation system. The steam boats were loaded with labours more than their capacity. There was no space left to sit comfortably or sleep at night in the ship. It took several days to reach the destinations. They had to travel many days in the overcrowded ships. They just had to lean against others with no space in between. They were given very ordinary food. There were no proper sanitations. They travelled like animal in the packed ships. Their discomfort or problems were not looked into. The unhygienic journey for several days caused various diseases in the ship during their journey. They were affected with disease like cholera. There was no remedy in the ship. Many of them died on the way. No funeral rites could be performed in the ship. The dead bodies were simply thrown into the river.

The workers were not only sad for the disease and death during their journey but also for the cruel behaviour of the sahibs. The sahibs treated them like animals. They were very rude to them. If the workers complained against any odds of the Sahukars, they were beaten badly. Besides, some girls and women became the victim of sahib's lust. Whenever, the sahibs felt sexual lust during their journey, they asked the Sahukars to manage some women for them. They gave a little amount of money to the Sahukars and also to the women. Some women could not think of their chastity due to their utmost poverty and humbly submitted themselves to them just to have a little money on the way. Some husbands of the women did not protest against it as they got something to smoke or drink for allowing their wives to the sahib's cabin. Some beautiful girls were targeted and persuaded to go to the cabin at night. Some were forcefully taken and when they protested, they were tortured and beaten badly.

The workers reached the Assam tea estates after their long tiresome journey. On reaching, they were taken to the coolie lines. They were provided straw and bamboo to make their huts. The next day onwards, their duty started. Once they entered into the garden, they became coolie. Their earlier identity came to a halt. They became tea estate coolies who are downtrodden and backward. They were allotted duties by the babus and sahibs. Some were assigned the duty of clearing the land for new plantations. Some were allotted the duty of plucking tea leaves. Some labours were engaged in the factory from where final tea was produced. They had to work whole day at a meagre wages. All the members of the workers' family were engaged in the estate activity. The children and women were not spared because the ration was given for the entire family. Even the pregnant ladies were not spared. They had to work in the garden till the child birth. After the child birth, they had leave for only one week or so. There were no proper principles of labour. Whatever the authority wanted became the rule for the estate.

The workers did not have basic facilities in the estate. They had to live in the huts with leaking roof and terrible sanitation. Many families had no toilets and they had no choice but to defecate among the tea bushes. They were not given justified wages. There was no pure drinking water system. They could not improve their condition as promised. The mere wages could not fulfil their dream. They were somehow living. They could not have proper food. The children were left malnourished and vulnerable to fatal illnesses. There were no hospitals in the estate in the initial stage. The workers died out of common diseases. They could not take treatment from a doctor by travelling miles. Though the hospital was established much later in the estate but there remained no doctors or nurse. It took many years to have a regular

doctor in the estate. Similarly, there was no school in the initial stage. It took several decades to have a primary school in the tea estate. Many years after, a school was established because of the order of the government. But there was no regular teacher. There were no proper facilities for the pupils. It took hundred years to have permanent teacher in the tea garden schools. Though the school was established but the authority did not want the workers' children to go to the school because it would decrease their work force in future. So, they discouraged them to go to school. Some workers really did not send their wards to the school. Gradually, their minds were changing and they used to send their wards to the school.

The tea estate authority always showed their back to the development of coolies. The British authority did not want the coolies to be civilized. They kept them confined within the estate premises. They did not like them to assimilate with the local communities outside of the estate. The local community of Assam also did not accept them. For them, the tribes were strange men with strange traditions and culture. Hence, the local community always maintained distance with them. It took hundred years for the workers to partially assimilate with the local community. In the course of time, the tribes accepted Assamese language and culture and became a part of greater Assamese nation. A section of local community still looks down upon them.

The workers were kept in strict order which they could not violate. They were looked down upon. They were considered as neglected marginalized class. They neither had any rights nor had any access to any rights in the estate. They were badly punished for even the slightest mistakes. They always created terror in the mind of the natives so that they would not raise any voice against them. They brutally suppressed those who tried to flee from the garden. The authority killed hundreds of workers for attempting to flee. Many were imposed heavy fine for breaking the contract. They could not pay the fine even in their life time. They were always met with injustice. They were discriminated as inferior class. It was the colonial attitude and policy that made these natives as marginalized class.

The authority also practised gender discrimination in the garden. They did not give equal wages to everyone. The men who were engaged in non-leaf plucking task were given double wages than women who were engaged in leaf plucking activities. The women and children were usually given less wages. As per the labour law, each tea garden worker must receive regular wages, provident fund payments, bonuses, pension (for retired workers), ration, umbrellas and aprons for working, firewood for cooking, housing, electricity, water, medical care and education facilities. But these facilities were beyond their imagination. Though the labours in Britain were having all such facilities but the British in India denied those facilities to the Indian labours. As a result, they lived very low standard life in the tea estate. There was no system of adult education. They could not justify what was good or bad for them. After day's works, they all would sit down to drink wine that degraded their health. Excessive intake of wine and salt in their tea affected them with cardiovascular disease leading to high mortality. They could not manage sugar in their tea because it was costlier than salt. They were not aware of their own health related issues. They were also affected with severe dehydration that was caused by long working hours under the sun and heat. Hence, the authority provided them copious amounts of tea, loaded with salt that caused cardiac problems to them. The tobacco intake was another cause for the health degradation of the

estate workers. All the workers irrespective of men and women consumed tobacco. Besides, anaemia and tuberculosis were the major causes of death in the tea estates. The authority did not take any effective measure for them in this regard.

The absence of labour rights made the workers a pathetic marginalized class. Marginalized class is usually isolated from the main stream of the society. They are the deprived class. They were deprived and exploited in their native places that compelled them to take up the job of bonded labour in the Assam tea gardens. In the Garden itself, they could not regain their identity. They again turned as marginalized class due to British suppression and cruel policy. They did not have education or status in the society. They were in the last strata of the social class. They were thus the most neglected helpless class. Their working conditions were very harsh and physically arduous. The human rights and labour laws were completely violated in the estates. The workers were not allowed to remain absent in their duties even for a single day. They did not have any personal freedom in the estate. They could not meet the labourers from the neighbouring estates. They had to take permission for arranging marriage and other gatherings.

The workers were not safe in the estate. They did not have any security. The British officer often tortured them for minor mistakes and sometime for no mistakes. A kind of Jungle raj was prevailing in the estate under the British officers. The women workers often became the victim of sahib's sexual lust. The young girls were often sexually assaulted and raped by them. There was no justice for this. The workers could not bring this matter for court justice. They silently bore this with unending pain. The workers did not have the dignity of normal human beings. They did not have any prestige and status in the estate. They were called coolie that meant person without rank. They were just born to cater the need of others. It became the custom of the garden that the coolie would be beaten. The coolies were mentally prepared to get beating when they committed any mistakes. It was their normal day to day activity that someone would get beating.

The persistent suffering and injustice eventually enraged the workers. They began to realize that they were being suppressed more than need. They were becoming conscious of their rights. In some tea estates, the workers endeavoured to form workers Union but the authority did not allow them to form it. They were suppressed by police. The leaders were arrested and put into jail. The cruel suppression of the authority could not stop them from forming the union. In many tea estates, the Unions were formed at the cost of lives of the workers. They also began to protest against the injustice of the authority but could not do anything as the administration and police were with the estate authority. They always favoured the estate authority but not the workers.

The historians have recorded the tragic history of the tea tribes. Besides, various Indian writers have portrayed the pathetic picture of the estate workers in their writings. Among them Mulk Raj Anand, Umakanta Sarma, Syed Abdul Malik were prominent. Mulk Raj Anand in his novel, 'Two leaves and a Bud' and Umakanta Sarma in his novel, 'Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya' have poignantly described the picture of these marginalized community.

Many socially concerned persons raised their voice against the injustice met by the tea tribes. But nothing happened. The workers persistently suffered for more than one century. Some positive changes took place with workers in the first part of the 20th century. After the Indian independence, they had more freedom and facilities in the garden. But these facilities are not enough for the development of a community that remained backward for more than two hundred years.

It was desired that after the independence, their poor conditions of life and suffering would come to an end. But still they are having number of problems and difficulties in their day to day life. At present, there are almost fifteen hundred tea estates, out of these, seven hundred ninety tea estates are registered with the government. The estates which are not registered with the government are not providing regular wages to the labours. The workers are also denied other benefits in those gardens as per the wage act. The Plantation Labour Act (PLA) bestows the tea plantation owners with the responsibility to provide tea workers with basic needs, including drinking water, health care, education and housing. But this remained a far cry for those labours working in the non registered estates. Sometimes, the govt. registered tea estates also found discriminating labour. They are still away from proper housing facility and other facilities like health and education. The parents are still facing problems in every stage in the growth of their children. There is no job security in the estate even today. The workers do not have legal rights over their house and land. Hence, the authority has the power to dismiss any worker out of work. Hence, the workers have to work very submissively so that the authority does not evict him from his land. They thus cannot raise their strong voice against the authority even after the end of colonialism. They continued to be marginalized. The circumstances compelled them to work for pittance wages under the authority to keep hold the house that they are possessing. They have already lost link with their actual home land for more than two hundred years.

The tea estate workers are unskilled labours. They could not manage job in any other sectors. Hence, they had to work in the estate permanently with all kinds of hardships and hurdles. They cannot raise their voice strongly against the authority even after seventy years of Independence. The workers are forced to work in bonded conditions where there is no escape for them. In the world of globalization, they are still lagging behind. The government have adopted many policies for the development of these people but that have not reached to them successfully. They are still poor and downtrodden class.

The government should come up with more practical plans and policies for the upliftment of this community. It should compel the estates to be compulsorily registered under it. Minimum wage system should be implemented successfully. The estates should not be privatised. The legal ownership of housing space to the workers should be granted. Casual labour should also be brought under the purview of Plantation Labour Act, 1951. The workers should be given 'Provident fund' and gratuity benefits. The government should make more strict laws to protect these workers.

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