

## Tea Garden Labour Situation in Assam

Dr. Putul Borah

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, University of Delhi, India

### \*Corresponding Author:

Dr. Putul Borah

Email: [putulborah79@gmail.com](mailto:putulborah79@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This paper examines the socio-economic and political situation of the tea garden labourers in Assam. The tea garden labourers were migrated from various places of India to work in Assam tea plantations during the colonial as well as post-independent period. Nowadays, the tea garden labourers are settled down permanently in various areas of Assam tea gardens as well as the other parts of the state of Assam. Therefore, this article highlights the labourers' condition and unionization and movements from colonial and post-independent period-till date in tea plantations of Assam.

**Keywords:** migration, unionization, trade union, labour welfare, labour movements, exploitation, etc.

### INTRODUCTION

Tea plantation in Assam was introduced by the colonial British government during the 1840's. When the British government explored the areas of Assam, the officials observed the possibilities of growing tea. In this regard, in 1834, the first tea committee was formed and the first tea garden was started in 1837 [1]. The area under tea cultivation increased over time in different location of Assam. In the process of developing this beneficial tea garden industry, the government and planters needed labourers. Since tea plantation was an agro-based enterprise, large numbers of manual workers were needed round the clock. The labourers who came to work in tea plantation played significant role in the development of these tea industries. The labourers of Assam tea plantation came from various part of India, especially from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Bengal. They were the heart line of this tea industry because local people of Assam were either economically affluent possessing cultivable land or were status conscious of working as labourers due to their illustrious past under the *Ahom* rule.

### Labour Condition from Colonial to Post-independence Period

During colonial period, many labourers were employed in Assam tea plantations through the 'indenture' system. They were recruited through two systems known as - the *contractors'* system and *sardari* system on contract basis for a period of five years. Due to frequent occurrences of various natural calamities, government policies, exploitation of low caste people by higher caste people, various socio-political movements, and socio-economic oppression at home had forced them to migrate and work in the tea plantations of Assam. The labourers who came from different places and varied

socio-economic and cultural background formed a new mixed society separately in the plantation regime. As a result, a new sub-culture formed gradually in the plantation regime of Assam.

After long years away from homelands, their traditions, customs, rites, and religious practices have undergone many changes over time. At present, the tea garden labourers of Assam, by themselves have formed a separate community of the Assamese society and call themselves, "The Tea Garden Labour Community".[2] There are more than a million tea garden labourers in the country of which more than 2/3 labourers are working in the tea gardens of Assam [3]. About 17 percent of the workers of Assam are engaged in tea industry. About 20% of the total population of Assam depends on the tea industry [4]. However, it is often alleged that the tea garden labourers are mostly oppressed and exploited by the leaders of labour union, planters, government agencies etc. in Assam before and after independence of India in various ways.

The plantation industry differs from other industries because the work in the former is family based. The family gets free residential quarters and also a small plot of land for agriculture. They live permanently in the same quarters even after retirement as their descendents get employment in the same tea estate. As a result, they have become permanent inhabitants of the garden for all practical purposes [5].

Initially, workers were encouraged to migrate to work in the tea plantations with their families. Planters preferred family based migration and employment because labour could be reproduced which could solve the problems of further recruitment at their gardens in the

future. The wage payment and completion of task system in plantation workers had two component in daily and contract basis. Male workers performed the task of planting tea and women and children mainly responsible for harvesting, nursery, plucking and light maintenance work etc.

Socio-economic condition of tea garden labourers in Assam during the phase of colonial period created many social and economic problems. They were lacking proper housing facilities, health and other amenities of life and women had to manage home with limited resources. Besides overcrowding and lack of space in labour lines, insufficiency of accommodation for all the family members was a great problem. Due to prolong droughts, outbreak of various epidemics, lack of sufficient medical facilities, different climate and unhealthy living conditions were the major causes of high death rate in plantations of Assam.

The labourers led their life in isolation and were alienated, in the Marxian sense of the term. In addition to this, the labour forces could not accommodate themselves in the mainstream socio-political system due to the biased nature of the administration. The workers were not allowed to go outside the gardens by the planters. No outsiders were allowed to meet them without prior permission from the managers. As a result, with passage of time, their own kith and kin living in the neighbouring garden remained unknown to them [6]. Therefore, the tea garden labourers were unable to take organized socio-political action against the planters for promoting their common interest in pre-independence period. These labourers were alienated from their own family, friend, relatives and community etc. In a feudal set up the labourers were treated like slaves in the plantation.

During the colonial period, their wages were low. Women and child labour was proportionately larger in tea plantation industries because planters compelled them to work on low wages. The hours of work between men and women were not different and children often worked the same number of hours, more or less same work as adult labour. Illiteracy was widespread among them during pre-independence period. Women were subjected to all kinds of abuse and maltreatment both mentally and physically at the hands of planters and their own men folk during working hours and at home.

The conflict ridden relationship between the labourers and the planters led to a large number of cases of desertion from the plantation industry. It is also to be noted in this context that many labourers were unable to desert their homes or other places because of insufficient and arduous communication systems during colonial period. Migration with family and various socio-economic and political problems in their homeland compelled them to stay in the plantations permanently.

They were unable to take organized action for promoting their common interest. There were several hindrances that always came in the way to organize activities on the part of the workers. They were illiterate and mostly recruited from the poorest and most ignorant classes of society. Moreover, most of the labourers were recruited during a time of famine or scarcity, and when they arrived in the gardens they were often in debt and in a helpless condition. Plantations were scattered over a large area, giving scarcely any opportunities to the labourers in one garden to come into contact with those of others. In addition, the remoteness of the plantation from cultural centres including the places of industrial and political activities and difficulty of labour leaders and political workers entering plantation were also among the important reasons for the absence of sufficient activities on the part of plantation labourers [7]. In spite of many difficulties, the feeling of cohesion and consciousness of class interest had grown slowly among the workers on various plantations in Assam since the later phase of the colonial period.

A series of strikes began to break out in various tea producing districts. The first sign of trouble occurred at Hansara (Lakhimpur district), a garden of the Doom-Dooma Company, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September, 1920, when different sections of the labour force refused to turn out for work. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September at Raidang, a neighborhood garden of the same company, the coolies struck work, a garden *jamadar* was beaten and two European Assistants attacked. More serious trouble occurred on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September at Pabhojan Tea Estate and its neighborhood gardens. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of the same month, strikes broke out in the other tea estates of Lakhimpur district [8].

In this way, the number of strike affected tea gardens all over the province increased from thirteen in 1937 to seventeen in 1938 and thirty-five in 1939. Police forces had to be rushed to nineteen out of these 65 strike affected tea gardens. Lakhimpur and Cachar were the districts most affected. As a sequel to the labour upheaval, as many as 106 labourers in twelve tea gardens were victimized in the form of discharge, dismissal or force repatriation during the period from November 1938 to October 1939, as per official admission. As a result of fifteen work stoppages of industrial nature, involving 20,000 workers in 1939, as many as 1,346,740 man-days were lost. The growing power of militant trade unionism was demonstrated when Sanat Kumar Ahir, a tea factory mechanic and communist sympathizer, won the by-election for the Silchar labour seat as a Congress candidate in 1940. He secured 3,165 votes as against 1,227 by his rival, set up by the British planters. Students and youth were deeply impressed by the working class awakening against the exploitation of British capital [9]. This election result is just one example to show that the

workers in the province were emerging as a 'class' to protect their rights by the end of 1940s [10]. So, they had strike together to get their basic rights from the planters in various tea gardens during colonial period.

The situation has not changed much in independent India. Family based employment in the tea garden is still a social reality. Even though different categories of workers are employed in tea garden during peak season minor girl and children are allowed for plucking leaves. For instance, in 1993, there were 668,898 total workers in tea plantation and out of these workers 583,865 were adults and the remaining were adolescents (13,915) and children (71,118) [11]. So today there exist a large number of child labourers in the tea plantation of Assam. The overall monthly income of the labour has remained very low and it is not sufficient to maintain everyday expenses of a family smoothly by providing basic necessities. Provision of proper and decent housing facilities lacks in the labour line of plantations. Overcrowding and unauthorized resident who live permanently in the labour line it becomes difficult for actual worker for getting benefit from the authorities. Lack of electricity and sufficient kerosene oil makes it difficult for women to work in household activities at night.

Apart from this the tea garden labourers are facing various kinds of diseases such as cholera, dysentery, and gastro-enteritis. Infant mortality rate in tea garden is very high, far above the state and national averages. The death rate is 11.4 for every thousand. In 1998, around 600 people died in the tea plantation of Assam due to gastro-enteritis [12]. All the tea gardens have hospitals under their own management but medical facilities or the treatment rendered by medical officers has become inadequate. The general health of the workers is also very weak and poor. For instance, nearly 95.7% of the workers are getting less than 3000 calories a day, 100% are getting less protein, 89.6% are getting less calcium and 47.8% are getting less iron than the required zone [13]. In fact, 90 percent of the Tea Garden Community is still below poverty line [14]. Due to excessive consumption of alcohol and the other habits of narcotics are also affecting the overall health and well being of the tea garden labourer.

Family welfare scheme is not properly implemented in tea plantations. Maternity benefit centers are very less and women face many difficulties in crucial time in garden hospitals. Child birth generally takes place at home with the help of experienced and untrained 'dais' or local midwives who don't have any proper solution in complicated cases. The proper crèche house and facilities in tea plantations are lacking which is a major problem for the women labour during work hours. The women workers occupy the lowest status on the hierarchy of estate bureaucracy. They work in the

plantation without any prestige or below their status. Work is necessary for them in order to keep their family alive and they don't hesitate to perform such work in their field or at the residence of managerial staff [15]. It can be argued that women always faced their double burden of work, role conflicts at home and in the fields. The level of literacy of the plantation workers especially women workers is very low and poor. For instance, the literacy percentage, male 30.96% and female 13.36%, is far below the average [16]. A large number of children are generally dropouts from primary school due to poverty of family, lack of knowledge, importance and ignorance of parents etc.

The tea garden labourers of Assam face a series of social anomalies which led to ignorance, illiteracy, discrimination and different forms of exploitation. As a result, it leads to social immobility and alienation of tea garden workers. They do not have sufficient medical facility, sanitary provisions and they are bound to work for long hours due to workload increases. They are trapped into the cycle of indebtedness in different ways as they cannot maintain basic and living standard due to an unequal and biased wage system. Due to these factors various trade unions carry out protests for fair wages and other facilities in the form of strikes, gherao and demonstration.

In tea plantation industry there are always conflict between labourers, outsiders and estate managers. The tea garden labourers don't have any interest in mixing with neighbouring people. The gradual increase of population has created the unemployment problem in the tea garden because of employment opportunities have not increased according to the areas of tea plantations and industry in current era of Assam.

In Assam, the Government has initiated some steps especially for the development of tea garden labour. Various developmental and welfare schemes have been evolved for the labour which is implemented and looked after by the Government. The Assam Tea Employees Welfare Board and the Rowriah Welfare Centre have been set up for the development of tea gardens labour. These centers are providing rest house facilities, medical college hospitals to open up for training centers, for reservation of seats in medical, engineering, polytechnics, technical, pharmacy, nursing and other institutions. Even though various welfare schemes have been provided for the development of labour they cannot take benefit fully because of ignorance and illiteracy.

Labour organization is essential in tea plantation of Assam, both for the benefit of the labourers and for their society. There are various trade unions formed for the development of better living standard, medical facilities, wages and bonus, other amenities etc. These

trade unions are All India Trade union Congress (AITUC), Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), Akhil Bharatiya Chah Majdoor Sangha (ABCMS), Uttar Assam Chah Karmi Sangha (Independent), Cacher Chah Sramik Union (CCSU), Assam Sangrami Cha Shramik Sangh (ASCSS), Assam Tea Company Labour Union (Dibrugarh), Assam Tea Labour Union (ATLU), Surma Valley Chah Mazdoor Union (SVCMU), Rajmai Tea Company Labour Union (Dibrugarh), Green Wood Tea Company Labour Union (Dibrugarh), Makum Tea Company Labour Union (Margaretta), Surma Upatyaka Cha Sramik Union etc. Among all these trade unions many of them were formed in the later phase of the colonial period and just after independence in various tea plantations of Assam.

However, women worker neither join the trade unions nor take any part in these organizations. Inequality between men and women has been fully carried over into the trade union organization. Hardly there is any trade union leader in plantation from among the women workers. Even in the local committees of the trade unions there are a very few women workers [17]. Male dominance is one of the main reason such backwardness and discrimination of women in trade union activities of tea plantation.

It is also said that INTUC popularized the demand of old age pensions, ration to children, supply of cheap cloths and minimum daily wages for children. This has initiated the formation of trade unions in the tea gardens of Assam. As opposed to the common perception, industrial relation in the tea industry of Assam at present are quite harmonious despite differences between trade unions and garden owners over minor issues such as living conditions and productivity. Since now the labour force and tea estates are organised, industry wide problems are solved through the tripartite agreements, which are mostly signed every three years. Despite this semblance of order prevailing in the tea industry, in recent times there have been reports of violence in the gardens, even resulting in deaths. However, such incidents are localized in nature and do not reflect the overall industrial relations in the plantations. The management also feels that the charge regarding low minimum wages is not correct. Wages have been revised regularly over the period of past 35 years. The AITUC feels that discontent of workers is slowly spreading again like the days of colonial period. The AITUC says that the living condition of tea garden workers is unhygienic, marked by perennial acute shortage of drinking water [18]. Though various developmental and welfare measures are introduced by trade unions in Assam but these are not sufficient in comparison with rising demand of the workers nowadays.

However, the freedom of association is severely restricted in the tea plantations of Assam. The ACMS dominates the Assam plantations and it is only trade union recognized by the employers. All the negotiations and agreements are conducted between ACMS and the employers' associations. So, workers are not directly involved in the matters relating to them. A large number of workers also believe that the trade union is good only at collection of annual contribution from the workers. In addition, the amount collected from the casual workers is unaccounted. The ACMS never raise voice on the issue of providing permanent status to the casual workers. Though membership fee is collected from all the workers in the estates, very few workers are members of trade unions and attend union meetings. Since the yearly contribution of the estate workers go to the ACMS directly from the garden office many workers are unaware whether they are member of ACMS or not [19].

Moreover, it is to be noted that in direct contrast to the ACMS is the much smaller and infinitely more valiant ASCSS which has led numerous struggles and won some important victories in the few tea gardens where it has a base. And while one didn't see a single woman in any of the meetings with ACMS unions, all the ASCSS meetings had at least a third of the participants being women. In addition, all of the ASCSS unit leaders had a good understanding of labour rights as well as the need to tackle issues of self-exploitation among workers such as patriarchy, alcoholism, and sectarianism [20]. In this respect, it can be argued that all the trade unions are not capable to create conditions for subjective awareness among all the workers and recently gradually separatist movements are going on in tea garden labourers and trade unions in Assam.

It has to be noted that people belonging to these communities have become inseparable part of the society and the social milieu in Assam. They face and they have not been given their due as they are not recognized as Schedule Castes or Schedule Tribes. In Assam, they are simply "Other Backward Classes" while in other status including the neighbouring tea growing states of West Bengal and Tripura they enjoy the status of Schedule Castes or Schedule Tribes depending upon their actual status in this respect in the state of their origin. The recognition as "Other Backward Classes" is no substitute for the recognition as the Schedule Castes or Schedule Tribes because the latter gives statutory and constitutional reservations in jobs, representation in the state legislative as well as in the Lok Sabha etc. while the former does not [21]. Moreover, Harlalka also mentioned that 'In Assam the various tribes and castes working in the tea plantations are not recognized as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.....and more particularly those are not shown as indigenous to the state except a few. There is widespread resentment amongst these tribes for

depriving them from the constitutional benefits' [22]. They are still fighting for this right to get constitutional ST status in Assam.

### CONCLUSION

At last, in favour of tea garden labour various Acts and Labour Laws have been enacted to reform and improve the socio-economic condition and living standard. Labour Act of 1951, made various provisions for the welfare of the plantation workers but yet till today it has not been fully enforced and implemented by the planters. It is to be noted that the conditions of work, quantity of task, workloads, wages, living conditions and other facilities and amenities are great variation from estate to estate in Assam. Due to low level educational attainment among tea garden labourers the scope of occupation and social mobility is generally limited. The lack of proper education in the tea plantations of Assam is bound to affect social and occupational mobility of children in future. In addition, recently there are new regulations and policies which tried to improve the condition of labour but it could not successfully do.

### REFERENCES

1. Phukan U. The Ex-tea Garden Labour Population in Assam. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1984; 2.
2. Goswami IM. The Tea Workers in Assam and Social Security Programme. In Sebastian Karotemprel, SDB, B. Dutta Roy (Eds). Tea Garden Labourers of North East India, A Multidimensional study on the Adivasis of the Tea Garden of North East India. Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990; 285.
3. Karotemprel S, Roy BD. Tea Garden Labourers of North East India, A Multidimensional study on the Adivasis of the Tea Garden of North East India. Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990; viii.
4. Baruah SK. Assam Year Book. Guwahati: Jyoti Prakashan, 2002; 102-103.
5. Narain A, Kumar P, Singh SN. Socio-economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers: A case Study of Assam. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2006; xii.
6. Ibid. p. 192.
7. Das RK. Plantation Labour in India. Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, 1931; 93-94.
8. Bose SK. Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry. Bombay: All India Trade Union Congress, 1954; 97-98.
9. Guha A. Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947. Delhi: People Publishing House, 2006; 199.
10. Banerjee D. Labour Movement in Assam, a Study of Non-Plantation Workers' Strikes Till 1939. New Delhi: Anamika Publisher and Distributors (p) Ltd, 2005; 195.
11. Xaxa V. Condition of Tea Estate Labours in Assam. In Sharit K. Bhowmik, Virginious Xaxa, and M. A. Kalam (Eds), Tea Plantation Labour in India. New Delhi: Friedrich Edbert Stiftung, 1996; 20.
12. Lahiri S. Bonded Labour and the Tea Plantation Economy. Retrieved from URL <http://202.43.219.46/in.f944.mail.yahoo.com/ya/download?..> 5/15/2007. p. 1.
13. Kumar P. State and society in North-East India, A study of immigrant Tea Plantation Labourers. New Delhi: Regency Publications, 2006; 191.
14. Bhengra T, Doungel L. Trade Union Movement in the Tea Industry in Assam. In Sarthak Sengupta (Eds), The Tea Labourers of North East India. New Delhi: Mittal Publication, 2009; 106.
15. Narain A, Kumar P, Singh SN. 2006; 198.
16. Kumar P. 2006; 192.
17. Bhadra M. Women workers of Tea plantations in India. Delhi: Heritage Publisher, 1992; 185.
18. Das K. Labour Contracts and Work Agreements in Tea Plantation of Assam. Noida: V. V. Giri National Labour, 2002; 36-37.
19. Ibid. p. 37.
20. Ananthanarayana S. Struggles of tea garden workers in Assam. Retrieved from URL [http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/tea\\_workers\\_struggle.htm/](http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/tea_workers_struggle.htm/), 2008; 1.
21. Nag AK. Socio-economic Problems of Tea Garden Labour Population. In Sebastian Karotemprel, SDB, B. Dutta Roy (Eds), Tea Garden Labourers of North East India, A Multidimensional study on the Adivasis of the Tea Garden of North East India. Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990; 56.
22. Dasgupta PK Khan IA. Impact of Tea Plantation Industry on the Life of Tribal Labourers. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, 1983; 61.