

Tea Garden Labors of Assam: A Community in Distress.

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Abstract

Assam is famous for tea. To cultivate and pluck tea leaves, a huge number of labors are required. The process of mobilizing labors started soon after the state deemed fit for tea plantation during the British Raj. A large number of workers are employed in the tea estates of Assam. But the conditions of the labors are very hard and painful. They lack basic facilities like access to Education, Healthcare and etc. This study strives to outline the conditions of the labors whose hard work fetch the delicious tea every day into our lives.

Key Words: *Arkattis, Communicable, Malnutrition, Mobilization, Plantation.*

Introduction

Assam is one of the North-Eastern States among seven others. It is one of the richest states in terms of culture and natural resources in the Indian sub-continent. Assam produces the highest quantity of tea in the country. There are about 800 big and over 1 lac small tea gardens in the state. It is the world's single largest tea producing region. The tea gardens of the state produce approx half of the total tea in India. During 2016-17, Assam produced 642.18 million K.Gs of tea in 304.40 thousand hectares tea production area. Commercial cultivation of tea started in India during the British rule when in the year 1823, the first Indian tea bushes were identified growing wild in upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam by British Army major Robert Bruce. A board was created in the chairmanship of Lord William Bentinck. On January 1834 to explore the scope of tea cultivation and the report provided by the board described the region as *to be by far the most significant finding that has been prepared in matters linked with the commercial and agricultural capital of the British Empire*. First time India has supplied Assam's tea to England on May 1838 for public sale.

The first tea company set up in Assam was the Assam Tea Company. The government of India extended all sorts of support for the tea industry to grow. Huge forest and areas under cultivation were shown as wasteland and these were given to the company at minimal rate. China was replaced as the highest tea exporter to Britain to the end of the 19th century as the production of tea in Assam witnessed huge success than anticipation.

The Community

A major aspect for tea cultivation in Assam was the mobilization of labor. During that time there was a lack of substantial class of agricultural labor as the population of Assam was very low. Assamese people were considered as being lazy, indolent and opium addicts and were considered as the major hindrance for the tea industry. The local laborers who agreed to work in the plantation demanded high wages which compelled the planters to look for cheap laborers. All these conditions resulted in the recruitment of laborers from distance region. The planters made all possible hard work to keep and protect the idea of indentured labor system in the tea gardens.

The laborers also known as coolies or majdoors were brought from the tribal districts of former Chotnagpur province which presently covers Odisha, Jharkhand, Bengal and Bihar to labor in the tea plantation of Assam. Initially the coolies were brought from the lower districts of Bengal, but gradually the tribal of Chotnagpur region became more viable and sought after by the planters. A

new class of agent known as arkattis emerged to mobilize the coolies as Assam was far from Chotnagpur both by physically and mentally for the coolies. Speculating that it was advantageous for both the laborers and the planters, revolutionary historians like Donald Galenson have lessened the model of indentured labor by establishing significance on the economic prudence of the system. Migrant laborers enrolled indentures offering them much freedom as the factors like attraction of economic freedom and achievement of bettering their future were ample to remind them, but revolutionary historians have to stay silent about the situation of un-freedom inborn in the indentured labor method. The laborers were taken to Assam by boat which was a tedious and dangerous journey during that time. Many laborers would die before reaching their destination. The tea plantations were sketched in such a system that the labor force remains secure for the planters and the wages of these laborers were determined by the planters themselves, not by the existing labor market.

After the recommendation, special committee formed in the year 1862 to investigate the affairs of the tea gardens of Bengal, The Transport of Native Laborers Act III was passed in the year 1863. The act ensured the authorization of all recruiters, medical examination of all emigrants and enough sanitary arrangement in the norms of conveyance of laborers. The act also ensured that all the emigrants had to be enrolled in front of the District Magistrate and the contract period should not exceed five years. The Plantation Act VI of 1865 recommends the scheme of penal contract for the 1st time. Minimum monthly wages were set at Rs.5 for male, Rs. 4 for female and Rs. 3 for children. The act also ensured 9 hours of working time, a government labor inspector who would take necessary action against the officials of ill-treatment to the laborers and the contract period was lessened to 3 years. The act conferred power to the planters as well to arrest those coolies who would violate of the contract.

Post-independence, the Plantation Labor Act 1951, which standardize the wages of tea garden laborer, their duty hours and facilities that the management is invented to provide such as drinking water, housing, education, child care, health care facilities such as crèche, accident cover and protective equipment has not been implemented, where provided are of very poor quality. Even today, the tea laborers of Assam are the most marginalized community even though the population of these laborers is approximately 1/5 th of the total population of Assam. The tea planters have ensured that these laborers by any means do not come into contact with the mainland society. The idea of forming trade unions came very lately in the minds of these laborers as they lived in the isolation, had lack of education and for the revengeful attitude of the planters. They get a fixed wage of Rs. 71.50; nearly half of the government set the minimum wage of Rs. 130. Sundays are considered as unpaid holidays. Some workers who work in the processing of the tea are considered as unskilled labors. In several gardens wages are not paid for 2-3 years, in many others it is irregular. In most of the cases arrear compensation were not compensated by the management.

The place of India in the world of tea has been disappearing eventually. In 2005, China again overtook India as the world's major tea manufacturer and relegated India to the second position. For a business with a recorded history back at least two and a half centuries to East India Company days, a piece of the basis India's tea industry is not performing as well might be the structural legacies from the colonial era.

On July 29, 2015, the government of Assam has issued an outline statement that the minimum daily wage of ordinary daily rated workers in tea plantation would be Rs. 177.19, the same as the general minimum wage in Assam for the unskilled workers from September 1, 2014.

The conditions of the laborers in tea plantations, by most accounts have not made much progress. Obvious implication of poverty is that the families living in the gardens cannot support themselves on the wages which they earn. For this, children particularly girls become vulnerable to trafficking. Ignorance due to illiteracy, poor socio-economic and political conditions, stuffed and unhealthy living environment in the residential colonies in the tea gardens make the workers helpless to various infectious diseases and malnutrition. A detailed study on the health conditions of the tea garden labors accomplished by the Regional Medical Research Center (ICMR), N.E region, Assam, has revealed problems like malnourished among children (59.9%), slenderness among adults (69.8%) and micronutrient deficiencies like anemia (72%). Most of these diseases appear to be emerged from household and poor personal hygiene along with unawareness due to lack of education. Another major issue is the insufficient and poor quality of protective and medical care for sprayers. Women are compelled to do heavy labor even during pregnancy. The study simultaneously revealed that the psychosocial health of the tea garden labors is strongly influenced by their occupational health conditions. The

balance between a worker's effort and rewards (like pay, recognition and promotion) received for his or her work and the scale to which the supervisors are supportive, play a significant role for the psychosocial well-being among the laborers.

Concluding Comments

The problems being faced by the community working in the tea estates of Assam are growing with every passing day. The community is being deprived in every step of their lives. They are striving to live a descent life with the minimum basic needs. Their voices are ignored. Even if someone tries to raise their voice, that is dominated with power. Though the government has launched various policies till date for the upliftment of the community, most of them futile to touch their lives. These all have happened only because of the colonial mindset of the estate owners. It was great time to offer them with the necessities in the estates and merge them with the mainland society. If the community is left behind like they are today than it will leave a very negative impact on the holistic growth and development of the state.

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