

Tea Industry in Assam (India): Issues of Migration and Gender Discrimination

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Abstract. This paper dwells upon the present state of tea industry in Assam against the backdrop of two major issues and concerns, viz. extent of migration and subordination of women workers in the tea estates. The tea industry in Assam is a significant contributor to the development of the region having produced annually nearly 53 per cent of the total production of tea in India and generated employment for a large proportion of population in Assam. However, the issues of the extent of migration from other regions and sectors, declining labour conditions, and subordination of women workers may be attributed to the withdrawal of the State from its responsibilities and commitment and social welfare activities. The study was conducted in selected tea estates situated in Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, and Golaghat districts of Assam. The respondents include owners of the tea estates, representatives of the management, members of the trade unions and workers engaged in various activities. It is important to understand the implications of industrial relations in tea industry in Assam in the context of the norms of neoliberal policies on work, ownership and control. Further, changing industrial relations in tea industry in Assam have significant implications for questions of gender and class.

Keywords: Migration, Gender Discrimination, Industrial Relations, Tea Industry

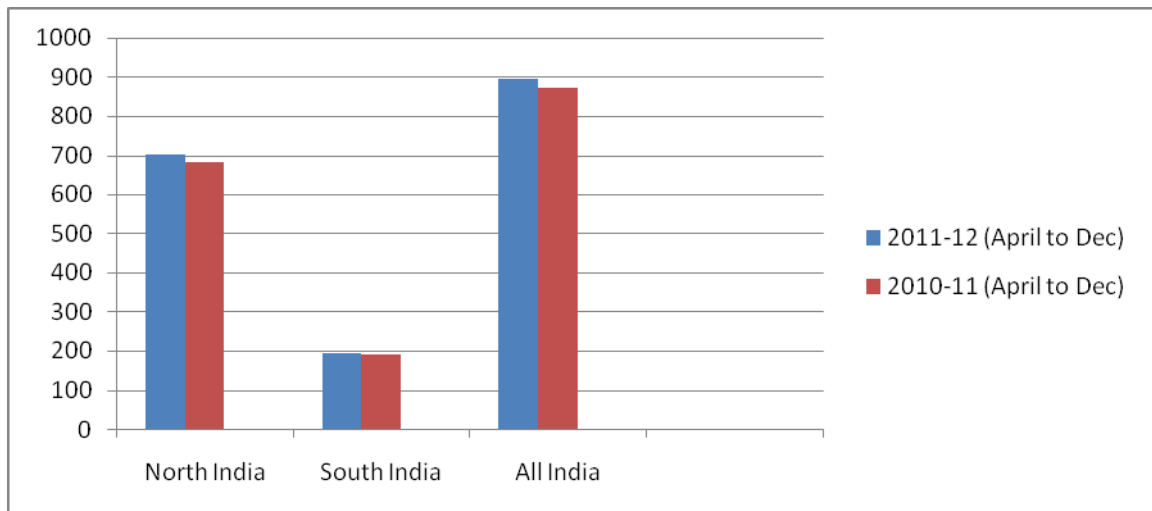
1. Introduction

Tea is the most popular drink in the world in terms of consumption. It is a labour-intensive industry. Tea drinking was widely practiced in China in the 6th century. In 793 AD the drinking of tea became so widespread that it spread to China's neighbor, Japan quickly. Choudhury's study (2010) describes that the British wanted to explore the prospects of tea cultivation in their colonies as it was too expensive for them to procure tea from China by exchanging gold coins. The discovery of the Assam tea plant may be attributed to Robert Bruce, according to Baruah (2008). In Chabua, about 25 kilometres east of Dibrugarh in 1837, the first English tea garden was established. The East India Company had monopoly over the tea trade until 1840 when the Assam Tea Company began the commercial production of tea in the region, run by indentured servitude of the local inhabitants. Beginning in the 1850s, the tea industry rapidly expanded, consuming vast tracts of land for tea plantations. By the turn of the 20th century, Assam became the largest producer of tea. In India, tea production, certification, exportation, and all other facets of the tea trade are controlled by the Tea Board of India.

Table 1: Estimated Production of Tea in India

Year	North India	South India	All India
2011-12 (April to Dec)	701.89	192.04	893.93
2010-11 (April to Dec)	682.97	189.37	872.34

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Source: Tea Board of India Report, 2012

Figure 1: Estimated Production of Tea in India

1.1. Migration of Labourers in Tea Industry in Assam

In Assam, the British planters wanted to engage Assamese speaking, non-tribal people in the expansion, but they were not willing to work in tea cultivation. Only tribal people belonging to the Bodo and Sonowal Kacharis tribes were available as plantation workers. Two firms, Arkatis and Sirders, were engaged initially as commissioned agents in Kolkata to supply labour from outside the state. First the workers of Chinese origin were brought to Assam from Kolkata and gradually recruited thousands of labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and newly formed Chota Nagpur, and Jharkhand were gradually recruited. They were lured to migrate as they were poor and illiterate. Baruah (2008) states that in the agrarian regions of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, famine, drought, flood and epidemics coupled with excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the big landlords and zamindars was common. These factors led to migration of huge bulk of population to Assam in search of livelihood. Apart from these “push factors”, certain “pull factors” like false assurance regarding easy work, ideal condition of work, better pay and unlimited land available for cultivation were given to the workers which motivated them to migrate to Assam. Contractors were usually deployed to hire labourers for tea estates in different parts of the state. The transportation of the workers to these estates, covering sometimes a distance of 800 kms without any road or rail link was a hazardous task. The long journey mostly caused sickness and high mortality.

After reaching the tea estates, the migrant labourers’ mobility was restricted within the vicinity of the tea garden and factory alone and was completely isolated from the outside world. They were consciously made dependent on the basic facilities provided in the estate. Gradually the migrant workers realized that it was all false assurances of good pay and better facilities that was used to procure their blood and sweat in order to earn massive profit from tea production. There was and still exists excessive exploitation of the workers by the owners of the estates.

Welfare schemes provided by the management of the tea estate should ideally include housing, subsidized rates of ration and tea, Provident Fund, medical benefits, firewood, bonus, blankets, umbrellas for the workers as per the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. A casual (temporary) worker does not get any of the other benefits except the ration at nominal rate. They stay in a permanent worker’s house who might be a relative or a member of the family. In reality, one-third of the tea estates in Assam fail to provide the workers with even the basic necessities like life saving drugs. Education is lags behind in the labour settlements as the management is unable to provide with schools for the workers’ children. Hence there is illiteracy and ignorance among workers and their future generations are also likely to remain in the same dungeons of darkness. Field study conducted in selected tea estates from Dibrugarh, Sonitpur, Sibsagar, Golaghat and Jorhat districts shows that a meager amount of Rs. 71.50 daily wage also limits their chance to uplift themselves from rampant poverty. Now, the important question is what decides how much should go to the

worker and how much to the boss. The employer will try and keep wages down as low as possible to keep profits up. The bottom line is sufficient money to keep the worker fit enough to come back to work the next day and raise a new generation of workers. But even that is not definite. In times of crisis, bosses would not be bothered if bad health hits workers due to low pay as long as there are others to take their place.

1.2. Issues of Gender Discrimination

Sexual division of labour is highly prevalent in the tea plantation system. Scott and Marshall (2009) define sexual division of labour as a term referring to the specialized gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife. This particular division of labour by sex is usually associated with the separation of workplace from home which followed industrialization in the West. Research also shows that most pre-industrial societies also distinguish men's tasks from women's tasks. Again within Marxist feminism, domestic labour is sometimes referred to as 'reproductive labour'. Such division of labour is considered an important basis for inequality between sexes, entailing some degree of exploitation of women by men. Feminists assert that sex roles are essentially a way of keeping women subservient to men and are the result of a patriarchal society in which men preserve their own self-interest by maintaining a status-quo.

According to Samarsinghe (1993), in China, history narrates that women who were involved in plucking tea, their hands and fingernails were carefully scrutinized to ensure cleanliness. Body oils, perspiration and heat were believed to contaminate the quality of leaf. Notions of purity, contamination and feminine virtue were associated with the brewing of tea. In the 'Tea Ceremony' of Japan also, women play a vital role.

According to Choudhury (2010), when the migrant workers in thousands reached Assam, the local workers along with the tea workers of Chinese origin were surprised that women would also be working for the first time in the plantations. Managers had a satisfactory look since these would be used like slaves and would be paid much less than the Chinese counterparts. They would be submissive, and could not threaten to stop work, like the Chinese and the local workers used to do. Indian prospective tea workers were brought in ships and in very bad condition with no food, proper stay and basic amenities. Choudhury's study (2010) mentions that the Chinese paired in with the coolie and the local Assamese as well. The single men and women were forcefully paired. They would produce children, hence the population would increase, a strategy of British to cut down on the expenses of providing the basic facilities to the migrant labourers and create generation of workers.

The Chinese paired in with the coolie and the local Assamese as well. The women even if ailing, were forced to go to work by the sardars and sometimes after few days of delivery. There was massive exploitation of the migrant workers. Even if they die, they had to work. In 1962, when China attacked India, Arunachal, Assam, then the Chinese origin in India was ill-treated gradually by the Indian Government and the Indian fellow mates. The families were torn apart as the Chinese origin people were deported to camps in Rajasthan. The women and children were the worst sufferers.

Varma (2005) shows that Assam tea garden was not a new avenue for the employment of women's labour and women constituted almost half the workforce. The work in plantation had very neatly spelt out gender-specific domains where the crucial labour-intensive task of plucking tea leaves was said to be 'quintessentially feminine, requiring nimble fingers'. The preference for 'families' in gardens of Assam was most clearly premised on the payment of what was called as the 'family wage', ensuring not just a body of cheap reproducing workforce but also effecting controls over the labour and sexuality of the large number women coolie under the patriarchal structures of the family. However, the possibilities of single, uprooted and rejected women finding their way to Assam under the free recruitment system fuelled into the larger social anxieties about the norms of breakdown of the ideal family and the loss of patriarchal controls over women's labour and sexuality. The increased facilities for emigration led to kidnapping or fraudulent recruitment, and have loosened family and domestic ties, enabling wives and minors to desert their lawful guardians.

The subordination of the women workers is found in almost all sectors of work, according to Chatterjee (2001). Politics of patronage and the construction of the "moral economy" to which the owners and the working class consent to are clearly visible. The patron system is understood to be extremely patriarchal in nature as the planter-manager-sahib symbolizes the father figure. The women's work, i.e. tea plucking is

usually underpaid. The plantation system dwells in the underlying belief on the subordination of women workers. As per data collected through interviews in selected tea estates of Upper and Mid Assam, during season time, i.e. during the monsoons when production of tea is at its peak, the women workers are able to earn a lot of incentives based on the amount of extra kilos of tea leaves they are able to pluck in addition to the minimum kilos required to get their daily wage.

2. Discussion

The planter-manager-sahib symbol is clearly visible through the version of some of the workers interviewed by the researcher. An old, retired lady, who worked in Ghogra Tea Estate of Sonitpur district, said “I don’t approve of the misbehavior on the part of the workers to the manager. Earlier people had much patience in work. The managers used to call us by the colour of the blouse we were wearing but we didn’t mind”. This shows owing to lack of education and awareness among the workers, they had very low self-esteem and dignity. The owners and managers were and are still considered to be Gods and the workers are bound to obey whatever they order.

Sarkar and Bhowmik’s study (1998) argues that women workers, who form fifty per cent of the total workforce, remain marginalized in Trade Union. Involvement of women is limited with membership and in some estates participation in rallies and demonstration. They carried out a study on three plantations in the Dooars and the Terai regions of North Bengal which shows that despite forming half the labour force in plantations, women workers have remained marginalized in trade unions of plantation workers. The reasons of huge amount of employment of women in the plantation industry are: (a) the workers’ migration from their native place to the plantation areas of Assam with their entire family: thus the members of the family, i.e. men, women and children are all engaged in the plantation work; and (b) the plantation work is gender specific. While women are engaged in tea plucking, men and children, including adolescents are engaged in the maintenance of the plantation, factory, giving pesticides and removing the weeds from the tea plants.

Responses collected from the field study shows that the control of income is dominated by the male members of the family as the female workers did not collect their own wages. On the economic front, women workers are at a position of subordination. Their wages are handed over to the males (husbands/fathers) by the management. The women worker has to bear double burden of working in the field, as well as in the household. They toil from morning to night as the work load of a tea plucker is heavy and also they have to do all the household chores. The male members do not help them in any of the household work. There is less participation of women workers in the trade union activities and thus issues relating to grant of flexible timings to tea pluckers, better access to basic needs and living conditions are never put forward in the charter of demands of the trade unions.

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