Impact of Modernization and Local Socio-Cultural Element on the Tea Worker Community of Assam

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Abstract

The Tea-Tribes occupy an important place in the socio-economic and cultural field of Assam. The impact of growing tea tribe population along with the continued socio-cultural interaction, and embracement with the host community has had significant bearing in forming the present social fabric of the greater Assamese society. The culture that emerged due to the long continued interaction of British planters, tea worker tribes and indigenous Assamese is well reflected in the language, way of life, work culture, food habits and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates in the state. In fact, the impact of tea culture is so penetrative that it has been able to bring about development in the form of tea festival, tea folk songs and dances, etc. in the state. An attempt is made in this paper to explore the role of tea tribes to the socio-cultural transformation of Assam based on both secondary data and primary data through field study. The primary data have been collected from selected tea estates, tea garden worker colonies, tea-tribe villages.

(Key words: Tea Tribes, Social Practices, Tea Culture)

I. Introduction

Tea is one of the most popular beverages in the world. It is one of the oldest industries in India, a large organized sector and has been an integral part of the economic development of the country. The tea industry of Assam had a glorious past and a long history. Tea plants (Camellia sinensis (L) O.Kuntze, Family: Theaceae) were discovered in Assam way back in 1823. The indigenous people of Assam were drinking tea for its medicinal properties. The credit for discovery of tea in Assam goes to three persons - Beesa Gam, a tribal head of Upper Assam Village, an Assamese working with the British, the famous patriot Maniram Dewan and Robert Bruce, an English infantry officer. However, Mr. Robert Bruce is widely recognized as the discoverer of tea in Assam. The labour were brought originally from various parts of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh etc. about 150-160 years back and they have now become very part of Assamese society. The impact of growing tea tribe population along with the continued socio-cultural interaction, and embracement with the host community has had significant bearing in forming the present social fabric of the greater Assamese society.

Historically, the society of Assam has been continuously subject to socio-cultural change due to the influx of outsiders as well as due to the internal growth of the population. One such influx of population occurred when the British started the tea plantations in Assam in 1837 and recruited huge number of cheap, hard pressed and illiterate labourers belonging to lower and downtrodden communities such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Khond, etc. from famine and poverty-stricken areas of Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal having diversity in respect of their language, tradition, culture, religion and social background on false promises such as higher wages, better life, better living conditions and at the end of contract period they would be free to go. However, the most significant of all these phenomena is the culture that emerged due to the long continued socio-cultural exchange, interactions and assimilations between the British planters, the indigenous Assamese society and the tea tribes. These can be well interpreted in the tea drinking habits and food habits, language, way of life, work culture, and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates in the state.

II. Objectives

The specific objective of this paper is to study the importance of socio-cultural practices of the tea worker community.
of Assam. An attempt will be made to study the impact of modernization and local socio-cultural element upon the tea worker community of Brahmaputra valley.

III. Methodology

The study involves the qualitative and analytical method of research on the basis of both primary and secondary sources which contains the official records, proceedings, related books and journals, reprint of published papers, soft copies included web pages, pdf files (e-reprints) downloaded from the websites. The study will be based mainly on the primary sources, while secondary sources will be consulted wherever and whenever it is found necessary.

IV. Discussion

IV. 1 Socio-Cultural Practices of the Tea Worker Community

Every society has their own socio-cultural practices and traditions and tea tribes are not different. Tea and ex-tea tribe community is a heterogeneous mixture of more than one hundred aboriginal Indian tribes and castes who hailed from different parts of central India. They were composed of three different distinct linguistic elements such as the Kolarian speaking (Ho, Munda, Santhal, Kharia, etc.) group, Dravidian speaking (Oraon, Khond, Gond, Malpaharia, etc.) and the Group speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. After settling in the close quartered tea garden colonies of Assam, due to extremely limited interaction with the outside world, bearing interior location, language barriers and dissimilarity in physical outlooks, they were insulated from the local population and as a result, the multi-tribe, multi-caste and multi-lingual society slowly started interacting among themselves embracing different lingo-cultural background tea tribe population in order to unify the different ethnic groups and minimise the communication gap and solidarity, hence, adopted a new but common language which is basically an admixture of their own aboriginal dialect, Assamese, Hindi and Bengali which is today popularly known as Chah Bagisar Asomia (Tea Garden Assamese Language) or Sadani or Sadri.

Traditionally, their religion like any other aboriginal tribes of mainland India was based on worship of village Gods and deities, their ancestors and the evil spirits. Today, majority of the people of the tea tribe community in Assam is composed of Hindus, while only a small section of approximately 10 per cent population of the total tea and ex-tea tribes comprise of Christian population. The tea workers’ community has not only diluted their individual identity largely by practising a common language but they also have started celebrating a host of common festivals. This community celebrates festival such as dangoria puja, baghut puja, dharma puja, karam puja, manasha puja, sarun puja, kali puja, durga puja, tusu puja, madula puja, etc in almost every month of the year with their own traditional customs and systems. Jhumur is mainly danced on the occasion of Karam Puja and Tushu Puja. If you ask any tea worker about the single most important event or ‘parab’ in his or her annual calendar, you can be sure the reply is going to be ‘Karam Puja’. According to the occasion and the difference in form, songs and instruments, ‘Jhumur’ (as we know it) can be divided primarily into Jhumur, Bhimseria, Damkaash, Lathi khel, Lasuwa and Arati nas.

Karam Puja is a week-long celebration to worship Karam Raja. For a week, starting from Monday, every evening there is jagaran or nightly song-and-dance rituals. On Friday, the head of the family accompanied by seven virgin girls go to a spot in a nearby forest and after clearing the ground lay down offerings of sindoor, mustard oil lamps, milk, cool water, money, durba, flowers, etc. in front of a ‘Karam’ tree. They then invite Karam Raja and ask him to come to their homes the next day. That night too, jagaran is done with jhumur dance till about 1am in the morning. The next day, i.e. Saturday, the entire family as well as the seven virgin girls fast from morning and the house and yard is cleaned and decorated to welcome the god.

At exactly the same time as the previous day they go to the forest accompanied by a special person who will cut the ‘Karam’ tree. The tree is washed with milk and water as one would welcome a guest in
an Indian home. Then four virgin girls hold one branch and three hold another branch. These branches are called Ram and Sita. There is a third branch named Laksman which is left behind. The woodcutter will cut both these branches (Ram and Sita) with one chop and then these are taken home with great merriment.

Once at home, the main female of the household will welcome the group and the branches are washed with turmeric paste and water. The virgin girls dance three rounds all the while holding on to the branches. The woodcutter then digs a hole and plants the branches in the ground thus starting the puja. A Kohini or narrator, who is usually an elderly man, then narrates the story of Karam and the rituals. This takes two hours and after this everyone comes in with special offerings (puri, fruits, etc.) for the God and places it before the branches. After the puja concludes, the Jhumur begins. It continues throughout the night. In the early morning, around 4am, when the Karam tree is taken for immersion in the river, the dance changes its form and becomes 'Bhimseria'. Bhimseria is danced to the beat of a different drum and the songs are also different.

Jhumur is performed to the accompaniment of a wooden drum called ‘Dhol’. During Karam Puja, the first song is always: “Akhora bandana kori, Saraswati bandana kori, mago boli; Akhora bandana kori, bejonari madane jumoro lagal bhari”. Another popular song is: “Karam Raja kar beta, chinite na paribo seta; Karam chilo ajhay da nagar, aaj Karam hangde ghare.”

Jhumur is also danced during Tushu puja, which occurs around the time of Durga Puja. Lakhima idol is worshipped after rites for a week and dancing takes place for 2-3 hours.

From about 15 days before Holi, Lathi khel rehearsals take place. This is very similar to the garba or dandiya dance of Gujarat. The synchronization is perfect and will make you feel like joining in. Unlike Jhumur proper, where the participants hold each others’ waists and dance, in Lathi khel each one has two sticks (lathis) that they use to hit each others’ sticks with in rhythm. The Lathi khel group goes to whichever house invites them and in return for the entertainment they are given a small token by the household.

Lathi khel also takes place in Gaaram puja. During the months of Phagun and Chaitra, around the same time as Holi, Gaaram puja takes place. This is a community worship of the local spirit and each locality has its own Gaaram site. The tea workers believe that the Gaaram protects their cows, goats, poultry and their children. If this puja not done, something bad is sure to happen. There are sacrifices of chicken, pigeons, goats and offerings of fruit, flowers, etc. About 4-5 people dance a Gaaram dance to the accompaniment of drums and become possessed. They then answer questions from the people. Once the puja is over, Lathi khel takes place and everyone is free join in.
The Jhumur that is danced during weddings and births and for pure joy is called Damkaash. The basic dance is the same as Jhumur but the songs are different. Here to, the dancers keep the rhythm with the help of a dhol.

During durga puja, Kali puja and Basanti puja, the evening starts off with an Arati nas where rhythm is kept with the help of a Dhak or a large drum. People dance swinging incense pots (Dhuna Dani) with both hands. Songs are sung in praise of the goddess. Once Arati nas is over and the main puja is done, Lasuwa is danced. This too is Jhumur but is danced to the accompaniment of a Maadal or an earthen elongated drum. During the immersion procession of the idols, dancing goes on but no songs are sung.

These are some of the many forms of dances that can be seen in the villages of the tea workers. These are performed in perfect rhythm without any stage, make-up room, lights or sound systems. The dancers themselves sing in perfect harmony. The songs tell listeners about nature and of love, betrayal, joy and sorrow.7

In Bihu songs mentions are made about the lives and practices of the tea tribe communities and these songs have won a lot of popularities in the state as well as in the country. The tea-tribes have also started celebrating Bihu dances actively in the community functions. The workers of Tea community also started celebrating festivals such as ‘Sirish Festival’, the first ever integrated festival to honour the contribution of the tea tribe community to Assam, Sirish, a Sanskrit word meaning soul, is the local name for the shady trees in tea gardens. The festival will showcase traditional dance forms, sports, art and literature of the tea community of Assam. 8

IV.2 Impact of Modernization and Local Socio-Cultural Element upon the Tea Worker Community

Socio-geographical factors in terms of location of the tea gardens, the residential patterns of the labour lines, the location of the market centres and the urban areas, spread of education and other such factors have played significant roles in the process of socio-economic transformations which the tea workers have experienced in recent years. The tea tribe youths of new generation have progressively adopted the Assamese language and the process of linguistic adaptations is operating at various levels among them which were termed by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala as ‘Na-Asamiya’, or neo-Assamese. Attempts have been made by various tea tribe organisations to promote Assamese language by making it compulsory in the school curriculum and government offices so that the educated tea workers can read and understand the official instructions and communications. Despite having their own socio-cultural norms and practices, the tea tribes of Assam today are divulging into the Assamese culture to such an extent that they have become quite different from their ancestral race that had originally migrated here. Many people of the tea tribe community have also accepted the Sankari Dharma or religion and are living in the satras such as Kuruwabahi and Na-Kachari satras. In some parts of Assam, the tea tribes have started adopting some cultural practices from the Assamese society which were not found in their ancestral tribes. For instance, the women among the tea tribes have started taking part in the namghars and started singing ‘naams’ along with the women of greater Assamese society in Chinamora and Khapekhati tea gardens while in some parts of upper Assam, tea tribes have started celebrating the first marriage of the girl child on attaining the puberty.9 Women, besides wearing saree, also wears Chador-Mekhela and men have started wearing the Gamosa just like the Assamese youths. Besides, some people of the tea tribes also celebrate and take part in the socio-cultural dramas of Assam such as Ras and Bhaunas.

Today, the tea tribes are involved in all spheres in the development of culture in Assam right from writing and singing Assamese songs, making cinemas, creating serials, cassettes, theatres etc. A significant number of tea garden and tea tribes’ related movies have also been made such as Erabator Sur in 1956, Kechasun in 1959; Chameli Memsaab in 1975, etc. are worth mentioning. Today, a number of eminent writers, poets, academicians and politicians from tea tribe community have emerged. Some of the important literary contributions made by them are such as (Sahitya kriti samuh) like ‘Khaluk Bachan, Panke Dathi, and Sahrai,’ by Meghraj Karmakar; (RasanaRaji ) like ‘Chah bagisar Puja Parab and Chah Bagisar Akhomiya Khabda Sambhar,’ by Deuram Tassa; published books such as ‘Banuwar Sanskritik Jibonot Ebhumuki’, by Narayan Ghatowar; ‘Sah Bagisar Jibon Aru Sanskriti and Sah Bagisar Akhomiya Sanskriti,’ by Sushil Kurmi; ‘Chah Janagusthir Luka-Sanskritir Ek Jhalak,’ by Ganesh Chandra Kurmi and ‘Chah Bagisat Khikhar Prasar and Shatabdir Argha’ by Prahlad Chandra Tasa are
worth mentioning. All these have contributed to popularise and enrich the Assamese language and literature. Poets such as Sananta Tanti’s ‘Tuponite Ketiyaba Barikha Ahe, Khobdatta Athoba Khobdahinatat and Nijor Biruddhe Khekh Prastav’, and Sameer Tanti’s ‘Seujiya Utsav and Ei Andhar Ei Puharor Tanmoyata,’ also occupy significant places in poetic literature (Kurmi, 2007) and thereby, enriched Assamese literature and culture. The Assamese elites and litterateurs have also recognised the contributions of the tea tribes to Assamese literature, culture, economy and politics, and this has been reflected in the writings of various Assamese intellectuals.

V. Conclusion

From the above discussions, it is clear that the culture of Assam has been highly enriched by the different elements surrounding tea and the tea-tribes. This is observed through slow but significant assimilation of socio-cultural elements among the tea tribes to the greater Assamese society. This diffusion and transformation is mostly confined to the highly concentrated tea areas of central and eastern Brahmaputra valley due to prevailing caste and creed differences in establishing matrimonial relations between them and the mainstream society as well as their existing physical difference inherited through ancestral racial stock. However small, these socio-cultural transformation is a positive indication of the decreasing gap between the mainstream populace and the downtrodden tea tribe masses towards achieving a balanced socio-economic development of the region. It is therefore high time to initiate all necessary efforts towards upliftment of the tea tribes in socio-economic front irrespective of any social discrimination.

References