

The History of Migration of Tea Tribes into Assam During Colonial Period

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Abstract: Migration has always played a vital role in the formation and development of a society. So, the history of migration is always been an interesting field of study. Tea plants were discovered in Assam in 1823. Later on, the British started tea cultivation in Assam for which a large number of workers were needed in this field. But the unwillingness of the Assamese people towards tea cultivation led the British to take many other programmes to make tea an economic crop. British started importing workers from different parts of India to Assam. There were many other factors like excessive poverty, debt, social disorder and inhuman torturing by the feudal landlords and Zamindars bound the tea tribes to migrate themselves to the tea gardens of Assam with an expectation of building a better future. With the progress of time, the tea workers establish themselves in Assam permanently and they played a very important role in the formation of a greater Assamese society. So, it is very important to study the history of the migration of tea tribes in Assam during colonial period.

Keywords: Migration, Tea Industry, British, Labourers, Assam

1. INTRODUCTION:

Migration is, first and foremost, a normal human activity. Human migration is the movement of people from one place to another with the intentions of settling, permanently or temporarily at a new geographic region. The Migration could be happened due to different factors like economic, cultural, political etc. 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. 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 tea plantation industry of Assam is over 160 years old. The tea bushes were abundantly available in the jungles of Upper Assam. The initial attempts to encourage tea cultivation in India were made by Governor General Warren Hastings in 1776. In 1821 Robert Bruce an Englishman discovered the tea plants from the Upper Assam jungles with the help of Beesa Gam a 'Singpho Chief'. In 1824 his younger brother Charles Alexander Bruce planted tea plants in front of his bungalow at Sadiya Upper Assam on an experimental basis for the first time. In 1828 imported tea seeds were germinated in Joypur and later on at Dinjoy (Chabua) in Upper Assam. Bruce sent first sample of tea leaf to the first commissioner of Assam David Scott. This proved that the first tea cultivation on commercial basis was carried on 1835 at Chabua area in Upper Assam. The collapse of the trade agreement between the British and China finally led to the introduction of tea cultivation in India.

2. METHODOLOGY:

The study is descriptive in nature and based on various secondary sources like Journals, Reports, Internet and Books.

3. DISCUSSION:

3.1: Origin of the Tea Tribes:

Origin of tea tribes was very excruciating story in the history of Assam and in order to understand the immigration and settlement of tea tribes, it is very important to understand their origin and who and how they brought to this state. The Gradual expansion of tea plantation in Assam during the British period compelled the authority to recruit a large number of workers to achieve the highest scale of productivity. During that period, Britishers thought that this would be managed locally, through the labour force available. However, their observation pertaining to the availability of the local labour went on different track. In the succeeding time, the British administrators cum planters faced the shortage of labour in the increasing tea plantation. It was observed that the local labours were found indolent, hopeless and lazy and hence the plantation work began to suffer.

Moreover, local labourers could without difficulty run away to their native villages. Physically and psychologically, they were also unwilling to clear dense forest infected with malaria and other diseases. They did not also desire to work such type work as because they have self-sufficient economy and it was due to their socio-cultural background which led them to feel to work as labour in the garden was a very lower-class job. Consequently, shortage of labour became a crucial problem for the planters. Under existing condition and grave demand of the labour, the supreme Government decided to bring labour from the provinces of Bengal, Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and other places. The planters also searched for such type of labourers who could be made permanent settlers in tea estates. It is important to point out here that the plantations all over the world survived on imported labourers who were comparatively cheaper than the local indentured labourers and they in due course of time became an indivisible part of the plantation life in any country. In fact, plantation is associated with resident labourers. The majority of the gardens in Assam are still situated in the remote areas and in isolated corners which were once under the dense forest and wild animals' dwelling place. Thousands of labourers from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Jharkhand and from newly formed Chota Nagpur region were gradually recruited and let them to work in and to settle in those dense forests. These labourers had also desired to migrate to work in the tea garden of Assam as they had been suffered from poverty, illiteracy and many others. These causes led to migration of vast number of populations to Assam in search of livelihood. Apart from the above factors like ideal condition of work, false assurance concerning easy work better pay and limitless land available for cultivation were given to the workers which provoked them to migrate to Assam.

3.2 Modes of Labour Recruitment:

In order to get the labourers from different parts of the country for the labour shortage in the tea gardens Assam, two distinct agencies for recruiting emigrants and forwarding them to their destination under the provisions of the law were in operation. To implement this, mainly two system of recruitment were followed, namely the Contractor System and Sardari System. These two systems were being functioned from 1859 to 1915 and from 1870 to 1959 respectively.

- i) Contractor System: A Contractor was a licensed person whose only objective was to collect as many coolies as possible, without reference to their fitness for work in Assam or any considerations beyond their willingness to emigrate. The contractors used to recruit men, women and children from the North-West parts of the country, such as – Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madras without restraint and supervision of any kind and bring them from their villages to the different tea estates of Assam. It is found from various sources that, under this free contractor system, the coolies were neither medically examined nor registered and most of the time they adopted all kinds of fraudulent methods while recruiting them.
- ii) Sardari System: The recruitment through Garden Sardars was commonly known as Sardari System and this method was used to recruit labourers directly. Under this system, a labourer, either a male or female who is working in the garden, was chosen by the garden management and sent to his original place to bring his own relatives and friends to the tea gardens of Assam as tea labourers.

3.3 History of Transportation of Labours:

The transportation of labour during the British era to the remote tea estates in the state of Assam and Surma valley, about the 800 K.M distance before the development of the railways was really a formidable task. During that time, the steam navigation was yet to be introduced, neither there was availability of boats in large number nor any expert boatman. Rail or road link was really not an easy task during that period. The strong velocity of the current and gathering of big trunk of the trees and rocks on the river's banks let the navigation of the boat more complicated during the rainy season. It took almost 135 to 140 days to reach Sadiya and Cachar from Calcutta. The transportation of labourers from their native place to the plantation locations in state of Assam and West Bengal were cruel and difficult. The weather was not favourable for the voyage of such a long distance where the rate mortality was very high. In this regard, a civil Surgeon notes this evil trade as was resulted in very brutal consequences. 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.

4. CONCLUSION:

Thus, the tea garden labourers of Assam were brought from Eastern India and placed to work under harsh conditions and poor remuneration. 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. With time those migrated tea workers started establishing themselves in Assam permanently and introduced themselves as the tea tribes of Assam. Tea tribes played a vital role in the formation of greater Assamese society. There are different subtribes within them & includes they are Munda, Chaotal, kol, Kharia, Bhumij, Ghatowar, Baraik, Sabar, Gauda, Skandha, Baiga, Bheel, Saora, Bhuia, Paharia, Urang, Parja, Mali, Teli, Dom, Rajput, Than, Mal, kandapan, Hari, Sarban, Hoo, Nowar, Napit, Patra, Sero etc. .The tea tribes are living in various districts of Assam such as Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Darrang, Nagaon, Morigaon, & North Lakhimpur.

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