



Socio-Cultural Conditions of the Tea Labourer in Assam

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Abstract:

The tea garden community is a mixture of more than hundred tribes and castes living uniform life in the plantations. The life in the plantation, which is akin to all, compelled them to come closer to each other, sometimes even forgetting their individual identity. The main tribes and castes which has contributed in this assimilation process, is worthy to be discussed as they enjoyed the majority among various small groups. The result is the emergence of the tea tribes' culture. The objective of this study is to focus on the changing pattern of the socio-cultural life of the tea community. This study has been carried out through inductive, deductive and empirical approaches. In most cases relevant sequential data are not found even in the secondary sources, the inductive method applied to arrive at the definite conclusion. Likewise, situation made to apply deductive method in respect of some data which are found extravaganza.

Keywords: community, mixture, uniform, plantations, assimilation etc.

I. Introduction:

The tea garden community is a mixture of more than hundred tribes and castes living uniform life in the plantations. The life in the plantation, which is akin to all, compelled them to come closer to each other, sometimes even forgetting their individual identity. The main tribes and castes which has contributed in this assimilation process, is worthy to be discussed as they enjoyed the majority among various small groups. The result is the emergence of the tea tribes' culture.

The origin of both these tribes and castes could be trace back to the period of formation of the different caste groups in the country. The tribes, originated from the Dravidian and Austroloid stocks still kept some of their aboriginal traits in their socio cultural behaviour. There are a few of them referred in the great epics; Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The references

prove that they are as ancient as the two great epics, the exact date of which is still unknown. Some of them are of course, of later origin out of the natural assimilation process among the different tribes and castes throughout the ages.

The Santhals, Bhumijis, Sawras, etc. are such tribals of the later origin. They claim as the major and ancient tribal groups to be their forefather as retained some of the rituals belong to their host tribes.

The Castes, on the other hand, originated with the development of the caste system among the Vedic people. They include the people of lower strata from the Aryan stock. Here it should be mentioned that a large number of non-Aryans enemies who had fought against the Vedic Aryans, defeated and had to be surrendered. They were allowed to live for the service of the victor Aryans. These non-Aryan stocks later amalgamated to the Vedic people of lower strata. The Castes in the tea community consists of these types whose number is about half of their total population.

There are also some people of higher caste of Vedic origin. These people for individual reasons hide their actual castes to enter into agreement with the recruiters to come to the plantations of Assam. Most of these people were famine affected and forced to give up their caste behaviour.

The tea plantation originated during the middle of the nineteenth century, required large number of labour force which was not available in Assam. The period was also of the East India Company's rule and the entire India was divided into a number of provinces for administrative convenience. To break their unity and dissatisfaction the Company's government advised the planters to recruit people from these areas. Unhabituated with foreign administration the people of India had a mix response. The tribals who were affected by the company's land policy were engaged in a number of riots since 1813. The Company's policy also led to famine like condition in most of the plains where the general castes were living. The planters mainly brought such famine stricken people from the tribal areas of Madras, Central and Bengal provinces. After the independence, the present States are re-constituted on linguistic basis out of these provinces. The Oriya, Tamil, Telegu, Marathi, Bengali, etc as such states. The people speaking these languages are a little advanced were untouched by the recruiters for the plantation works.

The places referred in their documents of recruitment are as - Barhampur, Singbhum, Bilaspur, Chaibasa, Purulia, Santhal Pargana, Hajaribag, Raipur, Jabbalpur, Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Bolangir, Ranchi, Dumka, Deltonganj etc. They are not states but districts under a certain state with special character. Some of the districts consist of more than 50% of the tribal population

and there are also some with only 5%.¹⁷ Most of these districts fall within the ranges under the Chhotanagpur plateau. The Castes on the other hand, are people of the plains around the river tracts of the same area useful for paddy cultivation. The planters needed hard working and people fit for odd situations, and they were the right people to be chosen.

II. Language:

Linguistically, the tea garden community belong to the three major linguistic stocks—the Dravidic, Austric and Sino-Tibetan. Most of the castes and tribes speak the regional languages of their origin. The Oriyas whose percentage is about 40% among them speak Oriya of different variations and write the regional language. Other castes belong to Santhal Paragona, Purulia, Barhampur etc. were using Bangla in their literary works when they came to Assam. Literacy among them was almost absent so their regional languages could not make any impact on their later generations.

The tribals speak their own dialects. The same is also spoken by their fellow brothers in their present States. None of these dialects were recognized as regional language due to various reasons. Recently, Santhali, one of the tribal dialects adopted the ‘devnagiri’ script and is recognized as the 19th language in the Constitution.

In the plantation, the languages spoken by the people, matching with the new situation developed in to the ‘lingua-franca’ which they call ‘sadri’. There are more than ten variations of ‘sadri’ spoken in the different plantation areas in Assam. Though varied, they could be spoken by all of them as they derived most of the words from the regional languages of their previous States.

III. Linguistic Division of the Major Castes and Tribes:

The Mundas: Mundas are from the Austric family whose different branches laying from the Himalaya ranges in the north to the hilly tracks of Orissa in the south. In the west they are scattered up to the present state of Chhatisgarh and in the east; as our discussion refers; the whole of the tea plantations of Assam. They belong to the Kolarian group, ceded in to a number of sub-groups with separate identity. The Bhumijis, the Santhals are the members of the Munda family. But among them, the main Munda folk and who are non- converts still retain their individual identity. A good number of them are converted into Christianity follow the apostle. A good number of tea gardens in upper Assam have majority of population of them. Dirok T.E., the easternmost tea garden of the Country has 60% of the Munda people and most of them are Christians. The other people, who claim to be Hindus, follow some of the non-Vedic rituals.

The Mundas are divided into a number of clans among whom inter marriage is permitted. Generally endogamy is strictly followed but it is prohibited in within the same clan. The clans of the Mundas are – Manki, Barla, Tuti, Bhengra, Bodra, Horo, Purti, Nagbansi, Demta, Dhanowar, etc. They worship the spirit of their forefathers as household ‘devta’. Beside, ‘sahrul Puja’ is the main festival they celebrate once a year. They also celebrate ‘Karma Puja’.

The Santhals: The Santhals called themselves that they were originated from the Mundas. They constituted an important portion of the tea tribe’s population. They were brought from the areas of Hazaribagh, Malbhun, Singhbhun, Bangkura, Chaibasa, Medinipur, Birbhun, etc. Their socio-cultural behaviour has not much different from the Mundas. Their dialect, developed into separate line sometime similar to the Mundas. A major portion of Jharkhand and West Bengal is occupied by them. Their language ‘Santhali’ is recognized by the Constitution of India. In the district of Tinsukia there population is less than the district of Dibrugarh which bears majority.

The sub clans of the Santhals are--Hasda, Murmu, Sorin Tudu, Majhi, Mardi, Kisku, Besra, Pandri, Baska, Hemram, Soreng, etc. The social system of the Santhals is well organized. The head of a Santhal village is called ‘Majhi’. He is helped by a member called ‘Pran Ego’. The other three officials are Jag-Majhi, Gadet and Naike whose functions are to give information, collection of contributions and worship. ‘Baha’, similar to ‘Sahrul’ is their main festival. Besides Sahrai, Phagua, etc. are also celebrated. Their marriage custom is similar to the Mundas which is called ‘Bapta’. In the situation of the plantation they are also affected by the amalgamation and losing their traditional

The Oraons: Oraons are also called ‘Kurux’ and their dialect is also called by the same name. M.N.Srinivas and S.C.Ray identify them with the Dravidian stock and opined that they migrated from the coastal areas of the present Kerela to the middle and the eastern India. The Oraons immigrated to Assam, were from the present Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa. They are equally scattered in almost all of the tea gardens of Assam. There are some Oraon line could be seen in some gardens like Dighalturang, Baghjan, Dhaisa and Khobang tea estates of the Tinsukia district. They are divided into five different classes called Berga Urang, Dhanuka Urang, Kharia Urang, Khudra Urang and Munda Urang. The later might have been the production of the assimilation with the Mundas. Besides there are a number of sub-titles they use after their names. They are Tirkey, Kerketta, Kujur, Ekka, Minj, Tigga, etc. Marriage is like the Mundas and Santhals but they are much more liberal than their counterparts.

Their main festival is the 'karma-Puja' is celebrated with 'mandal'. The 'akhada' is said to be the place of meeting of the young boys and girls to choose partner for marriage. The 'pahan' is the priest who follows the rituals in their celebration. Other officials are similar to other castes in the plantation. They are engaged in different crafts like Ahir, Kumar, Konwar, Baraik, Chik, etc. The 'dhumkuria' organization is a special feature in their social life which allows young boys and girls to meet and to be educated in different aspects of social life. In Assam the Oraons, who are not converted retain some of their rituals. The Christians do not follow the rituals but retain the dialect.

The Sauras: The 'Sauras' are the people living in the plains of the north western Orissa and are originated from the 'Sabars' whose reference could be found in Mahabharat. They are divided into two groups called 'juria' and 'muria'. Their language is nearer to the Kharias. In most of the tea gardens in Sibsagar district, specifically in Sepon T.E. they are in majority; almost 70%.

The Kharias: The Kharias were inhabitants of the present Chattisgarh, Orissa and Ranchi district of Jharkhand. They are divided into three groups called Dhelki Kharia, Dudh Kharia and Hill Kharia, They are related to the Kolarian groups of people. Their migration in the ancient time cross the hilly tracts of Tibbet, Myanmar The Hill Kharias claim themselves to be Brahmin who are privileged to place the silk cloth over the Ratha during the occasion of the 'rath-yatra' celebrated during the 'asada' month.. In Assam they are scattered in most of the tea gardens of Upper Assam but a few garden near Digboi possess majority of them.

The Gonds: Gonds are traditionally characterized the 'lingo' who is a cultural leader responsible for establishing social order They have the titles and evidence of the defused social and cultural milieu suggest to minister at ritual by virtue of a younger brother or a son or any other member of his lineage. The Gonds have five major clans. The priest is nominated with a hierarchical replacement of his lineage. They have five clans, namely—the Koriam, Siam, Morkam, Paule and Parte. Marriage in the same clan is prohibited. The messenger or the 'ghotakali' is the person who interacts between the two families for marriage. Turmeric play important role in their marriage. They celebrate Sahrai, Karam, Gram-Puja, Dangria-Puja etc. The Gonds, originally belong to tribal family were Hindus and many of them follow Vedic rituals in their celebrations.

Kurmi, G.: Kurmi, G.s are originated from the plains of Bihar, West Bengal Orissa and northern India. They claim to be the descendants of Shivaji. They keep brotherhood with the 'majhi', who

helped them against the aggression of the Mohammedans. They have a total of twelve clans, namely—Purnia, Dumuria, Bansiar, Bag, Bamwar etc.

Marriage between same clan is prohibited. They feel themselves superior to the other castes among the tea community. Being Hindu, they appoint caste Brahmin in their worships. Beside Sohrai and Holi, they celebrate Karam, Manasha, Kali and Tushu etc. Other rituals are similar to the Vedic rites.

Gowala: Gowalas are originated from Bihar and present Chhotanagpur plateau. They relate themselves with Sri Krishna episode and claim to be ‘Yadubanshi’, ‘Nandabanshi’ and ‘Krishnababgshi’ which are represented as their clans. Being related to Sri Krishna they claim to be Vedic people and follow Vedic rites. Their main religious celebration is Satyanarayan-Puja, besides they also celebrate Karam and Tushu.

Porja: Original places of the Porjas were the middle India, present Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Madras province. Originally they were tribal people with their own dialect but gradually became assimilated with the plain people who regarded them inferior to them. Unlike other people their clans is also named after beasts and plants. Marriage between same clans is not allowed. Their youths live in the ‘dang-gada’ while the young girls in the ‘dang-gadi’.

There are also vast populations of tribes and castes, who came from Orissa, whose identification is named after the places of their origin. Though all of these people are Oriya, their language differ from each other but intelligible to all. All the Oriya people have their identical clans. They believe that the same clan is originated from the same parents. So, marriage is prohibited among the same clan even between different groups. The rites and rituals they follow are more inclined towards Vedic rites. But some of non-Vedic rituals also existed among them is strictly followed. Being literary aware they possess prosperous folk materials. The Gonda, Kondo, Sanlia, Kolahandia, Kotkia etc. are their subgroups. The clans in the subgroups are same. The other small groups are- Asur, Teli, Ghatwar, Robidas, Boraik, Karmakar, Mahali, Panika, Turi, Rajwar, Pradhan, Gorait, Mirdha, Dudhas, Khodal, Katwar, Sawashi, Thakur, Bagti, Kumhar, Mal, Nunia, Baroi, Modi, Chhotri, Kishan, etc. All of these castes are mainly from the plains of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, present Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. All of them have their own sub-clans related to different items, beasts, birds, fish etc.

The traditional and cultural views of the tribal as well as caste societies have been resultant factors of the pragmatic act of individual groups. The three basic characters—the traditional and instrumentality displaying certain degree of anatomy in their social system, the headman or the

older of the clan who co-ordinates the pursuits of morality and equality of rights and duties derived from the tradition of their society which preserves the traditional beliefs contrary to the counter balancing body of authority in rapidly advancing modern

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