

HISTORY OF SMALL TEA GROWER'S IN ASSAM: A SILENT MOVEMENT

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Abstract

The small tea cultivation forms an interesting field in socio economic history of Assam. There are many intensive studies have been carried out on small tea industry in different disciplines in different parts of the world, but very little contributions were available from the historians on the importance of small tea cultivations in Assam as well as in other parts of the country. The economic contribution and employment opportunity generated by these small tea cultivators have great significance in Assam. It has also greatly contributed in changing the socio-economic development as well as land use pattern of the region. Growth of small tea growers was needed to provide hopes and productive employment for thousands of young unemployed youths and accelerate the reduction of extreme poverty. Growth of the small tea cultivation in Assam transformed the economic, social and cultural life of the rural masses to a significant extent. It succeeded in providing better and well diversified work opportunities, improved a new awareness among the rural people towards a better life- style. The small tea growers who are mainly from the weaker sections of the population have succeeded in making a serious dent on the rural economy of Assam. Therefore it is an interesting field of research how it has changed people's attitude in their occupational structure, providing better economic conditions and employment opportunity to unemployed youth of Assam in the forms of farmers.

Keywords- tea, economic, employment, youth, rural, poverty, population, farmers.

Introduction

Tea is one of the most widely consumed beverages in the world. The tea history in India dates back to 1823, when Robert Bruce met Beesa Gaum, a Singpho Chief of Upper Assam region (Sadiya) with the help of Maniram dewan. Beesa Gaum offered a sample of tea plants, which was growing wild in that region. Bruce sent the sample of tea to Calcutta Botanical Garden for its experiment, given by the *Singpho* Chiefs. But Robert Bruce's discovery in 1823 did not get quick approval from the scientists of the Calcutta Botanical Garden. Therefore the potentiality of Assam's forests remained unknown. Almost a decade later the tea discovery went to Lieutenant Andrew Charlton of Assam Light Infantry.

The rapid growth of tea plantation had happened only after the proposal of waste lands grants. As early as September 1827 David Scott proposed a plan of granting waste lands on condition that the grantee should bring one –fourth of the allotment into tillage by the expiry of third year, one fourth by sixth year and another one fourth by ninth year, after which the grantee should be entitled to hold the land in perpetuity on paying usual rent upon three fourth of the whole. The object of the agent was defeated when the applicants were required to deposit a security equal to the first two years revenue and in default of payment at the expiry of fourth year his holding was liable to be resumed. To remedy the defect, Robertson allowed the occupants to hold these lands rent free for a period of three years after which a graduated system of taxation was to be paid for every year until the tenth year when three fourth of the entire area was to be assessed at full rates.

Another one of major factor of growing tea plantation was the introduction of Fee Simple Grants in 1861. Under this grants land was sold at a rate of, ranging from Rs.2 to Rs. 5 per acre. From 1862 onwards, grants were put on auction sale. From 1876, the sale of fee simple land was stopped and a new system of thirty years leases, also on liberal terms, was introduced.

Thus we can say that the British Government policy of making Waste Land Grants Rule and Fee Simple Grants had vehemently impacted upon the tea plantation economy in Assam. A few numbers of native people also individually came up to take the initiative of tea plantation. The pioneer native tea cultivator of Assam was Maniram Dewan. However, the British could not tolerate that a "native" would go for tea plantation competing at par with them and put many obstacles. Maniram Dutta Baruah was a great patriot and a person of firm determination. He established two tea estates successfully in spite of the all obstacles, *Chinamara* and *Senlung*. Maniram Dewan was hanged by the British in 1858 for taking part in the Indian freedom movement of 1857. The execution of Maniram Dewan acted as a setback for Assamese people but towards the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century a number of Assamese pioneers took up tea cultivation. The prominent amongst the pioneers Assamese tea planters were Rasheswar Barua, Hemadhar Barua, Rai Bahadur Jagannath Baruah, Krishna Kumar Boruah, Col. Sibram Bora and Sarbananda Barkakoti. Amongst them Rasheswar Baruah of Lahdaigarh was of the foremost

Until the 1980's, the plantation of tea dominated by the big companies or estate owners. After the 1970's there had emerged a new trend of cultivation tea in Assam. The trend was started by some of the local people, who had begun to cultivate tea in a small plot of land with their homestead land. These new trend emerged as the small tea cultivation movement in early 1980's.

Objectives

- The main objective of this paper is to trace the history of small scale tea cultivation in Assam.
- To discuss the role of different organizations and individual in the growth of small scale tea cultivation.

Methodology

The study is descriptive in nature and carried out based on various primary and secondary sources available on small tea growers. The primary sources such as Souvenir, government letter etc. are reviewed throughout the study. Apart from this face to face interactions and interviews also have been conducted with the small tea growers.

SMALL TEA GROWERS IN ASSAM

The small tea growers (STGs) in Assam are a group of local people who concentrate themselves mostly in producing green tea leaf. They emerged into the tea industry of Assam after 1978. These small tea growers sell their green tea leaf to the tea manufacturing factories owned by big tea estates or others.

Unlike the big tea estates the small tea growers land-holdings are very small in size. The government of Assam recognizes an individual tea grower as a small tea grower if he/ she produce green tea leaf on land holdings less than 5.4 hectares. On the other hand the tea board of India and Small Tea Growers Advisory Programme recognizes as small growers who produce tea leaf on a land area less than 10.12 hectares. The government of Assam and Tea Board of India provide financial assistance and other incentives to the growers operating within the above mentioned land ceilings. However, at present a grower who produces tea leaf by holding land area less 33.33 hectare is recognized as a small tea grower but not entitled to get the facilities offered by the governments.

There are many controversial arguments about the pioneering of small tea cultivation. Many growers and other statistical facts reveal that the name of Mr. Gangadhar Saikia was the first small tea growers in Assam, who formed and first president of All Assam Small Tea Grower's Association in 1987. On the other hand, some people and some reliable data have shown the evidence against the name of Mr. Soneswar Phukan of Sivsagar district, who commercially began the small tea cultivation from 1976, in small plots of land.

Though the concept of small tea cultivation had grown in the mind of Assamese local people in the year of 1978, after the declaration of erstwhile Agricultural Minister Soneswar Bora, the rapid growth of small tea cultivation had happen only after the establishment of AASTGA. After the establishment of AASTGA, the growers of this section thought that one of big problem faced by them to cultivate tea was requirement of land. Then, they began to demand to government that those

lands which were un-utilizing yet, provide them to cultivate tea. There are so much of un-utilizing lands in the hill area of Assam, which is not suitable to doing other agricultural crops, except tea. Therefore, from the very beginning of the establishment of AASTGA, they had been demanding the Government to provide them those unused area for tea cultivation. The Government of Assam also gave them a positive response regarding the land requirements for small tea cultivation. In the year of 1989, the Government of Assam had passed a Land Policy Act, where it announced that those who are engaging themselves as small tea growers, they will provide 30 *bighas* of Government land to them. The Act passed by the Government of Assam, inspired a lot to the native people for initiating tea cultivation in small scale.

However, the very concept of small tea cultivation had grown in Assamese people during the colonial period. People of Assam has been regarded Maniram Dewan as the first tea planters in Assam. Accordingly we may also assume him as the first small tea planter in Assam. Because he started his plantation with a small plot of land and also he had not own tea manufacturing factory.

But here is another claim coming from ‘Singpho National Council’ that Singpho Chief Ningrola might be first tea cultivator of Assam against the name Maniram Dewan. They forwarded information and data to establish his name. According to an essay an American Baptist Missionary that Mr. Bruce belief that Ningrola, a Singpho Station on the Buri dehing have direct intercourse with the Hankong Valley, had the potential of becoming a control station for Tea business in India and suggested the establishment of a Baptist Mission at this point with this purpose mind. Another prominent historian of Assam, Dr. Amalendu Guha said that at the first time 95 tea box exported to the outside of Assam and out of this box, 35 boxes manufactured tea by the Ningrola. But, Ningrola had worked only in collaboration with British Capitalist. With the British incentive to serve their interest and therefore, the chief had very little to do with its production.

Another small tea grower Sri Purna Chandra Bora claimed as first small tea cultivators in Assam with produced certificate from Assam Agricultural University and he commercially cultivated tea from 1976 though he was a teacher of primary school. He did tea cultivation and sold green leaf near the Meleng Tea Estates factory by carrying his bicycle.

Prior to formation of AASTGA, there were a number of other Associations of small tea growers in some places of Upper- Assam, viz. ‘All Assam Green (Tea) Leaf producers’ Association’ of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh districts, ‘Charaipoong Self employed Tea Growers’ Association’ and ‘Rural Tea Growers’ Association, Bhawani Bill, Barhat’ etc. Later on, all these associations were dissolved and small tea growers of Assam were united under one association named ‘All Assam Small Tea Growers’ Association’ from 1987 onwards. 32 small tea growers were present in the first meeting

to form this Association in 1987. These founder members had taken initiatives to popularize small tea cultivation in Assam. District and Regional committee's of 'All Assam Small Tea Growers' Association' were formed in small tea growing areas.

Growth of small scale tea cultivation in Assam can be divided into the following three periods-

1) The period of 1978-1987: This is the initial period of small scale tea cultivation in Assam. During this period the tea plantation on small holdings gradually expanded to most of the upper Assam districts. The former agricultural minister of Assam, Mr. Sonowar Borah of Golaghat district made a collective effort to get the government approve for small tea growers. He is known as the founder of small tea cultivation in Assam. The growers formed their Association to fight and to expose their demands in a collective force. The Golaghat District Small Tea Growers Association came into being in 1987. Being the founder district of small tea growers, the association became formed the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association

2) The period of 1987- 1997: This was the most prosperous period during which the number of growers, area under small scale tea cultivation, production, hectorage yield etc. have increased remarkably. The prices of green leaf reached its peak, many new growers were attracted to take up small scale tea cultivation as their alternative source of livelihood and additional earning. In 1987, the government of Assam had declared that the small tea growers would have not pay sales tax income tax of agriculture raised to 30000, earlier which was 12000 and it reduced to 3 *bighas* from 76 *bighas* to register them with Tea Board. Besides, it also declared that after the registration with Tea Board, they will provide them Rs. 21,000 to those who are starting tea planation in plain area, and Rs. 28,000 to hilly area. The government had provided various training schedule on regular basis and who were began their garden under the scheme of Pradhan Mantri Rojgar Yojna, they have given the opportunity to take an amount of 2 *lakhs* as loan. These initiatives given by the government had influenced greatly to the native people.

3) 1997 and Aftermath: This period is marked by developing and recovering performances featured by government incentives, tea Board of India's Development Schemes to the small tea growers. Tea cultivation expanded to new areas and more tea processing units, the Bought Leaf factories and Cooperative Factories have come into existence. Thus, local people's participation into more than one and half century old tea industry has emerged.

In the year of 2000, there had established 29 bought leaf factories. One of it, the growers had established one factory co-operatively at Barhat, Sivasagr. The Assam branch of Indian Tea Association, in one of their letter to

Assam government for the protection of big tea garden, it has shown that to the mid of 2005, there emerged 170 bought leaf factories in Assam.

The emergence of small tea cultivation in such a rapid way had threatened the big Estate owner severely. It was noticed from the one of the letter of ABITA (Assam Branch Indian Tea Association). Here I put some of the portion of the letter exactly-

“Today over 170 bought Leaf factories have been established in Assam which collectively produces about 60 million kgs of tea. These bought leaf factories, which mainly source green leaf from the small grower sector, have posed a serious threat to the established tea estates because of lower operational cost and production of teas of inferior quality which is affecting the image of Assam teas. These bought tea factories because of low cost structure are in a position to produce teas which are on an average Rs. 20-30 lower than the established tea factories and are, therefore, in a position to sell their teas at a much lower price, thereby affecting the market dynamics and price realization of established factories.”

The tea gardens started by the British during the early period of the 19th century, were like some isolated islands of alien ways of life in the midst of a traditional society. The emergence of small tea growers into the tea industry in Assam is a historic event in the economy of the state. The number of small tea growers is estimated to be more than 50, 000, practicing tea cultivation by covering an area about 60,000 hectares and produce nearly 90 m.kgs of tea in Assam. The small scale tea plantation accounts for about 20 percent of total tea production in Assam. The gamut of small tea growers in Assam is that during the month of March- April in 1978 the erstwhile Agriculture and Cooperative Minister of Assam Late Soneswar Bora, hailing from Golaghat District, had made an appeal in the platform of Assam Legislative Assembly to start tea plantation by indigenous people on their small holdings at least by 1.5 hectares. The Minister, who had no any institutional higher education but held other valued practical knowledge, further announced that there would no objection from the government to plant tea on small land holdings. The announcement received wide spread response from the people of Assam.

But the foundation of thinking or discussion was started in 1975 by the famous tea planter and having huge knowledge about tea marketing Late Hiralal Phukan and renowned economist J.B. Ganguly expressed their views in a seminar which was held in 22-23rd November, 1975 about the tremendous scope of small tea garden in Assam. Another senior intellectual and famous Assamese writer Homen Borgohain, wrote an essay on “*Ghare Ghare Chah Bari*” (tea garden in home to home) discussed about the big potential of small tea garden in Assam. However, the concept of small tea cultivation popularized in a organized manner by the Former Chief Minister of Assam, Late Sarat Chandra Singh and

former Agricultural Minister Mr. Soneswar Borah, during the period of Janata Government. A strong group of middle class young generation also took bold efforts to create a green revolution by the small tea gardens and at last a new entrepreneur class had been growing up.

It is well-known to all that made tea requires two stages, agriculture and industry, in its whole process before using as beverage. Selection of species, nursery, land preparation, land testing, plantation, use of shade tree, drainage, manuring, pests and weed control, plucking, pruning etc. are related to agricultural activities. On the other hand withering, rolling, roasting, packing, transporting, warehousing etc. involve industrial activities. The Minister also thought of all these aspects of tea plantation. He requested the well established big tea estates of the state to forward necessary helps to the small tea growers. This was so that the large tea estates, situated nearby the small tea growers were the markets for selling the green leaf produced by the growers. It would be pertinent to mention here that the large tea estates also took a leading role in the development of small tea growers in Assam. Large estates of the state came forward, though not all, to give necessary helps related to tea plantation and tea culture. The Minister also addressed the Tea Board of India, Calcutta, for permitting the indigenous people to cultivate tea on small holdings. He also had discussions with the scientists of Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat to find out ways and means through which small tea growers could prosper.

Prior to the late 1980's the indigenous weaker section of the people of Assam thought that tea plantation involves huge capital and large tract of land, so taking up of tea cultivation was supposed to be a difficult task. Hence they had been engaging themselves in producing traditional crops which included rice, maize, jute etc. in low land and orange, areca nut, sugarcane, ginger etc. on high land. Most of the highlands were lying as wastelands, grazing lands of varieties of flora and fauna. But after the 1980's the situation has been changing rapidly. A large section of rural people including youth have developed curiosity, knowledge of tea plantation on small holdings through their perseverance determination to be self-employed and courage others to be competent in tea plantation and manufacturing.

The farmers who were producing traditional high lands started tea plantation as experiments. The names of the small tea growers to be mentioned first include Mr. Gangadhar Saikia, who is regarded as the first small tea grower in Assam, Mr. Jibeswar Borah, Late Phatik Saikia, and Late Tulshi Kurmi of Golaghat district of Assam. In the early part of the decade 1990 Mr. Gangadhar Saikia sorted out a plan for tea plantation on his small holdings which had been under the sugarcane cultivation. Mr. Saikia's plan for tea cultivation was supported by some of his friends who also later on started tea plantation. They have opened the door for the local poor people to adopt tea cultivation. Their initiatives have, to some extent, similarities with the Tea Committee formed by Lord William Bentick 1835 to whom the credit of expansion of the

tea industry in India as well as in Assam goes. Gradually the small scale tea cultivation spread to other places of the state and become a prime source of livelihood of the rural people. The people, who were thinking before that the tea cultivation as a rich man occupation started tea plantation on their small holdings.

In such a way the small tea growers of Assam has reached the present position. To reach this position they had to fight with government in many times.

Conclusion

The trend of small scale tea cultivation by individual farmers in Assam is not very old. During the last two decades, tea has become a popular crop among the farmers. Tea cultivation in small holdings ranging from 0.13 hectare to 3.0 hectares or even more spread over almost all districts of Assam, however highest concentration is in the five districts of upper Assam.

Small tea growers are originally from sedentary cultivator, educated rural youth, educated urban youth, in service personal and ex-tea garden workers. Small tea cultivation helps in utilization of human labour. It provide ample avenue to self employment engaging family members directly and has created indirect employment in the field of manufacturing and supply of garden implements, transportation of green leaf and agro-chemicals.

The small tea growers of Assam have created a new section of propertied class in rural areas. Those who are emerged as small tea cultivator, become a separate class in the society. The change in life style with the rise in income has separated them from other villagers who are dependent on paddy and other cultivation. Cooperation and help to each other is generally not seen among themselves. In some cases a buyer's and seller's relationship among them is observed. But villagers having paddy cultivation have some common interests and they generally help each other maintaining a good human relationship

No doubt the emergence of small tea cultivation is a very fortunate to unemployed rural youth and also to the society. But, with the growth of it, a new social tension in rural areas has been emerging. The field study and various newspapers articles reveals that in some rural areas mostly in hilly areas has been inhabiting a poor section of people since very ancient time. But due to the span of small tea cultivation those people have to vacate their land. Because, the people of that area have not ownership right on that land. But morally they own it. The government began to lease those areas to small scale tea cultivator. Therefore, some of the people who inhabit in that area displaced their own land and settled in other areas which are very ironical.

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