

“History of the Green Gold: Building of the British Tea Empire in Upper Assam and Demolition of the wild”

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ABSTRACT:

Background of the article: Across the world, the Tropical lands became scapegoat of *Western imperialism* which resulted in drastic alterations of the relation between human and nature that led to the massive destruction of the indigenous, native way of being on earth. Armed with *military force, modern scientific knowledge*, bands of botanists, surgeons, military officers and missionaries; the imperialists thrived to *order the wild nature* with **modern method of culture** known as the *Monoculture*. Primitive tropical rainforests were felled in Malaysia, Indonesia for Rubber plantations; in Congo, Ghana for Coffee Plantation; in Cuba, Brazil, Argentina etc. for Sugar, in Myanmar; for rice, and in Malabar and Western Ghats of India for Eucalyptus; changing the lives of the forest people forever.

The case of *Tea*, regarded by imperialist British as object more valuable than Gold, the *National drink* of 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th century England was the repetition of the same story of clash between western scientific knowledge and the Assamese indigenous people's traditional beliefs, the modern cultivation based on domination over nature by commodifying it and native's sustainable use of it by regarding it as the *mother*, the forceful appropriation of nature by the British for *civilizing* and *developing* the native Assamese and latter's apparent alienation from their own lands. Thus the article tries to analyze how the capitalist Monocultural Tea plantation changed the entire ecological, economical, sociological set up of Assam turning it into a *garden* from a prosperous *Jungle*.

METHODOLOGIES:

Historical-analytical method has been used while analyzing the entire Tea Venture in Assam. Rather than adopting a fragmented outlook to understand the Capitalist development in Britain and Assam separately; here an integrated, post-colonial approach has been adopted to view the development of Britain and undevelopment of Assam as the effect of the same capitalistic movement of money and nature.

While writing the article both primary sources like the Parliamentary papers, district Gazetteers, annual forest administrative reports, land revenue reports, along with secondary sources like books, articles, PhD thesis, dissertations, etc. have been used.

Finding and conclusions:

1. Tea, as the first modern economic venture in Assam proved to be the largest destroyer of an ancient tropical rainforest which constituted the backbone of embedded economy of the local Assamese people. It was the profound strike against the biodiversity gene pool of the region.
2. It was the largest cause for alienation of lands along with forests on the parts of the locals which later resulted in massive reduction of cultivation paving the path for a post-colonial dependent economy in Assam.
3. Contrary to the usual perception of Tea as a symbol of development; in reality it was the cause of large scale transfers of native's lands to the British and then to the Migrants from mainland India causing a relentless tension between the natives and the outsiders and the state and the Centre after independence.
4. British Tea venture was the genesis of the current inter-state border clash between Assam-Nagaland, Assam-Mizoram etc. The inner-line system that the British innovated for peaceful Tea plantation brought bloody strife to the region.

Keywords : Colonialism, development, enclave, imperialism, modernity.

1. Triangular trade of Tea, Silver and Opium by the British and clash among the imperialists: an introduction:

“ *The advances in transportation and communication, technological innovation and rapid industrialisation ...in turn(led towards a) rising public demand for consumable products that Britain neither produced nor possessed. It made for a global and spatial re-arrangement of peoples, crops, flora, landscapes.*” (Dey, 2018:23)

Tea; was neither a plant that Britain could cultivate, nor did it possess it. But the popularity of this beverage was so immense in Britain, right from the beggars, working class to the royal elites ; that it emerged as the *National drink* soon after its first introduction in England by the Dutch merchant around 1657. (Mintz, 108-111; Ukers, 1935:29)

With the coming of Catherine-de-Braganza, wife of king Charles II as the queen of England (1649-1685); Tea drinking witnessed an unprecedented and unimaginable growth amongst the Britons because the queen belonged to Portugal; the country that traded with the Far Eastern Asian countries, and imported Tea; a magical plant according to the Europeans, (Rappaport, 2017) along the Dutch. Such lucrative trade soon attracted the British merchants and within a very short span of time they emerged as the greatest rivals of all other European trading companies. The formation of the East India Company or the John Company in 1600 was a revolutionary move in the history of Tea along with the entire trade in Far East. Within a space of a few years of trading, the Company became a formidable rival of both states and empires, with power to acquire territory, coin money, command fortresses and troops, form alliances, make wars and peace and exercise both civil and criminal jurisdictions. (Mintz, 1985:112). There were total 16 European Companies competing for Far Eastern market specially of Tea- The Dutch, French, Danish, Austrian, Swedish, Spanish and Prussian but no one as powerful as the John Company. In 1700, England received legally about 20 thousand pounds of Tea, by 1715; Chinese Green Tea was flooding the London Tea market and by 1760; duty was paid on more than 5 million pounds of Tea. By 1800, legally imported Tea alone accounted for more than 20 Million pounds. As tea drinking became popular in England, the black market of Tea smuggling grew into a major business. In 1766, the British government estimated that equal amount of smuggled Tea as that was the legally imported Tea; was introduced into England. In that year, the East India Company alone imported 6 million pounds of Teas, more than any of its competitors. (*Ibid*, 113). In fact this company was the first British company to import Tea directly from China in 1689 (Borah,2015). Till then the British merchants were trading with Dutch and Portuguese merchants who had been having access to the Chinese Cantons. Hence this Company was granted a *Monopoly* over Tea trade by the House of Commons in 1721 to facilitate a steady supply of it. The Company grew so powerful so as to precipitate a dietetic revolution in England, changing it from potentially a Coffee drinking nation to a Tea drinking. In fact it constituted the world's largest Tea monopoly and the first to commence a propaganda on behalf of a Beverage.

By then Britain had colonized the *New World* and found the most valuable exchange medium for Tea; the Silver. The British EIC's purchasing power in the Chinese base of Cantons was primarily dependent upon this commodity. It was the control over the New world and hence the Silver that made the Company triumph over every one else.

However, it soon lost the source of Silver. But unlike other companies it did not loss the trading capacity because soon it discovered that the Chinese had a great demand for Opium and by then, a significant portion of India came under the grip of the Company. In 1765 it had acquired the *Diwani* through the **treaty of Allahabad** that is the right to collect and impose taxes and revenues; over the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orrissa after the *battle of Bauxar 1764*. Interestingly, these were the regions of India where Opium had been cultivated abundantly. Soon the British destroyed the bases of *free* Opium trade in Bengal and established it's own *monopoly*. (Farroqui, 1998:13). Through this, the

EIC could regulate the quantity and quality of production, stabilized prices at high level and consistently undercut or assimilated other sources of international competition so as to grab the Chinese Opium market. (Richards, 1981:61).

Since 1770 onwards, with the cognizance of the British EIC, the Dutch EIC had been conducting Opium trade between **Malwa** and Java. However, soon the Fort William at Calcutta found the Malwa Opium to have certain advantages over that of the Bengal or Patna; and hence crushed down the trade by establishing its own monopoly in 1829. After the **3rd Anglo-Maratha war** 1818, the British company regime put effort to keep check upon this trade in Western India and formulated a new policy under which it *alone* could buy from these states a *specific quantity* of Opium annually *at a stated price* and no longer the product could be sold in a *free market* (Aitchison, 19).

All these were done for the sake of Tea. (Liu, 2020). Many Chinese historians blame that the British circulated Opium forcefully into the country turning almost the entire race *addicted*. But the Qing dynasty of China was particularly opposed to the British. The emperor made Opium illegal and banned it in 1839. Then the EIC resorted to smuggling Opium into China by auctioning it off to the small traders and thereby escaped the ban. The Chinese emperor ultimately confiscated some 20,000 chests of Opium and discarded the EIC merchants outrightly. The latter immediately retaliated with modern military armaments resulting in the **Opium war**. Around this time, the Chinese authorities increased their vigilance over the supply of Indian Opium (Borah, 2015:39). Moreover trading with China was becoming more and more costly for the Company. The deteriorating relations between the Chinese and British is best illustrated by the minutes of the *Assam Company's* first board meeting,

“The Chinese authorities have frequently suspended our trade and ordered the ‘Barbarians’ as English men are still popularly and unofficially styled, to quit the country, a proceeding which has often occasioned considerable inconvenience and embarrassment. Every merchant who is engaged in Tea trade must feel that it is carried on in the most humiliating circumstances and be desirous of getting rid of a dependence on a ‘Celestial Empire’ by submission to which he is alone enabled to carry on a profitable trade in an article which was once a luxury, but now has become a necessary of living.” (Antrobus, 1954:36)

Thus, the source of Tea for British market was shrinking and the major blow that shocked the EIC came in 1833 when its monopoly over Tea was removed by parliament owing to the constant pressures put by the private merchants commonly known as the *smugglers*. These weren't Joint Stock Companies like EIC, but means of establishing partnerships among individuals that could continue even if one of the partners died. These were structures able to adapt themselves to every line of growth, every avenue of remuneration which the China trade offered and hence had many advantages to the EIC. These independent traders developed a good relationship with Chinese **Hong merchants** and gradually became so powerful so as to challenge the monopoly of the EIC. From 1829 onwards the campaign against it started and finally in 1833 it was lifted. (Greenberg, 146-184)

Thus, this was the context that compelled the Company to look upon a new source of Tea and almost immediately it found Assam; geographically more inclined to China, yet a part of India to be the most fertile ground of it.

2. The Discovery of the Green Gold and Curving Out an Industry Out of Jungles:

“Article more precious than Silver and Gold, grows wild upon its mountains, uncultivated and till lately uncared for.” (MacLeod, 1982:1-6).

That Tea plant grows wild in Assam, finds its earliest mention in the **Reports of Sir Joseph Banks 1788** submitted to the **Board of Directors** of the British EIC (Chambers, ed. 2000:118-119; Report from the Select Committee, 1840:38-43) In the report he also suggests the necessity of cultivating Tea in this region of India to get rid of the Chinese control over the commodity, but the suggestion was lost in negligence since the Company had been enjoying the monopoly till then. In 1823, a Scottish military officer turned trader; **Robert Bruce**, who was in search of good trade fortune with Burma and further China had entered into the Eastern Assam with the hope of establishing some contact with Yunnan via land. Eastern Assam shared its lush green vegetative border with Burma at the **Patkai mountain range** and crossing the present day **Arunachal**, China could be accessed just on foot.

Just after entering the Eastern Assam, he found Tea growing wild in **Rongpur**, Sibsagar; that constituted the capital of Assam during the Ahom reign. (Ukers, 1935:136). Thenceforth he continuously found wild Teas across **Sadiya** and its surrounding places. Here he came into contact with the Singpho tribe's chief, **Beesa Gaum**; near the present day **Margherita** region of **Tinisukia** district, who taught Bruce how to prepare the indigenous Tea. He made cordial relationships with Beesa and conducted a written agreement to transfer indigenous Tea plants, seeds, fruits and flowers. In the meanwhile captain Charles Alexander Bruce, the elder brother of Robert Bruce; was stationed at Sadiya in command of military gunboats as part of the **third Anglo-Burma war, 1824**. Seeing the immense jungle of Tea trees; he joined his brother's mission and started an intensive journey to explore the actual extension of Tea jungles across the country. After the demise of Robert Bruce, Charles Alexander Bruce discovered a large number of Tea tracts cultivated but later abandoned by tribes of Singphos, Muttocks or Morans. He travelled along and down the river **Buri-Dihing** and found wild tea at *Phakial, Tingri* etc. He persuaded the native tribes to clear the jungles, plant Tea seeds and assured that he would buy the leaves at good market prices. In this way, he established experimental Tea gardens at *Jaipur, Chabua, Tingri, Hukanpukhuri* etc. In *Mishimi* hill of Arunachal, adjacent to the present day *Lakhimpur* district also, he found many tracts of Tea. (Baruah, 2017)

In 1839, Charles Bruce published a pamphlet also which contained a map of the extent of discoveries of wild Tea. He located 80 Tea tracts in the Muttock country, 12 in Singpho and 28 in the west of Buri-Dihing at *Namsang, Tipam, Jaipur*(Joypur) and in the neighbourhood of *Rangpur*(Rongpur) and *Gabru*(*Gabharu parbat* or hill in the present day *Mariyani* district of Eastern or Upper Assam). (Harler, 1933; Tea Committee Report,1839)

Suryya Kumar Bhuyan's (1949:30) '*Early British Relations With Assam*', also confirms the fact that the Upper Assam, the hotbed of Ahom kingdom; was the centre stage of Tea. He writes that Mr. Bruce met the octogenarian headman of a *Nara* village (Nara village was situated at the border of Upper Assam and Burma; or at the Patkai mountain, contiguous to Joypur) to the South-West of *Gabharu Parbat*, who claimed that his father migrated from *Mukum*, settled in Tipam; *opposite to Joypur*, and it was he who brought and planted Tea on the Tipam hill. To verify the statement, Mr. Bruce cleared the tract on Tipam hill and found an area measuring 300 yards by 300 with a thick plantation of Tea.

He also met an *Ahom* who declared to him, (that) "It was *Sooka* (Sookapha?), or the first Kacharry (Ahom?) Rajah of Assam, who brought the Tea plant from *Mukum*". He also added that it was documented in his *Puthi* or History book.

Since the early 19th century, not only in Upper Assam but in Manipur, Mizoram, Myanmar, Thailand and upto South Vietnam and Laos; wild tea was discovered by the British. (Baruah, 2017). Thong Tenzelo (2014) shows that wild Tea was discovered in Naga hills also and its surrounding areas like Namsang, Borduar etc. in abundance. Hence, John M'Cosh(1837:36) wrote,

"*The Tea tree, the identical tea of China, grows as favourable upon the mountains possessed by dependent hill tribes of Khangtis, Singphos, Muttocks, as in the adjoining provinces of China itself.....*"

Thus, it is clear that all the major areas containing *wild* Tea and tribes who cultivated or used it lived in the Upper Assam and adjoining Eastern Himalayan regions which constituted one of the richest areas on earth in terms biodiversity since it was draped by a contiguous rainforest. A statement by Sanjoy Hazarika(1994:XV) confirms it,

"*Northeast is part of a great Tropical rainforest that stretches from the foothills of the Himalayas to the top of the Malaysian peninsula and the mouth of Mekong river as it flows into the Tonkim.*"

Soumyadeep Dutta(2010:115-117), the frontman of the '*Rainforest movement*' in Assam during the late 90's minutely shows that till the early 19th century or prior to the advent of the British, the entire Eastern Assam was covered with a single, contiguous rainforest. The present day *Joypur Tea garden, Namsang Tea garden, Naharkatia Tea garden*, all the mutually connected Tea gardens of Tinisukia district, *Makum, Chabua* etc. were the parts of same rainforest that got extinct due to continuous destruction of it by the British for establishing Tea gardens. He affirms that; had the British not discovered Tea in Assam, the intense harm which

was inflicted on its' rainforest, would not have occurred. Tea was the single most potent destroyer of biodiversity in Assam.

Thus, the most significant *discovery* in the history of the British empire (Tea Committee Report, 1833) in India, the commodity that acted as the *motor* for the development of the British empire; without which the health and strength of the empire couldn't have sustained (MacFarlane, 2003:167), had taken its root at the cost of rampant ecological destruction.

In 1841, the price of Tea per pound was *2d.*, lower than that of 1831 and the consumption per head increased to 1 lb. 60z. By 1851, the average price had fallen down to *3s. 4.75d.*, and the consumption per head increased to 2 lb.11z. By 1861, the price had further fallen down to *1s. 5d.* and consumption per head again increased to 3 lb.15z. In 1861, the total quantity of Tea that entered the British market was 123,000,000 lb. (Antrobus, 1954:276). All these became possible primarily to the fact that Assam was transformed into an enclave of the Planters. (Mintz, 1985; Guha, 1977). So prosperous the Tea industry became in Assam that Britain, which was dependent solely on China for Tea till the beginning of 19th century, could now export Tea to different regions of the world like Germany, the Baltic provinces and South America. (Borah, 2015:50).

By the early 20th century, U.K. surpassed even the *Celestial empire* of Tea; China, in world market. In 1900, China exported a total of 184,530,000lb. Whereas India's amount stood at 192,310,000lb. By 1920, China exported total 40,846,000lb. and India, 287,525,000lb. (Gardella, 1994:111)

So, it can easily be summarized how much pressure did this Tea success put upon the forests and land of Assam and hence Richard Tucker (1998) said,

“most of the Tea gardens were established at the expense of natural forests and whenever prospect of Tea rose in the market; more forests were destroyed correspondingly to meet the demands.”

In this way the *Planters became one of the largest land-owners of the empire.* (Guha, 1977)

3. Making Room for Garden: Removing the wild Jungle and its lazy natives:

“ A madness comparable in intensity with that of the South Sea bubble, hit the London Stock Exchange as normally level-headed financiers and speculators began to scramble wildly for Tea shares in Tea lands” (Griffith, 1967)

Even before Tea was commercially planted in Upper Assam by the *Assam Tea Company* right from 1839; the process of destruction of forests and corresponding land alienation started taking its roots in name of exploring and experimenting Tea culture. Forests had already been felled by different tribes under the persuasion of Charles Bruce for Tea culture and once Captain Jenkins became successful in asserting the fact before the *Tea Committee* (constituted in 1834 by the Governor General Lord William Bentinck; just a year after the abolition of *monopoly*), that *beyond all doubt Tea was indigenous to Assam*, some of the *administrative* steps were adopted by the EIC with assistance of Jenkins himself that *smoothed* the path for Tea venture in Assam, and also paved the paths for enslavement of the natives forever.

In 1834, the Upper Assam was handed over to an *Ahom* prince, *Purandar Singha* of earlier ruling family by the EIC so as tranquilize the aristocratic class of the land and thereby demolish any attempt for revolt. He was made treaty bound to pay a sum of Rs. 50,000 annually. But Jenkins soon found out that most of Tea tracts that were discovered by Charles Bruce fell under Purandar's territory. Soon the EIC appealed before him to grant several *Bighas* of lands for Tea plantation on the *Gabharu Parbat*. Purandar was zealous thinking about the prospects it could brought for the natives. His *Dewan* or Minister of Finance, Maniram Barbhandar Dutta Barua; who was one of most enterprising of all Assamese people; advised the king to accept all the liberal principles of the British and thereby to extract some profits for his people too. Hence, the progressive minded king allotted the entire hill lands to the British retaining just ½ for himself so that his people could also plant Tea on that. He requested the British to teach his people the art of planting and manufacturing Tea. (Baruah, 1990:535-539; Parliamentary Papers, 1839:63) But very treacherously on the pretext of misgovernment, he was dethroned. His kingdom was divided into two districts of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar. The entire kingdom, being of perfect climate for Tea, was directly placed under the Company by Jenkins. (Baruah, 1990: 537-539; Dey:2018). Hence, the last royal historian of the Ahom dynasty, Dutiram

Hazarika, under the patronage of Purandar Singha wrote that the king's rule was overthrown by the *White Men's* desire to turn the country into a vast *Tea Garden*. (Bhuyan, 1932:209). Hence when after 40 years of this incident, land grants were appealed before the king of Manipur for Tea plantation, he pleaded the British political officer to abandon the plan in the fear that if the latter succeeded, the king would lose his kingdom. (MacFarlane, 2003:8).

The Muttock kingdom, ruled by the Moran chief also met a disastrous fate at the hand of Captain Jenkins who continuously plotted against the ruling family since the entire Muttock kingdom was favourable to Tea. Taking advantage of civil and familial disputes he finally snatched away the kingdom and adjoined it with Lakhimpur together with Sadiya (Baruah, 1990:545-546) ruled by the Singphos and Khamptis.

The annexation of the lands (or forests) of the later two tribes, however could not be completed without direct violence. Since after the discovery of indigenous Tea in Sadiya and its surroundings inhabited by these two tribes, the British were aggressively grabbing more and more lands destroying the forests thereupon. In a letter to the British officials, Beesa Gaum lamented in this way,

“ Now it is said that where Tea grows, that is yours, but we make sacrifices, we require Tea for our funerals; we therefore perceive that you have taken all the country, and we, the old and respectable, can not get Tea to drink.”(Foreign Political Consultations, 1843)

When the Gaum, claimed his right over his ancestral lands that had been his for thousands of years, the British officialdom asked him for documentary evidences in support of his claim. But across the world it is observed that tribal people do not rely on documents for land rights.

“ Now whenever you find land you make Tea gardens; if it be so there will be no room for seventeen Gaums to remain.”(ibid)

It reveals the intensity of land and consequent forest alienation right from the *first generation of Tea gardens in Assam*.

Hence scholars like Jayeeta Sharma, Arnab Dey, Sanjib Baruah assert that 1843 Singpho uprising was in fact the result of the British expansionist policy for Tea. The company had to sent several *Pacifying Missions* to tranquilize this wild tribes. Regarding the Naga tribes of Lotha, Aou, Angami etc. Who lived on the border areas of Lakhimpur and Sibsagar district, the same can be said. During the Ahom reign, these tribes constantly used to raid the plain areas of the two above quoted districts since the forests were full of resources which easily supplied them with all their needs. Understanding the fact, the Ahom *Swargadeos* also used to install *Chowki* or legal trade routes for them, through which they could enter and exist by offering a little of their earnings from the jungles to the *Swargadeos*.(Baruah, 1990). But as the British started establishing Tea gardens, this conciliatory system was removed and the forests used for hunting and gathering were vanished forever. Thus, the Nagas resorted to a series of rebellion compelling the British to sent military missions for ten times between 1835-1851.(Baruah, 2005; Tenzelo, 2010) Frequent raids into the tea gardens by the Nagas became an usual phenomenon. This was the reason why the British innovated the plan of drawing *Inner Line* in 1875 pushing the tribes further back into the hills and restricting them from entering the plains. Although it was a strategy to protect the British Tea venture; officially and popularly it was recognized as a way to secure the British *subjects* from the *predatory* hill tribes. Southern part of Joypur, of Lakhimpur came under this line because Nagas used these areas for hunting-gathering, but many tea gardens were established there threatening their livelihood. For *Turack Tea Garden*; *Mithonia* Nagas were compensated, for *Hukanjuri* and *Namsang* gardens; *Namsangia* and *Borduwaria* Nagas were compensated(Mackenzie, 1979:89). After the independence of India, the clash which once used to occur between the Nagas and the British; became a clash between the Nagas and Assam. Not only that, Assam-Mizoram, Assam-Manipur border clashes of present day, are the result of indiscriminate establishment of Tea gardens for some 100 years back, on the *borders* of these regions to the disadvantages of these tribes.

All these areas of the Upper Assam were intensely covered by tropical jungles. So intense and impenetrable these jungles were that even in and around 1876; most of the forests of Lakhimpur were not under the regular supervision of the Forest department that is after 37 years of establishing the Tea industry and 12 years after

the *forestry* began in Assam, due to its inaccessible nature. (Handique,2004; Saikia, 2010). Total 7/8th of the land of Assam was covered by forests. (*ibid*) This was the reason why even after destroying the major portion of the rainforest, and then enclosing it in the name of *Reservation*, its people were still able to fulfil the needs from forests and hence unlike other parts of India; this region did not resort to any major revolt against the exploitative land and forest policies of the British.

There are many instances to show that almost each garden in Upper Assam was set up at the expense Tropical rainforests. For example, B.C. Allen(1905:76) wrote,

“ *Land, which is in its natural state, covered by tree forests; is usually considered the most suitable for Tea.*”

In a standard instruction, William Roberts of *Jorehaut Tea Company* also suggested,

“ *Forests lands are to be preferred to the grasslands in consequence of fine rich deposits of decayed vegetable matters which are found on the surface, and which stimulates the rich growth of the young Tea plants, better than any other description of manure.*”

For the same reason, the Assamese peasants preferred the Shifting cultivation instead of cultivating permanently on the same field. Since land was abundant in Assam, population was small and more importantly, cultivation was done for subsistence; so there were no clashes between forests and people. The peasants cultivated on one plot of land for at best three years continuously by clearing forests and then moved to an another plot by abandoning the earlier for 15-20 years to be again filled by forests. But the British uprooted this mode of cultivation as the most destructive use of nature and severely restricted the peasants' access to unlimited land so that the same can be granted to the Planters who would make best use of it by applying *modern science and mode of cultivation*.

Samuel Baidon(1877:13) too; in his pamphlet of instructions to the planters reiterates that the most satisfactory land for Tea planting is undulating flat forest lands. He provides detailed analysis of how the *unnecessary* jungles should be uprooted to make room for Tea plants. His advice to clear the *undergrowth*, but to retain some of the trees of the *Canopy layer* to shade the plants; proves that these were tropical rainforest with four distinct layers in the jungles. Hence the *clearing operations* were very tough, painstaking and costly task in these remote areas of Assam. (Handique,2004)

Looking at the both positive and negative effects of forest lands, the *1838 wasteland grants rules* allowed the ¼th of the total granted lands to be perpetually revenue free and *no revenue had to be paid on the remaining land for 20 years if it was under forests*. (Baruah, 2005). Such provisions made the planters more inclined towards forests.

B.C. Allen (1905:183) says that all the forests of Lakhimpur (Purandar Singha's kingdom) are composed of evergreen trees, and the largest of them are situated near the Naga hills, along the Southern boundaries of the district. The Gazetteer itself shows that in Southern boundaries of Lakhimpur, Joypur was located bordering Naga hills where many gardens were established. Further he says,

“ *A quarter of a century ago, the hills near Margherita (adjacent to Sadiya), and a belt of the country at there feet from 15-20 miles in width, were clothed with dense tree forest, the home nothing more interesting and useful than wild beasts. Much of the forests still remains, and on the either side of the railway line between Makum(adjacent to the Joypur rainforest) and Puwai, there is hardly anything but dense tree jungles to be seen. But on the banks of Dihing;(the river that flows through the rainforest)an extraordinary change has taken place. The forest had been felled, the Makum Garden has been put out with nearly 2000 acres of finest Tea....*” (190-91)

“ *.....The (Dihing railway) station is shut in by a wall of noble trees...sides and summits of hills nearby alike crowned with dense tropical forests. The smoke and sounds, which are so irksome in a manufacturing town of England, here but serve to remind the conquest of natural obstacles, of kindly works of men in the midst of primeval jungles.*” (191)

“ *Digboi*, (adjacent to Margherita, now a part of Tinisukia and earlier that of the Muttock kingdom) was *nothing more than desolate and unhealthy forest. Apart from the wells and railways, there are no signs of human habitation or handiwork of men, and on every side stretched mile upon mile of path less jungle.*” (194-95)

The British officers hated these forests because for them it was an obstacle in agricultural expansion and hence in revenue generation, the Tea planters hated it because it caused a huge problem to clear them of *unnecessary* trees, the Missionaries disliked it for they thought it was preventing the natives from getting assimilated with other superior races of India and the forester distaste was for the fact that more than commercial trees; the jungles of Assam were filled with inferior trees. Hence the entire forest of Assam was labelled as **Wastelands**, that is lands without revenue. But for the Assamese peasants, forests were their source of livelihood, mode of survival.

“ *....they collected all sorts of materials for making their house, boats, implements, mats, baskets from these tracts. At selected spots on these tracts; several miles away from the villages, peasants would erect their temporary clusters of huts known as the Pam-Basti to carry out shifting cultivation of Mustard, pulses and Ahu rice.*” (Guha,1977)

So rampant these forests resources were in Assam that B.C. Allen(1905:216-18) commented that the *Assamese people had their source of livelihood at the very doorstep of their houses.*

But the British official needed revenue in a permanent and continuous way and for that settled cultivation was desired by paying land taxes regularly. It would also help to grant the remaining land to other industrious planters and cultivators. But the natives followed a plot of land for almost indefinite period of times since they had right to cultivate wherever they wished, without any payment of revenue during the pre-British era. (Baruah,2005). Hence through the **British Land Settlement Rules 1853**; this limitless access to land without revenue was severely restricted, and even the Paternal or hereditary lands were made available on the payment of tax through *Money*. (Mills, 1853)This was a major blow for a people who had traditionally been following *barter system*, with terribly insignificant *money economy*. Forceful imposition of revenue on each **Bigha** of land ; the rate of which was higher than what the European planters had to pay on per Bigha, and that too through money, made natives to abandon all their claims upon those lands. This led to a wholesale reduction of agriculture, for more agricultural lands meant more revenue, but the natives were not in habit of **Market economy** where commodities were bought and sold, through which they could have solved this problem.(Sharma,1990). The peasants were also the entrepreneurs of honey making, Silkworm raising, wood cutting and curving all the necessary furniture and articles, boat making, elephant catching, vegetables; herbs and medicinal plants picking etc. (Baruah,2005; Handique, 2004). All these were done in the jungles and hence the moment the access to land was restricted, the base of subsistence *embedded economy* collapsed. Soon the British brought with them the Marwaris(or Keyas) who within a very short span of time filled the entire market of Assam with imported commodities like Rice, Mustard, Sugar, Salt, Dal etc. Since the native's agricultural land had been squeezed through the revenue system; they could not in any way compete with the imported articles. In this way the entire economic set up went out of the control of the natives and after independence, this gave rise to a very serious rift between the natives and the outsider Indians.

4. The Planter's Raj and the Native's enslavement:

This Land Settlement of 1853 was outrightly introduced to snatch away land from natives and grant the same to the planters. There were already several wastelands grants rules like the **99 Years' Lease Rules of 1838, Fee Simple Rules of 1826, Revised Fee Simple Rules of 1874, New Lease Rules of 1876** etc. Interestingly, there were no inducements on the parts of planter applicants to reduce the amount of lands being applied; and the result of such favourable rules was that; immense forest lands were alienated for Tea plantation.(Brandis,1879:10-11). Frequent applications for 1000-1,500 acres or more than that were made by planters who neither had the means of bringing or intention, the whole area under plantation. Yet such excessive applications were made looking to the fact that the jungles carried thousands of valuable trees from which Charcoal; the chief source fuel for processing Tea could be extracted.(Barpujari, 1992:44). The wooden Tea boxes or chests were required for nicely exporting the Tea via water routes and the jungle trees

provided a good source of it. Excessive forests lands were also used to settle down the tea-garden workers so that the Planters could have continuous flow of workforce.

There were total 115 such grants made in 1861-62, in 1862-63; it rose to 182 and during 1867-68, it further rose to 418. (*ibid*). *The Annual Tea Report 1878* (Brandis,1879), shows that in Sibsagar district; total 1,47,071 acres of land granted to planters out of which only 34,194 acres were planted and the remaining 1,12,877 acres left unplanted. In Lakhimpur too, total 1,17,308 acres were granted out of which 23,781 acres were planted and 93,527 acres were not. In this way the Tea planters became the largest private forest and land proprietors in Upper Assam. (Guha, 1977). In order to compensate the revenue loss due to free grant of thousands of hectares of land to the planters, the British officials constantly kept raising the rate of land revenue payable on the part of the peasants. Not only to compensate but land revenue was also constantly been raising so that the natives became bound to work in the Tea gardens to pay revenue. The locals regarded it to be very disgraceful to work in Tea garden as wage labourers. This created acute labour shortages for the Europeans and land revenue increase was a strategy to compel them. (Guha, 1977:10). In 1864-65; the total land revenue demand jumped up from Rs.1061,773 to 2,165,157 in 1872-73. Before that in 1860, land revenue in dry crops land was increased from 15-30% . The people, both in order to escape and protest this increase; deserted as much land as was possible. However, it led to massive poverty, food shortages, and a spiral of debt trap. The natives had no option but to take loan at high interest from the Marwari Mahajans and most of time being failed to pay back, the natives had to offer themselves as bonded labours to the Mahajans. When A.J. Moffat Mills arrived Assam to examine the administration; two prominent Assamese nobles, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan and Maniram Dewan submitted applications to Mills to lower the rates of land revenue. They pointed out that the Assamese people were becoming compelled to sell their own children to pay back the Mahajans. Many fled to remote areas of jungles to escape the burden of revenue.

The Assamese people, as can easily be gauged; had no means of competing the Europeans or even trying to sustain their own in the Tea venture because acts were promulgated that only those applicants would be qualified for land who had the capacity to bring workers from other parts of India as labour scarcity was enormous in Assam. It was done to discourage the local entrepreneurs and it was indeed true that rarely the locals could meet this demand. (Sharma,2011)

After independence when the national government of India decided to nationalize the Tea industry, almost all the British owned gardens were purchased by the Marwaris who were from the very beginning a collaborating agency of the British in the Tea market. (MacFarlane,2005)

Thus, first at the hand of the British; the native lost their base of economy, land and forests and then at the hands of outsider Marwaris. Hence Sanjib Baruah(2005) remarked,

“ while Tea cultivation introduced by outside settlers may have brought ‘economic development’ to the land called Assam, whether it benefitted the people who had historically called Assam their home is more problematic.”

5. Conclusion:

“ In 1839, The British decided to rent the whole (colonial) Assam out to the highest bidder, and one came forward calling The Assam Company.” – (MacFarlane,2005)

As a result of this, Upper Assam became denuded of its evergreen rainforests compelling B.C. Allen(1905) to remark,

“Upper Assam was a wide plain on which there is hardly any jungle to be seen. On the lower level, the staple crop is transplanted rice, while the higher levels have been planted out with Tea.”

That is within 70 years; right after the discovery of Tea in Assam, the lush green kingdom was vanished to quench the thirst of the colonizers for Tea.

The crises created by this has become more clear at present than during the British rule because although the Assamese people, along with the entire Indian nation, fought a prolonged war for independence, but after its gain; the native again fell into an unending circle of resource conflict against the Marwaris and Post Colonial Indian state. On the one hand, Tea was made the identity of Assam by the ruling and business elite of the country; on the other hand, one of the major militant outfit of Assam has signified it as the symbol of resource plundering by the central government. (Dey, 2018)

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