

Social Life and Festivals of Tea Plantation Workers of Colonial Cachar

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence and expansion of the tea plantation industry in Cachar during the colonial period, with particular emphasis on the social life and cultural practices of plantation labourers. Following the British annexation of Cachar in 1832, liberal land policies and favourable waste-land grants facilitated rapid growth of tea cultivation from the mid-nineteenth century. The industry's expansion depended heavily on migrant labour recruited from famine- and poverty-stricken regions of India through organized recruitment systems. While existing historiography on Assam's tea plantations has largely focused on labour exploitation, migration, and political economy, Cachar has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. By foregrounding the everyday experiences of tea workers, this study highlights their marginal social position, poor living and health conditions, restricted mobility, and limited access to education. At the same time, it demonstrates how labourers sustained vibrant cultural traditions and festivals, leading to the formation of a distinctive tea workers' culture. The paper thus offers a more nuanced understanding of plantation society by integrating economic history with social and cultural perspectives.

Keywords: Cachar, Tea plantations, colonial labour, social life.

INTRODUCTION

Cachar (covering present Cachar and Hailakandi district), is situated in the southern part of the Assam state surrounded by Khasi, Jaintia and North Cachar Hills in the north, the Lushai Hills and the Hills of Tripura in the south, Manipur Hills and the Barak river in the east and Bangladesh on the west.¹ Cachar is encircled by Hills from three sides - Borail Range in the north, Manipur Range in the east, Lushai Range in the south and only the western part facing Bangladesh is the plain area.² Before the annexation of Cachar by the British in 1832, the plains of Cachar (present district of Cachar and Hailakandi), the North Cachar Hill District, Hojai-Dabaka area formed parts of Cachar, an independent state then known as Heremba Kingdom.³

Cachar was annexed by the British in 1832. After about two decades of annexation, tea cultivation began to surface in this region. Although production of tea was an unknown art to both Europeans and Indians, around 1815 China Tea Trade was a major source of profit of the East India Company. But the removal of the Company's monopoly of the China trade in 1833, the first Indian tea was marketed in London and in 1839, a large Company, the Assam Company was formed for growing tea in India. A great extension of the tea planting followed mainly in Assam and Cachar.⁴

Tea production started in Cachar in 1856 and by 1869 the industry got firmly established in

Assam and Cachar had become the centre of production bulk percentage of Tea in India. Like Assam, land in Cachar was plenty. After the occupation the British by and large followed the land policy then prevalent in Cachar but when Tea plant was discovered and the need for augmenting revenue arose for the purpose of land administration, the British Government had prepared certain waste-land grant rules for special cultivation and settlement rules for ordinary cultivation. With a view to encouraging the growth and expansion of Tea Industry in Assam, it offered land for special cultivation of tea on specially favourable terms and conditions under various set of rules from time to time.⁵ During the middle of the 19th century when tea was discovered in Cachar, vast areas of land was available. It was also a sparsely populated area. This fact is corroborated by historical records available from Capt. Fisher's writing. Capt. Fisher, the first Deputy Commissioner of Cachar issued circular to Collectors of Bengal whereby he prevailed upon them to encourage peasant of their district to come over to Cachar and take up land.⁶

In response to the publicity made by the Government, a good number of Planters and entrepreneurs came forward to Cachar and started tea plantation. According to the report of the 'Annual Administration of the district of Cachar 1871-1872', there were total 278 applications registered.⁷ Out of these 181 grants were finally made, amounting on rough survey to 484,760 acres. On the basis of availability of sources, the following entrepreneurs communicated with the Government in an earlier date from 1855 to have facilities for the establishment of tea plantation as per Government rule.⁸ Beside the above applicants, it also appears that there were more 16 applicants who applied for the wasteland for starting tea plantation in Cachar.⁹

The tea plantation, thus, gradually developed all throughout Cachar and in course of time, with the liberal grants of land on easy terms, the expansion of tea plantation occurred throughout the province. By the end of the

19th century, as many as two hundred tea gardens were opened in Cachar. According to the sources recorded in the Director of Agriculture, Assam and Indian Tea Statistics, Government of India, up to the year 1947, the total number of tea estates in colonial Cachar was 231 with a total land area of 75,000 acres and labourers of 75,992.¹⁰

Though the tea plantation of Cachar had gradually developed, it cannot be denied that, the Planters and entrepreneurs were not free from the upcoming problems. Among the various major problems, the foremost was the scarcity of skilled labourers. With the gradual expansion of the tea plantation, the requirement of skilled labour increased. In the beginning, Chinese skilled labourers were brought in order to solve the problem of scarcity of labour. But, due to high rate of wages and difficulties in managing them, the planters were compelled to look elsewhere for labour. They, now turned their mind to engage the local people. But, here also, the planters were not able to come out successful because of various reasons. Having failed from all attempts to obtain labourers from the local population and the neighbourhood, the planters started pursuing the policies of labour immigration. Accordingly, the labourers from famine and poverty-stricken areas of Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhr Pradesh and Bengal were recruited through the *Arkatti* and *Sardari* method of recruitment.¹¹

Having failed in all attempts to obtain labourers from the local population and the neighbour areas, the Planters decided to bring the labourers from outside Assam. these labourers were brought to Cachar by the Planters through steamer and country boats in the early part of the 19th century to work in the newly established tea gardens of the province. The workers had shown great enthusiasm as well as eagerness to come to Cachar to make good money and to pass happy life as the *Arkattis* or *Sardars* told them. This was revealed from their folk songs, sung by early workers while recruits to Assam tea plantations. The folk song goes like thus:

“Chol Mini Assam Jaibo
Deshe Baro Dukhre
Assam Deshere Mini
Cha Bagan Hariyal!”¹²

(English Version: Come let's go to Assam my girl, as there is great misery in our country, let's go to Assam the land of lush green tea plantations)

But when the immigrant labourers put their feet on the soil of Cachar in a particular area of the tea plantation, they received great shock to see the pathetic situation of the garden life, and with utmost regret they cried out ‘*Hai re nirmohi shyam faki diya anlo Assam*’ (English version: O! cruel God, Agents brought us here by giving bluff).¹³ They now, became sure that the *Arkattis* gave them false promises. Tears tickled down from their eyes but there was none even God to help them. They blamed themselves on their own fate.¹⁴ However, with the passage of time, they gradually adjusted themselves with the situation and settled down in different tea estates of Cachar. Thus, they became part and parcel of the tea plantation of Cachar, which they never thought of and this made them cut off from their ancestral places.

Numerous scholarly studies have been conducted on tea plantations in Assam, notably the works of historians such as Amalendu Guha, Jayeeta Sharma, and Nitin Varma.¹⁵ These studies examine a wide range of themes, including the exploitation of plantation labour, patterns of labour migration, the socio-economic conditions of workers, labour politics, and the formation of tea tribe identity. However, comparatively little research has focused specifically on the tea plantations of Cachar as a distinct regional field of inquiry. Even within the limited studies that do exist, insufficient attention has been paid to the social life and cultural practices of tea plantation workers in Cachar, particularly their festivals and community traditions. An examination of these aspects is essential for understanding the everyday experiences and lifestyle of plantation labourers during the colonial period and the manner in which plantation

structures shaped their lives within the tea gardens of Cachar. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring these relatively neglected dimensions of plantation society.

SOCIAL LIFE OF TEA PLANTATION WORKERS

Socially, the tea garden labourers were looked down upon and in the society their social position was nil. Since they came from different background, it was difficult for them to adjust themselves with the local people and the latter too took little interest in mixing with them. In fact, it was rare that the tea communities were invited by the local population for any social function and always they used to be called ‘coolies’ by the people. The labourers had no freedom at all in their respective gardens as they used to remain confined in their own gardens only. They could not move or meet their neighbouring tea garden labourers, even with their relatives, separated earlier at the time of their recruitment without proper permission from tea Planters.¹⁶ Even, if a worker's daughter was to be married to a resident of another tea garden, the Manager's permission was necessary.¹⁷ The workers were like the prisoners within the four walls of the tea garden under the protection of Chowkidar in every day and night. It is assumed that such restrictions were made mainly to suppress the unity of labourers of various gardens so that they could not raise their voice unitedly against the authority or Planters.

The general living condition of the Cachar tea labourers was very pathetic during the beginning of the tea plantation. The entire family with average 5-8 members was housed in a small one or two roomed houses, furnitures were scanty, the clothes were minimum and it becomes more pathetic during winter.¹⁸ Articles of modern amenities like - radio, TV, electricity etc. we're not known to workers during that period.¹⁹

The living standard of the tea labourers were very low and they were very careless regarding maintenance of their families. As soon as they got their wages, they used to

spend the same quite generously without thinking for the future. To be specific, they used to spend their earnings in gambling, drinking alcohol and purchasing unnecessary articles without keeping any provision for the essential commodities, like – food stuff, clothing etc.²⁰ It is the habit of drinking alcohol that corrupted their social life. They did not even pay little amount of money from their wages to their family members for their maintenance and it was necessary for them to have savings after meeting the necessary expenditures, which they did not do. One of the worst features of the labourers in the plantation area was the addiction of liquors and narcotics. The habit of consuming the country made liquor, opium and ganja (an intoxicating preparation of Indian hemp) prevailed so extensively among the labourers that ultimately ruined the life of the labourers.²¹

After engagement of labourers in the tea gardens, it is found that proper medical facilities were not provided to them by the management in the early period, it was totally inadequate in the tea estate.²² They lived in most unhygienic condition, suffered from various diseases and were ill nourished, and there was no provision for drinking water, latrine and urinal. Because of this, including their poor diet, they easily become the victim of various diseases like – malaria, kalazar, cholera, dysenteries, leprosy and many other diseases. Though in the later years, some development had taken place with regard to the field of medical by establishing garden hospital in every tea estate. But, still, condition of all these were most deplorable.²³ These were running without properly trained doctors, without medicine and without nursing assistants. F G Foley, in his 'Reminiscences of a Pioneer Tea Planters (1867)' gave his own firsthand experience, stating, "As for the tea gardens, the Manager did the doctoring with an intelligent high caste coolie as dresser to dose the patients. There were no hospitals and if fracture accorded, the only thing to do is to send the patient to the government hospital. When epidemics arose, the most that could be done

was to segregate the patient. When I was assistant, my duty was to administer the medicine to all sick who were brought up to me by the line chowkidars, With the aid of doctors Geodesic's book I did my best. The specifics were quinine, chloridine and castor oil, with a simple ointment or two for dressing sores, etc. Naturally, the mortality on the gardens was of high percentage, even today, the same condition prevails in garden." Thus, the tea labourers of Cachar in the early period had suffered a lot for absence of proper medical treatment, therefore, they without getting any alternative may depended on 'Kaviraj' or natural treatment.²⁴

In the beginning of the tea plantation, there was scarcely any provision for education within the tea garden of Cachar. Neither the tea planters were interested to promote education in the tea estates, nor workers had any interest in education.²⁵ Planters held the view that, the introduction of education would make the children unfit for work, while the labourers themselves regarded, the earnings of their children as a greater value than the time spent in primary education.²⁶ However, with the passage of time, situation went on changing. The local garden priests and some educated persons kept the workers aware through religious books (like – Ram Charita Manas, Mahabharata and Hanuman Chalisa) and created interest among them to read and write in their own mother tongue (particularly Hindi).²⁷ In the subsequent year, the Government of India in Home Deptt. in its letter no. 412(Education) dated the 14th June 1906 deputed W M Kennedy, Deputy Commissioner on special duty for the purpose of enquiring into the existing condition of education upon the tea estates of this province. Accordingly, he submitted in consultation with the planters, proposals for providing increased facilities for the education of the children of tea garden coolies in the tea estates of the Cachar province.²⁸

In the beginning, recreational facilities for the labourers were very limited, because of their long-time engagement in the garden.

The strategy of the labourers in the tea plantation was maintained by the Planters in such a way that they never thought anything beyond the necessity of life. Their nature of work totally kept them isolated from outside influence and the modern facilities. Whether it may food, housing and recreation they were isolated in every respect. However, in the subsequent period, the management organized different sports and games and filmshows for the labourers. It was in the open field of the garden that the mobile cinemas took place and the labourers with great enthusiasm enjoyed the programme.²⁹

FESTIVALS OF TEA PLANTATION WORKERS

The large-scale recruitment and transportation of labourers from different regions of India, such as West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, during the establishment of the tea industry in Cachar resulted in the transplantation of diverse cultural traditions into the region. Over time, these traditions underwent processes of interaction and adaptation, leading to the emergence of a relatively homogeneous cultural form that may be described as *Tea Workers' Culture*. Festivities constituted an integral aspect of life in the tea gardens, with scarcely a month passing without the observance of one or more festivals; among Hindu labourers alone, there were thirteen festive occasions within a twelve-month cycle. Consequently, changes in seasons were closely accompanied by corresponding variations in festivals, songs, and dance forms. Fieldwork indicates that while some of these festivals retained their original and indigenous character, others were significantly shaped by local cultural influences. Despite enduring severe exploitation and hardships under the plantation system, the labourers continued to observe these festivals with remarkable enthusiasm. The tea workers of Cachar celebrated a wide range of festivals, many of which were associated with specific myths and legends, including *Ghar Puja* (house worship), *Gram or Goan Puja* (village

worship), *Karam Puja*, *Kathi Nach*, *Saharai or Saria Parab*, *Tushu Puja*, *Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, and *Ganesh Puja*. Some of the commonly observed festivals in the Cachar tea gardens are discussed below:

Ghar Puja (House Worship)- *Ghar Puja* is performed annually with the assistance of a *Bhagat* (priest) to ensure the well-being and prosperity of the household and its members. As part of the ritual, the house is ritually purified through thorough cleaning and washing, often using a mixture of mud and cow-dung paste. Traditionally, a hen is offered as a sacrificial offering during the ceremony, which is subsequently cooked and consumed by the family members.³⁰

Gram Puja or Goan Puja (Village Worship)- *Gram Puja* is observed annually during the months of June–July (*Asharh*) at a designated sacred site known as the *Devi Sthan* within the labour lines. The ritual is performed for the collective welfare of the village, with the belief that ancestral spirits reside in the village or household and protect the community. On this occasion, villagers contribute money and essential ritual materials and invite village priests to conduct the ceremony. The observance concludes with communal feasting, singing, and dancing. It is traditionally believed that black pigeons were sacrificed and consumed during this ritual.³¹

Karam Puja- *Karam Puja* is a harvest festival celebrated during December–January, coinciding with the arrival of new crops. It is regarded as one of the most significant festivals among tea workers and is performed to ensure agricultural prosperity and improved material conditions. The associated legend narrates the story of two brothers, Karma and Dharma. Karma, the elder brother, dishonoured the *Karam* tree worshipped by Dharma, resulting in misfortune, crop failure, and economic decline. Redemption came only after Karma worshipped the *Karam* tree, following which *Karam Raja* appeared and instructed him to observe *Karam Puja*.³²

The ritual centres on the cutting of three branches of the *Karam* tree, which are

installed at the centre of the dancing ground, known as the *Akhara*, and symbolically designated as *Karam Raja*. The *Pahan* (village priest) anoints the *Karam Raja* with *sindur*, ties it with unbleached thread, and offers milk. Young women then place *karam daura*, baskets containing *aura* rice, flattened rice, cucumber wrapped in coloured cloth, earthen lamps, flowers, and young crop shoots, before the *Karam Raja*. The girls sit around the sacred branches while an elder narrates the *Karam* legend.

The following morning, the maidens distribute *jawa* (maize saplings) among their brothers and relatives. In the afternoon, the *Karam Raja* is carried through the village amidst singing and dancing, and by evening, the branches are immersed in a nearby river. The songs performed during *Karam Puja*, known as *Jhumur Geet*, vividly depict floral imagery, natural beauty, expressions of joy and sorrow, and themes drawn from the Radha–Krishna tradition.

Kathi Nach- Kathi Nach was a widely observed social, rather than religious, festival among the tea communities. It coincided with the festival of *Holi* and symbolised renewal and the regeneration of nature. During this occasion, young men and women participated enthusiastically in circular dances, accompanied by rhythmic beats produced by striking wooden sticks. The songs performed were predominantly lyrical compositions centred on themes of love.³³

Saharai or *Garia Parab- Saharai* or *Garia Parab* was observed by the tea workers of Cachar on the new moon day of *Kartik* in honour of cattle, which constitute an integral component of agricultural life. On this occasion, cattle received special care and reverence: their hooves were washed with rice beer, their horns were oiled and anointed, and their heads were decorated. They were fed soaked pulses mixed with salt and paddy grains. Earthen lamps were lit in the cowsheds, fodder was freshly cut, and songs praising cattle were sung. These songs, transmitted orally across generations, are known as *Johali Geet*.³⁴

Tushu Puja- Tushu Puja is among the most popular festivals in the tea gardens of Cachar. Throughout the Bengali month of *Poush* (December-January), *Tushu* songs resonate across the gardens. *Tushu Devi* is believed to have been a historical figure who immolated herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and was subsequently sanctified and worshipped as a goddess.³⁵

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to situate the development of tea plantations in Cachar within the broader framework of colonial expansion while foregrounding the lived experiences of plantation labourers. It demonstrates that the growth of the tea industry, facilitated by liberal land policies and labour immigration, came at a heavy social cost for workers who endured isolation, restricted mobility, poor living conditions, inadequate healthcare, and limited educational opportunities. Yet, despite these structural constraints and persistent exploitation, tea labourers in Cachar sustained rich social and cultural lives. Their festivals, rituals, songs, and dances not only preserved memories of their places of origin but also contributed to the formation of a distinct and shared tea workers' culture in the region. By focusing on social life and festivals, this paper highlights dimensions of plantation society that have remained relatively neglected in existing historiography. Such an approach allows for a more holistic understanding of colonial plantation life in Cachar, revealing labourers not merely as victims of exploitation but as active agents who negotiated hardship through community, culture, and tradition.

Declaration by Authors

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