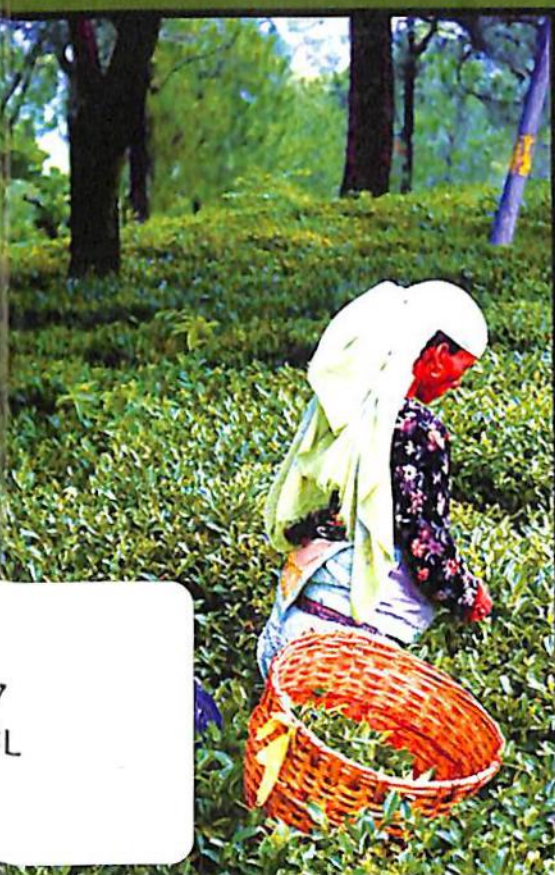


# The Tea Labourers of North East India



Sarthak Sengupta

A Mittal Publication

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## THE EDITOR

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# THE TEA LABOURERS OF NORTH EAST INDIA

—An Anthro-historical Perspective

SARTHAK SENGUPTA



**MITTAL PUBLICATIONS**

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## PREFACE

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In the world tea market, the place of India is still now unquestionably very high. The leading States in respect of tea industry in India are Assam and West Bengal. The State of Assam alone produces around 55 per cent of country's total production of tea. Unfortunately detailed literature discussing the origin and stages of development of tea plantations in Assam is conspicuous by its absence. In Assam the use of tea as medicine in cold and fever was in practice since a long time, because tea plants grew wildly in the hills and forests of Assam since time immemorial. People belonging to Singpho tribe had been making use of tea (*falap / fanpe*) since long. As early as 1815 A.D., Colonel Latter, a British Army Officer reported that 'the Singpho hill tribes of Assam gathered a species of wild tea, ate with oil and garlic, after the Burmese manner, and also made a drink from it'. But, taking advantage of the absence of any recorded history of tea in Assam, the East India Company claimed all the credit of discovering tea in Assam. It was Colonel Sergeant C.A. Bruce, who after getting information from Dewan Maniram Dutta Bhandar Barua, struck up friendship with Beesa Gam, a Singpho Chief, who gave him some indigenous tea plants and seeds in 1823 A.D. This incident is thought as the discovery of tea in India, for which Bruce was awarded medal of the English Society of Arts for his effort in the discovery of tea in Assam.

The recorded history of tea industry in North East India is nearly 170 years old and can be traced as back as to 1837 A.D, when the first experimental tea estate was established in Chabua (*Cha* – tea, *bu* – to grow) in Dibrugarh district of Assam in 1837. In 1839, the first tea company, namely the Assam Tea Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam followed by Jorhat Tea Company in 1858. Tea cultivation in Barak Valley (Cachar district), Assam was started in 1855-1856.

Initially, attempts were made to recruit labour from within Assam that would have entailed much lower costs of recruitment of labour. The Singpho Chief along with Matak Chief, Matibar Bar Senapati, volunteered to supply man power for tea cultivation. But it did not



succeed since the local people were by and large reluctant to take employment as they enjoyed an almost self-sufficient economy. Their socio-cultural background also impeded them to work as tea labourers. Thus, the authorities of tea plantations were compelled to employ intermediaries (*arkathi*) to procure labourers from other provinces of India. The then British tea planters also preferred the uprooted migrant labourers than the locals, because the locals frequently suffered from malaria, which had been endemic to this area and adversely affected their capacity to work. Moreover, the migrant labourers were obviously far easier to control and exploit. The recruitment of labour for the tea gardens in Assam was a profitable trade. It was a type of allured migration. They were either brought on false promises like less work and high wages or have voluntarily migrated to Assam during 1840 to 1961 from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages and from many provinces of India, mainly from West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. The places from where the recruits were mainly drawn were noted for famines and acute food scarcity. Further, the planters, as a matter of policy, were on the lookout for the most ignorant, backward and hard working people. The first attempt to import labour from Chotanagpur was made by the 'Assam Tea Company' (founded in 1839) in 1841. After 1836, when the system of recruitment was properly organized, Assam received a steady flow of labour from these provinces and it continued uninterruptedly till the mid-twentieth century.

The tea labourers of North East India are overwhelmingly composed of various tribes and few caste populations. Tribal communities like the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Gond, Khond, Kisan, Nagesia, Savara, Godava, Mura, Koya, Kherwar, Tasha, Manki, Mal-Paharia, Bhumij and the Pankha were mainly recruited. Some Hindu caste groups were also recruited and they belong mostly to the groups like the Kurmi, Tanti, Pan-Tanti, Kamar, Kalindi, Kumhar, Ghatowar, Ghasi, Turi, Biori, Charnar, Dom, Teli, Dushad, Mali, Mudi, Rajak, Rabidas, Gowala etc. Besides these, there are also a good number of other ethnic groups that have contributed to the formation of the total tea labour population in North East India. There are no reliable statistics about the tea garden labour population, however. Estimates vary considerably. The most numerous groups are the Oraon, Santhal, Munda, Kharia, Savara, and the Ho etc. It has been reported that three different distinct linguistic elements are present in these people, namely; (1) the Kolarian speaking (Ho, Munda,

Santal, Kharia etc.), (2) Dravidian speaking (Oraon, Khond, Gond, Malpaharia etc.) and (3) group speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi etc. A large number of labourers, after expiry of contract, now settled in the land which was abundant near the tea gardens, or settled as tenants, forming a group called ex tea garden labourers. At present the tea garden labourer population is about 20 per cent of the total population in the State of Assam. They are recognized as 'Other Backward Communities' in Assam, though their ethnic kin in their places of origin enjoy the status of either the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe.

As it stands now, one cannot speak of tea plantation labour population except in general terms, though the internal diversification in the group is of a remarkable degree. The tea plantation in Assam compelled these varied groups of people to come together and share the common working and living condition. The labourers were accommodated within the plantation boundary and are housed in rows of huts which are called labour *lines*. Due to migration to a new habitat, they had to give up many of their traditional beliefs and customs. Their original cultural identity rarely remained intact in the new geo-demographic environment and socio-economic setting – far remote from their original home. A new society emerged after complex interactions that underwent among the different sections of tea garden labour population belonging to various tribes and castes. A new language (*Sadani*) has come up as the *lingua franca* among these groups which is composed of Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Bihari, and Oriya. However, notwithstanding the fact of having socio-cultural affinity, their bent of mind is generally towards establishing nuptial relationship primarily within their own ethnic groups.

( The tea plantation is a labour intensive industry and tea industry has prospered on semi-slave labour. These plantation labourers are now completely cut off from their homes in distant places.) Their traditions, customs, rites and religious practices have undergone many changes. The interaction between these ethnic groups with diverse social backgrounds and their relationship with the social milieu into which they have been transplanted are of immense anthropological, sociological and political interest.

Plantation labourers as well as ex-tea garden labour population are now an integral part of economy and society of North East India in general and Assam in particular. Their contribution in the literature, economic front and political arena are well acknowledged, but recent emerging issues on their ethnic identity is believed to have far reaching



consequences. They have become an important factor in new political alliances and in elections in the pluralistic society of North East India. But it is very much unfortunate that even today in many tea gardens of North East India often they have not been able to go beyond subsistence level. Socio-economic problems of these plantation labourers continued to be deplorable. Even today, about 60 per cent of girls and 35 per cent of boys in the age group of 6 – 14 years are out of school. Tea plantations are still the major sources of their employment. Due to dearth of trained medical staff and infrastructure, death toll due to epidemics which resulted mainly from the unhealthy conditions is also reported to be abnormally high in many plantations. The fruit of the participatory democracy is still beyond their reach. The tale of these people is a tale of torture, exploitation and deprivation.

In the last few decades, though the autochthones of Assam are extensively studied by the social scientists, but only a few serious studies have been made on the plantation labourers in the tea gardens of North East India. A review of literature reveals only few studies that have been conducted among these varied ethnic groups.

The impressive collection of twenty-two research articles accommodated in this volume offer discrete descriptions on the history and migration of the workers in tea plantations in North East India and their settlement there. The articles included in this volume are the results of serious research and study by social scientists. The anthropo-historical accounts of the tea labour population groups discussed in details by R.K. Kar, M.M. Sharmah. Role of American Baptist Missionaries amidst the tea garden workers in the Brahmaputra valley is meticulously described by S. Bora. Status of women tea plantation workers has dealt with by Sr. M. Joseph. The article contributed by R.P. Athparia in essence is a truthful reporting of the settlement pattern and socio-economic life of the labourers in the tea plantations of Barak Valley, Assam. Few contributions in this volume dealt with their political problems (P. Kumar, B.P. Sahu, L. Dounge, B. Kashyap, T. Bhengra); trade union movement (T. Bhengra, L. Dounge) for collective bargaining. The dynamics of ethnicity and identity orientation among the population groups in the Brahmaputra valley, State of Assam is examined by R. Thapa, S.C. Sharma. The morpho-genetic features of the people (C. Piplai, S. Sengupta, A. Phukan Gogoi), demographic characteristics (M. Goswami, R. Das); their food habits and nutritional status (T. Barua); health and hygiene and morbidity scenario (R.S. Balgir, P. Barua); etc. have been studied



and scientific analyses made. Obviously, the present treatise does not claim to cover the entire anthro-po-historical perspectives of the Tea Labourers of North East India within its limited space. It touches upon only some important segments of the vast and varied area of the canvass. The volume will be of great use for wide ranging specialists - administrators, policy makers, planners and decision making bodies at different levels, development agencies, researchers in the field of social sciences and others concerned with migrant population groups.

**SARTHAK SENGUPTA**

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The articles included in this volume were presented at the seminar. I personally owe a debt of profound gratitude to all those scholarly contributors for kindly responding to our request and readily contributed to this volume through their articles.

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**SARTHAK SENGUPTA**

## PROLOGUE

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We are all aware that tea is one of the most precious legacies of the British Rule in Assam. Tea was a very popular beverage in Britain right from the 17th Century. In Assam, people took to the habit of drinking tea as a matter of daily routine only in the mid nineteenth century. Over the years, tea has become a component of Assamese culture. Discovery of tea, petroleum and oil by the British in Assam valley can be considered as a major breakthrough in the advancement of trade, commerce and industry in this region of the country. Discovery of these natural resources had direct impact on the growth of the Assamese middle class society in the second half of the 19th century. During this period, a number of tea companies came up. These companies obtained land as grants from the Government and started tea plantations. It is pertinent to mention that the tea companies employed a large number of local people in the beginning. The growing number of tea gardens compelled the planters to look for some stable source of labour supply. According to an account, in 1859 there were hardly 10 to 15 tea gardens in Assam. In 1869, 24 plantations sprang up in Kamrup district, 110 in Sibsagar in 1870, 46 in Darrang in 1871, in Lakhimpur the number was 112 in 1874 and 27 tea gardens came up in Nagaon in the year 1872.

With such a backdrop, in the mid nineteenth century, during the formative stage of Assam plantation with the growing number of gardens, the tea management of Assam was compelled to import labourers from other parts of India, since the required labour force could not be obtained from the local people within the province. This tea labour force comprised of various tribes and castes. They were either brought or had migrated enbloc to different parts of Assam between the period 1840 – 1880 and so from various cultural, linguistic, ethnic heritages and from many provinces of India primarily from West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, erstwhile Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and the then Madras province. The first ever Tea Company established in Assam was “Assam Company” in the year 1839 with it's headquartering at Nazira. This company made the first attempt to import labour from Chotanagpur area in the year 1841. Gradually,



when the system of recruitment was fully geared up, Assam received a steady flow of labour force from the above mentioned provinces and it continued till the later part of twentieth century. Tea labourers in Assam today are broadly known as Tea and Ex Tea Tribe communities of the State.

Today, the Tea and Ex Tea Tribe community in Assam, which is a conglomeration of more than 75 tribes and castes, are still lagging far behind development. The population of these tribes in Assam is approximately 60 lakh, which is almost one fourth of the total population of the State. They are mostly engaged in tea plantation and agricultural activities immensely contributing towards the enrichment of the socio-economic and cultural life of the State. The plantation in Assam compelled these varied groups of people to come together and share the common working and living condition. During British regime, the labourers were accommodated within the plantation boundary and they were almost kept isolated from the other native population. The overall conditions of those engaged in tea plantation were also not satisfactory. Though the Plantation Labour Act 1951 is in existence, it has not been implemented by the planter up to the desired level.

Over the years, due to migration to a new habitat, they had to give up many of their old and traditional habits, beliefs and customs. The huge chunks of population are extremely backward in all respect i.e. educationally, economically, socially and politically as well. Though the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe population living in Assam basically belong to Scheduled Tribes, in our State they have been deprived of enjoying the benefits and privileges as they are not recognized by the Government of India as Scheduled Tribes. However, their counterparts in the States of Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh etc and even in our neighbouring State Tripura are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. The rate of literacy of these people is hardly 12 per cent, which is far below the average rate of literacy in the State. To improve the situation, it has become necessary to give special attention to these groups of people. It is also unequivocally agreed by most of the political parties and social organizations in Assam that these groups of tribal people of the State are the most backward community as compared to other castes and tribes.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that, Parliamentary committees like "A.K. Chanda Commission", "Lokur Commission", "Dhebar Commission", "Pataskar Commission" etc. constituted from

time to time have recommended for inclusion of the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe communities of Assam for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes. In 1995, the Director, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, after conducting a detailed field study on the status of these communities had recommended to the State Government for inclusion of these tribes in the list of Scheduled Tribe (Plains). Accordingly, the State Government, headed by the then Chief Minister of Assam, Late Hiteswar Saikia had also recommended to the Government of India for granting the Scheduled Tribe status to these groups of people. Moreover, the report submitted by Joint Select Committee of Parliament headed by Shri Amar Rai Pradhani, M.P., Lok Sabha had also recommended to the Government of India for inclusion of these people of Assam in the list of Scheduled Tribe. The matter has been pending with the Central Government. It would also be worthwhile to mention that, Shri Tarun Gogoi, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam had also brought this long standing demand of a few communities of Assam including the Tea and Ex-tea Tribe communities for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribe of the State to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India. Pursuing a unanimous resolution adopted in the floor of the Assam Assembly, the Speaker had also led an all party delegation of Assam Legislative Assembly 2004 to New Delhi and submitted memorandums to the central leaders to this effect.

The new society emerged after complex interactions that underwent among different sections; groups with diverse social backgrounds and their relationship with the social milieu into which they have been transplanted are of immense anthropological, sociological and political interest.

The Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe of Assam and North East India as a whole are considered as an integral part of greater Assamese society. Their contribution to literature, economic front and political arena are well recognised. Though the Tea and Ex-Tea Tribe communities of the North East India have been contributing towards enrichment of socio-economic scenario of the region, they have not been able to go beyond subsistence level. Therefore, time has come for in-depth study on various aspects of the plantation labourers of North East India in general and Assam in particular.



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# ANTHROPO-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE TEA LABOURERS

—With Special Reference to  
North East India

R.K. KAR

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## Introduction

India's place in the world tea market is still now unquestionably very high. She occupies the largest area under tea; and produces the largest amount in the world. The other principal tea producing countries in the world include Sri Lanka, China, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya and Uganda etc. India accounts for around 14 per cent of the world trade in tea. Indian tea is exported to over 80 countries in the world.

The leading States in respect of tea industry in India are Assam and West Bengal. Assam covers approximately 51 per cent of the total land devoted to tea plantation in India. The other States in North East India, producing tea in small quantities include Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim. And the rest of States having tea plantations include Kerala (10.40) Tamil Nadu (9.65), Himachal Pradesh (1.20); Uttar Pradesh (0.50); Karnatak (0.50) and Bihar (0.10) per cent.

Before we take a very quick glance at the history and anthropology of the tea plantation and its labourers with special reference to this region, it would probably be fair to have some relevant idea about the plantation as a system.

## Plantation as a System

Historically, plantations are a product of colonialism. The development

of plantations needs two basic requirements, namely; large areas of cultivable land and a large labour force. But the areas where plantations developed were by and large initially sparsely populated; and as such there was a problem of acute labour shortage. Thus, it is observed that the plantation came to be associated, not only with a resident labour force, but more often "with one of alien origin" (Greaves, 1957).

Coercion, low wages and immigrant labour were initially the three important components of the plantation system. These ensured the planters of their high profits. As such the planters obstructed the growth of a labour market; and thereby deprived the workers of the market wage. In case local labourers were employed, the planters saw to it that they depended only on the plantation as their means of livelihood. Thus, for example, in the Caribbean countries, the entire peasantry was uprooted to provide labour for the sugar plantations (Mandie, 1972).

In the early stages of the plantation industry in India also, the colonial government adopted a position that favoured the planters. In an endeavour to overcome their shortage of labour, the planters sought to uproot the local peasants from their lands. They appealed to the government to increase land revenue so that the peasantry around the tea plantation areas would give up their lands and seek work in the plantation. Consequently, in 1868, the Bengal Government doubled the land revenue rates in those areas. This however, did not have the intended effects as the peasants rose in protest and refused to pay the enhanced rate (Guha, 1977).

It may also be noted that the plantation system is not only an economic unit, but also a component of the socio-economic formation of a society. The production relations change when the socio-economic formation of the society changes (Kar, 1998). Thus, for example, Cuba has a "plantation economy". Initially, it had coercion, low wages and all the inherent features of plantation system. These features have changed with a change in the socio-economic system after the revolution of 1959. In the post-revolution period, the ownership of the plantations passed from private owners into the control of the State.

In India too, we find that though the tea industry possesses the features of a plantation system, the change in the character of the State after independence has influenced this system. In fact, change in the plantation system in all parts of the world including India started



when the plantation labour could organize itself to fight for its legitimate rights and influence the affairs of the State.

### Tea Plantation in Assam

Assam produces around 55 per cent of the country's total production of tea, which is considered to be the backbone of the State's economy. At present there are a total of 845 tea gardens in the State that cover approximately 2,32,079 hectares of land; and have a total annual yield of 4,32,430 tonnes (Ravisagar, 2002). Besides, there are some 2,500 small-scale (producing green leaf only) tea plantations in Assam (Kar, 2001).

Tea plantation, as we know, is an agro-based labour-intensive industry; and the total number of workers (permanent and casual), engaged in Assam plantations (large and small) are around 11 lakhs (Kurmi, 2000).

The first experimental tea estate in Assam was established in 1837 at Chabua (*Cha* - tea, *bua* - to grow) in Dibrugarh district in Upper Assam.

In the early nineteenth century, during the formative days of Assam plantations, the labour scarcity was a constant hindrance to the expansion of tea plantations in the State (Kar and Barua, 1997). At the initial stage, however, the local people like the Kacharis, the Matakas, the Kukis, the Nagas, the Singphos and the Apatanis could be employed with the active assistance of the chiefs of the respective groups (Kar, 2001). But, these arrangements did not prove to be very successful and sustainable.

In course of time, the number of tea plantations steadily increased and as such, the demand kept growing for larger number of labourers. But the need could not be fulfilled from the local labourers as they had gradually been showing reluctance to work in tea plantation.

By around 1855, the problem became very acute. It was not only that the local people of Assam were unwilling to work in the tea gardens, but there was also an acute shortage of adult population in the State. Assam at that time was still experiencing the effect of Moamaria rebellion (1770 -1775 A.D.), the Burmese invasion (1819 -1824 AD.) and the raids of the hill tribes.

Under the circumstances, the planters started procuring labour from other States of India. The labourers were recruited from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages, mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Desperate



poverty and land alienation on the countryside in those areas; and the false promises of "less work and high wages" probably made this huge labour group available for transportation to Assam. A large number of the people however, were brought from Chotanagpur (present Jharkhand) area.

In view of the growth of unemployment as well as the shortage of food, the government of Assam in 1953 advised the planters for a gradual curtailment in the recruitment of labour from other States. From 1960 onward, recruitment from outside was totally stopped, and since then labourers were employed from the existing unemployed ones available within the State (Bhadra, 1990).

A major section of these migrants, after their contract periods were over, decided to make a permanent settlement in the new habitat in a new economy and far away from their natal homes.

The tea labourers in Assam are now a days popularly known as *Baganiya*, *Banua* or *Cha Mazdoor*, and the ex-tea labourers as *Bongal*.

There are at present more than one hundred tribe and caste groups that compose the tea and ex-tea labour population that constitutes around twenty per cent of the total population of Assam. There are at least 32 ethnic groups among them who were brought from Jharkhand (Kar, 1999).

Despite a host of foreseen and unforeseen odds and eventualities, all these groups of people, actually, in course of time have started identifying themselves with the land of their domicile. Since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it seems, there has been an observable change in their life style and worldview when they started settling in the rural areas of Assam, and gradually took agriculture as their main source of livelihood. Notwithstanding the fact that demographic constraint deters many groups from establishing an effective intra-ethnic social inter-course, it has been observed that many numerically dominant groups, for example, the Santal, the Oraon, the Munda, the Gor, the Patir, the Tanti and the Bhumij organize district and State level conferences at regular intervals to express ethnic affiliation and renew group solidarity. Of late, the terms *Adivasi* and *Tea tribes* have been gaining wide currency to refer to these heterogeneous tea and ex-tea labourers in Assam. Notwithstanding their sustained efforts of boundary maintenance at micro-level; the sense of sharing a common composite culture at macro level, coupled with growing unemployment problem and socio-economic backwardness seem to have substantially contributed

towards their being restive with the demand for being enlisted as Scheduled Tribe under a single identity banner *Adivasi/Tea Tribe (Cha Janajati)*.

### **Life and Living Condition**

While dwelling on the life and living condition of these groups of people in historical perspective, it may be noted that as usual with a plantation system, the British tea planters bought labour at a high cost, but spent very little to maintain it. Low wages and coercion were the rule of the day. Short work was punished with flogging and absconders, when recovered, were flogged. The management-worker relationship in those days was condemned by Guha (1977) as "the worst form of serfdom".

As noted earlier, things gradually changed in favour of the labourers after independence and with the promulgation of the *Plantation Labour Act (PLA)*, 1951. Subsequently, there have been some other enactments like *The Tea Act (1953)* and *Assam Tea Plantation Employer Welfare Fund Act (1959)* etc., that added to their prospective security and well-being.

Some of the important provisions of the PLA are that every worker and his family is to be provided with housing accommodation, wholesome drinking water, recreational facilities, canteens, educational facilities for children of workers, creches for children of working mothers, umbrellas, raincoats, blankets and other amenities for protecting against rain and cold. The Act also seeks to regulate the employment of children and prescribe the hours of work and holidays. Further, it provides for a weekly day of rest, holidays with pay, sickness allowances and maternity benefits etc. All these are to be framed by the respective State governments. The government of Assam in pursuance of the powers conferred by sub-section (i) of section 43 of the PLA has enacted the *Assam Plantation Labour Rules, 1956*, which also confirms the above-mentioned provisions.

With regard to the provisions of the PLA the *Plantation Enquiry Commission, 1956* noted that these welfare provisions would radically alter the working conditions; and this in turn would increase the labour productivity (*Report of the Plantation Enquiry Commission, 1956, Pt. 1, Govt. of India, pp. 117-125*). But, incidentally, even after more than half-a-century of the promulgation of the PLA, it seems, most of these provisions have not been fully and full-heartedly implemented and sustained in most of the plantations in Assam (c.f. Toppo, 1999).



As an illustration, I would like to dwell in brief on some of these provisions *vis-a-vis* their implementation on selective basis.

**Housing:** It is true that during the post-independence period, there has been a substantial improvement in the housing condition of the tea labourers in Assam. But, if we examine the reality against the housing provision of the Act, it seems to be far from satisfactory. According to an estimate (Bhowmick, 1992) more than 20 per cent of the houses do not meet the specifications. Further, the Tea Tribe Co-ordination Body (1994) estimates that in Assam plantations there are a total of 1,84,160 labour quarters as against the requirement of 3,58,435 quarters, the gap being of 1,74,275 quarters.

**Educational facilities:** Literacy level among the plantation labour is not at all encouraging. A 2002 survey shows that while in Assam as a whole twenty-five per cent of the children in the 6-14 years age group are out of school; among the tea garden workers, their proportion is forty-three per cent. There are 2,46,843 children in this age group and 1,05,821 (42.87%) are out of school (Fernandes *et al.*, 2003).

In many plantations, the schools have not been established as per the norms of the Act. These are merely for the sake of legal fulfilments; and are characterised by poor infrastructural facilities as well as maintenance provisions; and lack of sufficient and qualified teachers. Some tea garden schools do not even have permanent teachers, and the management uses them as "spare wheels" by employing them elsewhere besides teaching.

**Medical and Health Facilities:** Section 10 of the PLA and Rules 21-26 of the APLR provide for medical facilities to labourers and their dependents. Many of the plantation hospitals however, do not have a full-time physician. Most of these are under-staffed; and lack proper infrastructural facilities and the required stock of medicines etc. The medical facilities, in fact have declined over the years.

Sections 8 and 9 of the PLA and Rules 7-20 of the APLR contain provisions for health and sanitation facilities like supply of drinking water; conservancy (provisions of latrines and urinals); and construction and maintenance of drains etc. Despite all these provisions, in many plantations till date, these problems are very acute.

The tea labourers suffer from quite a good number of endemic diseases that include gastro-enteritis; anaemia; dysentery and diarrhoea, worm infection, skin diseases, night blindness, hypertension, tuberculosis, pneumonia and malaria etc. (Kar, 2000).



Besides the diseases of poverty and malnutrition, they suffer from a number of avoidable diseases that result out of very poor environmental sanitation, personal hygiene and unhealthy food and drink habits.

It may relevantly be noted here that the *Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association* (ATTSA) launched an agitation on 21 September 2004, demanding better health care facilities in the tea gardens. The association claimed that around fifteen hundred people died during the period ranging from January to August 2004, primarily because they did not have access to proper health care facilities. According to an official estimate (Government of Assam), over a hundred tea gardens in the Brahmaputra valley do not have doctors. The quality of medicines distributed is also below standard. To quote Dr. Bhumidhar Barman, the Health and Family Welfare Minister of Assam, "Tea garden labourers are dying for lack of proper health care facilities and hygiene. We have received several complaints about tea garden authorities not paying attention to hygiene and the health side of their labourers. This year (2004) score of garden workers died of gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, malaria, dysentery and other such diseases. The lack of concern is disgusting". He continues, ".....We have time and again urged them to appoint doctors on a permanent basis; and have even given them the option of appointing at least an *Ayurvedic* doctor if they are not able to appoint an MBBS. However, they have paid no heed..." (c.f. *The Telegraph*, 25 December 2004, Guwahati edition).

Morbidity and mortality rate being relatively high, fertility rate is also relatively high in the population. This in turn has its corollary reflection on the status of reproductive health of women.

Child Labour: Sections 24 and 26 of the PLA prohibit employment of children below 12 years of age. Despite this provision, according to an estimate made in 1994 by the *Tea Tribe Co-ordination Body*, there were 34,400 children studying in 666 tea plantation schools, while there were 89,598 child labourers working in the tea beds in Assam (c.f. *The Sentinel*, 30 April, 1994).

With regard to their overall economic condition, it may be noted that more than eighty per cent of the families spend whatever they earn in meeting the basic needs of their day-to-day life. Many people spend a substantial amount, sometimes at the cost of their basic needs, for country liquor. Many members of the younger generation spend a major amount of their income for purchasing non-tradition consumer goods. On the other hand, a numerically small group has realised the value and necessity of money; and a good number of

them have resorted to the habit of regular savings with some saving organisations

Partly because of their insufficient income and partly because of their expenditure habit, one observes an apparently tragic picture of indebtedness in many people. One form of exploitation to which these people have been, and are still subjected to, is traditional money lending. Originally, the *Kabuliwallas* controlled this business. At present, this is controlled by the local people, the traders and sometimes by the relatively well-to-do people from their own community (Kar, 1993).

Thus, it would probably be an oversimplification of the ground reality, if we hold only the management or the government responsible for the overall state of affairs among the people. The trade unions; and the relatively affluent and the elite ones from within the community also need to be involved to play some active and positive roles in the process of development of the life and living condition of the people.

The lockout episode (November-December, 2004) in the Binnakandi tea plantation in the Barak valley, resulting in to an apparently avoidable uncertainty in the life of its workers and their dependents probably makes an indication towards the same. I do not have yet the detailed empirical data as to the antecedents and other details in this regard, but, it seems, the showdown centered around the issue of the managements contemplated steps to increase productivity; and its asking for an active involvement of the workers to achieve the same.

In view of the fact that the health and well-being of the workers and the commercial health of the industry are organically related to each other, in this context, I would like to add a few words about the on-going health scenario of the tea industry as a whole.

Tea industry in India, of late is reeling under a crisis because of the problems arising out of decline in prices, low productivity and the need for a greater export thrust.

In its status paper for 2004, the *India Tea Association* has indicated that a level of 100 million kgs. has been assigned for orthodox tea production. The Association feels that the producers should set an orthodox output target at least 20 million kgs more than the current level.

The government of India is also seriously concerned with the state of affairs of the country's most important agricultural plantation crops providing employment to over a million workers. The *Ministry*



of Commerce and Industry has been deliberating on various issues like improving productivity; review of PLA; quality up-gradation for both domestic and export production and the likes. In the meantime, the following contemplated measures have already been announced (*The Assam Tribune*, 12 and 22 December 2004).

- (i) Rupees twenty cores will be made available to help the new promoters who are keen to take over sick gardens. This will be with an interest subsidy of five per cent for the old liabilities of the sick gardens; and another five per cent for new borrowings. Funds are expected to be released by January 2005.
- (ii) To increase orthodox tea production and export, it has been decided to provide an incentive of rupees three per kg of orthodox tea, and rupees two per kg of increased production beyond a point.
- (iii) In a move to bail out the small tea gardens that share over twenty-one per cent of India's tea production, it has been decided to set up a *Small Growers' Development Agency* under *Tea Board of India*. The modalities would be finalised soon.
- (iv) In order to increase productivity, a comprehensive package for re-plantation and rejuvenation of old tea bushes is under formulation.

In order to achieve all these at the receiving end, it is a prerequisite to have a sustained harmonious relationship between the management and the workers.

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