

EASTERN

The Tea Industry of Assam

Origin and Development

Pradip Baruah



THE TEA INDUSTRY OF ASSAM

Origin and Development



Dr. Pradip Baruah



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*To my
parents*

journalist & writer, Mr. Prafulla Chandra Borua

&

*Mrs. Labanya Borua,
wife, Mrs. Tapti Baruah (Moon)*

&

sons, the little darlings, Abhiraj (Sunny) & Apratim (Leo)

2020
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10/10/2020



The sovereign drink of pleasure and health.

N. Brady



Tarun Gogoi

**Chief Minister, Assam
Guwahati**

Dispur 31-7-07

This book "The Tea Industry of Assam : Origin and Development" authored by Dr. Pradip Barua is a product of his painstaking labour. In the book Dr. Barua has made an extensive analytical study of Assam's tea industry covering all aspects. His own experience of working intimately in the tea industry has added to the value of this product. Next to agriculture, tea is the mainstay of Assam's economy. In fact, tea is not a just industry in Assam but it is a part and parcel of the life and culture in Assam. This book will definitely go a long way in acquainting all those, both in the country and abroad, about the tea industry of Assam by providing a detailed, comprehensive view of the industry. I am sure, the book will be highly useful and informative not only to the scholars, intellectuals and professionals but also to the common readers as well and hope, it will get wide acceptance with all of them. My sincere thanks go to Dr. Barua for bringing out this exhaustive scholarly treatise. I offer my best wishes for all success of his endeavour.

(TARUN GOGOI)

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October 15, 2007

Shri Pradip Baruah
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The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development' authored by Dr. Pradip Baruah is an in-depth analytical study of the tea industry of Assam. The book covers a vast range starting from the origin of the industry, its development over the years, efforts in marketing, labour issues, its economic contribution, etc. The book also encompasses important issues affecting the tea industry in different states of India and of the small tea growers. The present state of the industry in Assam and its problems and prospects is also covered, with valuable suggestions regarding measures for future planning and development.

Assam is the main tea growing State of India producing more than 50 per cent of the country's total production. More tea is grown in Assam than either Sri Lanka or Kenya. The liquoring quality of Assam tea is one of the finest in the world. The book itself is a major contribution to the tea industry of India. It will fulfill a long felt need of a comprehensive book on the tea industry of Assam from its historical background to the present scenario. Tea connoisseurs all over the world, people drinking tea and interested common readers will be able to understand how the industry started and get to know about the people associated with the tea industry and their sentiments. The analysis of developmental aspects, manufacturing, economic contribution, delineation of problems and prospects will be useful to research workers and policy makers to give future direction to the tea industry in the present competitive world.

The dedicated approach, pain staking hard labour and sincere efforts of Dr. Baruah deserves special praise. Dr. Baruah's book, enriched by his experience and knowledge in broad areas of the tea industry is a mine of information on Assam tea. It will, I am sure, be a valuable asset to be preserved carefully. Scholars, educationists, research workers, tea planters, administrators, tea lovers and common readers as well all over the world wishing to know about Assam tea from an analytical, realistic point of view, will be greatly rewarded.

I compliment Dr. Baruah for bringing out such a book and commend the book to the tea world.

Kolkata

BASUDEB BANERJEE, IAS
CHAIRMAN, TEA BOARD

FOREWORD

The story of tea is one of the people, its economy, society and culture not in an insular framework but in a sufficiently broad one bringing into its canvas the urges and aspirations of human beings for human development. The story of Assam's tea, the 'green gold' of Assam and of the 'two leaves and a bud' attracting on time the nimble fingers of both hardy and soft and frail hands, has been told and retold from various standpoints by quite a few people from different disciplines, by poets, novelists, academics, colonial administrators, modern day entrepreneurs and indeed by a whole lot of them. While each author shines or may shine in his or her own excellence, the author of the present work, Dr. Pradip Baruah, possessed of academic and professional expertise, has succeeded in giving us a scholarly treatise with an admirable novelty. The scholar has pioneered the study of Assam tea as an industry in its multiform aspects with a global focus as it ought to be in an increasingly globalised economy. The author has filled a void, may not be entirely, but very substantially, suits to the needs of the present, for Assam, India and the world at large. It is a fairly well-researched, documented study adorned with a sense of history.

Tea has entered the Assamese psyche for reasons of history and the evolving socio-economic and cultural scenario. Tea had its origins undoubtedly in China and Assam. Chinese commercial activities in tea began quite early. Chinese tea leaves were first imported into Europe by the Dutch East India Company in around the early part of the 17th century. While tea shrubs grew in the wild in Assam even before the coming of the British, it was their East India Company which undertook for colonial economic reasons organised cultivation of tea plants for eventual trading purposes for the benefit of private owners and revenue for the Company Raj as it then was. It was during the time of Lord William Bentinck (Governor-General, 1828-35) that a Tea Committee was appointed in 1832 for looking into the matter of introduction of tea cultivation in the Company's territories. The Tea Committee observed that 'it is with feelings of the highest possible satisfaction, that we are enabled to announce to his Lordship in Council, that the tea shrub is beyond doubt indigenous in Upper Assam, being found there through an extent of the country of one month's march, within the Honorable Company's territories, from Sudia and Beesa to the Chinese frontier province of Yumin, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf. We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery, which is due to the indefatigable researches of Captain Jenkins and Lieut. Charlton, to be by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire' (Quoted in William Robinson, *A DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF ASAM with a sketch of the local geography and a concise history of the tea plant of Asam*, 1841, reprinted 1975, pp. 137-38). Thus, the British East India Company, their 'Board of Control', the Supreme Government of India, the Tea Committee at Calcutta decided that tea plant cultivation and its manufacture should be started as a 'private adventure' whereupon the ASAM Company was formed in England in February 1839 'with a present capital of 500,000L in 10,000 shares of 50L each; 8,000 shares were set apart for allotment in England, and 2,000 for allotment in India (*Ibid.* p. 142).

A very brief reference to Maniram Dewan must needs be made, as far as tea matters are concerned. Initially Maniram poured fulsome praise on the 'Sarkar Bahadur' (British Company Raj) and found no difficulty in joining the services of the British as Revenue Sheristadar of Upper Assam in 1828: thereafter, the total revenue of Upper Assam rose from Rs. 35,000 to as large a sum of Rs. 1,35,000 in 1830. When Purandar Singha was restored in 1833 with their hidden agenda of his ultimate deposition, Maniram became his Barbhandar Barua (chief minister). But with the deposition of the Ahom raja by the 'faithless' British in 1838, Maniram lost all his positions, becoming a mere *mauzadar* with a meagre salary of Rs. 50 per mensem. However, he resigned this nominal post and thence began the period of his gradual disaffection with the British leading up to his martyrdom in the wake of the Rebellion of 1857, India's First War of

Independence, it being noted that the nobility in Assam revolted against the British as early as 1830; earlier to that, the dispossessed ex-nobles of the Ahom court also revolted against the Company Raj in 1828, i.e., nearly two years after the Treaty of Yandaboo (24 February, 1826).

Maniram was induced to accept the Dewanship of the Asam Company, a tea concern started by the British for tea cultivation in the province. Maniram accepted the office thinking that he would be able to do something for improving the material conditions of the people. But differences cropped up between him and the Company whereupon he resigned his post in 1844. Incidentally, appointment to different posts in his service career enabled him to gain maturity in judgement which he used with diligence in his memorials to A.J. Moffat Mills in 1853. Maniram's personal memorial and non-personal petitions were virtually an Alternative Report on the Province of Assam.

Maniram Dewan was administered a political rebuff when the native dynasty was not restored. After leaving the Asam Company in 1844, he established two tea gardens of his own, one at Chenimara (Cinnamora near Jorhat) and the other at Chenglung (now Singlo, near Sonari in Sivasagar). Britain's colonial economic interests desired to keep the tea industry as their monopoly and hence, the Dewan was denied the privileges granted to the British Company in the matter of rebate in revenue, fee simple grants, etc. Out of the three tea gardens owned by individual proprietors in the Sivasagar district of the time by 1852, Maniram owned two while the other belonged to Hannay. Thus did Maniram earn the resentment of the British tea garden owners.

In the early part of the nineteenth century British tea planters recruited tea labourers from different provinces like Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Madras (since reorganised as Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh) to work in the upcoming tea gardens of Assam. Initially they came on a short-term basis and even when they settled permanently, they did not cause any hindrance to the language or culture of Assam. Tea garden and ex-tea garden labours proved themselves to be remarkably prone to assimilation. In course of time the number of this kind of immigration dropped precisely because of growth in numbers and the habit of cooperation with the local people. Thus, this current of migration did not affect the Assamese society; rather, its horizons were extended to build up a composite culture. Like some other currents of migration, tea garden and ex-tea garden labours did not serve to cause economic difficulties for the indigenous people of the State. While the tea garden community and their descendents form a part and parcel of Assam's composite culture, quite a few tea garden labour castes or tribes do maintain their distinctive identity - like the Kharia, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Bauri, Bhogta, Bhumis, Bhuiya, Turi, Teli, Ghasi, Mushahar, Rajwar, Khond, etc. - even while interacting with different sections of the people of Assam in all social endeavours. Many of the non-indigenous tribes or castes, however, choose to call themselves Adivasis and they, naturally enough, wish that their legitimate rights are conceded in the interest of socio-political harmony, and economic deliverance.

Having regard to his universe of study, the author has been able very successfully to present a fairly comprehensive study of the tea industry of Assam covering origin and development, its emerging problems and prospects for the future predicated upon thoughtful pursuit of certain policy measures pertaining to both domestic and international markets. Relevant materials he studied, and with judgement. It is a fairly good work and it adds to our insight and understanding of the subject. I commend the book to the attention of the academia and interested general readers.

Guwahati

1 August 2007

Prof. (Dr.) Debo Prasad Barooah
Ex-Vice Chencellor
Gauhati University

PREFACE

I was always fascinated by the tea industry being born and brought up in the midst of the greeneries of the tea gardens of Assam. The aloofness and the life style of tea industry enhanced my curiosity about it since my childhood. As I grew up, my love for the state of Assam - its uniqueness, natural beauty, wonderful culture, the people, and everything it has, inspired me to traverse throughout the length and breadth of the state to know her intimately. The search which I had started since 1990 resulted in my widely popular book in Assamese, 'Chitra-Bichitra Asom' (The Wonderland Assam) in 2003. The search is still continuing and I do not know when the journey will come to an end.

In the meantime, I got associated with the tea industry intimately. My first insight into the fascinating world of tea was when I took up to study Tea Husbandry and Technology as a subject in my college. Later on, I continued to study marketing of tea at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore during my post graduation and then for the Ph. D. study at Gauhati University, Assam, it was an obvious choice. I got the opportunity to work intimately with the tea industry by virtue of my employment as an Advisory Officer of Tocklai Experimental Station, Tea Research Association, Assam in the year 1992. Since then I have been working with the tea industry in all the tea growing areas of East India, i.e. Assam Valley, Cachar, Darjeeling, Dooars, Terai, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, etc. over a period of about fourteen years. The preparations of this work started long back as I felt the need of such a book on Assam tea. Thus, I kept my Ph.D. study a broad based one to cover all the relevant aspects of the tea industry of Assam. In fact, this book is a modified, and updated and enlarged form of my original doctoral dissertation entitled 'Growth and Development of Tea Industry of Assam: An Analytical Study' submitted to the Gauhati University in 2004.

It is surprising that there is no comprehensive book available on the tea industry of Assam which informs us about its glorious past, its performance over the years and also critically analyses the present scenario of the industry. Tea is not just an industry in Assam, it is a part of life and the Assamese people are emotionally attached to it. Hence, the study of the industry in isolation of its social milieu is not possible. But this vital aspect is kept out of the ambit of my study with great difficulty although plenty of references are available in the book. In fact, the development in the tea industry had given shape to the history of Assam since its discovery. My intention is to inform the readers about its past in brief, to scholarly analyse the developments made during the last three to four decades specifically, in various fronts, so that plans and policies could be made by respective authorities for future development and prosperity of this vital industry of Assam, and in turn usher in meaningful research.

Each chapter is devoted to separate subjects, viz. origin and historical background, area, production and productivity, labour, marketing, quality aspects, contribution to Assam's economy, overall problems and prospects and summary and conclusions, etc. Out of these, the chapter on contribution to the economy of Assam reveals this vital aspect in real terms. A complete analysis of the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre, the largest auction center in India is being published for the first time and findings on effects of agro-climatic factors on quality should give valuable information on quality parameters. The annexures on Assamese words adopted in tea vocabulary in English, tea garden tokens and tea growing countries of the world should provide useful information. The intellectuals, scholars and well wishers of the tea industry can delve further to give future directions. Special efforts have been made to make the book interesting

and informative to common readers also and to the one who wishes to know about the tea industry of Assam. I hope that not only the persons associated with the tea industry, but the general readers of Assam, India and abroad will also find the book useful.

My love for the state of Assam being the motivational force, the inspiration for the book was my father, the eminent journalist and writer of Assam, Mr. Prafulla Chandra Borua. He interestingly, refused the offered job of an Assistant Manager in a tea garden in his younger days, chose journalism and dedicated himself to it. However, my late grand father worked in tea garden for a long period of his active life.

I am grateful to many persons for this book and the list is endless. However, Dr. Devadas Bharali, Retd. Professor, Dept. of Commerce, Gauhati University, my guide for the Ph. D. study is the person, I am indebted for his meticulous guidance and support throughout the period of the study. Dr. C.K. Barua, Retd. Professor, Dept. of Botany, Gauhati University, the co-guide of the research work put forward valuable suggestions and encouraged me all the time.

My wife, Mrs. Tapti Baruah, had to take great troubles during the course of this study as I had to devote all my time after office hours and holidays it. I thank her for bearing all these. My mother's all pervasive soothing and comforting presence was always with me. My sons, Abhiraj (Sunny) and Apratim (Leo) are God's greatest blessings in my life. I take this opportunity to express my whole hearted affection to them.

I am grateful to my employer, Tea Research Association, for allowing me to carry out this research work in spite of heavy official duties and responsibilities.

My brother-in-law, Mr. Chandrajit Saikia, Executive Director, Tea Board Regional Office, Guwahati extended help to me on various occasions in different stages of the research work and also while finalising the book. The staff of the Media Trust, Assam offered their help and assistance all the time. I am deeply grateful to them. My thanks are also due to my colleagues of Nagrakata sub-station, Tea Research Association, West Bengal for their help in the latter stage of the book.

In fact, it was only due to Mr. J. P. Sharma of EBH Publishers (India) that the book could be published so elegantly. Mr. Sharma and his brother Mr. Vijay's keen interest and dedicated approach went a long way in planning and designing the book.

Finally, I wish to thank all those who had helped me all throughout this research work in various ways directly or indirectly. I regret that I could not put their names on record.

Guwahati, Assam
May 23, 2006

Dr. Pradip Baruah

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CHAPTER-I



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

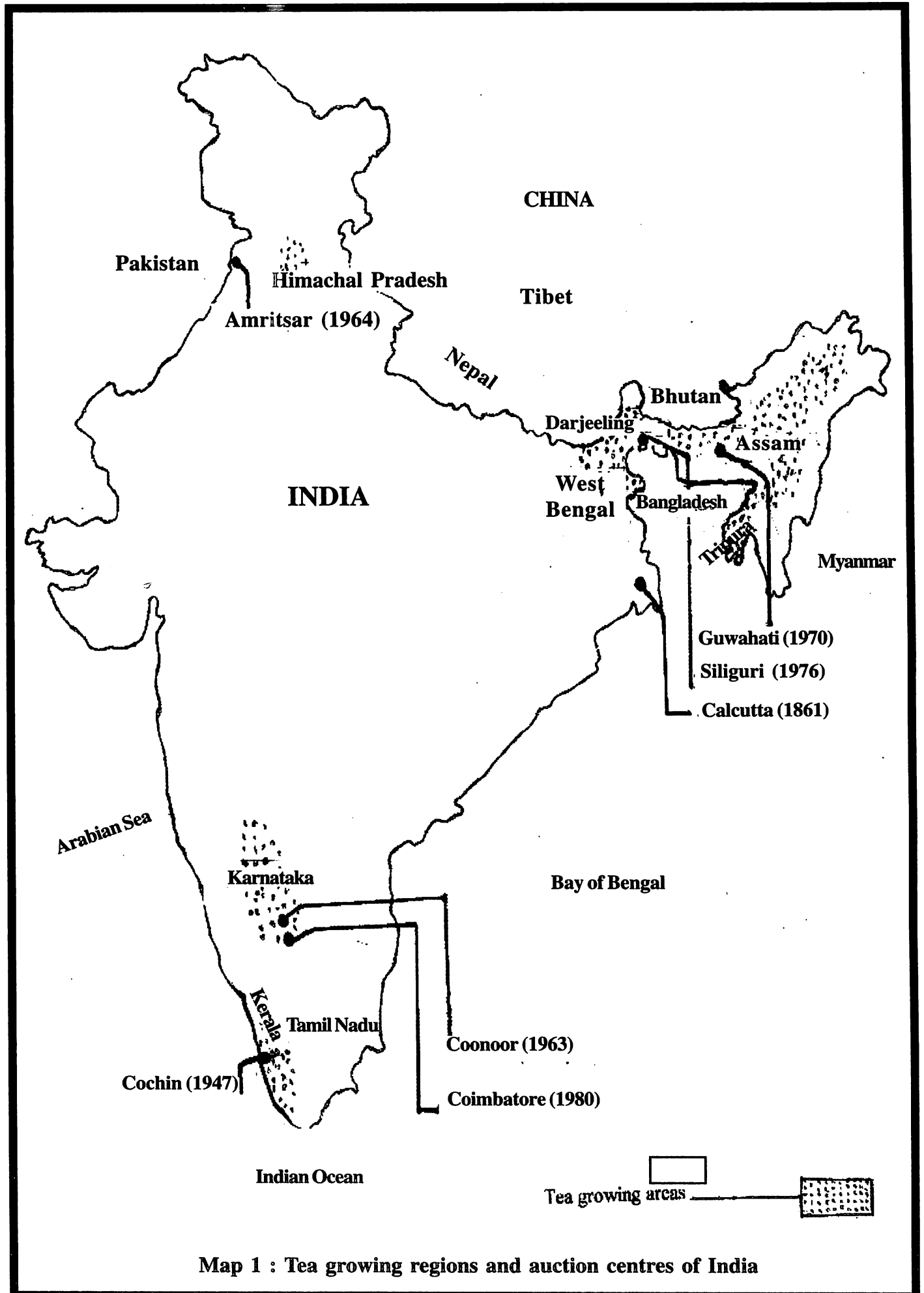
Tea is one of the most popular beverages in the world. Tea brew is acclaimed as a divine remedy for various ailments since the initiation of tea drinking and the Taoists called it 'elixir of immortality'. The tea industry is one of the oldest industries in India, a large organized sector and has been an integral part of the economic development of the country. India has the second largest area under tea after China and is also the largest producer, consumer and third highest exporter of tea in the world at present. It was the highest exporter of tea for a long time till recently. In 2002, India's production was 826.17 million kg (m kg) with an area under tea of 511,940 ha out of which 201.00 m kg valued at Rs. 1,753.39 crores was exported and 625.17 m kg was retained for domestic consumption. Assam is famous all over the world for tea. The name 'Assam' is synonymous to the best liquoring quality black tea in the world. Assam produced 432.51 m kg of tea in 2002 in an area under tea of 270,163 ha which were 52.35 per cent of total production and 52.77 per cent of total area under Indian tea respectively. Since its beginning about more than one hundred and seventy years back, the tea industry has become part of Assam's way of life with major contributions in the socio-economic sphere of the state. It is popularly called as 'Tea – the green gold' and 'Pride of Assam'. In fact, an analysis of tea in Assam depicts the socio-economic development of the state of Assam. Assam– situated in the North-Eastern part of India is also famous for the one horned rhinoceros and as a major producer of oil.

1.1 Origin of tea in Assam

Tea originated in China and it became popular as a beverage in many European countries, particularly in the United Kingdom. The East India Company traded in tea and imported huge quantities to London for internal consumption in the 17th and 18th century as tea was very popular with the British. The East India Company had to depend entirely on China for its supply of tea. But problems arose in trade with it in the beginning of the 19th century and thus, search for new source of tea started.

Tea plants (*Camellia sinensis* (L) O.Kuntze, Family: Theaceae) were discovered growing wild in Assam way back in 1823. The indigenous people of Assam were drinking tea in their own method of preparation for its medicinal properties since time immemorial. The credit for discovery of tea in Assam goes to three persons – Beesa Gaum, a tribal head of an Upper Assam village, an Assamese working with the British, the famous patriot Maniram Dewan and Robert Bruce, an English infantry officer. However, there still exists some controversy about the discoverers of tea in Assam. The discovery of tea in Assam is discussed in details in Chapter III of the book. Mr. Robert Bruce is widely recognized as the discoverer of tea in Assam. However, the plants did not get recognition as indigenous tea plant till 1834. Originally, tea seeds brought from China were tried in Assam for cultivation. But tea plants were found to be growing wild in Assam and the tea made from them were found to be quite good. Till that time, China was the sole tea manufacturing country in the world and the need of exporting tea from other countries and finding new areas arose when the East India Company's trade monopoly with it ended in 1833. The Company turned its attention to find an alternative source for its supply of tea, and the discovery of tea in Assam came as a welcome relief.

In the years that followed, tea growing wild in Assam got recognition as the real tea plant, and the British extensively cultivated tea in the virgin tracts of Assam which were found to have most suitable agro-climate for its growth. With such a beginning, Assam tea has grown enormously in area and production over the years to emerge as the world's best.



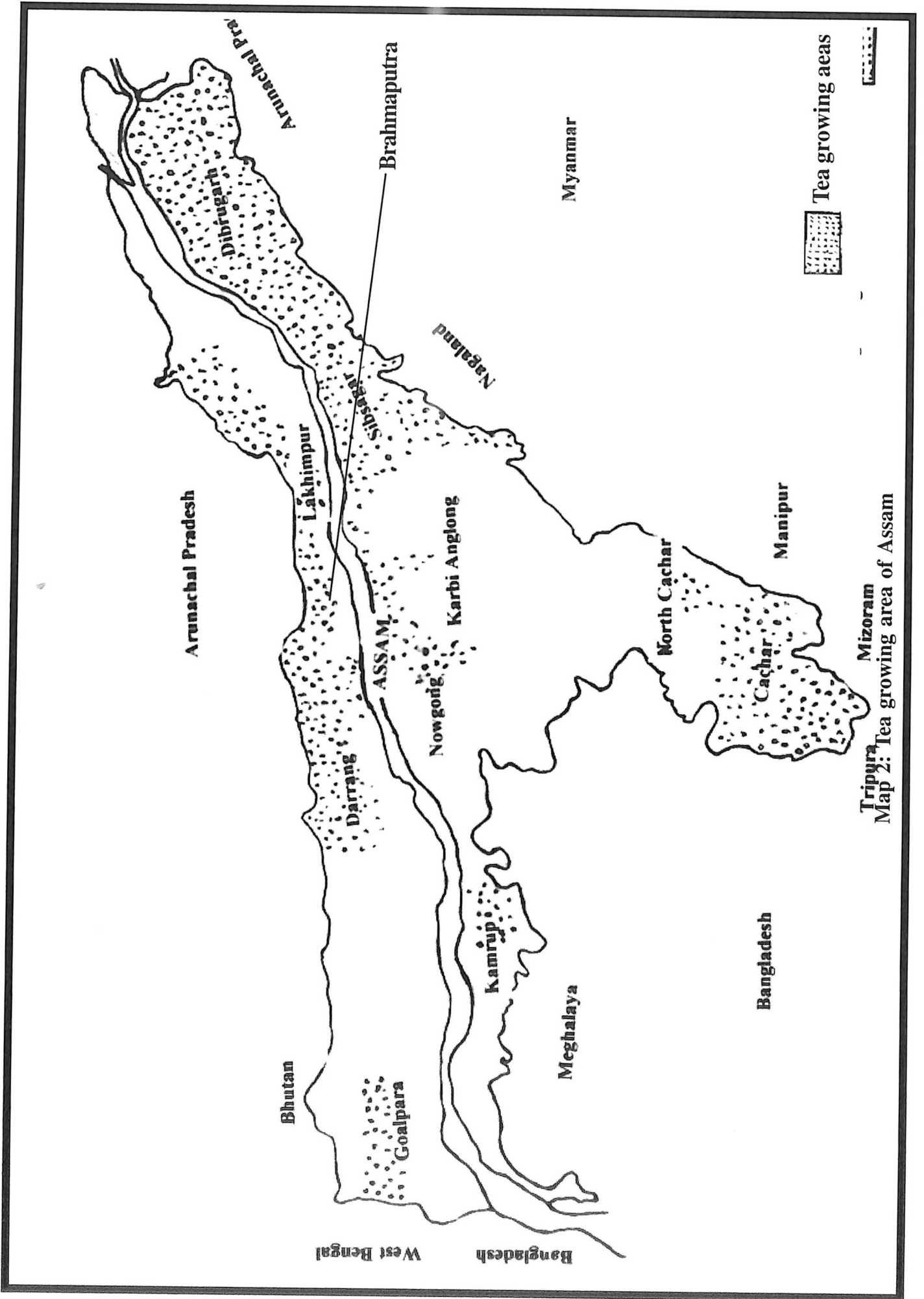
Map 1 : Tea growing regions and auction centres of India



A tea estate in Upper Assam producing the ‘green gold’ of Assam

1.2 Development of the tea industry of Assam – production, productivity and tea labours

The tea industry of Assam has undergone major changes since its beginning overcoming all the difficulties and ups and downs, particularly since independence. Changes in ownership pattern took place over the years. Secondly, area and production of tea have increased considerably during the last fifty five years mainly due to improvement of tea cultivation practices and technological developments. In 1947, India produced 254.80 m kg of tea in an area under tea of 309,959 ha. Assam produced 150.37 m kg (52.69 per cent) in 155,674 ha area under tea in 1951 (figures for 1947 not available). The tea industry of Assam had registered very significant growth over the years. The increase in area and production in 2002 for Assam tea during last fifty one years, i.e. over 1951 were 73.54 per cent and 187.63 per cent respectively. The productivity (kg made tea per ha) has increased from 966 in 1951 to 1,601 in 2002, an increase of 65.74 per cent. The total area under tea, production and productivity in all India level also increased from 316,870 ha, 285.40 m kg. and 901 kg/ha respectively in 1951 to 511,940 ha, 826.17 m kg and 1,614 kg/ha in 2002, increases of 61.56 per cent, 189.48 per cent and 79.13 per cent respectively (Table 1). Assam used to produce one fourth of world tea till recently and at present (2002) accounts for 13.96 per cent of world production of 3,099.29 m kg. At present, due to global competition from other tea producing countries, particularly Kenya, Sri Lanka, China and Vietnam and resultant fall in exports, quality is turning out to be the most vital factor and Indian tea industry is passing through tough times to maintain its prime position in the world market as well as to tackle the situation arising out of declining prices in the domestic market.



Map 2: Tea growing area of Assam



Labours plucking ‘two and a bud’s during a heavy flushing period

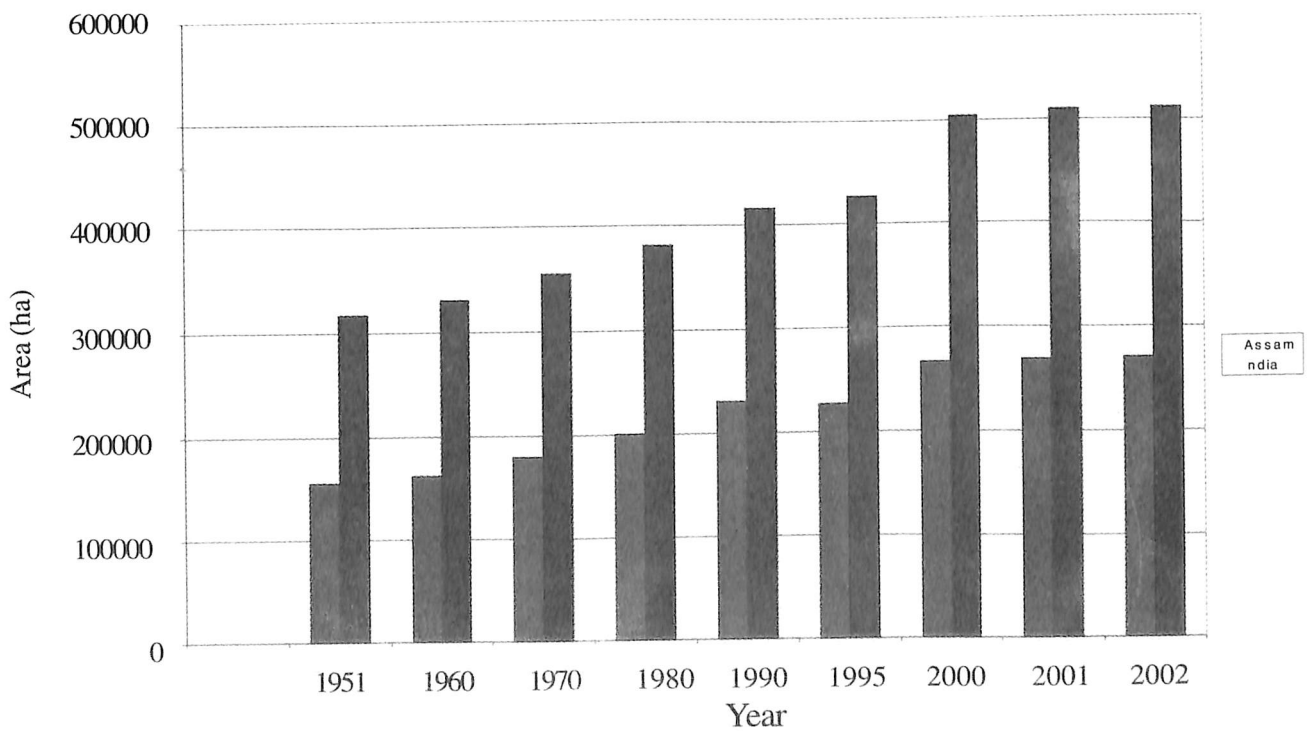


Fig 1: Share of Assam to all India area under tea (1951-2002)

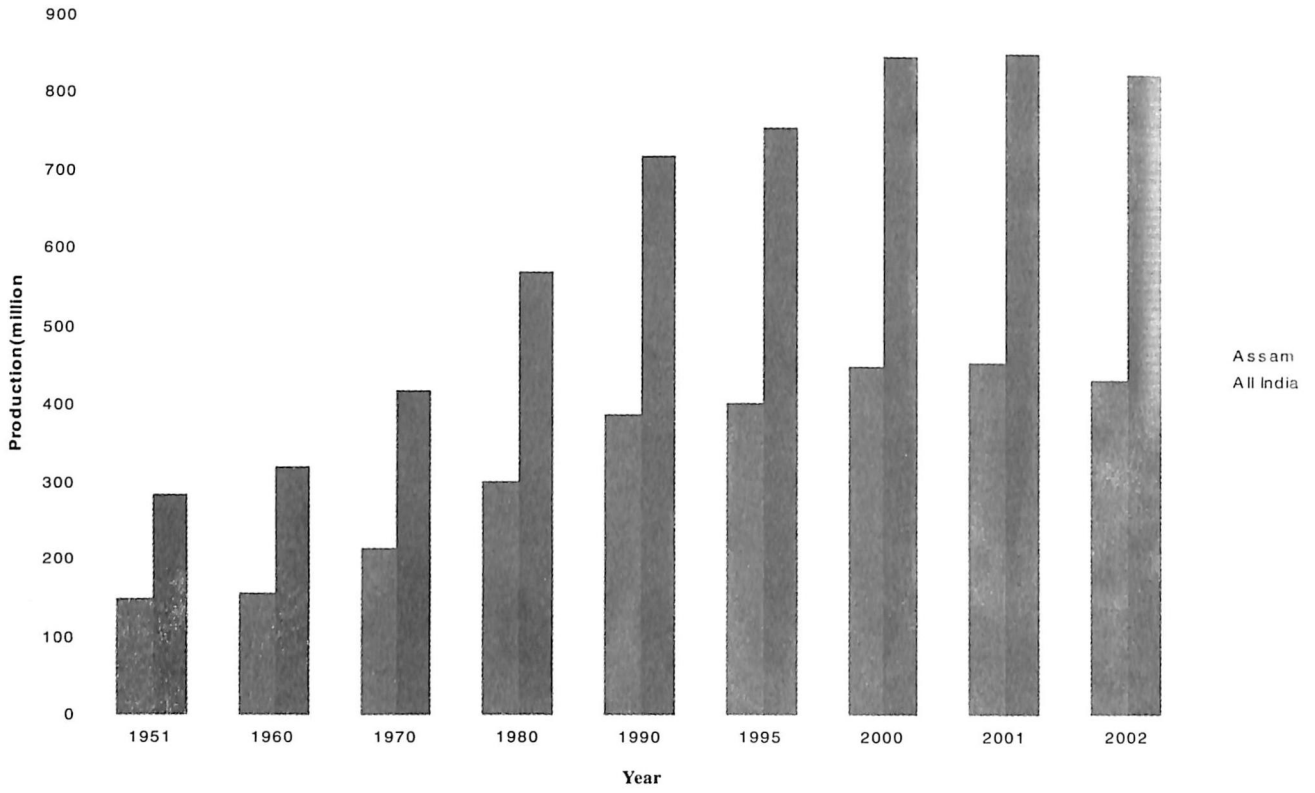


Fig 2: Share of Assam to all India production of tea (1951-2002)

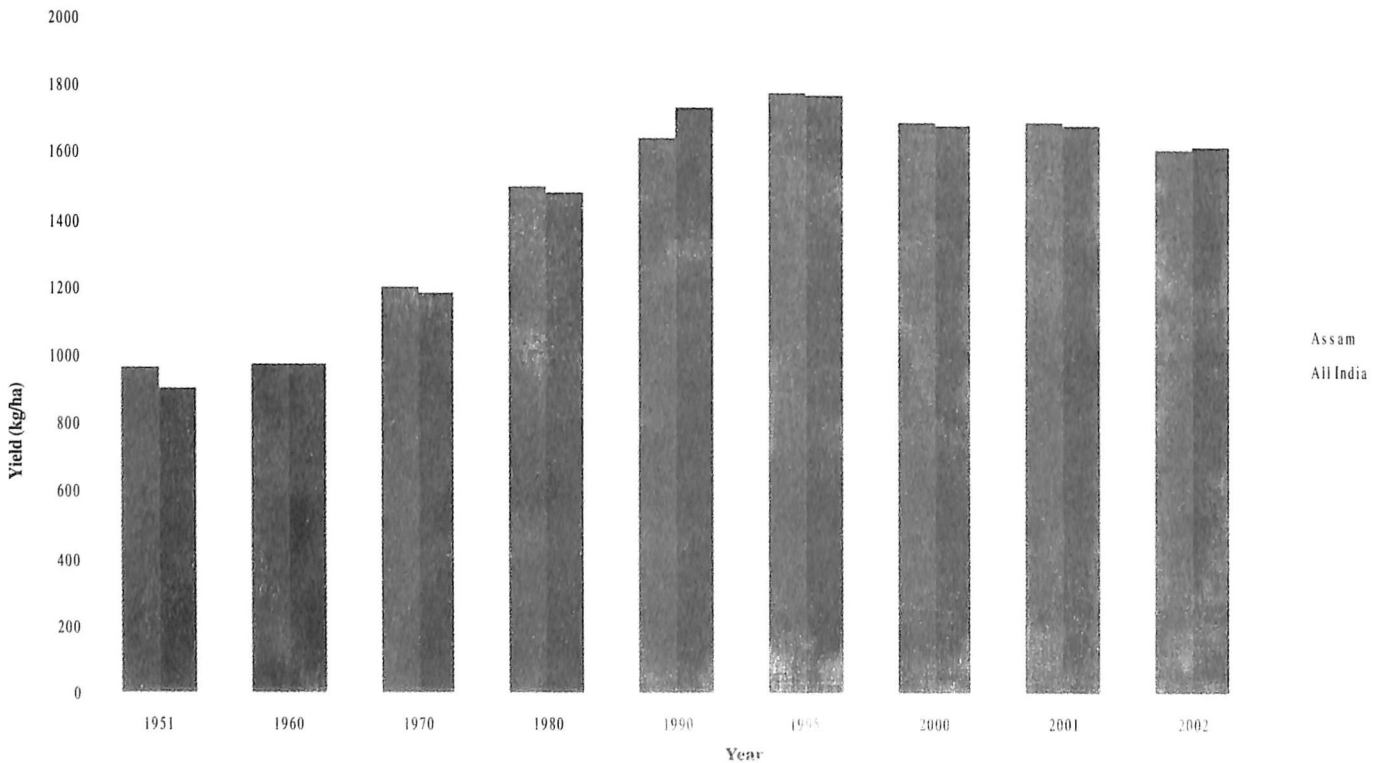


Fig 3: Comparison of Assam to all India yield of tea (1951-2002)

Table 1: Production, area under tea and productivity of tea in Assam and India (1951-2002)

Year	All India			Assam		
	Area (ha)	Production (m kg)	Yield (kg/ha)	Area (ha)	Production (m kg)	Yield (kg/ha)
1951	316,870	285.40	901	155,674 (49.13)	150.37 (52.69)	966
1960	330,738	321.08	971	162,367 (49.09)	157.50 (49.05)	970
1970	354,133	418.52	1,182	180,065 (50.85)	215.16 (51.41)	1,195
1980	381,086	569.17	1,474	200,569 (52.63)	300.70 (52.83)	1,499
1990	416,269	720.34	1,731	230,363 (55.34)	388.18 (53.89)	1,643
1995	427,065	756.02	1,770	226,280 (52.98)	402.62 (53.26)	1,779
2000	504,366	846.92	1,679	266,512 (52.84)	449.22 (53.04)	1,686
2001	509,770	853.92	1,675	268,983 (52.77)	453.94 (53.16)	1,688
2002	511,940	826.17	1,614	270,163 (52.77)	432.51 (52.35)	1,601

(Figures in parentheses indicate percentage to all India)

Source: Tea Statistics, Tea Board.

It is evident from Table 1 that Assam is maintaining about 52 per cent share of all India production and area under tea since 1951.

The tea labours of Assam originally brought by the British from various parts of India, viz. Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, etc. at the time of starting tea plantations about 150 years back are the vital human resources of this labour intensive industry. The tea industry of Assam employed a total of around six lakh labours and more than six and half lakh people were *bona fide* dependents of the resident workers alone (2000). A unique feature of the tea industry is that about half of the labour force constitute of women. About 20 lakh people of Assam are estimated to be directly or indirectly dependent on the tea industry in the state with a population of about 280 lakhs.

In depth analysis of the growth in area, production and productivity aspects of the tea industry of Assam and employment of labours are presented in Chapter IV and V respectively.

1.7 Review of literature

Review of literature is a major ingredient of research work on which the researcher has to rely to understand and analyse the subject of research. A large number of literatures were reviewed for the purpose of the study from books on tea, research papers from journals, newspaper articles, reports, research works and from proceedings of different seminars confining to the areas concerning the objectives of the study.

Thus, all the broad areas of the tea industry of Assam since the time of discovery of tea plant growing wild in 1823 till 2002-03 are analysed in the study, and the findings are presented chapterwise alongwith suggested recommendations for future planning and measures to be adopted for development and sustenance of the industry.

