

**A Study on the Socio-economic Conditions of Labourers in the
Tea Gardens of Jorhat District, Assam**

**Ph. D. SYNOPSIS
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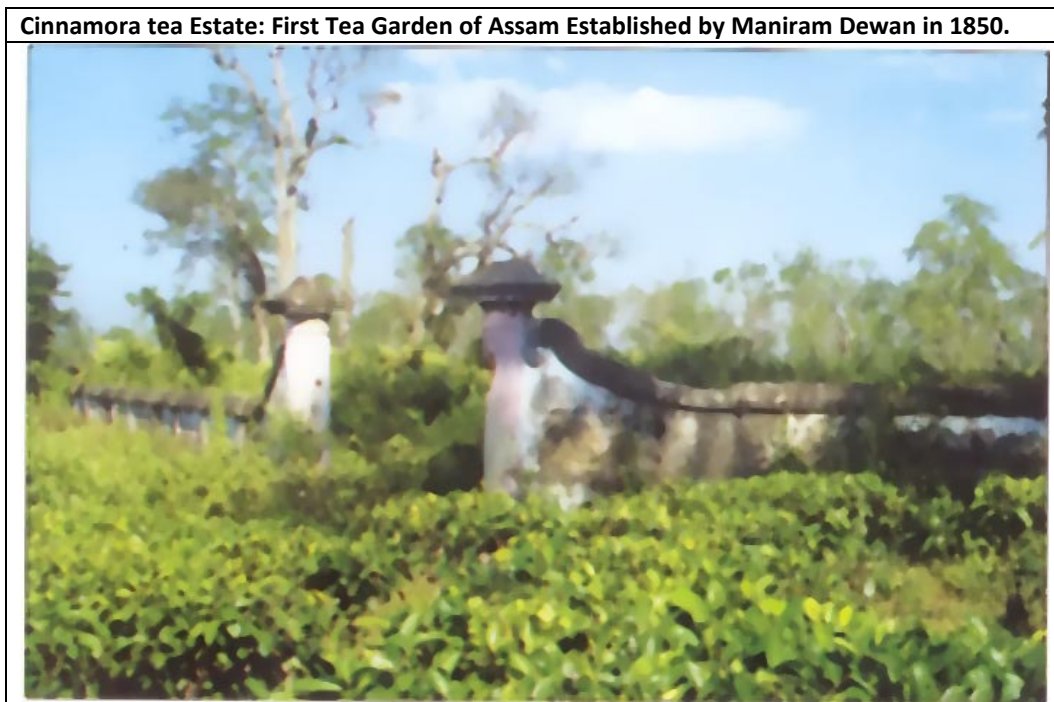
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I. Introduction: Assam is the biggest producer of quality tea in India, contributing about 55 per cent to country's total tea production. It is generally believed that the people of Bodo tribe brought tea into Assam (Indialine, 2008). But they produced for themselves and hardly took it outside Assam. As pointed out by Bhuyan (1974) the tea plant was discovered in 1823 by Robert Bruce, merchant and soldier of fortune, during his visit to Rongpur, where he was imprisoned by the Burmese. A Singpho chief furnished Bruce with some plants. In 1824 Robert Bruce gave some plants to his brother C. A. Bruce who handed them over to David Scott. Scott in turn gave a few specimens to the Botanical Garden, Calcutta. The discovery of tea plant in Assam enabled the East India Company to develop a trade, which China had hitherto monopolized. Bruce was appointed superintendent of the government tea forest, who in 1837 sent 46 boxes of Assam tea to the tea committee. When, in 1824, Dr. N. Wallich of Botanical Garden identified these specimens it was the beginning of the scientific study of tea in India. Dr. Wallich visited Assam in 1834 and submitted his report in 1835. The Assam Company was accordingly formed in England in 1839 with a capital of Rs. 5 lakh. The Assam Company with its headquarters in Nazira is the oldest commercial tea company of Assam which is still functioning. The second company was formed in 1859 as the Jorhat Tea Company and even today its central office is at Jorhat. The first consignment of 12 boxes of tea manufactured by the Singpho chiefs were shipped from Calcutta to London in 1835. The first auction of tea took place in London on May 26, 1841, which was conducted by Ms McKenzie Lyll & Company. 35 chests of tea made by the Singphos and 95 chests from the government plantation of Assam were offered (North East Enquirer, 2002). The biggest research centre of tea in the world, now situated in Jorhat, was started in Calcutta in 1900 by the India Tea Association. In 1904, a laboratory was started at Heelea-kah Tea Estate near Mariani. In 1912, the laboratory was shifted to Tocklai

(Jorhat) and was renamed as Tocklai Experimental Station. In 1964, the experimental station became Tea Research Association (TRA).

The first Indian to start planting of tea was an Assamese nobleman Maniram Dutta Barma, popularly known as Maniram Dewan. He was a Dewan of Assam Company until resigned in 1841 to start his own tea estate. He had two gardens at Jorhat and near Sonari. But the British hanged him in 1858 for taking part in mutiny in 1857. After Maniram Dewan's pioneering efforts, many others, mostly Assamese, came forward to plant tea. Someswar Sharma became the first Indian superintendent of the tea industry of the Manband Tea Company. After independence things started changing. The British dominated industry changed hands. Although the Jalans, Saharias, Ahmeds, Kanois, Darshan Lalls and few others were already there, the reputed industrialists of India like the Birla, Poddar, Paul, Shetia, Rhuia and Tata amongst other became the biggest producer of Assam tea. From 1823, the tea industry in Assam valley came a long way. Today there are about six lakh tea garden workers engaged in 850 tea gardens (North East Enquirer, 2002).



According to a report (North East Enquirer, 2002), in the year 2000, the total area of Assam under tea production was 26739 hectares and total production of tea was 451236 thousand kilograms, thus showing a yield (kg/hectare) of 1688. However, in 2001, the production of tea dipped to 450132 thousand kilograms, thus falling by 1104 thousand kgs from the previous year's production. The 2001 figures of Indian tea export (in million kgs) show a total figure of 164.19. The main countries to which the tea is going are CIS countries (including Russia and Khazakhstan) — 77.46 million kgs; UK — 15.41 million kgs; UAE — 19.65 million kgs; Iraq — 14.14 million kgs; Poland — 7.59 million kgs and the USA — 5.35 million kgs.

According to the Directorate of Tea, Govt. of Assam, there are about 28,000 small tea gardens in the State producing about 70 million kgs tea annually (cf. 451 million kgs mentioned above). According to another report, Assam has over 800 tea plantations that are of medium to large size. There are also over 200,000 small-scale cooperative and individual tea farms. On an average, Assam produces over 480 million kilogram of tea per year, making it the largest tea growing region in the world (North East Enquirer, 2002).

The State Government is thinking of registering the small tea gardens with the labour department. The Tea Board has opened a cell at the Assam Agricultural University to train small tea growers with the aim of improving the quality of Assam tea. A similar training session for small growers would also be started at Tocklai Research Station. According to the Tea Board, a cooperative of small growers was floated in Assam and the Tea Board would help it to purchase a factory of its own which in turn would help produce quality tea. Recently a group of tea makers of small tea growers from Assam visited Kangra valley of Himachal Pradesh to learn about mechanized plucking and new methods pruning tea bushes. Kangra valley is known for producing orthodox tea of a high quality. The group that was sponsored by the Tea Board returned with a wealth of information. The Tea Board will also introduce an export rating system soon to control

the quality of Assam tea. The tea research association is also taking measures in Tocklai (Jorhat) for producing quality tea.

II. The Tea Garden Labourers in Assam: Assam's tea industry is dependent on about two million labourers almost all of whom are the descendents of those who were brought to Assam as slaves first by the East India Company and later by the British rulers and entrepreneurs from 1830's through 1920's, mostly from the Santhal Parganas district of Bihar (now in Jharkhand state). The descendents of these slaves, are now called tea tribes (Chatterjee and Das Gupta, 1981; Verghese, 1996). The tea tribes form the backbone of the Assamese tea industry. The tea-tribes are found mainly in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Tinsukia and almost all the districts of Assam (Wikipedia). It may be mentioned here that Santhali speaker tea tribes are also found in parts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon districts. The population of Santhali speakers is about 135,900. People from the Singpho, Boro, Moran and Kachari tribes are also involved in growing, and harvesting of tea.

According to Behal (2006) the tea industry, from the 1840's onwards the earliest commercial enterprise established by private British capital in the Assam Valley, had been the major employer of wage labour there during colonial rule. It grew spectacularly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when tea production increased from 6,000,000 lb in 1872 to 75,000,000 lb in 1900 and the area under tea cultivation expanded from 27,000 acres to 204,000 acres. Employment of labour in the Assam Valley tea plantations increased from 107,847 in 1885 to 247,760 in 1900, and the industry continued to grow during the first half of the twentieth century. At the end of colonial rule the Assam Valley tea plantations employed nearly half a million labourers out of a labour population of more than three-quarters of a million, and more than 300,000 acres were under tea cultivation out of a total area of a million acres controlled by the tea companies.

As described by the Wikipedia, the Tea-tribes of Assam are among the backward and most exploited tribes in India, though their newer generation is comparatively educated and now it has intellectuals and professionals in various fields. The Tea tribes, being basically labourers, live in villages, inside tea-estates (established by tea-planters). These estates are located in interior places and this contributes to the backwardness and exploitation of them by the tea-planters. The workers, in a way, have to live with the basic facilities provided by the tea-planters. The tea-planters, usually exploit the tea-tribes in every possible way. Violence and agitation of labours against the management is common, where the state machinery normally protects the tea-planters. Non-education, poverty, addiction of males to country-beer, poor standard of living and health facilities are the problems in their life. There are instances when tea-planters do not even supply the life-saving drugs when workers are dying out of epidemics. The 'welfare officer' appointed in every tea-estate due to compulsion from Govt. of India, are mostly show-pieces than of any good.

III. The Recent Uprising of Tea-Tribe People in Assam: Tea plantation, tea estates and the tea industry as a whole has been seriously hit by the explosive environment in Assam. Militancy is telling heavily on the industry. Many tea gardens are abandoned by their owners and many others are somehow functional. The dwindling economic condition has further been made worse by the tough competition in the international market, falling prices and recurrent slumps (Orange, 2008). These factors have led to deterioration of the economic conditions of tea labourers in Assam. Secondly, the tea garden labourers who were brought as slaves or bounded labourers by the British to Assam, have now well settled in Assam and the new generation that grew up in Assam has become well-integrated with the Assamese culture (Kar, 1975, 2001). In due course, a demand for an equitable dealing arose. As viewed by some, with good housing, health and education along with better salaries and wages, the tea garden labourers enjoy better facilities than other labourers engaged elsewhere. Today prolific singers, sportspersons, academicians and even politicians are coming up from the garden areas

of Assam, which truly reflect their condition. However, the rosy picture presented by such views is not in tune with the findings of a number of studies such as Barker (1884), Gohain (1973), Phukan (1984), Dutta (1985), OKD Institute Report (1992, 1996), Dev and Phookan (1996), Sarma and Borah (1998), Kerketta (1999), ICMR (2001), Medhi et al. (2006), Singh et al. (2006), Das and Islam (2006), etc.

An ethnic clash between Bodo tribe (one of the largest tribes in Assam and in North East India) and Santhals (who are the descendents of indentured tea labors in Assam that migrated from the Santhal Parganas district of the erstwhile Bihar) erupted in early 1996. As Narzary (2006) points out, the hidden truth of the ethnic clash is the banning of entry into the forest, which caused heavy blow to the economy of Santhals. Narzary also holds that besides this, conspiracy and upper hand of third party cannot be denied. Thus there was an economic root of the ethnic clash and genocide.

In India, since her independence, 'reservation' is one of the major policy instruments used to bring about (at least supposedly) the protective justice to those who did not receive their due in the past. A very complicated chain of political and administrative considerations led to the representation of class by the castes and tribes. The appropriateness, desirability, efficacy and effectiveness of this representation are though questionable, it has given rise to caste and tribe consciousness, and subverted class-consciousness (Lenin, 1902; Sheppard et al., 1990; Leftwriter, 2007). Like many other caste and tribe groups, the tea tribes of Assam as well began demanding the 'Scheduled Tribes' status. This demand is naturally not welcome by many other sections of the Assamese society. This led to unrest and uprising of the tea-tribes in Assam in the recent past.

IV. The Study Area - Jorhat District of Assam: Jorhat is called the 'Tea Capital of The World'. It is located between the Brahmaputra on the North and Nagaland on the South at 26.46⁰N and 96.16⁰E in the Central part of Brahmaputra Valley. The District covers an area of 2859.3 Sq. Km. and has a population over 10 lakh (Census 2001). The area under

cultivation is about 1.66 thousand hectares. According to a report, it has 101 Tea gardens spread over 24,274 hectares of area (Govt. of Assam, 2008). According to another report the district has 135 tea gardens (NEFR, 2008), while yet another report mentions the number as 139 (DRDA, 2008).

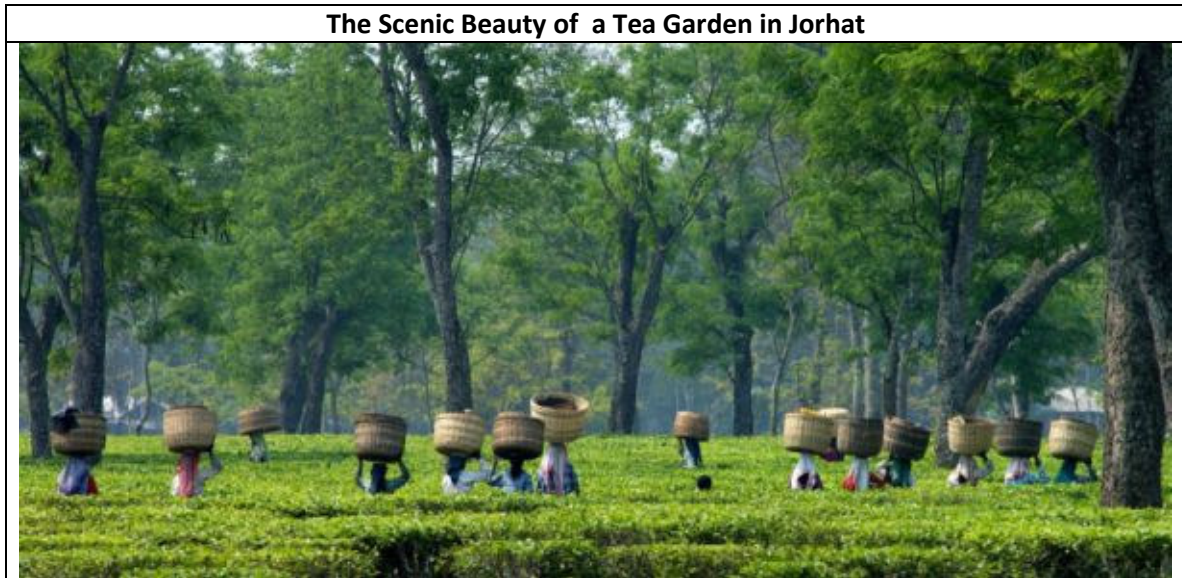


Table 1: Distribution of Per capita NSDP, 2000-01 (Rs/Year at constant 93- 94 prices)

District/State/India	Jorhat	Assam	India
Per capita NSDP, 2000-01 (at constant prices, 93-94)	11222	6158	10254
Source: HDI Report, 2003 & Statistical Outline of India, 2002-03			

As per the HDI report, the per capita NSDP of the district is almost double the state average and also better than the All-India average. As already stated, the district is also the first in rank in the HDI index. Thus, the district is relatively one of the better off districts of the state (Table-1).

V. Objectives of the Study: The proposed investigation has the following objectives:

- *To assess the socio-economic conditions of the tea garden labourers in the Jorhat district of Assam:* The socioeconomic conditions in this context encompass the status of the community as a collectivity vis-à-vis other communities (as a collectivity) with regard to different aspects of life such as education, health, employment, income, gender equality, access to and realization of opportunities

of participation in various activities of general significance, command over means of well-being, feeling of security and integrity to the social environment.

- To investigate how the economic performance of tea gardens (in the study area) determines the well-being of the labourers working in them
- To assess the role of labour unions in promoting the welfare of the workers in the tea gardens (in the study area).

VI. Hypotheses: The major hypotheses to test in this investigation are:

- *Inter-categorical indifference and integration:* The tea garden labourers as a collectivity (category-I) are statistically indistinguishable from other communities as a collectivity (category-II) in matters of different aspects of life such as education, health, employment, income, gender equality, access to opportunities, realization of opportunities, participation in various activities of social significance, ownership of resources and means of well-being, and they do not feel insecure and secluded with any substantiation of relevance.
- *Immunity to the conditions of the livelihood base:* The socioeconomic conditions of tea garden labourers are not contingent upon either the size or the economy (profitability or otherwise) of the garden in which they work.
- *Ineffectiveness of unionization:* The size of the labour force working in a tea garden and its level of unionization do not determine the socio-economic status of those labourers.

VII. Methodology: Not much information is available from secondary sources to prove or disprove as to indifference or difference of the community of tea garden labourers vis-à-vis other communities in the study area. There is a general impression held by the members of the (tea garden labourers) community that they make a lot of the underdogs and they have been discriminated against. There is another view, equally prevalent among the people (as well as the state), that the said view held by the tea garden labourers is unsubstantiated. The Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil in the Lok Sabha on November 27, 2007 said that Assam's Tea tribe communities had tended to

lose their tribal characteristics over the years and that the Registrar-General of India (RGI) also did not support their inclusion in the S.T. list for Assam. He said that there has been a demand for giving S.T. status to Tea and Ex-Tea garden communities comprising Munda, Oran, Gonds, Santhals, etc. from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, etc. This has been examined several times by the office of the RGI. The Lokur Committee had also considered this issue in 1965 and had noted that it agreed with the opinion of the Backward Classes Commission and did not recommend the tea plantation labourers to be treated as S.Ts. The settlers in the tea estates have tended to lose their tribal characteristics in their new surroundings. Moreover, the office of the RGI noted that many of the Tea tribe communities were not listed as S.Ts in their native States but as Scheduled Castes (Talukdar, 2007). This view should be read with the supposition that in the context of assessment of socio-economic condition in India, the economic class has been represented by the caste (tribe) or the conglomeration of castes (tribes) and the policy of reservation of socio-economic opportunities in favour of certain conglomerations (of castes or tribes) has been used as a means to secure protective discrimination.

The proposed study, therefore, would build upon the information collected from the primary sources, although it would use secondary information wherever available. The primary data will be collected from the structured questionnaires administered at the household level.

First, a list of major tea gardens in Jorhat (district) will be made. As it has been mentioned earlier, the list of tea gardens in the district is far from having been fully accounted for. To recall, one of the sources states that the district has 101 tea gardens spread on 24.3 thousand hectares of land. Another report mentions of 135 tea gardens in the district. Yet another report mentions of 139 tea gardens. The figure on the total number of tea gardens in the state (Assam) itself is not properly accounted for – the number varying between 8000 and 28000. Obviously this anarchy of figures is on

account of inclusion (or exclusion) of small patches of tea plantation in (from) the list of tea gardens.

The study, therefore, will have to resolve as to the universe (list) of tea gardens in the districts that might have a bearing on the assessment of tea garden labourers. It appears that the area under the tea garden or the labourer population working in them (or both) could be useful in classifying the gardens and enlisting them for our study.

At the second stage, the study proposes to classify the tea gardens in the district according to their status and economy of operation. Some tea gardens are in a bad shape (Orange, 2008) and striving for survival; they are a 'losing concern'. Some other tea gardens are just a 'going concern'; with little or no prospect at present to thrive in the future. Yet some other gardens are thriving and earning huge profits. Since the economic conditions of labourers working in a tea garden are closely connected with the economic (and managerial) status of the gardens, this classification will be used as a basis of one of the criteria for selecting the samples.

Using the two criteria (size of the garden in terms of area and number of labourers working therein) and the economic conditions of the gardens, a stratified sampling plan will be devised to randomly select the tea gardens for our study. In all, nine or ten gardens will be chosen randomly.

At the third stage, a random sample of household from the chosen tea gardens and its surroundings will be drawn to collect data. Two sets of households will be selected: the one from the tea garden labourers and the other from the rest of the communities. For practical reasons, the total number of households (from the two groups together) may not exceed 300. Thus, from nine (or ten) gardens about 30 households (each) will be chosen – 15 (or so) from the tea garden labourer households and 15 (or so) from other communities in the surroundings of the particular tea gardens.

The data thus collected will be subjected to suitable statistical analysis to draw conclusions. Although it is difficult to commit as to the statistical techniques to be used for analysis and hypothesis testing, it may be stated that the statistical techniques such as discriminant analysis and multiple regression would be used. Discriminant analysis is a statistical method to examine if two (or more) samples, supposedly drawn from two different multi-variate populations, are indeed different from each other (Kendall and Stuart, 1968). In this context, quantitative measures of different socioeconomic aspects of communities being studied would be used as the variates. Additionally, measures of central tendency, dispersion and correlation will be used wherever applicable. Measures of inequality (such as Gini's coefficient or Theil's measure) and poverty (based on per capita income/expenditure, calories intake, etc) will be used to study the internal structure of the sample households. An assessment of the health conditions of the household members also will be made by suitable methods. A measure of bargaining power of the unionized labourers vis-à-vis the tea-planters will also be devised. Effectiveness of unionization will be studied by the historical-dialectical method in terms of amelioration of the conditions of labourers and inculcation of class consciousness.

VIII. A Tentative Chapter Plan: It is envisaged that the dissertation will be divided into six chapters.

- **Chapter-I: Introduction** (including introduction to Jorhat, statement of the problem, literature review, methodology of data collection and analysis, etc)
- **Chapter-II: A Profile of Tea Gardens of Jorhat** (including their location, size, no. of labourers, economic performance, etc with a detailed description of sample tea gardens. It will also have a subchapter relating to tea labourer unions, their functions, effectiveness, etc)

- **Chapter-III: A Profile of Sample Households** (Sample tea garden labourers and other communities including all information collected from the sample households))
- **Chapter-IV: Quantification of Various Aspects of Socio-economic Conditions** (including methodology of quantification)
- **Chapter-V: A Comparative Depiction of Tea Garden Labourers' Community vis-à-vis Other Communities** (presentation of findings of the investigation).
- **Chapter-VI: Summary and Conclusions** (the final part of conclusions may have bearings on the policy formulation).

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