

# Agony of the Plantation Workers in Assam: A Historical Study

Bedanta Bikash Bora

Malinipur, Golaghat, Assam-785621  
bedantabbora96@gmail.com

## Article Info

Volume 83

Page Number: 5342 - 5351

Publication Issue:

March - April 2020

## Article History

Article Received: 24 July 2019

Revised: 12 September 2019

Accepted: 15 February 2020

Publication: 27 March 2020

## Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the conditions of the Tea Plantation workers in Assam. It tries to trace the history of the tea plantation in Assam and to draw out the conditions of the labourers in the plantations. It also tries to look into how the jump from Planters Raj to Swaraj i.e. the shift from colonialism to independence affected the conditions of the plantation workers. This paper primarily resolves around two questions: how did India's post-colonial regime affected the prolonged exploitation of the plantation workers, has the exploitation come to end with the independence of the country, and is there any historical continuity of that exploitation of these workers in India's post-colonial experience which still remains a cause for agony of the largest stake-holders of the tea industry. The impact of post-colonial legislations and welfare policies, various facets of the exploitation of the workers besides economic and the political dimension of the Bagan Life will also be a concern of this paper.

**Keywords;** *History of plantation, Assam, Exploitation of labourers, legislations, politics..*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The tea industry is the backbone of the economy of Assam. Assam being the largest producer of tea produces more than 50% of the total tea production of India. Although the tea industry in the state has been able to achieve a satisfactory growth over the years, but the problems of the largest stakeholders i.e. the plantation labourers are yet to be addressed. These workers are being deprived of the basic amenities and the facilities they deserve in a working environment. The condition of the workers is a significant issue to dwell upon considering the continuous deprivation even after seventy years of independence. This paper address the issue of exploitation and the corresponding problems associated with a Bagan Life. Although there has been legislations been enacted by the government for the fixation of wages and providing other facilities to the workers, the implementations of such legislations and following consequences would

also be a concern of the paper. This paper will also try to look into various dimensions of the exploitation of the tea labourers with the direct observation of the author in such an area. It will address the key question of whether the exploitation has come to an end with the end of Planter

Raj or it has got any historical continuity at present. Moreover, it will also look into various dimensions of the exploitation, other than economic.

## II. EMERGENCE OF TEA INDUSTRY IN ASSAM

The origin of tea industry in Assam takes us back to 19th century during the British colony in India. The East India Company had been importing tea from China in exchange of British woollens and since the 18th century. Till then Britain imported tea from China. Tea consumption, which was confined to a few elite classes of the British society until the beginning of the eighteenth century, became an

indispensable part of the poor and working class by the later half of the century (Burnett, 1999, p. 52). The increasing consumption of tea in Britain led to declare it as the National Drink in 1784. This growing demand for tea resulted in the commodification of tea as an object of international trade and its import from China increased from 142,000 lbs in 1711 to 2,800,000 lbs in 1751 and again, further

big increase from 4,900,000 lbs in 1781 to 15,000,000 lbs in 1791 (Burnett, 1999, p. 53). However, a tension emerged between Britain and China on the illegal export of opium to China by the East India Company and led to a threat to stop tea export. Moreover, the abolition of company's monopoly control over the export of tea from China in the 1930's

Charter Act, the directors of the company sought for an alternative to acquire a commodity with a monopoly control over it. The idea to plant tea in the Himalayan regions of India was put forwarded 'by a very intelligent gentleman of the name of Walker' (1839, p. 05). Already, Robert Bruce who visited Assam in 1824 had discovered the existence of tea leaves in the hills of Assam and referred to the northeastern region as a potential hub for tea production. Through his connections with BeesaGaum, the chief of a native tribe, Singpho, he came to know about existence of indigenous tea plant in those regions (Anonymous, 1839, p. 21). The discovery of tea in Assam led to a huge anticipation for the British to fulfill their dream of producing tea within the boundary of the British regime and cause a threat to the Chinese monopoly in tea production.

"Discovery (of tea) has been made of no less importance than that the hand of Nature has been planted the shrub within the bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain: a discovery which must materially influence the destinies of nations; it must change the employment of a vast number of individuals; it must divert the tide of commerce, and

awaken to agricultural industry the dormant of mighty country". (Sigmond, 1839).

As a result after the annexation of Assam in 1826, the East India Company initiated tea production in the jungles of Assam. Consequently, the establishment of Assam Company in 1839 marked the beginning of tea industry in India. The British passed several legislations to exploit the potential tea production and developed it into a lucrative export product by expanding its production. The colonial government gave extensive grants of land to British owned tea companies under Waste Land Rules 1839 the terms for which were much more liberal than those for agricultural land even though meant for sacrifice of public revenue (Bhowmik, 1985). It opened up the tea gardens for European entrepreneurs and consequently led to the expansion of tea production in Assam. The tea industry in Assam showed phenomenal growth record during the late 19th century, with the expansion of product from six million lbs in 1872 to 75 million lbs in 1900. While the land under cultivation also increased from 27 thousand to 204 thousand acres during this period (Behal, 1983). Moreover, the volume of adult labour force also increased from 10,847 in 1885 to 247,760 in 1900 (Behal, 1983, p. 45). However, in the beginning of the 20th century, the tea industry showed a steady growth, whereas the three major tea producing districts of Assam Valley (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) demonstrated a huge expansion total production from seventy million lbs in 1900 to 243 million lbs in 1947 (Annual Report on the Production of India 1900, 1947). Again, the total cultivated area increased sharply from 187,639 in 1900 to 279,299 acres in 1947 and the strength of daily, including both permanent and temporary, indicated a sharp increase from 289,920 to 394,799 during

that period of time in the above mentioned districts (Annual Report on the Production of India 1900, 1947).

### III. EXPLOITATION OF LABOUR

In the initial period, recruitment of adequate labour force was a great challenge before the planters. At first, the Chinese labourers were imported for coordinating the process of tea cultivation in Assam.. But they were very demanding and tough to handle. “More Chinese men were brought in to work as labourers in early 1840. However, these men were found to be troublesome and this experiment of importing workers from China turned out to be complete fiasco” (Behal, One Hundred Years of Servitude, 2014, p. 38). As a result, by 1843, they were released from their works and as an alternative, the planters sought to recruit native Assamese labour force in the plantation work. They used various coercive measures to compel the natives to work in the plantations. They kept the neighbourhood underdeveloped so that the labourers couldn’t find any employment in the neighbourhood and plantation becomes the only way to attain livelihood (Bhowmik S, 1985). Moreover, consumption opium and easier access to food by subsistence farming were seen as reasons for their disinterest in plantation work. The govt. prohibited the cultivation of opium to discourage its consumption. Captain Rowlatt, Comber, Lloyd and Holroyd, Collectors of Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong and Sibsagar districts recommended to raise land revenue ‘as a means of throwing labor into the hands of the planters by compelling the ryots to seek for employment in order to pay their revenue’ (1861, pp. 2-25). Having the full support of the govt, favourable land reforms were introduced which culminated in the eviction of local cultivators. It was a conscious effort on the part of the planters to ensure that natives became dependent on the plantation work to achieve their means of subsistence. For example, the same was applied in the Caribbean countries where the entire peasantry was excavated from their lands to provide land for the sugar plantation (Mandle, 1972, p. 57). In the same way, the planters took the help of the govt. to increase land revenue so that the native peasants around the plantations would give up their

lands and wish to work in the plantation for subsistence. As a result, the govt. of Bengal increased land revenue by 15%-30% in these areas. But all these couldn’t bring desired results to the British planters as the native Assamese people remained reluctant to work in the plantations. Instead they rose up in protest and refused to pay the increased rates (Guha, pp. 9-10).

The planters had to suffer a lot in such circumstances regarding the recruitment of labour forces in the plantations. As a solution to the problem of labour shortage, they asked for help from private contractors or arkatis. These recruiters roamed around the Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas and the Central Province (Madhya Pradesh) to recruit the impoverished tribal in the plantation work. “The unwillingness of Assamese peasants and the corresponding absence of a labour market were frequently cited as reasons for long-distance recruiting, but there is no doubt that the high wages demanded by the local labourers was an important trigger” (Behal, One Hundred Years of Servitude, 2014, p. 55). The report of the committee appointed to enquire about the tea states in 1868 reveals that the local wages had doubled since 1850s due to the works available in PWD and even if the local labourers were then ready to work, it would affect the profits of the planters (Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Te Cultivation in Assam, 1868). This report also reveals the very low wages paid in the tea gardens which failed to attract the locals. So as a solution, they decided to recruit labourers from the neighbouring states through the artikars, who operated in the districts of eastern India.. The artikars used dubious means and tempted the tribals by promising a better life and amenities. These included advanced luns paid to potentials victims, tempting of young men with women and liquor and kidnapping of young girls and marrying them in the depots, known as ‘depot marriages’ (Behal, One Hundred Years of Servitude, 2014). In 1868, report submitted by the Bengal government appointed W.

Ainslie, H. Stewart Reid and J. M. Cunningham to enquire about the status of tea industry in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet, presented a very appalling scenario of the plantations in Assam. They reported about the deception of the migrated labourers by the recruiters. The process of recruitment developed under the arakatis was full of abuses which led to serious illness and high mortality among the migrants. They were made to stay in an extremely inhuman, unhygienic and conditions. The Chief Commissioner, in 1878, expressed concerns about the death rate in the Assam Valley districts, which were 7.35, 7.72, 9.64 and 11.09 per cent respectively in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgong. However, the planters were not very concerned about the inhuman sufferings of the migrants, but worried about the financial losses caused by them. The 1868 committee also reported regarding the high rate of mortality both at the transit depots and the river voyage to Assam (Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Te Cultivation in Assam, 1868). The migrant who were promised higher wages and better live in the plantations, were guarded like prisoners during the journey. Things remained same after arrivals on the plantation, where

“They found themselves set down in the midst of a swampy jungle far from human habitation where food was scarce and dear, where they have seen their families and fellow labourers struck down in numbers by disease and death, and where they themselves postrated by sickness and have been able to earn less than they could have in their home. This is no fanciful picture; it has occurred in many instances and when to the ills we have described, the labourer has had to serve a hard master, it is not to be wondered at that he was thoroughly discontented and miserable”. (1868, p. 36).

The commissioners presented the figures of high mortality in many gardens in support of their report. There was completely lack of proper medical

assistance to the migrants in the gardens. The migrants who were not familiar with the new places, the kind of work, climate and diet had suffered from serious illnesses and met death. The situation was even worse for the survivors, who had to bear the ill-treatment and exploitation at the hands of the planters. Between May 1863 and May 1866, approximately 84,915 labourers were imported into Assam, out of which only 49,750 workers were working in 1866. “All must have died during the three years or have absconded and not been caught, and it is a terrible certainty that the greater number of the later must have died of hunger or exhaustion in the jungles (Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Te Cultivation in Assam, 1868). The report of the Sanitary Commissioner of Assam in 1877-84 revealed the pathetic condition of labourers. According to the report, bad water, lack of cleanliness, damp floors were the main reasons of high mortality. Moreover, it also talked about the malnutrition of the labourers. Due to insufficient intake of nitrogenous and oleaginous diet, as they couldn’t purchase food articles that possess oil and nitrogen, the labourers were in a stage of ‘extreme emaciation’ and ‘advanced starvation’. Their food rations were also limited as the influx of tea workers created a food problem in Assam. Moreover, the report also identified consumption of bad water as a cause of deaths caused by diseases like cholera, dysentery and diarrhea. So once the migrated labourers came to the plantations, they realized that they were no more than slaves. Various coercive methods were used to keep the immigrant labours tied to the plantations. For example, the Legislative Council of India in 1859, enacted an act known as ‘The Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act’ which said that the workmen who had taken from the employers any advance money for performing any work would, according to the act, constitute a contract. If any workman violates the act, then he would be subjected to prosecution and imprisonment. One very important aspect of the act is that the contracts could be in either oral or written.



But then it was a tragic destiny of the labourers that when they were employed, they were given a small amount of money as advance and they had to press their thumbs on a contract of which they had no knowledge. So unknowingly, each worker bound himself into a contract of working at least four years in the plantation.

The wage rate of the workers was very low and remained static even after significant increase in productivity. The tea labourers were paid lower wages than the agricultural workers in the neighbouring areas. It was written by the SDO of Karimganj in 1833 that the labourers in tea gardens were paid Rs 3 per month, while the agriculture worker in the neighbouring villages comfortably earned Rs 7 per month. The productivity of the workers was never considered as a concern in the determination of wage (Bhowmik, S. K., 1980).

“There exists a dualism in the plantation system. The plantation in its relation to the outside world was governed by the market principle, i.e. the price of its products was fixed through the interaction of demand and supply. At the same time, its own internal hierarchy was regulated by coercion. For instance, in the tea industry, the wages of the plantation workers were fixed by the planters through their organizations like the Indian Tea Association, Indian Tea Planters Association and others. The workers had no say in it”. (Bhowmik S. K., 1980).

Due to such low wages paid to the workers, the Royal Commission on Labour in 1930, suggested the fixation of minimum wage in the tea industry and recommended for a machinery to execute it. But the planters felt it “absolutely unnecessary” to fix any minimum wage (1929, p. 98). It was also observed by the Rake Commission that the workers were yet to develop a spirit to bargain collectively and so they were unable to stand united against their such exploitation in terms of wages paid to them (Rege, 1946, p. 176).

As the existing laws couldn't prevent the act of breaching by the migrants, the govt. amended the laws and as a outcome the Assam Contract Act came into being which introduced the system indenture contract, that continued during the next half century, till the first decade of twentieth century. This contract system fixed minimum monthly wages, Rs 5 for men and 4 for women and 9 hours of work per day for a contract term of 9 years. The planters were given absolute powers to punish and arrest the workers, even within a warrant, and imprisonment if violated. “Notoriously, the state allowed planters penal rights over their workers. Penal provisions such as the right of private arrest created a virtual Planters' Raj in Assam. The reformist provisions within these laws remained confined to paper” (Sharma, 2009). On the other hand, for the labourers it ensured a minimum wage, housing and medical facilities and subsidized rice. The rationale behind providing the labourers residence near the bagans was to utilize the maximum amount of sunlight for work. The planters, astonishingly, put the garden clock one hour ahead of the IST, and their life and work were directed according to this scheduled ‘Bagan Time’ (Money, 1870). However, the enquiry of 1868 revealed that the minimum wages for indenture labour were not paid. Violating the 1865 act, wages were linked to various tasks. In order to earn their daily work, the labourers had to complete a daily task which was assigned by the planters on the basis of their understanding of a reasonable days labour. The planters considered that the coolies are primitive and work on a natural notion of time, so shift from time-wage to task wage (Behal, One Hundred Years of Servitude, 2014, p. 65). The payment of minimum wage remained on the pages of the act.

#### **IV. SCENARIO AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

By the end of the indenture system in the twentieth century, the workers were migrating to the plantations. The availability of land attracted the migrants from land-scare regions. Moreover, the possibility of obtaining cultivable land outside the

plantations kept many workers to stay here even after expiration of their contracts. There were 12,00,000 such 'time-expired' workers in Assam in 1920 out of which 50,000 held land (1930, p. 359). Although the penal contract and the indentured system ended in British Empire, and there was high mortality, low fertility and desertion, the planters kept the wages low. Although the indenture system was over, it was yet there in the minds of the workers and taking it's an advantage the planters continued the exploitation.

Planter Raj was so much powerful, especially in the Upper Assam, that it virtually meant prohibition in free movement of the natives, use of umbrellas or vehicles in presence of the whites. But gradually, in the wake of the independence movement, the Congress started approaching the tea workers. Gradually they became part of the freedom struggle. Congress made an declaration in 1946 that their trade union wing, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) would have a monopoly over the tea labour unions. Congress organizers, after 1948, established several organizations for eg- ChahMazdoorSangh, which were affiliated by the Congress party. In 1948, under the name of Assam ChahMazdoorSangh, an all Assam organization was created (Sharma, 2009).

Things didn't change even after independence. The tea tea garden labourers adopted a new identity as 'tea-tribe' and recognized as one of the 'adivasi's of Assam. Assamese people called them as 'baganiyas' on the basis of their language. But these new identities were just to hide their socio-economic problems. The problems of the tea tribes were never addressed. The remained dependent on the plantations as their was scarcity of cultivable land it was very difficult to get employment outside the plantations. The exploiters changed, but not many changes in the conditions of the exploited people. The tea labourers became slaves of 'brown- chahibs' i.e. the middle class managers and the industrial houses (Sharma, 2009). Exploitaion in terms of

wages, rights still continued. Many elements of the colonial Planter Raj has remained in the tea plantations which still affecting the tea labourers. Their rights and priviledges are compromised. The Assamese or non-Assamese owner class or the bureaucratic system of the tea gardens doesn't consider them as human beings. There still exists a neo-colony inside the tea gardens which frustrates the labourers and they became violent (Misra, 2003). Although they were included in the greater Assamese society, it was not substantive. Discrimination and deprivation continued with them trhw were never paid the due respect they deserve as a part of Assamese culture. There are 30 lakhs people belonging to tea-tribes, who form 20% of tha total population of Assam. They belong to more than 40 different communities and have their origins back in Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and also have their mothertoungues. But they adopted a version of Assamese as their mothertounge and it resulted in a complex culture main elements of which were brought from Assamese. But the greater Assamese society consider them as inferior and it has hampered the process of their assimilation into Assamese society. Tea tribes have remained as a sub-culture of Assamese socity (Bhowmik S. , 1985).

Even after more than half a century, the issues of the tea labourers are not addressed, neither by their labour organizations, nor by the subsequent governments. The issues of the tea tribes have remained as an instrument of vote bank politics. Being the 20% of the population of Assam, they are very important for the political parties. Everytime before the elections a dirty game is played by the parties regarding their issues like increase in wage, other facialities, but never fulfilled. Promises and the steps taken to meet their problems remained only on the papers. Although majority of them belong to tribes, they are not given the status of Scheduled Tribe, even after being one of the most underdeveloped tribes. So the priviledges they deserve to get in education or govt. jobs now has

been compromised. Socially they are one of the most backward communities, still living in pathetic conditions. Basic amenities like clean water, health services, right to education, equal status in the society, dignity of labour, a quality working life, dignity of women is not given to them. All these have led to formation of militant groups like Cobra Commando etc to protect and safe-guard their community.

#### **V. EXPLOITATION OF TEA GARDEN LABOUR IN THE CONTEMPORARY TIME WITH THE HELP OF AEXAMPLE IN MAHALAXMI TEA ESTATE**

For the understanding of the exploitation of labourers, I have taken an example of a tea estate. The name of it is Mahalaxmi tea estate situated in the MarangiMouza of Golaghat district in Assam. Mahalaxmi tea estate is the biggest of this area registered as covering 20 acres of land. It was started by the Britishers in the nineteenth century itself. The tea estate is the source of employment for 1200 permanent workers and the number of temporary workers keeps on changing. Let us discuss different aspects of the garden life through the direct observation of the researcher.

**Types of works:** In the Mahalaxmi tea estate, workers are mainly leaf pluckers, pesticide sprayers, workers of tea factory located inside the tea estate, bungalow workers working as cook, servant, chowkidar, labourers etc. Almost 88% of the workers are female, who are mainly engaged in leaf plucking. Rest are male who are mainly pesticide sprayers, factory workers or chowkidars, cutters of branches of tea in the winter.

**Income:** The permanent and temporary workers of the tea estate get Rs 70 as their daily wage. Permanent workers work in the same garden in a year, while the temporary workers work 6/7 months and most of them don't work the same work, sometimes they get engaged in seasonal agricultural works or other works like MGNREA, daily wage labour (hazira) etc. The income paid to them is

much less than what the tea estate actually earns. For example, in a working day, a tea plucker plucks average 20/30 kg of leaves. If the price of per kg tea leaves in Rs 25 (it fluctuates), then the money value of the labour done by the labour is  $25/30 = \text{Rs } 750$  or  $25/20 = \text{Rs.}500$ . But the wage paid to the labour is only Rs 120. In some of the work it is less than that. The surplus value, as stated by marks is Rs  $(750-120) = \text{Rs } 630$  or Rs  $(500-120) = \text{Rs } 380$ . This is the surplus that is not shared by the labourer and invested in further expansion of the production by the tea estate. However, it is true that this Rs 630 also include the cost of other three factors of production other than labour, i.e. cost of land, capital and organization. But even after that such a huge difference in the surplus value per labour per day is a huge amount. Even the minimum wage that has been fixed by govt. isn't implemented in the ground level sometimes.

Another thing I observed by interacting with many labourers that there is a sharp difference in the wage fixed by the govt. between a labour working in a tea factory inside a tea estate or in a factory outside a garden. In a tea factory inside a tea estate gets the wage fixed by the govt. as tea garden wage. The wage is Rs 139. But a worker working in a factory which is situated outside plantation gets Rs 240. Because his wage is fied under Assam Industrial Labour wage Act. But both of them do the same labour.

Political dimension of the tea estate: It is the direct observation of the researcher that a big nexus is working in the tea estate which is a main reason of their sufferings. This vicious circle is constituted by owners of the tea gardens, bureaucratic structure of the bagans and the state level and local leaders of the tea labour organizations. The tea labour organizations always have a close relation with the political parties. The Assam ChahMazdoorSangh is a affiliated body of Indian National Congress. Such political affiliation has hampered their development rather than addressing their issues. In the tea bagans,

which party the tea labourers would vote, is determined by this nexus. The mostly illiterate voters always follow the direction given by their leaders. So, the leaders of the tea labour organizations negotiate with the political parties and decide whom they as a community would vote. The owners of the tea gardens play an important role. In case of Mahalaxmi tea estate, the owner is a district president of a political party. So it is observed during the elections that he with the help of the local leaders, whom he pleases with money, he forcefully mobilizes the voters of the estate vote according to his directions. In a way, the poor tea garden labourers even don't enjoy the right to vote according their wish. The benefits that are ensured by the govt. for tea labourers are curtailed by these leaders and it doesn't reach the real beneficiaries.

**Housing:** The permanent workers of the Mahalaxmi tea estate are provided houses called as *bagan line* around the tea estate. It is the system adopted by the British so that they can utilize the maximum work from the workers. The houses made for them are in pathetic condition. There is no arrangement of drainage system. It's not been many years that they have got electricity. They live in unhygienic conditions. They consume polluted water, and most of them don't use toilets. They are not at all concerned about cleanliness and most of them keep their surroundings very dirty. The conditions of the temporary workers are worse. They live in thatched houses, in a very dirty, unhygienic condition. They don't have electricity. One major problem for the labourers of Mahalaxmi estate is the rampant of wild elephants, tigers from the Namabor wild life reserve only 4 km away from the tea estate. They destroy their houses and even kill people every year.

**Education and Health:** 80% of the people in Mahalaxmi tea estate. As they earn very low, so they are not interested to educate their children. Rather, they emphasized on earning two square meals. Children grow up by working in tea gardens like cleaning of the tea trees after the branches are cut in

the winter, collection of tea seeds etc. There is a govt. primary school near the tea estate, but its infrastructure and facilities are not up to the mark. There is only one teacher in the school, so it's very tough for him to handle all the students. Most of the students come to school only to have mid-day meal. Most of them even come in the afternoon, when meals are provided. So, most of the students couldn't make to the higher classes.

There is no hospital in the Mahalaxmi tea estate. Patients are taken to the district hospital which is 30 km way. So often the labourers go to *bez*, the traditional doctors who offer medicine. They also believe in black magic and many among the labourers perform. Because of their low earnings, they can't afford to take nutritional food. So malnutrition is a common scenario. 59.9% children in the tea estate are underweight. Among adults, thinness is seen among almost 69.9% adults. Anemia is widespread and almost 70% of the population suffers from it. Worm infection, respiratory infection, skin problem, tuberculosis, back pain are common to many of the labourers. Intoxication is a common phenomenon there. 80% of the males and 70% of the females consume alcohol, mainly rice beer (*laopani*) and locally produced liquor. Some families run a illegal business of preparing and selling locally made alcohol (*mod*). 70% of the males and almost 35% of the females smoke and chew tobacco. Out of which some are young boys and girls. Because of which, in the recent years four people have died of cancer. As they work very rigorously, they become easily prone to fatigue, irritability, headache, spinal disorders. Workers, who work in the tea factory, continuously hear high decibel sounds which lead to irritability, headache or hearing impairment. The labourers who spray pesticides are not provided gloves, masks or helmets. There is no such labour security provisions even in the tea factory inside the Mahalaxmi tea estate, so accidents occurs very frequently. Women who pluck tea leaves are not provided with umbrellas while working in the summer, they use



traditional japis. There many instances that they have been bitten by snacks or insects, but as there is no hospital, they go to bez for treatment. Moreover, Workmans's Compensation Act, Employees State Insurance etc facilities are not provided in the estate. Moreover, the anxiety or fear for the manager still continues in the minds of the tea labourers who use them as their slaves. Women are not given any special attention during their pregnancy and not even granted adequate maternity leave. So they prefer to do abortion, mostly by using medicines given by local bez at many times becomes dangerous.

**Alienation of the workers:** If we go by the concept of alienation put forwarded by Marx, it's completely applicable to the tea garden workers. They are not only alienated or exploited in terms economically, but they they are socially segregated or marginalized. They don't realize that the product produced by their labour is consumed across the world. The tragedy is that they never get to taste the best quality tea as it is exported abroad. For them it has become a mechanical cycle to always go to the plantation and do perform their work and come back in the evening. The British arranged houses for the workers near the tea estates known as bagan lines so that they can utilize the day time to the fullest without wasting a minute. An alarm would ring in the morning to give them a signal to come to work. The watch of the tea gardens used to be one hour faster than the normal watch, only to use the most of the day time. Although they can't keep the watch faster now, but many things of that legacy has continued. Even now, there exists a feudal structure in the tea estates. The owner or the bureaucrats consider the labourers as their subjects, not as right bearing fellow citizens, as said by many labourers. Two /three months back in a tea estate near Mahalaxmi, two owners of the garden started on the workers protesting for a genuine demand where some were killed and many injured. The controversy is still going on that the police protected the convicts and justice did not prevail. There are many instances

when female workers have been sexually harassed without any justice. Moreover, the gender dimension of the tea labourers is already known to all.

Moreover, the tea labourers who had migrated from different neighbouring states gave up their mother tongues and adopted a version of Assamese known as Baganiya. They became a part of greater Assamese culture. But even now, they are not given equal status in the Assamese society. They consider them as inferior. The Assamese people consider them as untouchables, to an extent. If they visit a labour for some reason, they take bath before entering home. The labourers are given separate glasses or plates if they are offered to eat something and these plates and glasses are kept outside. Moreover, it is very difficult for the children of the tea tribe to take education in Assamese. They found it difficult to cope, as it's not their mother tongue. An inferiority complex always haunts the children and they don't feel themselves as capable as the Assamese classmates. They are also deprived of the ST status also many of these tea tribes were originally tribals. They deserve the special attention of the govt. as said by a local AATSA (All Assam Tea Tribe Student Association) leader.

This social and economic marginalization is very dangerous for the workers. This constant alienation has sometimes made them violent and there are many instances that they murdered the owner or bureaucrats working there. This psychology developing among the workers is very dangerous.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The exploitation of the tea garden workers has still continued although the degree of this exploitation and the structure of the exploiters have changed. From the above findings, we can easily realize that although the British had left, the workers are given equal rights, the legacy of that Planters Raj is evident in some way or the other. The independence certainly have changed the condition of the workers, mostly in pen and papers, but it couldn't change their destiny to be exploited in the gardens. The

exploiters have changed, exploitation has reduced, but it has not come to an end. The reflection of the century long legacy of the tea gardens can still be observed. It is a need of the hour to take care of these people who taken care of us since the 18th century and contributed to establish Assam or India in the global map.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. Anonymous. (1839). Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil, and Productions: with the Discovery of the Tea Plant, and of the Countries Adjoining Assam. London: Smith, Elder and Co.
- [2]. Annual Report on the Production of India 1900. (1929). Indian Tea Statistics, Indian Tea Association, 1929
- [3]. Behal, R. P. (2014). One Hundred Years of Servitude. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- [4]. Behal, R. P. (1983). Some aspects of the growth of the Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) 1900-1947. Ph.D Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University.
- [5]. Bhowmik, S. K. (1980). The Plantation as a Social System. Economic and Political Weekly , 1524-1527.
- [6]. Bhowmik, S. (1985). Plantation Labour in North-East India. Economic and Political Weekly , 538-541.
- [7]. Burnett, J. (1999). Liquid Pleasures: Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain. Flowrence: KY: USA: Routlage.
- [8]. Copy of Papers Received from India Related to the Measures Adopted for Introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant within the British Possessions in India . (1839). Parliamentary Papers.
- [9]. Guha, A. From Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom struggle and electoral politics in Assam 1826-1947.
- [10]. Mandle, I. R.(1972). The Plantation Economy: An Essay in Definition. Science and Society , 36, 57.
- [11]. Memorandum submitted by Govt of Assam. Report of the Indian Statutory Commission (1930).
- [12]. Misra, U. (2003). Assam Tea: The Bitter Brew. Economic and Political Weekly , 3029-3032.
- [13]. Money, E. (1870). The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea. Calcutta: Thacker & Co.
- [14]. Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Bengal, Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal.(1861). Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press.
- [15]. Production Report (1900). Indian Tea Statistics.
- [16]. Rege, D. V. (1946). Report on an Enquiry into conditions of labour in Plantations in India. Delhi: Government of India.
- [17]. (1868). Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Te Cultivation in Assam. Cachar and Sylhet.
- [18]. Sharma, J. (2009). 'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry. Modern Asian Studies by Cambridge University Press , 1287-1324.
- [19]. Sigmond, W. (1839). Tea its Medicinal Effects and Moral . London.