

“FROM LEAF TO CUP: UNPACKING THE HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF ASSAM'S TEA ESTATES”.

JYOTI PATOWARY ¹, PRERONA NATH ², SUDARSHANA BHAGAWATI³

¹GUEST FACULTY, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, LOKANAYAK OMEO KUMAR DAS COLLEGE, DHEKIAJULI, ASSAM, 784110.

²MASTERS OF ARTS, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, GAUHATI UNIVERSITY, ASSAM, 781014.

³MASTERS OF ARTS, DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, GAUHATI UNIVERSITY, ASSAM, 781014.

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

Assam tea is more than just a popular beverage; it's a symbol of warmth, comfort, and tradition. But what makes Assam tea so special? Beyond its unique flavours and rich aroma, it carries a deep history, a dedicated community, and a complex blend of social and economic influences that shape its enduring appeal. In this article, we will take a journey into the world of Assam tea, exploring the lives of the hardworking tea workers who bring this beloved beverage to our tables. We will trace the history of tea cultivation in Assam, from its modest beginnings to its rise as a global leader in tea production. We will also shed light on the economic and social conditions of the tea community, highlighting their challenges, achievements, and progress in education. And the initiatives taken by the government to support them. By sharing the stories of the people behind Assam's famous tea, we hope to deepen our appreciation for their dedication while also raising awareness of the struggles they face and the steps being taken to improve their lives.

INTRODUCTION:

Tea is one of the world's most beloved beverages, with over thirty countries now producing this popular drink. Among the top tea producing nations, India, China, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Indonesia. India's tea industry is one of the country's oldest and most resilient sectors, playing a vital role in driving economic growth and development. India plays a significant role in the world tea Market, producing a staggering 26% of the world's total tea output. The country's major tea producing states are Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Assam, a northeastern state in India, the region's unique combination of rich soil, ample rainfall and favorable climate creates the perfect conditions for cultivating strong, flavorful black tea. The origins of Assam tea trace back to 1823 when Robert Bruce discovered wild tea plants in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley. This led to the establishment of the first tea garden by the government in the Lakhimpur district in 1833.

Assam holds a unique position in India, producing an impressive 53% of the total tea output, with a vast plantation area spanning over 3.22 lakh hectares, which is more than half of India's total tea cultivation area. This, in turn, strengthens Assam's GDP and improves the overall socio-economic condition of the region.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To explore the history and significance of Assam tea, highlighting its distinct flavour, aroma, and cultural importance.
2. To understand the lives of Assam's tea workers, highlighting their hardships, achievements and progress in education.
3. To create awareness about the Challenges faced by the tea community and showcase efforts by the government to uplift their lives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study was conducted at the Dhekiajuli Tea Garden, located in the Sonitpur district of Assam. The study relied on Primary data collection methods such as personal interviews, questionnaire, observation and conversation. Additionally, Secondary data were sourced from offline and online publications, research journals, books and online websites.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

- Manoj Kumar Sarman (2017), studied the socio-economic status, and economic backwardness and suggested measures to improve the condition of the tea garden women workers of the Bokakhat sub-division of the Golaghat district of Assam.
- Pallabi Devi (2014), their study has been designed to inform the socio-economic status of the tea garden women workers of Sonitpur district of Assam. Women could be an important role player in the uplifting of the society. For development of human society participation in economic, political and social field is essential.
- Saikia Biswajeet (2008), in his study regarding the problems facing by the tea garden worker for their identity and rights. He pointed that tea community in Assam has never received any attention for boosting their development.

THE LEGACY OF ASSAM'S TEA PLANTATION; A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

Assam Tea: A legacy of flavour and tradition:

The discovery of Assam tea was a lucky accident, but its rise into a thriving industry was shaped by the vision and determination of Maniram Dewan, a remarkable figure in Assam's history. Born in 1806, he was a nobleman, a visionary, and one of India's earliest tea pioneers. The story of Assam tea began much later, in 1823, when Scottish traveler Robert Bruce discovered a unique tea plant growing wild in the lush Brahmaputra Valley. Bruce's discovery was facilitated by Maniram Dewan, a local pioneer who introduced him to the Singpho tribe. The Singpho people had been brewing tea from these tradition would shape the entire industry. Bruce sent samples to experts in Calcutta, who confirmed that this plant *Camellia Sinensis* Var. *Assamica* was distinct from Chinese tea. The first tea plantation was established in Assam's Lakhimpur district in 1835, followed by the formation of the Assam Tea Company in 1839. By 1838, the first batch of Assam tea was shipped to Britain, marking the beginning of a global phenomenon.

A new era for Assam tea:

Today, Assam tea is renowned worldwide for its bold, malty flavor and rich, amber color. However, the industry faces numerous challenges, including raising temperatures, soil depletion, and a shortage of skilled workers. Yet, with every challenge comes an opportunity. Sustainable farming, organic cultivation, and eco friendly tea tourism are opening new doors for the industry. The success of Assam tea led to the expansion of plantations to other parts of the country between the 1950's and 1960's . In 1970, the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre was established to facilitate better marketing of tea produced in the region. Today, it stands as the world's largest CTC Tea Auction Centre after Colombo and Malaysia and world's second largest in terms of total area.

THE PLIGHT OF TEA ESTATES WORKERS IN ASSAM; A SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL ANALYSIS:

We conducted a preliminary survey across multiple regions of Dhekiajuli Bagan in Sonitpur district, gathering data through a structured questionnaire to assess the prevailing conditions of the community. In addition to firsthand observation, we have incorporated a comprehensive review of secondary sources, including books, research articles and newspaper reports authored by various scholars. This comprehensive study has given us a rich insight into the lives of

Assam's tea tribe community. We've uncovered the social, economic and educational challenges they face and gained a deeper understanding of their daily struggles and triumphs.

Social conditions: A legacy of marginalization

The tea workers of Assam, predominantly from the Adivasi community, brought to the region by the British during colonial rule. For generations, they have been socially marginalized, leaving them with little opportunity to improve their lives. Their living conditions on tea estates are grimy, overcrowded homes, poor sanitation, and a lack of clean water and medical facilities. Malnutrition, high infant mortality rates, and diseases like anemia and tuberculosis are rampant due to poor diet and lack of medical care. The social conditions of tea estates people in Assam are marked by significant challenges and hardships. Despite contributing significantly to the state's economy, tea State workers face numerous social injustices. The tea estate management often wields significant power over the workers, leading to exploitation and mistreatment. Overall, the social conditions of tea estates people in Assam are a pressing concern that requires immediate attention.

Economic Hardships: Trapped in Poverty

Tea estates workers in Assam face harsh economic conditions, struggling with low wages, job insecurity and poor working environment. Despite being the backbone of the state's tea industry, they earn very low as compared to other government and private sector employee. They earn shockingly low wages, often between 250 and 350 per day far below what is needed for a decent living. From the study, it is found that, permanent workers get a free quarter and some other facilities like water and toilet facilities. And it was also found that tea estates provide food rations, medical aid but this creates dependency, making it harder for workers to leave, even where conditions are poor.

Barriers to Education: A lost future

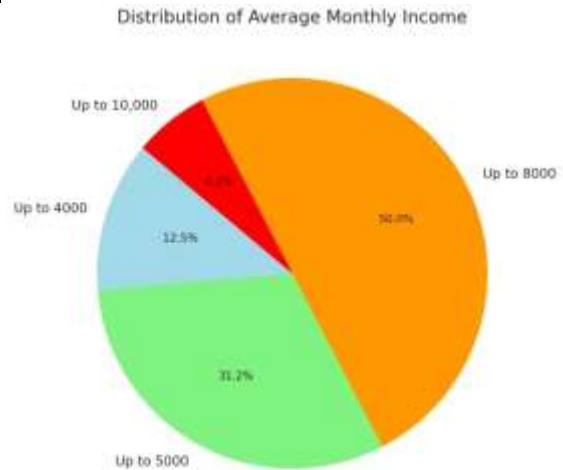
Education is the foundation of a developed society and Plays a crucial role in its progress. In the study area, it was observed that the overall education level among respondents is quite low. Assam's tea estate workers face a daunting obstacle; a lack of quality education. This fundamental right remain elusive, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities. Many workers lack basic literacy skills, while their children are forced to abandon their studies due to economic hardships.

But a heartening transformation is underway in the tea community. Younger generation are realizing the value of education and embracing learning with fresh enthusiasm. Full of ambition and determination, they are looking beyond traditional gardening roles, eager to explore new career paths. With a strong desire for economic independence, they are taking bold steps towards a brighter future, seizing new opportunities, and shaping a better path for themselves and their community.

Using the valuable data gathered from the tea tribe community of Dhekiajuli Bagan in Sonitpur district, we have presented the figures below:

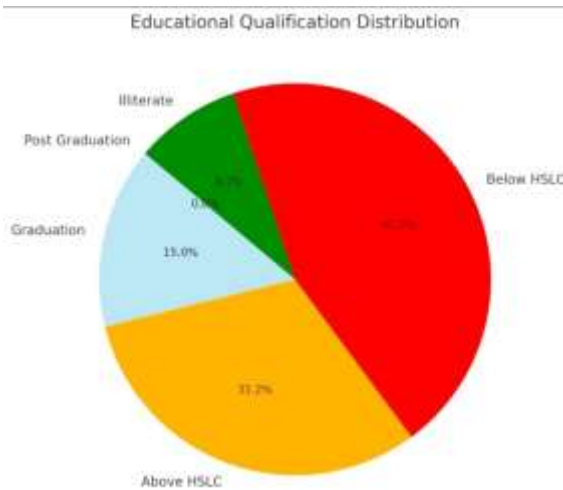
Average monthly income of the respondents

Sl. No	Average Monthly Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Up to 4000	10	12.5%
2	Up to 5000	25	31.25%
3	Up to 8000	40	50%
4	Up to 10,000	5	6.25%



Educational status of the respondents

Qualification	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Post Graduation	0	0.00%
Graduation	12	15.00%
Above HSLC	25	31.25%
Below HSLC	36	45.00%
Illiterate	7	8.75%
Total	80	100.00%



EMPOWERING TEA COMMUNITY IN ASSAM:

The Assam and Central Governments have launched several initiatives to uplift the tea community.

Wage Revision And Financial Assistance:

- Chah Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela Scheme - Direct bank transfers to tea workers to promote financial inclusion.
- Welfare Pension schemes for retired tea workers.

Healthcare Improvement:

- Free Medical Services through Ayushman Bharat and Assam Tea Tribes Welfare Board Health Scheme.
- Free Sanitary Pads for women workers.

Education and Scholarship:

- Establishment of new schools in tea estates.
- Assam Tea Tribes Welfare Board Scholarship to support higher education for children of tea garden workers.

SUGGESTION :

- The Government of India and Assam must ensure that their initiatives for Assam's tea community reach the most disadvantaged, bridging the gap between policy and tangible benefits for those who need them most.
- To uplift Assam's tea community, education is a key. Targeted initiatives can spark a love for learning, empowering individuals to claim their rights and shape a brighter future. By nurturing a culture of education the community can overcome obstacles, unlock new opportunities, and pave the way for a more equitable society.

CONCLUSION:

Assam's tea industry is not just a commercial enterprise; it is a living legacy of history, culture, and resilience. From its accidental discovery to its rise as a global leader in tea production, Assam tea has shaped the region's identity and economy. However, behind every cup of this cherished brew lies the untold story of the tea workers -the backbone of this industry -who have endured decades of social and economic hardships.

The study conducted in Dhekiajuli Bagan, Sonitpur district, reveals the harsh realities of tea estates workers, from poor wages and inadequate living conditions to limited access to quality education. Yet, despite these challenges, there is a growing sense of empowerment within the community. With government interventions, social awareness, and a shift in mindset among younger generations, the tea tribe community is beginning to break the cycle of marginalization. Education is emerging as a powerful tool for transformation, allowing individuals to explore new career paths and improve their socio-economic status.

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