

TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: A STUDY OF THE CULTURE OF TEA WORKERS OF ASSAM

(BASED ON A FIELD STUDY FOCUSED ON DEJOO TEA ESTATE OF LAKHIMPUR DISTRICT)

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ABSTRACT:

India has upheld its robust global dominance in tea production, a remarkable achievement unparalleled worldwide. Particularly impressive is the substantial input from Assam, which contributes to more than half of India's total tea output, highlighting its central importance in this sector. Examining the shifts taking place in the way of life within Assam's tea worker community is of utmost importance, given their integral role in the local society and the worldwide significance attributed to Assam's tea industry. Furthermore, studying their future dynamics within the context of Assam is crucial. Such a study can shed light on the distinct changes brought about by modernity in the lives of those people. The tea worker population in Assam has dispersed across various locations throughout the region. Among them, a field study was conducted in Dejoo Tea Estate in Lakhimpur district and it was taken as the background of the study. The paper discusses the festivals, food, dress, folk beliefs and agricultural practices of the workers of Dejoo Tea Estate. One of the highlighted objectives of this paper is to discuss the changes in the culture and future of tea workers.

Keywords- Assam, India, Assam Tea, Tea Estate, Tea Workers, Culture.

INTRODUCTION:

Over the course of the last two decades, India has consistently upheld its dominant position in the global tea production landscape, boasting a substantial and unchanging share of approximately 28%, a figure that stands unparalleled globally. (A Basu Majumder et al., 2012). Within the Indian context, it's noteworthy that Assam commands a substantial 60% share of the nation's tea production, a testament to its significance in this industry. (Govt. of India, 2018). Renowned for crafting some of the world's most exquisite and high-value teas, Assam stands as a distinguished purveyor of unparalleled tea varieties. Moreover, Assam boasts an exceptional distinction as the solitary region on the planet to boast its very own tea cultivar, recognized as 'Camellia assamica'. Therefore, tea assumes a substantial role in the social history of Assam, and the tea workers also holds a pivotal position in this context.

In the global perspective, the United States is often referred to as the epitome of a 'melting pot of cultures,' while Assam holds that role within India. Situated in the easternmost region of India, Assam appears to be a microcosm of the country itself, featuring a blend of Dravidian, Austrian, and Mongolian cultural influences. One of the enduring legacies of colonial influence on Assamese society is the integration of tea workers. The discovery of tea by Robert Bruce in 1823 led the British to eventually occupy Assam. By the 'Treaty of Yandabo' (This peace treaty ended the First Anglo-Burmese War) (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015) in 1826, Assam fell under British rule, and subsequently, numerous tea estates were established across the region. Local inhabitants were not deemed suitable for plantation work, prompting the British to bring in labor from Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and South India—landless and marginalized individuals who could be employed for meager wages. (Tanti, 2020). These laborers hailed from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages. They still divided into 61 castes and sub-castes (Kurmi, 2020). Even after India gained independence in 1947, these oppressed workers remained confined to the estates, with the 'white sahib' replaced by the 'black sahib'. Over nearly two centuries, the evolution of their culture resulted in both shared and distinct characteristics. This paper delves into five main components food, agricultural practices, folk beliefs, festivals, and dress to explore these traits in detail.

Review of Literature:

There was a lack of adequate resources when discussing the socio-cultural issues of tea workers. *Chah Janagosthir Lokageet: Lok Parampara Aru Utsabar Ruprekha* by Shukdev Adhikari (Adhikari, 2015), *Chah Janagosthir Jati-Upajati (Pratham Khanda)* edited by Nakul Kurmi (Kurmi, 2020), *Chah Janagosthir Chinta-Chetana* edited by Rajen Gogoi (Gogoi, 2001), *Asamar Chah Janagosthi-Adibasisakalar Nritattvik Parichay*, edited by Kamal Kumar Tanti (Tanti, 2020), *Chah Janagosthir Sanaskriti* by Dimbeswar Tasa (Tasa, 2013) and two magazines of the tea workers' organizations were found. Some resources, however, were also found on the Internet.

Scope and Methodology of the Study:

Tea workers are spread throughout Assam as the high mountainous areas are suitable for tea plantations. However, due to the limitations of the paper, the culture of tea workers in different parts of Assam is not studied, but the culture of tea workers in Lakhimpur district, its traditions and changes are discussed. There, too, the paper continues with special mention of Dejoo Tea Estate on the basis of the main source field study. The manuscript has been intricately written using a descriptive methodology, and it has followed the citation and referencing guidelines of the APA-7 format.

Based on the information provided by the individuals listed in the following table, the research paper has been authored.

Table 1: The Names and Details of individuals interviewed during a field study conducted at Dejoo Tea Estate, Lakhimpur by Authors on 18th October, 2020.

S. N.	Name	Address	Sex	Occupation	Age	Education
1	Manoj Belwar	Staff Quarters	Male	Shopkeeper	45	Graduate
2	Ruma Chavar	Bijuli Basti	Female	Labour	46	Illiterate
3	Reena Parja	Staff Quarters	Female	Teacher	44	Graduate
4	Aamir Chavar	Bijuli Basti	Male	Teacher	27	Post Graduate
5	Bhayaram Kujur	New 3 No. Line	Male	Charder	62	Illiterate
6	Ram Tanti	3 No. Line	Male	Charder	56	LP Pass
7	Binod Bhumij	Rangagara Line	Male	Labour	48	Illiterate
8	Karam Singh Rajput	Rangagara Line	Male	Labour	42	Illiterate
9	Jagannath Cheruva	New 3 No. Line	Male	Supervisor	43	12 th Pass
10	Jivan Chaotal	7 No. Line	Male	Charder	68	LP Pass
11	Rupesh Chabar	New 3 No. Line	Male	Watchman	32	12 th Pass
12	Shiva Phukan	Staff Quarters	Male	Supervisor	53	12 th Pass
13	Kanaklata Phukan	Staff Quarters	Female	Home Maker	47	12 th Pass

MAIN DISCUSSION:

Introduction to Dejoo Area:

Dejoo area is located in Lakhimpur district, (a district located on the eastern side of the state of Assam) about twenty km north-west of North Lakhimpur town. Situated on the Assam-Arunachal border, this region is abundant in natural beauty, where mountains and plains come together in harmony. The Ranganadi flows along the eastern boundary of Dejoo. The Dejoo region is bordered by Kimin (Papung Pare district, Arunachal Pradesh) to the north, the Harmati region to the south, the Ranganadi to the east and the Arunachal border to the west. There are several opinions about the origin of the name of this region. According to some, the name 'Dejoo' is derived from the Tibetan word 'Dzong'. In accordance with certain narratives, the name "Dejoo" came into existence through the amalgamation of the word "Di," (denoting river) and "Ju" (which symbolizes a locally brewed rice beer crafted by the tribes residing in the region) (Goodricke, n.d.). The third opinion is that, the area inhabited by the Nepali community, with the passage of time their address word *Dazo* changed to *Dejoo*. (S. Phukan, personal communication, October 18, 2020).

The primary inhabitants of the Dejoo locality are predominantly Muslims and tea workers. One of the villages, Dejoo Pathar, is inhabited by about 25 households of the Ahom community. There are a total of 9 educational institutions in the Dejoo area. They are 'Dejoo Chah Bagisa LP School', (est. 1957), '1 No. Dejoo Pathar LP School' (est. 1962), 'Dejoo Chah Janajati ME School' (est. 1985), '110/107 Grant LP School' (est. 1993), 'Dejoo Chah Jana Jati High School' (est. 1996). 'Dejoo Sankardev Shishu Niketan' (est. 1999), 'Dejoo 7 No. Primary School' (est. 2006), 'Bijuli Basti Anganwadi Centre' established in 2007, 'Dejoo Jatiya Bidyalaya' (est. 2017). In the past, the tea workers in the area had lower levels of education, but the literacy rate is currently on the rise. Education has consistently been a priority for Muslim and

Ahom community. Aspiring individuals seeking higher education predominantly gravitate towards Naobaicha and North Lakhimpur town.

Introduction to Dejoo Tea Estate:

The Dejoo Tea Estate, founded in 1884, encompasses a significant portion of the Dejoo region and adds a distinct charm with its lush dark greenery. Dejoo Tea Estate is famous for producing Black tea and Orthodox Tea with Classic Malty Liquor made from crops. This tea estate is located in the northern part of Dejoo. Then the Arunachal border starts. Previously, the estate was under the ownership of Stewart Holl (India) Limited until the 1990s. However, Goodricke Tea has now become its primary partner (Goodricke, n.d.). The present manager of the TE is Dhrubajyoti Boruah.

The Dejoo Tea Estate covers a total area of 531.8 hectares (S. Phukan, personal communication, October 18, 2020), and it is home to approximately 5000 tea workers. Among them, 1,200 are engaged as permanent laborers on the estate. The estate comprises five lines, namely-- Bajbari, Rangagara, lines 7 no. Line, 3 no. line and new 3 no. line, along with one village known as Bijuli Basti (Village). Within the estate, there is a diverse community of more than twenty ethnic groups of tea workers. These individuals have access to educational opportunities provided by various educational institutions in the Dejoo region.

Regarding religious affiliations, the population in the area is divided, with 55% identifying as Hindu and 45% as Christian. Consequently, there are two churches present in the garden—one Baptist and the other Catholic. Additionally, a Namghar (worship place for Assamese, started by Vaishnav Saint Sankardeva) and three temples serve the religious needs of the community. Banking services for the workers are provided by the 'Assam Gramin Bikash Bank' in the Dejoo Bazar area, Similarly, the Dejoo Tea Estate Hospital is a thirty-bed hospital. In 2018, the hospital was awarded the Best Tea Estate Hospital in Assam. (NorthEast Now, 2018).

The labor force in these tea estates comprises individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, yet they have developed a shared sense of community. The garden is mainly celebrated for Karam Puja, Tusu Puja, Durga Puja, Vishwakarma Puja, Kali Puja, Christmas, Diwali, Fakuwa, Magh Bihu, etc. In 2016, a Bihu stage was set up within the garden. (J. Cheruva, personal communication, October 18, 2020). Furthermore, the tea workers' living conditions have improved significantly due to the convenient transportation facilities available in the area.

Culture of Tea Workers in Dejoo Area:

In Assam, there exists a diverse array of tea workers, who form an essential part of the Assamese identity. These individuals were originally brought as laborers from various regions in Middle-East India and South India to work on the tea plantations established by the Britishers in Assam. Each group of tea workers brings along their distinct arts, culture, social traditions, and historical backgrounds. Within the Dejoo Tea Estate, several ethnic groups coexist, such as-- Chaotal, Kurmi, Kherwar, Oraon, Paraja, Teli, Bhumij, Chaora, Chabar, and more. (A. Charav. personal communication, October 18, 2020). While each ethnic group used to maintain its unique characteristics, over time, the Dejoo tea workers' society has evolved into a unified culture, blending the elements from all the different backgrounds. This collective culture represents the amalgamation of diverse traditions and is now celebrated as a whole.

Festivals:

The working community of Dejo Tea Estate celebrates agricultural and religious festivals. Agricultural festivals- Karam parab, Tusu Puja, Line Puja or Garam Puja, Diwali, Magh Bihu, other religious festivals- Durga Puja, Vishwakarma Puja, Fakuwa, Saraswati Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Christmas.

Karam Parab: 'Karam' essentially involves the worship of trees. The 'Java' or sprouts are gathered from the riverbanks near the Dejo Tea Estate, and they consist of sprouted rice, groundnuts, beets, and other crops. During the festival, a branch of the 'Chika Maralia' tree is brought to the place of worship, and this is done three days before the actual Karam Parab. Young women, known as 'Karamati,' play a significant role in this ritual. They are accompanied by musical instruments such as Dhol, madals, and kartals. The Karam festival takes place on Shukla-Ekadashi in the month of Bhada (August-September). Within the tea worker community, the Jhumur dance has become the central dance form during the Karam celebrations. As part of the festival, a 'Baiga' narrates the story of two brothers named Karma and Dharma. The tale revolves around how Karma faced adversity after disrespecting Karam Puja and eventually found better days. The Karam festival holds a significant place in the Dejo Tea Estate as its main celebration. Nonetheless, in Assam, the tea gardens do not shut down during this festive occasion, which has been a point of demand from the workers to the government.

Tusu Puja: Tusu Puja is observed on the sankranti of the months of Puh and Magh (January), and its songs are linked to agricultural traditions. This festival coincides with the eve of Magh Bihu and is celebrated by the workers of Dejo Tea Estate. During this occasion, they partake in various Assamese delicacies like coconut laru, sesame cakes, etc.

Line Puja or Garam Puja: This festival is intertwined with folk beliefs and is observed in every line and Bijuli Village and in the Bijuli Basti within the Dejo Tea Estate. The primary aspiration of this celebration is the welfare and prosperity of each line. Historically, this festival was held as a safeguard against wild animals. The main participants in this event are predominantly men, and as part of the rituals, goats are offered as sacrifices on altars constructed beneath trees.

Diwali: This festival is celebrated as a festival of lights all over India but it has a different meaning for the tea workers of Dejo TE. For them, this festival is similar to the Assamese Garu Bihu. Cows are fed haria (a type of local liquor) during this festival. They are dressed in a garland of Marigold flowers and a bouquet of Sindoor on their heads. By giving Uruli (a series of devotional sounds that women produce during some religious ceremonies like puja, marriage etc) (Xobdo.org, 2007), they feeds rice the cows. People also takes rice from there. It is believed that eating the food eaten by Lakshmi will bring improvement to the life.

Religious festivals: In the Dejo Tea Estate, the number of Hindu and Christian workers is evenly balanced. However, Hindu festivals are mostly celebrated. Christmas, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja, Vishwakarma Puja are same as others. Only on the day of Holi, Holika is burnt and dances and songs are performed like Huchari from house to house.

Food:

There is almost no difference in the eating habits of tea workers. They also have less traditional food. Their foods are---

- a) Main food- Rice and Roti.
- b) Non-Vegetarian- Fish, Pigs, Cows, Rats, Snakes, Snails, Beetles, Ducks, Geese, Chickens, Goats, etc.
- c) Vegetables- Cauliflower, Brinjal, Dingla (Cucumber), Onion, Potato, Radish, Shea (Carrot), Beans, Kacha Jalakia (Raw Chili), Rasun (Garlic), Turmeric (Tumeric), Kosu, Kapita (Amita) etc.
- d) Fruits- Apples, bananas, Kathar (jackfruit), Amba (mango), Kamla (orange), Anaras (pineapple), Sweet potatoes.
- e) Spices- Adi (ginger), Cumin, Garlic, Coriander etc.
- f) Mouth-Freshner- Battel nut, Tobacco, etc.
- g) Addictive- Haria.

Clothing:

Tea workers possess their own attire, though it is somewhat limited, and there are distinctions between the clothing worn by men and women.

Women's Dress: Referred to as the 'Adibasi Sari,' this traditional attire is available in various colours like red, white, purple, and green. The women complement this sari with a red blouse and adorn their hair with flowers. During festivals, they have access to a wide range of different types of saris. Nowadays, women have also embraced the trend of wearing mekhela-chadars as part of their clothing choices.

Men's dress: Men wear white dhoti, kurta and turban for auspicious occasions. They also participate in the dance wearing vests. There is a growing trend of modern dress among young people. They are seen wearing T-shirts, long pants, half pants and frocks, churidars, kurtis, etc. There are many children in the slum who live without clothes. (A. Charav. personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Folk Beliefs:

There are many folk beliefs associated with the festivals of the tea worker community.

Festival Centric: The Karamatis has to do fasting from the day of Java. Throughout the Tusu Puja festival, women exhibit devoutness by staying awake at night for a whole month.

Birth-Death-Marriage Centeric: During pregnancy, the mother is brought amulets, bandhans or laces from the Oja or Bej. In marriage to decide a Subh Din (good day), Rahi-jora (matching of couple), Gotra is decided. After death, they dig canals in north-south direction to send the soul to heaven. It is believed that if a cow is released into the canal and another person crosses the canal by holding the tail of the cow, the soul reaches heaven.

Daily Life Centric: In their daily lives, certain customs are followed, such as abstaining from consuming fish and meat on Thursdays. Moreover, unmarried individuals are prohibited from planting fruit trees like coconut and banana trees in the Dejo gardens.

Agricultural System:

Some tea workers have opted to leave the tea estate and establish their own separate villages, with one notable example being Bijuli Village. In these villages, many individuals have access to sufficient land for cultivation, and they primarily focus on growing paddy crops. Traditionally, cows played a significant role in agriculture, but nowadays, tractors are extensively employed. Alongside crop farming, the locals also raise ducks, chickens, pigs, and cattle among their livestock. However, due to malaria outbreaks, the plantation authorities have prohibited the keeping of pigs within the lines. (M. Belwar. personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Modernization's Influence: Transformations in the Culture of Tea Workers:

The society of the workers in the studied Dejuo Tea Estate has experienced considerable transformations due to the impact of modernity and the infusion of other cultural influences. These changes are presented in accordance with the mentioned clause.

In Case of Festivals: Tea workers partake in only two traditional festivals, with Hindu religious festivals exerting a significant influence across the community. Additionally, the celebration of Bihu, a prominent festival in the Assamese culture, also leaves an impact on the tea workers' community.

In Case of Food: Traditional rice-based alcoholic beverages are a common preference among tea workers. However, there has been a decline in the interest of consuming this local drink, as many are now more inclined towards foreign liquor options.

In Terms of Dress: The younger generation of tea workers shows a preference for modern attire over traditional clothing. They obtain their traditional saris from weaving mills located in Udalguri district, Assam. But there are no such weaving mills available in Dejuo.

Regarding Folk Beliefs: Folklore holds a significant presence in the tea workers' society, partly due to the limited number of highly educated individuals. While more people are becoming educated nowadays, the rationalist mindset might not fully establish itself among those with basic school-level education. For genuine progress in this direction, an increase in the number of highly educated individuals is essential. As an illustration, within the Dejuo Tea Estate, there is presently a sole individual possessing a postgraduate degree in science. (A. Charav. personal communication, October 18, 2020).

Regarding Agricultural Practices: The labor force primarily engaged in paddy cultivation has now adopted the tractors for plowing the land. Consequently, the traditional practice of using cows in farming has diminished, and nowadays, cows are primarily utilized for milk production.

The Future of the Culture of the Tea Workers' Community:

Dejuo Tea Estate, is a very convenient area for transportation and communication. The district headquarters, North Lakhimpur town is located at a distance of only twenty km. Therefore, the culture of the tea workers of Dejuo Tea Estate has been heavily influenced by external influences.

The festivals celebrated by tea workers, such as Tusu Puja and Karam Parab, have undergone influences from various other cultures, making it uncertain how long they will retain their original characteristics. Additionally, during Bihu, there is a growing inclination towards consuming pitha as a festival delicacy. Unfortunately, the younger generation lacks awareness of and interest in the traditional 'Haria' recipe, putting indigenous food at risk of disappearing altogether.

The younger generation's attire is strongly influenced by modernity, leading to a probable decline in the use of traditional saris and dhotis over time. Despite this, it appears that folk beliefs will not easily vanish. While they might undergo changes, they are unlikely to disappear completely, as these beliefs can persist even with education. The lack of emphasis on rationalism in schools might contribute to the continuation of folk beliefs among tea workers for many years. Aligned with the wave of modernization, the Dejoo Tea Estate has embraced progressive agricultural techniques. The usage of tractors, power tillers, and similar equipment serves as an example of the estate's embrace of modern agricultural techniques.

Hence we can say that the culture of the tea workers' community is currently in the flow of globalization. All cultures except a few minor elements are in danger of being dissolved under the influence of world cultures (or influential cultures).

CONCLUSION:

The paper delves into the enduring impact of modernity and its potential ramifications for the future. Through extensive field studies exploring the culture of Dejoo Tea Estate workers, various noteworthy conclusions can be drawn from this research---

- a) The dietary habits of tea workers are notably influenced by the mainstream Assamese society's food preferences. The advent of modernity raises concerns about the preservation of traditional foods that are still part of their culinary heritage.
- b) The younger generation exhibits limited interest in donning traditional attire like saris and dhotis, primarily due to perceived inconveniences. Consequently, the usage of traditional clothing might gradually diminish, except for special festival occasions.
- c) The adoption of modern farming techniques in agriculture has resulted in significant economic empowerment among the workers, who have reaped substantial benefits from these advancements.
- d) The festivities cherished by the working community have undergone diverse cultural influences. However, amidst the changing times, only a few festivals such as Karam Parab, Tusu Puja, and Garam Puja are likely to endure.
- e) Folklore often incorporates superstitions, yet it also serves as a distinct expression of a society's identity. As education spreads rapidly, it is anticipated that the folk beliefs of tea workers will gradually undergo evolution and transformation.

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