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## A Historical Background of Tea in Assam

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### Abstract

*Tea is one of the most popular beverages in the world. Tea in India is so popular that liking for it has reached the point of adoration. The best quality tea in India pours chiefly from Assam. It was way back in 1823 that Robert Bruce . a merchant and soldier, first spotted tea plant in Assam and this eventually led to East-India company developing a trade in it. A visit from Dr. Wallich to Assam in 1834 saw the formation of the Assam Company in England. Among the Indians, it was, however, Maniram Dewan, an Assamese noble man, who initiated planting tea leading many others, mostly Assamese, to follow in his footsteps. After independence, as the scenario change, Indian Companies like-Birla Tata entered the fray to become biggest producers of the coveted "Assam Tea". The picture, however, is not completely rosy as the tea plantation, tea-estate have been severely affected in recent years by the militancy in the state. Dwindling economic condition, stiff competition in international market and recurrent slumps have not helped the cause either. This paper is an earnest effort to highlight the historical background of the development of tea industry of Assam.*

**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 he 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 producers 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).



Cinnamora tea Estate: First Tea Garden of Assam Established by Maniram Dewan in 1850.

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 Kazakhstan) — 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 of 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.

#### The Tea History Timeline

2727 BC CHINA - The Emperor Shen Nung discovers tea one day while drinking hot water in his garden.

600's Chinese character c'ha, meaning tea, comes into use

780 CHINA - The first tax on tea in China, due to its popularity. The first book on tea, the Ch'a Ching (The Classic of Tea), written by the poet Lu Yu is published.

Tea drinking becomes very popular at court, inspiring the custom of "Tribute tea", whereby tea growers "donate" their very best tea to the Emperor and the Imperial court.

Due to its popularity, tea is taxed for the first tax in China.

794 Japanese monks plant tea bushes in Kyoto's Imperial gardens.

900 Japan is again influenced by Chinese culture, when Japanese scholars return from a visit to China bearing tea.

1191 JAPAN - The Buddhist abbot Yeisei re-introduces tea to Japan after travels in China. He brings tea seeds and knowledge of Buddhist rituals involving a bowl of shared tea. He also writes the first Japanese book about tea

1261 JAPAN - Buddhist monks travel across Japan, spreading the art of tea and the Zen doctrine

1400's Tea drinking becomes prevalent among the masses in Japan

1521-1591 JAPAN - Sen Rikyu, known as the "father of tea" in Japan, codifies the tea ceremony.

1618 RUSSIA - Tea is introduced to Russia, when the Chinese embassy visits Moscow, bringing a chest of tea as a gift for the Czar Alexis.

1635 EUROPE - The "tea heretics" (doctors and university authorities) of Holland argue over the positive and negative effects of tea, while the Dutch continue to enjoy their newfound beverage.

1650/1660 NORTH AMERICA - A Dutch trader introduces tea to the Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam (a small settlement in North America). Later, when the English acquired this colony, they found that the inhabitants of New Amsterdam (or New York as they chose to re-name it) consumed more tea than all of England.

1652 EUROPE - Tea is introduced to England by the Dutch East India Company.

1660 England's first tax on tea, levied at 8 pence for every gallon of tea sold at the coffeehouses.

1664 Tea drinking becomes very fashionable among the aristocracy of England, although the debate continues as to its medicinal value or harm.

1670 The English begin to make and use silver teapots.

1675 EUROPE - In Holland, tea is widely available for purchase in common food shops.

1685 England begins to trade directly with China. Tea and the Chinese word t'e (Amoy dialect) is brought to England directly from the Amoy region.

1699 EUROPE - England imports an average of 40,000 pounds of tea.

1708 EUROPE - England imports an annual average 240,000 pounds of tea. People of all levels of society now drink tea in England.

1716 Tea is brought to Canada by the Hudson Bay Company.

1750 Black tea exceeds green tea in popularity in Europe.

1767 England imposes high taxes on tea and other items sent to the American colonists. The colonists, resenting the monopoly that England has over them, begins to smuggle tea in from Holland.

1773 EUROPE - The John Company and the East India Company merge, forming the New East India Company. This new company had a complete monopoly on all trade and commerce in India and China. Trade with China is expensive however, and England's solution to its financial problem is opium. They begin to trade opium, (which they could grow cheaply in India) with the Chinese for tea. The Chinese would become addicted to the supply of opium, ensuring a constant supply of cheap tea to the English.

The famous Boston Tea Party occurs when American patriots dressed as Mohawk Indians push 342 chests of tea overboard. This act would eventually lead to the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.

1784 The grandson of Thomas Twinning persuades the Prime Minister William Pitt to drop the high taxes on tea, not only eliminating smuggling, but making tea an affordable luxury to Brits of all walks of life.

The Comte de la Rochefoucauld writes "Throughout the whole of England the drinking of tea is general. You have it twice a day and though the expense is considerable, the humblest peasant has his tea just like the rich man."

1800 Tea gardens become popular haunts for fashionable Londoners.

1818 The Temperance Movement is founded as a result of rampant alcoholism brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Members seek salvation for the drunken men with "tea and god on their side". This movement eventually inspired the word "teetotaling".

1823 The first Indian tea bushes are "discovered" growing wild in the Assam region of India by British Army Major Robert Bruce.

1826 The first packaged tea is made available for purchase in England by the Horniman Tea Company.

1834 The "Tea Committee", appointed by the Governor-General Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, reports that tea can be successfully grown in India.

Experiments with tea planting are conducted in the Darjeeling region of India.

1838 The British seriously set about planting and cultivating tea in the Assam region of India.

1839 The first chests of Assam tea arrive at the London Tea auctions. The British are ecstatic as this means that they are now able to successfully grow their own tea.

1842 CHINA - The Opium Wars end with England winning "the right" to trade opium for tea.

1850's EUROPE - The world's nations competed with one another in global clipper races to lay claim to the fastest ships. The fast sailing ships would race all the way from China to England, and up the Thames river to the Tea Exchange in London, where they would present the year's first crop of tea to be auctioned. Steamships would replace these tall ships by 1871.

1851 Full of "tea pride" the British exhibit their own Assam-grown tea at the Great Exhibition.

1854 The British introduce tea to Morocco.

1867 Scotsman James Taylor, manager of a coffee plantation in Ceylon, experiments with growing tea, planting both the China and India seed. The Assam seed flourishes and becomes the first commercial tea from Ceylon.

1898 Tea is introduced to Iran.

1900 RUSSIA - The Trans-Siberian Railroad is completed, ending camel caravan trade between Russia and China. In Russia, tea has become the national beverage (besides Vodka).

Tea is planted in the Botanical gardens at Entebbe, Uganda.

In England, teashops become the popular place for the working class to take their afternoon tea. By this time Lyon's has over 250 teashops, and taking tea, as meal away from home becomes a part of daily life.

The proprietor of the Aerated Bread Company begins to serve tea in the back of her shop to her favorite customers. Her back room becomes such a popular place to take afternoon tea that the company decides to open an actual teashop, the first of a chain of shops that would come to be known as the ABC teashop.

1903 Tea is planted in Kenya at Limuru.

1904 NORTH AMERICA - The first "iced tea" was served at the St. Louis World's Fair. A certain tea merchant had planned to give away samples of his tea to the fairgoers, and when unable to think of anything else to do when a heat wave threatened his plans, he dumped ice into his hot tea.

1906 The Book of Tea is written by Okakura Kakuzo, thus introducing the west to the Japanese Tea Ceremony and its history.

1914 British workers are given tea breaks throughout the day as this is thought to improve their productivity.

British soldiers are given tea as part of their rations.

1953 The paper teabag is developed by the Tetley tea Company, thus transforming tea-drinking habits around the world.

## 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 teatribes in every possible way. Violence and agitation of labours against the management is common, where the state machinery normally protects the tea-planters. Noneducation, 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.



Laborers working in a tea garden.

### 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 bonded 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 laborers 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.

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