

Maniram Dewan and the Tea Industry : Some New Facts

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Maniram Dewan (c.1806-58) had little to do with the so called "discovery" of tea in Assam until about 1828. Robert Bruce in 1823 and his brother, C.A. Bruce in 1824 were the first persons to be aware of the fact that tea plants were a natural vegetation in Assam and that a section of the tribal population of Upper Assam, particularly the Singphos, were in the habit of making and drinking tea¹. The Singphos also knew the utility of pruning and of shade trees in the context of the tea culture². There is no evidence that the Bruce brothers were introduced to the Singphos by Maniram. In 1825 or before, Maniram was still in his teens and must have been away in Nadia. For, we are told that, under the princely patronage of Rajah Purandar Singha, he had his sanskrit-based education there for seven years³. We cannot accommodate this sojourn within his career unless we also assume that his Nadia chapter preceded 1826.

Much information about Maniram remains still buried in the Assam Company papers now preserved in the Guildhall Library, London. The present author looked into the Company papers during his short three-day stay in London in 1985 and despite his search being selective and hurried, found a lot of new information about Maniram's service career in the Assam Company⁴. On the recommendations of F. Jenkins and Prasannakumar Tagore, he was taken into the service of the Assam company in late 1839, after an interview held in Calcutta. He had to sign a covenant here as tea garden managerial cadre still do while accepting their appointments⁵. His pay was fixed at Rs. 200 per month, not a small sum for those days. He was the chief of the native Department and as such had multifarious duties. His services were so much praised by the

Directors of the Company that some of his European Colleagues became jealous of him. Like some of them he too started developing his private tea gardens in 1842 and, as in their cases, possibly with the Company's labour force and seedlings in an unauthorised manner.

In February 1843 he was chargesheeted and suspended from service, and his office papers were sealed by July after an enquiry. Thereafter, either he was dismissed or he resigned. I have failed to get further information, for lack of time for a thorough search of the Company papers. However, it appears that his connexions with the Assam Company were completely severed by 1844, if not earlier.

Maniram's two gardens started manufacturing some time before 1850. A packet of two pounds of his tea was sent to the Great London Exhibition, 1851. However, arriving late, the specimen could not be displayed in that Exhibition. In view of the delayed arrival, the consignee refused to pay the duty of twenty-five pence per pound, and the packet languished in bond for ten years. Then it was sold at auction and was probably purchased as a curio by some concern. It was exhibited in the Indian and Colonial Exhibition of 1886. Thus his little packet of two pounds of tea survived him, but not his two tea gardens Selung and Cinnamara which were confiscated and auctioned after his martyrdom. These were mostly absorbed into the plantations of Williamson Magor and his partners. Thus ended the career of the first Indian tea planter who, in his own right, was also a historian of the region.

Notes & References

1. H.A. Antrobus, **A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953** (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 17-19 and 463-4; W. Robinson, **A**

Descriptive Account of Assam (Calcutta/London, 1841), p. 136; J.M.' Cosh, **Topography of Assam** (Calcutta, 1837), pp. 31-32.

2. C.A. Burce, "Report on the manufacture of tea and the extent and produce in Antrobus, op.cit., pp. 463-4; also "Private Journals of William Griffiths", an eminent botanist attached to the Tea Committee (1834). Of the 95 chests of tea, manufactured at the Government Tea Factory at Chabua and sold in Calcutta in 1841, 35 chests were made by the Singpho Chief Ningrolla, aided by the Factory staff. See Antrobus, op. cit, p. 268.
3. Excerpt from Maniram Dewan's intercepted letter cited in H.K. Barpujari, **Assam in the Days of the Company 1826-1858** (Guwahati, 1963), p. 184.
4. Assam Co.Ltd.... Official Records (including London and Bengal Boards' Minute books : Vols. 1-13. journals and ledgers) 1839-1948 (MSS 9924-9936), Guildhall Library, London. We have checked Calcutta Boards Proceedings, Vols I-III (1839-1846), i.e.MSS 9925.
5. Ibid : MSS 9225, Vol I, Calcutta Board Proceedings of 30 August, 3 Sept. and 10 Sept. 1839.
6. MSS Eur, F 174/2270 : Indian Tea Association (London) List, India Office Library, London **The London Produce Market (Mincing Lane) Being a Section of the Work of the Exchanges of London at the Begining of the Twentieth Century** (Hey wood and Company Limited, London, 1904).
8. Information based on research by Benudhar Sharma and other local historians in Jatinarayan Sharma "First Indian Tea planter died as a freedom fighter; opening of Cinnamara and Singlo by Maniram Dewan in 1805", **North East Plantation News**, December 1981, pp.24-25.