

Tea and Tea-Plantation Workers of Tripura in the Past and Present

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The history of the introduction of tea culture in Assam by the East India Company in the thirties of the nineteenth century when the Company lost its monopoly in the tea trade with China is well-known. The birth of the tea industry in Tripura dates back to 1916 when leases of extensive wasteland for tea cultivation were granted by Maharaja Birendrakishore Manikya (1909-1923 A.D.) to the emerging Indian capitalists on the other side of the Princely State (and not to European planters) with the hope of making the tea gardens a good source of revenue. Tea plantation was introduced in Tripura during the period of the World War I (1914-18). Amiya Kumar Bagchi in his *Private Investment in India* has shown how the war years marked the real beginning of the new strength of Indian capitalism. While the World War I meant misery and fall in living standards for the majority of the Indian people as the War affected life through massive recruitments for army, heavy taxes and war loans, sky-high prices etc., it also largely contributed to the fabulous super-profits by the Indian business groups by taking full advantage of the war demand. A. C. Bhattacharyya had informed us how the owners of the tea gardens of Tripura had invested more than a crore aggregate capitals,² during the war years. In 1916 Prasanna Kumar Dasgupta, the Chief Dewan of Tripura, who played a very significant role for the introduction of tea plantation in Tripura, announced the terms and conditions of the 'bandobast' in detail including the rent-free period of three years.³ The result of the above notification was to be found in the *Report on the General Administration of the Tippera State for the Year 1329 T. E. (1919-20)* :

"There were 33 applications for Tea settlement of which 23 obtained final sanction and 18 remained pending. 15 of these relate to the Sadar Division,⁷ to the Kailashahar Division and 1 to the Dharmanagar Division. One settlement in the Kailashahar Division had to be cancelled owing to non-payment of the *Nazarana* in proper time. So there were 22 grants in the year. The approximate area covered by those 22 grants was 3,737 Drones (24,800 acres) the *Nazarana* received being Rs. 37,978 with a perspective annual revenue of Rs. 27,749 after 3 years of rent free period.

"It may be noted here that the grants for Tea settlement sanctioned till the close of the year under report has fetched a total

Nazārana of Rs. 76,848 and assured a prospective revenue of Rs. 54,281 per year after the rent free period which is usually 3 years.”⁴

The Hiracherra Tea Estate at Kailashahar was the first garden of Tripura⁵. The two mounting problems which the planters faced at the initial stage were the clearance of the dense forest and adequate supply of labour for hoeing, weeding, pruning of bushes and a large number of other agricultural activities. While the process of tea cultivation remained labour-intensive, the supply of labour was far from assured as the local people, both tribal and non-tribal, due to low wages, peculiar nature of the plantation industry and the working conditions did not feel encouraged to participate, rather all these factors provided strong disincentives.⁶ Hence, most of the workers in the tea gardens of Tripura, in the formative stage, came from Bihar, Orissa, Madras, Madhya Pradesh and the United Province, having different language and culture. The process of interactions and adjustments with the local people had also started since the beginning which might form an interesting chapter of social history. Another interesting point in this connection is that the plantation workers, due to their nature of work, have a closer link with the agricultural workers in many respects. In off season, the plantation workers usually go for harvesting and stay there for three months. In the seventies it was seen how the struggles of the tea workers in North Tripura inspired the peasants of the surrounding area of the gardens and the vice versa. In June 1980 when Tripura was rocked by communal violence, the tea gardens remained safe from it. These points should be properly focussed if we attempt to write anything about the cultural pattern and struggles of the tea garden workers of Tripura.

We have already pointed out how tea cultivation in Tripura owed its origin purely to Indian enterprise and how the bulk of the plantations were started in the first quarter of the present century by some pioneers of Bengal with the active encouragement of the Maharaja of Tripura, and also how the gardens suffered from chronic shortage of labour since the formative period. Now we should mention how the nation-wide Non-Cooperation upsurge of 1921-22 left its mark on the tea plantation industry of Tripura. Sumit Sarker has concluded that the Non-Cooperation in Assam attained a strength which no later phase of the national movement would ever equal,⁸ Amalendu Guha quoted P. Barthakur (*Swadhinata Ranar Samsparshat*) to show the impact Non-Cooperation among the tea garden labour of Assam.⁸ In the second half of the nineteenth century, *Somprakash*, the leading Bengali weekly, and *Dacca Prakash*,

another periodical published from Dacca, exposed the barbarities committed on the coolies (as the garden labours were then called) by the planters. Ramkumar Vidyaratna in his *Kuli-Kahini* (1887), Dawan Chamanlal in his *The Coolie : The Story of Labour and Capital in India* (Vol. II, 1932), Rajani Kanta Das in his *Plantation Labour in India* (1931), Amalendu Guha in his classic *Planter-Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947* (1971) have vividly described the torture perpetrated upon the tea garden labour population in Assam by the planters and the reasons for the large scale desertion by the coolies. A British Trade Union delegation headed by Purcell and Hallsworth who visited India in 1928 very caustically remarked : "Virtually slave, Plantation workers of Assam are perhaps the most wretched species of humanity that are to be found in the civilized world."⁹ In 1928 the All India Trade Union Congress was formed and in the subsequent years large scale unrest among the workers followed. At that moment came the call of Non-Cooperation. R. K. Das reported that in 1921 about 8,888 workers left the tea gardens of Assam.¹⁰ Several of them died of disease and of starvation on the way and the rest were either forcibly stopped at Chandpur or Karimganj Railway Stations by the British Indian authorities. In this connection, we should read the letter of the Minister, Tripura State, addressed to the Political Agent of Tripura on June 6, 1921.

"I am directed by the Durbar to address you in a matter of great importance in connection with the trouble due to the exodus of coolies from the Assam Tea Gardens, the alleged incidents at Chandpur and the unfortunate strikes and hartals all over the country which have affected this territory along with the bordering British Districts. You have already been informed by me, and His Highness's Chief Secretary and Private Secretary of the recent troubles into which the Durbar have been dragged by the agitators.

"2. This situation has given rise to a thought in His Highness's mind as to how he could render some services to the Imperial Government in the midst of this general turmoil. A solution presents itself to H. H. in offering a decent livelihood to the disaffected coolies in this territory. The Durbar are prepared to find shelter, land and employment for them if they choose to come and settle in this territory. They are ready to receive all the coolies (with the exception of these who are lying ill) stranded at Chandpur, pay for Railway-fare to Akhaura if the A. B. Railway demands the same and to give them food and shelter on the following understanding among other things which may be settled in conference with the

coolies, their advisers, popular leaders and the Government of Bengal :

(i) If the coolies agree to settle in this territory the Durbar will grant some lands to each family for cultivation and building their houses on. No rent shall be payable for such lands for the first year of settlement - a reasonable rent shall be assessed on the expiry of the year and this rent will be regulated from time to time by the laws of the land governing the relationship of landlord and tenant.

“(ii) The Durbar will supply temporary cottages for the immediate shelter of the coolies and feed them for 3 days of their arrival.

“(iii) The Durbar will be ready to receive batches of 508 souls daily, 3 days after their intention to come here is intimated to the Durbar.

“(iv) The A. B. Railway should undertake to carry the coolies at Chandpur free of fare or at reduced fare, or even at full fare to be paid by the Durbar in the event of their refusal to grant concessions.

“(v) The Durbar will not receive the persons who are lying ill at Chandpur and their families until they are all right and declared fit to travel. State doctors will examine and pass them before they are taken charge of at Chandpur.

“(vi) The coolies will be free to serve anybody they like. If it is desired, the Durbar will fix the rate of their wages from time to time. The Durbar will themselves employ them if they want.

“(vii) No one will be forced to live a life of labour if he wants to turn a cultivator.

“(viii) A Census of the coolies will be taken by the State Agents before they depart from Chandpur.

“(ix) The Durbar shall provide Civil protection, Medical aid and the education for the coolies at their settlement.

“(x) The coolies shall be free to leave their territory at any time they like should they desire to go back to their ancestral homes or change their residence.

“3. The Durbar will feel thankful by your kind intervention in obtaining the approval of the Government of Bengal to these proposals by immediate Telegraphic communication as there is no time to loose and request you to be so good as to place yourself in communication with the local Government officers and popular leaders.” ”

Another similar letter was sent on June 28, 1921 regarding the stranded coolies at Karimganj. These two invaluable documents,

though very lengthy, not only prove how the question of scarcity of labour in the tea gardens of Tripura was solved but also present a socio-economic profile of the time. Somendra chandra Debbarma in his *Census Bibarani* has shown the gradual rise of production of tea from 1923 to 1938 in the following shape ¹².

1923 A. D. - 2,25,533 pounds	1924 A. D. - 3,38,272 pounds
1925 A. D. - 5,68,568 ,,	1926 A. D. - 8,28,615 ,,
1927 A. D. - 9,48,862 ,,	1928 A. D. - 10,57,488 ,,
1929 A. D. - 14,82,725 ,,	1930 A. D. - 12,49,374 ,,

It is evident from the above figures that from two lakh pounds in 1923 the total quantity went upto fourteen lakh pounds in 1925 and came down to twelve lakh pounds in 1930. Recession became a common word, and the 'young areas' of Tripura planted since the twenties suffered heavily during the the Crisis in the thirties. The Tripura Tea Control Act of 1345 T. E. (1935 A. D.) and the Tea Control Act of India 1938 placed a number of restrictions. Most of the pious wishes of the Government of Tripura in 1921 regarding the workers remained in paper alone. According to the Bulletins of the Statistical Department, Government of Tripura, as late as 1961 the daily money wage rates for male workers were as low as Re. 1.25 perhaps the lowest in the North Eastern region. The average number of medical personel employed per labour was 9.91 even in 1974. Once the total number of plantation was more than fifty and the total number of workers was more than 10,000, but in 1974 it came down to forty-six and 6,771 respectively.¹³ The big hopes of the initiators of the tea industry in Tripura were belied. In a note on the condition of Tea Estates in Tripura in 1975, published by the Labour Department, Government of Tripura, it is observed that the number of gardens has been further "reduced to 39 and out of these to, the condition of more than half defies any hope. In the circumstances, the morals of the labour force which has naturally centred all its future hopes around those gardens remains at a low level. In quite a number of Tea Estates not only the payment of dues, rations and amenities etc. are far from regular, depositing by the employers of Provident fund dues of the workers including their own contribution have ran into heavy arrears. These facts tell upon the overall efficiency of the workers. Lack of technical supervision, inadequate machinery and other factors are far apparent than need be pointed out. Only a handful of Management have been found supplying

fertilisers etc. There is complete lack of application of modern technique and inputs in most of the gardens and as a result, their production as also the chances of survival remain on the low side"¹⁴.

In the *Techno-Economic Survey of Tripura*, 1961, by the National Council of Applied Economic Research, some major obstacles to tea cultivation were pointed out, e.g. the total average rainfall lower than required and the deforestation process caused further deterioration. no detailed soil studies made to ascertain the suitability of Tripura soils for tea cultivation, the lack of technical knowledge and experience on the part of the pioneering planters, the size of the gardens smaller than in the other tea regions of north-eastern India (the planted area in the bulk of the tea estates was between 151 and 300 acres, whereas the size group of 500 acres and above were usually regarded to be the optimum size for estates run on scientific lines), the layout of the Tripura gardens, the number of bushes, shade trees etc. unscientific. As a result, in the words of the NCAER, "the average yield of processed tea in Tripura during recent years was only about 400 lbs. per acre, which was less than 50% of the all-India average. The yields in Tripura are the lowest in northeast India."¹⁵ It becomes evident from this that the workers were not responsible for the low yield.

In 1948 Tripura Tea Association sent a representation¹⁶ to the Central Government in which it was claimed that the total strength of labour force employed in the tea gardens of Tripura was about 20,000, the total acreage occupied and taken lease of by the Tea Estates was 54,413 acres for which the revenue payable to the State was about Rs. 75,000/-, the Road cess levied would amount to over Rs. 12,000/-. The production of tea in Tripura was about 48,000 mds. in 1947 and the money value of the crop was estimated at about Rs. 26,000,88/-. The Export Duty payable to the State at two and half percent was estimated at Rs. 50,000/- per year. Again, the Excise Duty at 1/3/- annas per pound yielded a revenue to the State of about Rs. 6,00,00/-. Hence, the total benefit accruing to the Tripura Durbar from the Tea Industry was about Rupees Eight Lakhs per annum, according to the representation of the Tripura Tea Association. It is interesting to read some portions the above representation - "In addition to the above the state is now insisting upon realisation of Industrial Income-Tax and Agricultural Income-Tax. The State authorities know well that most of the Tea Estates having their Registered Offices in the Indian Union and selling their tea in the Calcutta Market are liable to pay Income-Tax to the Central Government at 7 to 8 annas per

rupee on their total income. It is no wonder that the Tripura Tea Gardens being burdened with such heavy taxation are unable to effect necessary improvements in their gardens, and that only a few of the Companies are able to declare small dividend to their share-holders..... Though the Companies have been paying Road Cess and then *Purtabartakar* at an enhanced rate from the very beginning, not a single mile of new road has been constructed to the nearest Railway Station or River. This entails heavy costs and great trouble for despatch of supplies to the garden and despatch of tea from the garden".¹⁷ Infact, the entire despatch is very interesting to read as the organisation of the planters not only painted a grim picture but accused the State authorities and approached the Central Government to save the tea industry of Tripura from ruin. The Durbar naturally refuted the charges. Dewan B. K. Acharyya¹⁸ pointed out that the labour population in the tea gardens of Tripura was only two thousand and not twenty thousand, as claimed by the organisation of the planters. S. C. Dutta, Dawan-In-Charge, in his letter to the Adviser to the Governor of Assam,¹⁹ denied the other charges against Tripura administration for the deplorable conditions of tea industry.

Without entering into the controversy regarding the responsibility for the poor condition of the tea gardens in Tripura, we should point out that the most powerful factor which retarded the development was the lack of transport and communication internally and externally. Transport difficulties particularly became acute after the partition of the country. Prior to partition, the railway lines running in East Bengal, along the boundaries of Tripura, served the tea gardens of the Princely State. As Tripura was virtually cut off from the rest of the country, as in Tripura, transport is the hub on which progress of all industrial sectors revolves, naturally the tea gardens suffered a lot after 1947. There are reasons for resentment of the owners of the gardens. True, Tripura can claim no industrial tradition, except in handloom and handicraft, it is also true that the quality of the tea prepared in Tripura is not of very superior quality due to a number of factors. In 1930-31 *Memorandum and Statistics* it was mentioned that the consumption of tea was mainly confined to Agartala and other Divisional headquarters only and in rural areas people scarcely took tea, Again, the town people consumed imported blended tea (and not the product of Tripura) and the import of blended tea, as recorded, were 5,000 lbs. valued at Rs. 5,000/- in 1938-31.²⁰ This proves that the tea of Tripura had practically no internal market. Not only, the blen-

ded tea, but even the Tea chests were also imported. In the above *Memorandum and Statistics* it was also mentioned how the imports of Tea chests declined from 20,000 (in number) valued at Rs. 50,000/- being the average of the three years (1927-28 to 1929-38) to 16,000 (in number) valued at Rs. 40,000/- in 1930-31, as the overall condition of Tea industry in Tripura deteriorated to a 'great extent due to financial crisis'.²¹ In spite of all these, Tripura, even today, occupies the fifth position in the Tea Plan of India, although compared to Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Madras, the total area under tea plantation and the total workers engaged in this industry are rather negligible.

The development of Trade Union consciousness and organisation among the tea plantation workers of Tripura was comparatively a delayed phenomenon as upto 1948 there was practically no labour organisation in Tripura²². although during the days of the rule of the Maharaja of Tripura there was practically no fixed working hours for the tea garden workers, no binding laws and the period may be termed as 'unregulated period'. Biren Dutta, the veteran Trade Union leader of Tripura, in an interview with the author pointed out that before the first general election in 1952 hundreds of tea workers, disregarding bullets, virtually gheraoed the Kunjaban Palace and snatched from the unwilling hands of the Chief-Commissioner Nanjappa, the terror of these days, the promise of opening a Labour Office in Tripura.²³ Hence, it is perhaps not correct to say that there is a general reluctance on the part of the tea garden workers of Tripura to move for struggles even on the question of increase of wages. We have some records of heroic struggles of the tea workers by which they earned equal rates of wages for field and factory workers of the garden, for male and female workers, for revision of Tripura Plantation Labour Rules etc. In spite of all these, the plantation workers in Tripura are not even today very much organised. In the Sixth State Conference of the Centre of Indian Trade Union, held at Agartala in May, 1966, it was also admitted that out of a total of 4,000 female tea garden workers of Tripura, only 400 are organised and the rest remain scattered.

True, the planters of Tripura are also in trouble since the partition of the country a number of gardens are either closed or sick due to the perfunctory attitude of the owner's the workers as the lessons of Rupali and Sonali Estates of Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, are indicators in this respect. The workers of these two closed gardens, who were under severe repression by the authority, have

already shown that they themselves could run the gardens well. The Tea Development Corporation in Tripura, constituted by the Government of Tripura in 1980, with a view to promoting co-operativisation of tea plantation and rejuvenating the gardens, has already undertaken an ambitious programme, with an authorised capital of Rs. 5 crores. The Tripura Tea Development Corporation, with the active support of the present State Government, has directly taken up tea plantation in 3000 acres of land at Maghmarra in North Tripura and over 1200 acres of land at Kamalasagar in West Tripura. To revive the sick and closed tea estates and to start plantation in new areas, at present eight gardens, with the grand introduction of Tashai Cooperative Garden in 1979, are run by the workers themselves on cooperative basis. When a bold experiment is afoot in establishing Tea Estates by organising cooperatives with tea garden labourers, a bogey is also being raised of the crisis in tea industry throughout the country to discourage the workers to march ahead. In spite of all limitations of the present situation of tea industry all over the country, we should also note that India is still now the largest tea producer in the world and tea is the second highest foreign exchange earning industry whose annual earning is more than Rs. 400 crores per year and lakhs of people are now engaged either in the tea industry or in its ancillaries throughout the country. A look to the activities of the eight cooperative gardens of Tripura. Although time has not come to judge its performances, would reveal that the above eight gardens had already received a tremendous boost-up during the last years in its Journey towards achieving the avowed objectives of co-operative movement though there are miles to go to attain that objective.

Notes & References

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
22. Tripur Chandra Sen, *Tripura in Transition (1923-57 A. D.)*, Agartala, 1978, p. 37.
23. Author's interview with Sri Biren Dutta, the veteran T. U. leader of Tripura on 23.10.86.