

Tea Cultivation in Tripura (1917-47)

A study in the land settlement and its revenue potential

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Tea proved a lucrative business during the First World War. The quest for new tea lands nearly saturated in Bengal and Assam, provided a fillip to the native capital to turn back to Tripura in 1916 as a prospective area for tea cultivation¹. On analysis, the soil of Tripura was found to be as good as that of the Surma Valley for tea cultivation². Eschewing the slough of conservatism, the State made tea settlements of extensive waste-land and hasitatingly opened up this prospective area for the diversification of its economy.

The initial tally of tea estates was only four in 1916-17 and all of them were started in two northern Divisions of the State-Kailasahar and Dharmanagar³. The tea settlements multiplied by leaps and bounds, and within 14 years of its humble beginning, it showed the sign of tremendous expansion. The number of tea estates which had been 4 only in 1916-17 progressively rose to 50 in 1930-31 and thence to 55 in late forties.⁴

A note on the average size of the tea estates in Tripura

The size of the tea estates in Tripura were, in fact, relatively smaller. And as a result many of them could hardly prove to be a viable economic unit. The average area per unit set out in the table below will give us a general idea of their sizes.

Table No. 1 : Areas of land under tea cultivation⁵

Reference Year	No. of tea estates	Land under tea cultivation	average acreage per unit
1916-17	4	2,000	500
1930-31	50	8,386	167.72
1937-38	50	105,63	211.26
1940-41	55	10,938.5	198.88
1942-43	55	11,366.86	206.67
1944-45	55	11,560.43	210.19
1944-56	55	11,700	212.73

Source : TARs for those years

Limited inherently by the smallness of their sizes, the growth of the tea estates of Tripura was further baulked by tea restriction measures of the Government of India. We will revert to this point later.

Terms of settlement

The settlement of lands for tea cultivation was first granted in 1917 during the rule of Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909-23 A.D.) and thus the foundation of tea industries was laid in the State with a far-reaching material prospect. To invite investment from outside the State an information brochure, specifying the terms and conditions for tea settlement, with the quinquennial average of rainfall in the State and a conversion table of local land measurement unit into acreage were circulated in 1917⁶. The settlement for tea cultivation was stipulated for a block of twenty years including a period of remission for three years. It was renewable, after every twenty years⁷ with an enhanceable *Jama*. The right of alienation was allowable only in special circumstances, and in the area otherwise specified⁸.

Rate of Jama and the amount of Nazarana

The land settlement for tea plantation departed from the existing rates of *Jama* and *Nazar*, and above all, secured a share in sale-proceeds of tea. The rate of *Jama* varied from Rs. 6 to Rs. 10 a *Drone* (6.4 acres), depending upon the quality of the soil and communicational facilities available. A *Nazar* amounting to one year's *Jama* was to be paid at the time of such settlement.⁹

Period of remission

Apart from the paying aspect, the settlement secured a period of revenue remission for three years initially in the first block of twenty years. No remission was allowed for any renewal of the lease; to the contrary every re-settlement of land for tea cultivation progressively demanded an enhanced rate of annas two ($\frac{1}{8}$ of a rupee) per rupee over the past *Jama* fixed for the block.¹⁰

Other terms of settlement

Neither this enhanceable *Jama* nor the payment of sizeable amount of *Nazarana* alone characterised the settlement for tea plantation in the State. The term of settlement also secured the payment of an *ad valorem* export duty/royalty of $\frac{1}{2}$ per cent on the Calcutta price of tea¹, and thus the land settlement for tea transcends its traditional jurisdiction to become ambivalent with industry on the matter of revenue.

Other concessions on the performance

Though not stipulated in the lease deed, other concessions were granted to the proprietors of the tea estates on their performances. Most of the tea estates had not fair sailing in their course of journey. In 1923 the management experienced so much tough financial constraint that it became extremely difficult for them to

match between the cost of inputs and the gain from output. Soon many of them fell in arrears. The lack of experiences in the new enterprise, and small size of tea estates economically not very much viable may be accounted for their being sick in the prime of their life.

Aware fully of the difficulties, the suspension of *Jama* for a year was allowed at the first instance, which was later extended to a period of three years, depending upon the drive and initiative on behalf of the sick estates to recover. But this concession was not without a sting. An interest at the rate of six *per cent per annum* was charged over the *Jama* suspended for a year or years.¹²

Things came to such a pass that some of the tea estates were purchased by the State in revenue auction sale for re-settlement. This demanded a liberal policy of protection for the tea industry still in its infancy. The sick tea estates were granted not only temporary suspension and easy instalments for payment of arrear revenue, but also they were allowed remission of interest and relinquishment of uncultivated lands.¹³ These were some of the attempts to revamp the tea estates economically.

Tea cultivation in Taluki and Taskhishi settlements

The tea settlement in the *Taluki* land was also another incentive given to the tea industry. As a rule, tea cultivation was not allowed in the *Taluki* settlement without the special permission of the *Durbar*, nor was the tenant of landlord right authorised to make such settlement even within his estate¹⁴. His interest was thus restricted by tea cultivation rules. The choice of the State was naturally confined to the lands hold under *Taskhishi* tenure with a promise of the enhanceable *Jama*. Sickness writ large on many of the tea estates prompted the State to allow tea cultivation in the *Taluki* estates¹⁵ in the hope that the enterprising Talukdars could develop tea estates as an economically viable unit with minimum cost on lands. For the tea plantation in the *Taluki* lands only the amount of *nazarana* was paid at the rate fixed by the *Durbar*. Earlier *Jama* was not enhanced any more, and above all, a period of revenue exemption was too allowed.¹⁶

Measures for the recovery of arrear revenue

But all these measures were in a sense directed to ensure the flow of revenue to the State coffer. When all the soft measures referred to the above could not deliver goods, the tea estates on the run were put up in revenue auction sale, and purchased mostly

by the State. In case of the shortfall the movable and immovable properties of the proprietors were attached to balance the payment.¹⁷

Tea restrictive measures and its impact

The Indian Tea Control Act of 1933 introduced the Tea Restriction Scheme to which the State was a participant. The Scheme seriously limited the extension of tea cultivation in the State. As the tea industry in the State was in its early stage of growth during the mid-thirties, the pioneer plantations being now in the middle of the second decade of their existence, and the youngest group barely a couple of years old, the extension of tea cultivation was sorely necessary for most of the tea estates. But the attitude of the Indian Tea Licensing Committee was very tough on the matter of extension. Even with the *Durbar's* negotiation with the imperial Government, nothing could avail. As a consequence of the tea restriction measures, several tea gardens wanted relinquishment of large portions of uncultivated land which the State had to consider as a protective measure.¹⁸ Neither the Indian Tea Control (Amendments) Act, 1938, nor the Tripura Tea Control Act of 1948 T. E. (1938 A.D.), adapted in the light of the former, could improve the position. The Indian Tea Licensing Committee was hence given indirect position only. The permission for the extension of tea cultivation could now be granted by the State by arrangement with the Government of India. But such extension was allowable only to a limited liability companies with less than 300 acres of planted area or to tea estates owned by individual proprietors having the limit of 150 acres.¹⁹ In 1940 only an extension of 200 acres was allotted to the State of Tripura for plantation.²⁰

Under the provisions of the International Tea Agreement the total area of land, permissible for extensions to be made in 1940 was 52 acres only. Through unremitting persuasion of the State, some 200 acres out of the unutilized area of 981 acres available for extensions in Bengal were allotted to Tripura. On recommendations from the Indian Tea Licensing Committee on the tea extensions in the State, an allotment of 152 acres was made in 1941 (November) at the first instance, keeping some 100 acres in reserve to meet the requirement of any orders passed in appeals to the State Government. During the triennium 1943-46 the area admissible to the State came up to 133 acres, out of which 80 acres were distributed in 1945 among the deserving estates, and the rest were allotted against the orders passed in appeals in 1946 (February)^{20b}.

All this indicates that restrictive measures were primarily designed to control tea market in the interest of the big planters.

In other words, the economic strangulation crept in under the Indian Tea Control Acts of 1933 and 1938, which, restricting the export quota, not only lay curb upon the expanding tea revenue of the State, but also curtailed the *Rajah's* political right to lease out land for tea plantation even within his own territory. Thus the tea industry started to languish and many of the tea estates in the State grew sick and anaemic in the prime of their growth.

Yet the State gained enormously from its venture in tea settlements. The vast tracts of waste land was brought under rentals would otherwise yield no or insignificant amount of revenue. This apart, the realisation of *nazarana* was quite considerable. In 1920-21 the total collection on this account came to Rs. 1,01,991 as referred to in the annual report. The terms to pay an *advalorem* export duty or royalty of $\frac{1}{2}$ per cent on the Calcutta price of tea opened up a new area of revenue potential. The 'Special Excise Duty' on tea proved another source of revenue in the train. It can be said, and not inappropriately, that the State derived triple kind of revenue premium from its enterprise in tea settlements. The following table will show the quinquennial average of rentals, and export duty or royalty on tea received by the State, along with the volume of export, for the period in 1928-29 to 1942-43.

Table No. : The quinquennial average of land revenue, export duty, and volume of tea export

(Tea export in pounds)

Quinquennial period	Land revenue	Export duty/ royalty	volume of tea export
1928-29 to 1932-33	Rs 3,895	Rs 11,487	12,94,640
1933-34 to 1937-38	Rs 45,756	Rs 29,216	24,24,572
1938-39 to 1942-43	Rs 65,000	Rs 47,824	32,69,122

Source : *Tripura Administration Reports for those years*

From the table it can be seen that both land revenue and the export duty/royalty realised from the tea estates show a continuous ascending graph during the quinquennial periods. The volume of tea export too progressively increased with each successive quinquennial period, yielding proportionate rise in export duty on tea.

The levy and collection of duty on all the commodities liable to duty of Central Excise had been introduced in the State in 1944-45 as "Special Excise", and with its operation, the Special Exoise

Duty on tea opened up another prospective area of revenue. The biennial average of the revenue for the period 1944-46 came to Rs. 2,27,068 which was highly significant as compared to other components of income derived from tea settlements.²¹

Bibliography

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2. Soil analysis was carried out by Dr. A.C. Bhattacharya in the laboratories of India and abroad, and his report on the "Soils of Tripura State" largely influenced the *Durbar* to overcome the initial inhibition in regard to the settlement of extensive waste lands hitherto not allowed for tea cultivation (see Dr. A.C. Bhattacharya's *Progressive Tripura*, pp. 59-60; Tripura State Administration Report, 1327 TE (1917 AD), p. 3.
3. Tripura State Administration Report, 1326 T.E. (1916 AD), p. 3 (*herein-after TAR.*)
4. State Census, op. cit., p. 115; TAR (Consolidated) 1353-55 T.E. (1943-46 AD), p. 25.
5. TAR, 1326 T.E. (1916 AD), op. cit., p. 3; State Census, op. cit, p. 115; *Memorandum And Statistics Relating to Agriculture, Forests, Exports and Imports of Tripura State for 1937-38*, Agartala, 1938, p. 3; TARs for 1347-55 T.E. (1937-46 AD).
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7. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
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12. Tripura State Gazette, Part XXII No. 6, IInd Fortn[gh]t dated 29 Ashad, 1333 TE (1923 AD).
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14. *Cha-Krishi Ain*, op cit, Sections 6-8, p. 2.
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18. TAR, 1343 TE (1933 AD), op. cit., p. 6.
19. The Tripura Tea Control Act, 1348 T.E. (1938 AD), Section 10.
20. TAR (Consolidated), 1350-52 TE (1940-43 AD), p. 18.
- 20a. TAR (Consolidated), 1353-55 TE (1943-46 AD). op. cit., p. 25
21. *Ibid*, pp. 27-28.