

Leadership In Electoral Politics Of Assam: The Role Of Tea Garden Community

Channika Borah

PhD Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Dibrugarh University.

Abstract:

Leadership in the electoral politics of Assam is a complex and evolving phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, ethnic diversity, socio-economic challenges and shifting political alliances. The tea garden community's role in the electoral politics of Assam is both significant and evolving. Their large population, economic contribution, and growing political awareness make them a crucial demographic for any political party seeking power in Assam. The leadership emerging from within this community holds the potential to address historical injustices and work towards a more inclusive and prosperous future for the Tea Garden Labourers (TGLs) and their families. In this context, the present article will primarily address two issues: why and how the concept of leadership emerged among the Tea Garden Community in the political domain of Assam, and the role of trade unions, such as Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), in developing leadership among the Tea Garden Community.

Key Words: Leadership, Electoral Politics, Tea Garden Community, ACMS.

Introduction:

Leadership in the electoral politics of Assam is a complex and evolving phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, ethnic diversity, socio-economic challenges and shifting political alliances. The role of the Tea Garden Community in the electoral politics of Assam is both significant and evolving. Their large population, economic contribution and growing political awareness make them a crucial demographic for any political party seeking power in Assam. But from the beginning, the working conditions and living conditions of the Tea Garden

Community at tea estates have been unpleasant. During the colonial era, there has been some opposition to these measures. However, in general, opposition was either individual or group of people. Of course, there were periods when it included kin/ethnic-based groupings. In general, such opposition remained localised. In post-independence India, the basic focus of state policy regarding the Tea Garden Community has been one of integration or inclusion into many spheres of national life. At least, if one closely reads the provisions for tribes in the Indian Constitution, this seems to be the prevailing mindset. The Constitution has many clauses aimed at protecting and promoting the interests of the tribal community of India. Reservations in politics (Parliament and state legislatures), employment (government and semi-government sectors), and education, particularly in higher education and learning institutions, are examples of such provisions. When a reservation is made, there is a clear presence of leadership in the Tea Garden Community. However, if it's absent, a conspicuous deficiency in leadership is apparent. Their prominence in electoral politics can be explained by this. If there had been no political reserve, non-tribes would have represented tribes instead of tribes. The Tea Garden Community should have representation in state legislatures and the parliament, among other institutions. Many political parties therefore organised this community to win their support. Therefore, the leadership emerging within this community holds the potential to address historical injustices and work towards a more inclusive and prosperous future for the Tea Garden Labourers (TGLs) and their families. In this regard, political parties used novel strategies by launching numerous platforms in the form of "tea trade unions" to look after "Labour Welfare." 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha' (hereinafter referred to as ACMS) is one of the numerous trade unions that serves as a platform for leadership development among the Adivasis in Assam.

In this context, the present article will primarily address two **objectives: first**, why and how the concept of leadership emerged among the Tea Garden Community in the political domain of Assam, and **second**, to what extent trade unions i.e. Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) aid in the development of leadership among the Tea Garden Community in Assam.

Materials and Methods:

This article uses primary and secondary data to contextualise the leadership of the Tea Garden Community in the electoral politics of Assam. The primary data has been sourced from the Election Commission of India and Assam, Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Department of tea tribes of the Governments of India and Assam. Secondary sources are drawn from a substantial number of scholarly works, archival documents, and various government and non-governmental reports. Both the historical and analytical methods are used to collect data, with the historical method studying the origins and evolution of Tea Garden Community's leadership in India in general and Assam in particular. However, an analytical method is utilized to analyse the increased influence of ACMS as a platform for leadership development among the politically ambitious section of Tea Garden Community in the electoral politics of Assam.

Emergence of Tea Garden Community Leadership in India and Assam: Revisiting the Existing Literature and Theoretical Framework

Leadership is an important aspect of the progress of any community. The more enlightened and foresighted the leader, the more rapid the progress of the community. Community representation in politics argues for the readjustment of rules for electoral competition so that the outcome would be more representative. In politics, it is believed that their community members would be in a better position than other legislators to comprehend the problems faced by tribal communities if they were represented as a group or community. As John Burnheim writes 'Our interests are better preserved when we are represented by others who share our experience and interests, and this similarity of circumstance is a much better predictor than whether people could share our fairly questionable ideas.'ⁱ

The existing theoretical underpinnings strongly advocate group as well as community representation and contend that 'others' cannot represent marginalized and excluded groups in politics, such as the tribes in India. There is high support for the inclusion of tribal communities in the political arena since they have been previously excluded. To meet the objective of the celebrated principle of democracy,

‘one man one vote, one vote one value’, there is a need to extend the group rights to the tribals in India. Kymlicka asserts that no one else could represent minorities in politics.ⁱⁱ McMillan underlines that group representation for the tribals tends to be justified in the context of persistent political exclusion and past discrimination perpetuating separate community identities.ⁱⁱⁱ Within this context, the Tea Garden Community’s representation in electoral politics can be analysed through the above-mentioned theoretical underpinnings.

With the emergence of leadership, the Tea Garden Community in India have been at the forefront of some of the most militant movements aimed at achieving a variety of goals, including non-usurpation and alienation of land, exorbitant land rent and other exactions, extortion by moneylenders, self-serving outsiders, cultural dominance, and seeking access to forests and their resources, as well as a remunerative price for their produce.^{iv} Some of these movements were headed by traditional leaders, while others were led by charismatic people who tapped into their local communities’ cultural resources and/or reconstructed new information they met in the broader world to speak to their concerns.^v In Central, Northern, and Eastern India, many social movements were preceded by internal churning to weld the society together via internal reforms, referred to as Bhagat movements.^{vi} We have movements, such as the Naga and Jharkhand movements, that have been organised and led by a vanguard selected from the affected people themselves to explicitly achieve definite modernist aims since the second decade of the twentieth century. There have also been movements driven by intellectual streams and leadership not derived from the Tea Garden Community, even though their social makeup was mostly by this community. The Godavari Parulekar-led Warli struggle or the Maoist activity in Dandakaranya today are examples of this.^{vii} Apart from such movements, there are imperatives of daily social reproduction that need a particular style of leadership. The Tea Garden Community in India today are established groups, mostly agricultural, and many of them have been for centuries. Community leadership, often led by chiefs with varying titles between tribes, governs their internal affairs and relationships with other communities. In resolving and arbitrating over communal matters, such leadership often

turns to customary laws and customs. Furthermore, tribal tribes have developed their type of leadership as a result of India's national movement and democratic politics. In this regard, the main objective of this article is to determine how successful Tea Garden Community's leadership has been in asserting its presence in India's and Assam's representative and participatory democracy, as well as its unique contribution to such politics, the issues that this community have raised as their primary concerns through their movements, and the challenges that this leadership faces today.

Emergence of Leadership among Tea Garden Community in Assam:

Before discussing the nature of the emergence of leadership among the Tea Garden Community in Assam, it is important to first comprehend how the notion of leadership emerged among the Tea Garden Community of Assam, as well as the major factors that contributed to the development of leadership among them. To begin with, popular Indian nationalist leaders toured Assam's tea estates during colonial times as part of a bigger campaign against the tyrannical and repressive British administration. They offered the workers a feeling of independence and dignity in the face of the Britishers' inhumane acts. Workers in the tea estates were given the motive and encouragement to speak out against the discriminatory practices of the British Planters. It is important to note that the majority of workers were not inspired or understood the message of the nationalist leaders. However, a newly educated group of Tea Garden Community were very driven to break free from the worst forms of enslavement. And those leaders supplied the first impetus and platform for the following generations of leaders to contribute to the Tea Garden Community's current problems.

Thus, in response to this, this new group of educated elites of the Tea Garden Community's attempted to unite and solidify the community by forming various organisations to aid in the combat of their problems. After independence, those who were part of the intelligentsia created a slew of political, cultural, and social organisations that have helped the Tea Garden Community become more united and expand on the political influence they had before independence.

Within the Tea Garden Community of Assam, the growth of the educated and political elite was a slow process. Their shared experiences of colonial exploitation, anti-colonial resistance, migration, and enslavement allowed them to form a strong community. People started to recognise that they needed to organise to express their rights and demands as greater engagement, better conditions for exercising democratic rights, universal education, and other factors became available. As a consequence, a group of wise leaders realised that the Tea Garden Community needed a strong structure to assist them solve their difficulties. This knowledge and understanding aided in the formation and development of numerous socio-political groups that have assisted the Tea Garden Community in becoming more unified and building on the political strength they had before independence. For example, on December 28, 1947, a group of Adivasi college students formed the Assam Chotanagpuri Chatra Sanmilan (ACCS), which aimed to bring all the Tea Garden Community students together on a common platform, foster socio-economic consciousness among them, and thus eliminate the various social prejudices that existed in their communities. In truth, this was a well-known group among the Tea Garden Community. This student group, however, decided to change its name to the Assam Tea Tribes Students' Association (ATTSA). Since its establishment, the leaders of ATTSA have made several requests to the central and state governments to ensure the holistic development of the Tea Garden Community.^{viii} Thus, in the post-independence period, the student groups of the Tea Garden Community of Assam were able to create a new political class, which led to the development of the idea of leadership among the ambitious part, and subsequently, it was highly successful in both state and national politics.

Finally, the establishment of another organisation, such as trade unions in Assam which played a key role in politically organising the Tea Garden Community, which helped the community address its many issues. The Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was the state's first trade union, and it played a key role in resolving different issues. Following that, several trade unions were formed to fight for Adivasis against various forms of exploitation. 'Assam Chah, Mazdoor Sangha', 'Bharatiya Chah Mazdoor Union', 'Bharatiya Chah

Parishad', 'The Cachar District Chah Mazdoor Samiti', 'Purbanchal Chah Parishad', 'Upper Assam Tea Co. Labour Union', 'Rajmai Tea Co. Labour Union', 'Greenwood Tea Labour Union', 'Makum Tea Labour Union', 'Assam Janajati Cha Mazdoor Sramik Union', 'Assam Tea Workers' Union', 'Assam Tea Workers Union' etc.^{ix}

But it is the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS) that has emerged as the most powerful force among the Tea Garden Community of Assam. In a strict sense, ACMS serves as a platform for many Tea Garden Community leaders to participate in electoral politics, which has resulted in a sense of leadership development among them. Because of its large membership and officials, the ACMS is associated with several prominent labour groups throughout the globe. On September 3, 1947, the Assam chapter of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) was founded, with Kamakhya Prasad Tripathy as its President. Following the foundation of the INTUC in Assam, a number of trade unions dedicated to the cause of the Tea Garden Community of Assam were created on a district basis. On August 9, 1958, all of the District Chah Mazdoor Sanghas were merged into one 'Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha'.^x The ACMS backed the INC-led government in its efforts to find a solution to the long-standing challenges that have plagued Adivasis since independence. The organisational dominance of ACMS and the legacy of its early leadership development have aided in maintaining its grip over rival unions throughout practically the whole Brahmaputra valley. The term "trade union" is equivalent to ACMS in most Assamese tea estates.^{xi} Congress has been able to establish a significant presence in the tea plantations of the Brahmaputra Valley because of the Tea Garden Community widespread support for ACMS. The formation of ACMS has provided the TGLs with a legitimate strength to ventilate their grievances before the government and the plantation authority. The majority of the ACMS leaders have been elected to various constituencies of the State Legislative Assembly and Lok Sabha. As a result, an effort has been made in this paper to analyse how ACMS serves as a platform for leadership development among the politically ambitious section of the Tea Garden Community.

Leadership of Tea Garden Community in Electoral Politics of Assam: The Role of Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS)

With the democratization of the political system in post-colonial Assam, tea trade unions played a crucial role in organising the Tea Garden Community of Assam politically. The involvement of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha in this context is likewise not an exception. It has played a significant role in helping many Tea Garden Community leaders to win elections. The ACMS leadership was certain that their participation in electoral politics, in collaboration with the INC, was the most effective method of assuring "their security and development via the implementation of the law," as stated in the ACMS constitution. The INC, on the other hand, believed it was expedient to organise the Tea Garden Community under the flag of the ACMS to gain mass support and thereby seize political power in the state. As a result, on the eve of each Assembly election, the INC considers the requests of the ACMS when selecting candidates to run in different seats. It is clear from the fact that Sanu Kheria, the founding president of the ACMS, was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly (hereinafter referred to as the ALA) as a congress candidate in the 1967 elections, followed by Maliya Tanti (Doomdooma) and Upen Sanatan (Chabua). As a result, the ALA has chosen several ACMS-sponsored leaders, both Adivasis and non-Adivasis, from time to time. They include Bijoy Chandra Bhagawati, Kamakhya Prasad Tripathy, Biswadev Sharma, Jaganath Bhuyan, Durgeswar Saikia, Maliya Tanti, Upendranath Sanatan, Gojen Tanti, Chatra Gopal Karmakar, Bishnulal Upadhyay, Narendra Nath Sharma, Mohikanta Das, Lily Sengupta, and many more. Among them, Chatra Gopal Karmakar, the first induction into the Council of Ministers in the post of Minister of State for Labour, was elected to the ALA from the Sarupathar Constituency as an INC candidate.^{xii}

INC candidate Gojen Tanti, representing the Mariani seat, was chosen as the first cabinet minister with the Ministry of Labour and Supply in the 1972 ALA election. Another ACMS-backed INC candidate, Dipak Murmu, was elected from the Lahowal seat in this election. In the election, none of the labour candidates who were not endorsed by the ACMS were able to gain seats. This election reaffirmed the view that being elected to the ALA was almost impossible unless the Tea Garden Community candidate was endorsed by the ACMS in alliance with the INC. Following that, there has been a growing race among the Tea Garden Community leaders to secure a position

in the ACMS or one of its branches to gain the ability to barter with the INC for its nomination to run for election. Kumari Rabidas (Ratabari), Monilal Gowala (Patharkandi), Mithius Tudu (Gossaigaon), Dinesh Prasad Gowala (Lakhimpur), Silvius Condopan (Majbat), Rameswar Dhanowar (Digboi), Dileswar Tanti (Digboi), Dileswar Tanti (Digboi), Dileswar Tanti (Doomdoooma). Boloram Nag (Kaliabar), Aklius Tirky (Sarupathar), Rupam Kurmi (Titabar), Narad Kumar (Mahmora), Satya Tanti (Sonari), Dipak Murmu (Lahowal), Paban Singh Ghatowar (Tinkhong), Upendra Nath Santan (Chabua) were among the ACMS-backed Congress candidates that lost this election. As a result, the INC nominated all 15 ACMS-backed Tea Garden Community candidates in the 1985 Assembly election.^{xiii} This tendency persisted in successive elections, prompting the INC (I) to nominate an increasing number of ACMS-backed Tea Garden Community candidates to ensure their win and maintain control. In reality, under the umbrella of the ACMS, Tea Garden Community leaders have developed an astonishing potential to play a significant role in the contemporary electoral politics of Assam. The Tea Garden Community essentially became "a traditional supporter of the Congress party."

As a result, the ALA in 2006 had a total of ten Tea Garden Community members, seven of whom were elected as ACMS-backed Congress candidates. Furthermore, two Tea Garden Community congress members, Dinesh Prasad Gowala and Prithivi Manjhi, were inducted into the Council of Ministers as cabinet ministers, while Jibontara Ghatowar, the only Tea Garden Community woman member, was appointed as Parliamentary Secretary with the health and family welfare portfolio under Tarun Gogoi's then chief ministership. In reality, in the case of its nomination and creation of a Ministry, the INC (I) party has given significant weight to the Tea Garden Community population to maintain their support for the party. Despite this, the Tea Garden Community leadership seems to be dissatisfied with the representation they have had in the ALA thus far. To secure proper representation, the ACMS passed a resolution at its executive meeting on August 27, 2000, in Dibrugarh, requesting the allocation of 35 ALA seats and 15 parliamentary seats for Adivasis. In a memorandum sent to Sonia Gandhi on 10th December 2000, then-AICC President Paban Singh Ghatowar justified this demand. The

Tea Garden Community voters now control at least 38 constituencies in Assam, and the ACMS has played a significant influence in the political affairs of the state. The Tea Garden Community has been credited with providing the Congress with a strong foundation of support, allowing the party to consistently win in tea-dominated districts. Paban Singh Ghatowar, a prominent Congress politician, expressed his support for the Tea and Ex-Tea Gardens voters, saying, "The Tea and Ex-Tea Gardens voters have remained faithful to the Congress Party, whereas other individuals have abandoned the Congress Party."^{xiv}

The ALA election results show how ACMS-backed candidates have played a significant impact on the contemporary politics of Assam. ACMS serves as a platform for political party and leadership development among Adivasis in the ALA elections of 2011, 2016 and 2021 with political ambitions who want to promote, disseminate, and influence their views to mobilise public opinion. However, the situation has drastically shifted after the ALA's general election in 2016. Other political parties, such as the BJP and the AGP, have recognised the significance of the Tea Garden community's votes and have nominated several Adivasi candidates. The BJP established a significant presence in the predominantly TGLs population seats of Assam, i.e. Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Kaliabor, and Tezpur, where the main leadership in politics comes from the ACMS. However, the importance of ACMS as a platform for leadership among the Tea Garden Community in the ALA elections of Assam.

In recent elections of ALA, it is obvious from the preceding discussion that the ACMS was created for two goals. First, to secure the Tea Garden Community's en-bloc support for the ruling Congress to ensure their win and maintain power in the state. Taking note of this, the Tea Garden Community educated elite began to connect with the ACMS and its affiliates, allowing them to develop their future political careers. As a consequence, a slew of Adivasi leaders closely affiliated with the ACMS were elected to the ALA and Parliament over time. As a result, the ACMS has essentially served as a platform for politically ambitious Tea Garden Community leaders to further their careers.

Apart from playing a decisive role in the state politics of Assam, the Tea Garden Community of Assam has also been active in the parliamentary elections of India. The political leaders from this community have been elected successfully in the parliament of India from 1977 to 2019, and they have been elected not only from the Congress but also from other political parties such as the AGP and BJP, thus, the Tea Garden Community have been able to make a significant impact in the politics of the state as well as the country as a whole.

Challenges before the Leadership of Tea Garden Community:

Despite the prevalence of tribal among the leaders, they have been systematically denied important posts in political organisations. A crisis like this span across political parties of all stripes. This has not just been the case with political parties, but also with organisations such as trade unions. For example, tribes make up the majority of the tea garden labour force in Assam. It is a distinct thing that Tea Garden Community in Assam have not been granted Scheduled Tribe status. There are currently a considerable number of trade unions linked with various political parties that operate among the Tea Garden Community in Assam. Despite this, trade union leadership has always been in the hands of persons from outside the tribe and the labour force, even at the block level. Tea Garden Community's leadership on tea plantations is limited to tea estates levels at best; it rarely extends beyond that. In Assam, it is noteworthy that most of the prominent leaders in the ACMS are still outsiders' i.e. educated, middle-class individuals who came into union work from outside rather than through the wage-earning ranks. It is essential to look at the reasons why this is the situation. Several reasons are found for this phenomenon, namely, the rank and the file are largely illiterate in the garden of Assam; as such they cannot effectively communicate with the management; the union's lack of formal power tends to put a premium on the charismatic type of the leader, usually a politician, who can play the role of their defender of the workers against his enemies; for ensuring a measure of the equation of power in collective bargaining, where the tea garden workers are generally uneducated and have a low status; for avoiding victimisation of workers office bearers of the trade unions; and at times for lack of financial resources to appoint whole time office bearers. Thus, in ACMS, most leaders combine political

interest with union work, and, therefore, they cannot focus their entire attention on the internal functioning of their unions or the daily problems of the members in the workplace. Besides, they hold a multiplicity of offices. Despite all this, outside leadership cannot be altogether avoided. Recently, this tendency has begun to shift, and more internal leadership is forthcoming.

This isn't to say that only tribes may speak for the tribes' interests. Non-tribes can do it, and they can probably do it better than tribes since they have superior articulation, network, mobilisation, and manoeuvring capabilities. However, there has often been a wedge (social, political, economic, and cultural) between tribes and non-tribes, and tribes' interests have frequently been sacrificed in favour of 'others'. In the previous fifty years, this has been the history of the reserve for tribes. There isn't a single political party that has produced national-level leadership from inside tribes.

In terms of intellectual, organisational, and mobilisation capabilities, the Tea Garden Community's leadership is severely lacking. This is an issue to which neither political parties, trade unions, nor non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating with the Tea Garden Community have given any attention. The Tea Garden Community's leadership is completely reliant on regional and central leadership for all reasons. They are unable to take initiative and make judgments on their own about topics that are vital and critical to the organisation and programme. Outside leadership, no matter how charismatic or successful, cannot sustain an organisation or movement for long. The trade unions must investigate the situation thoroughly and devise strategies for resolving the issue and narrowing the disparity.

End Notes and References:

ⁱ Phillips, A. (1995). *The politics of presence: The political representation of gender, ethnicity and race*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

ⁱⁱ Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights*. Oxford: Oxford University

Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ McMillan, A. (2005). *Standing at the margins: Representation and electoral reservation in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 5

^{iv} Kothari, S., Savyasaachi, & George, PT. (Eds.). (2010). *Dissent, self-determination and resilience: Social movements in India*. New Delhi: Intercultural Resources.

^v Sarkar, T. (1985). Jitu Santal's movement in Malda, 1924–1932: A study in tribal protest. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (pp. 136–164). New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 136-164

^{vi} Fuchs, S. (1966–1967). Messianic movements in tribal India. *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, 20(1–2), 15–33.

^{vii} Shah, A. (2018). *Nightmarch: Among India's revolutionary guerrillas*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press

^{viii} Thapa, R. (2020). Assam Tea Tribes Students Association: An Overview. In R.Thapa and P.Champia (Ed.) *Politics of Identity and Assertion of Tea Communities in Assam*. Guwahati: DVS Publishers. Pp-166-169

^{ix} Ibip

^x Jayjatra (1956) *Souvenoiur, India's Independence Golden Jubilee Celebration by Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha*

^{xi} Sharma, Pratim Dhruba (2009), *Role of Tea Tribe in Electoral Politics in the Brahmaputra Valley*, *Journal of Political Science*, Published by Department of Political Science, Guwahati university, Vol-6

^{xii} Memorandum submitted to the Chairman, Backward Class Commission (ST & SC), Government of India jointly by Adivasi Council of Assam and ACMS dated 13 April 1978, Secretarial Report, 4th Plenary Conference of ACMS held at Tinsukia on 30th

April 1967 prepared and read out by Durgeswar Saikia, General Secretary ACMS, p.63

^{xiii} Kurmi Sushil (1997), Rajnitir Patharat Chah Janajatir Vote-Bank appeared in the Amar Asom, 3rd October, 1997

^{xiv} The Memorandum presented Mrs Sonia Gandhi, President of All India Congress Committee by a group of Adivasi MLAs under the stewardship of Paban Singh Ghatowar, President of the ACMS, New Delhi, 20th December, 2000