

## Life Behind Two Leaves And A Bud: A Socio-Cultural Study In Perspective Of Tea Community Of Assam

Deepika Das

Research Scholar (Ph.D), Department of Hindi, Banaras Hindu University, Uttar Pradesh.  
Email- deepika87249@gmail.com

### **Abstract:**

The Tea community of Assam, commonly known as the Adivasi, originally gained the identity of 'tea tribes' following their involvement in tea production in the region. Despite their significant contributions to the economic development of Assam, they remain one of the most disadvantaged tribes in North-East India. This study aims to explore their identities not only as a natural category but also through political, social, cultural, and economic lenses.

The British brought the Adivasi to Assam as indentured laborers under false promises of easy work, ideal working conditions, and better pay. However, the reality was starkly different, leading to their agitation against exploitation and efforts to establish their own identity in Assam. This struggle is also evident in their folk literature. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Adivasi community's socio-economic, political, and cultural positions are gradually improving due to their positive attitude and increasing focus on education. This paper primarily aims to understand the socio-cultural aspects of the tea community in Assam.

**Keywords:** Tea Community of Assam, Tea Industry of Assam, Women worker in Tea Plantation, Celebration of festivals in Tea Community, Exploitation of Tea Community.

### **Introduction:**

Discussions on tribal folk life, literature, socio-economic issues, politics, and language have recently gained significant momentum.

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Just a few years ago, these matters were often overlooked, much like issues related to backward classes and women's empowerment. While modern society has made substantial progress, a segment remains marginalized and disconnected from this advancement. This group continues to be neglected, exploited, and dominated by the upper classes. They remain largely unaware and excluded from many government policies and schemes aimed at uplifting the poor.

Today, this group is striving for progress. In this context, B.R. Ambedkar stands out as a pivotal leader and role model for their advancement. India is a land of unity in diversity, home to people of various religions, castes, creeds, colors, and languages. Among them, tribal people constitute 8.6% of the population, including groups like the Naga, Kuki, Mising, Boro, Karbi, Nyishi, Ho, Santhal, and Munda. Tribals typically reside in forested and hilly regions. The tea tribes are a distinct group of Adivasi tribal people who migrated to Assam from various parts of India. Known as 'Natu Assamiya' or 'Bagania,' they encompass over a hundred castes such as the Manjhi, Santhals, Oriya, Munda, Telenga, and Koal. Brought to Assam by British colonizers primarily for tea production, these tribes, despite being hardworking and dedicated, are often labeled as uncivilized.

**Their economic backwardness can be attributed to several factors:**

1. Inferiority Complex: They perceive themselves as inferior to other societal groups.
2. Low Literacy Rates: The low literacy levels among tea tribes hinder their ability to voice against exploitation.
3. Low Political Participation: Their minimal involvement in politics results in reduced influence in government formation compared to other societal classes.

**Tea Industry in Assam:**

The tea industry in Assam stands as a global leader, renowned for its production. Approximately 17% of Assam's population, nearly 60 lakhs individuals, belongs to the tea tribes, originally brought to the region as laborers during the 19th and early 20th centuries by the East India Company and British entrepreneurs. These laborers,

predominantly from the Santhal Parganas district of Bihar (now part of Jharkhand), form the backbone of the tea industry in Assam.

Located in remote areas, tea estates contribute to the socio-economic challenges faced by these communities, exacerbated by the exploitative practices of plantation owners. Basic amenities provided by the planters often fail to meet the needs of workers, who endure poor living conditions and limited access to education, healthcare, and other essential services. Instances of labor unrest and agitation against management are not uncommon, underscoring a historical imbalance where state authorities have typically favored planters over laborers.

Despite regulations like the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 mandating welfare officers on estates, systemic improvements for workers remain inadequate. The initial workforce recruited in the mid-19th century primarily consisted of men, with women gradually integrated into the labor force through the 'Sirdari System', wherein garden sirdars brought entire families to settle in Assam, seeking relief from poverty and hardship in their home regions of Bihar and Bengal.

This historical context highlights ongoing challenges and disparities within Assam's tea industry, reflecting broader issues of socio-economic inequality and exploitation endured by its labor force.

**Women workers in tea plantation:**

The tea industry in Assam has historically employed more female workers than any other sector. This preference for women is attributed to their perceived submissiveness, obedience, and lower propensity to cause disruptions compared to men. It has long been believed that women possess the patience and dexterity necessary for the delicate task of plucking tea leaves.

To ensure a steady workforce, women were encouraged to migrate with their families, making it easier for them to settle near their places of employment. This strategy of family-based employment was also driven by the agricultural nature of the work,

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which suited women who came from agricultural backgrounds and could quickly adapt to plantation activities.

Since the jobs in tea plantations required minimal skill, employers preferred to hire women, who were willing to work for lower wages and often demonstrated higher quality work than their male counterparts. Thus, women were employed in large numbers.

**The key reasons for preferring women in tea plantations include:**

1. Women demonstrated superior efficiency in the art of plucking tea leaves, making them more desirable workers than men.
2. Rural women, accustomed to agricultural work, easily adapted to the plantation environment.
3. Historically, women were paid lower wages than men, making their employment cost-effective for employers. Their higher efficiency in field activities further enhanced their appeal.
4. Women willingly took up plantation work to supplement their family income and improve their standard of living.
5. During the sirdari system of recruitment, whole families were recruited to ensure a higher number of female workers in the fields.

These factors collectively contributed to the significant presence of women in Assam's tea industry.

**Celebration of festivals in tea community:**

Initially, the culture of the tea tribes in Assam closely mirrored that of Hinduism. However, over time, some members of this community have converted to Christianity, while others have embraced the 'Ek-Saraniya Nam Dharma' faith. The tea tribes celebrate a variety of festivals, including Karam Puja, Tusu Puja, Gram Puja, Mansa Puja, Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja, Lakhi Puja, Garaya Pooja, Surjyahi Pooja, Good Friday, and Christmas. They are also renowned for their traditional folk dance, the 'Jhumur/Jhumair Dance.'

### **Major Festivals of the Tea Community in Assam:**

**Karam Puja:** This is the most significant festival for the tea community in Assam, celebrated to honor nature and trees for the well-being of families and society. It takes place on the night of 'Bhado Ekadasi,' usually in mid-August. The community believes that the blessings of the deity 'Karam' ensure a bountiful harvest and protection from evil. Women specifically pray for a happy married life. Karam Puja comes in three forms:

1. Ekadashi Karam on the Ekadashi tithi of Shukla Paksha in the 'Bhadra' month of the Hindu calendar.
2. Jeetiya Karam on the Ashtami tithi of Krishna Paksha in the 'Bhadra' month.
3. Budhi Karam on the Navami tithi in the 'Ashwin' month.

During Karam Puja, villagers gather for a communal celebration in 'Ashad,' and the night is marked by the traditional 'Jhumur Nritya' dance. This group dance, performed to the rhythm of the 'Dhol' and 'Madal,' involves young men and women dancing together.

**Tusu Puja:** Another important festival, Tusu Puja, celebrates the harvest season and involves the worship of the Goddess Tusu. In Assam, it is observed in the month of 'Paush' (January). Women create mud sculptures of the goddess, decorate them with colorful flowers, and place them on special wooden structures. These structures are carried from house to house by village children, who sing folk songs recounting tales of Tusu's valor. Young girls, dressed in traditional attire, perform dances to the accompaniment of ritualistic music played on traditional instruments. The goddess Tusu symbolizes sacrifice, compassion, and love.

**Jhumur Dance:** The Jhumur Dance is a traditional performance of the tea tribe community, typically held during the autumn season. It is usually performed by young girls in open areas such as fields or under trees, accompanied by male members who provide rhythm, vocals, and play musical instruments. The male performers wear long traditional dresses and maintain the beat with instruments like drums, flutes, and 'Taal.' The girls perform synchronized movements, holding each other's waists while moving their hands and legs in harmony. This dance often

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incorporates songs and dialogues that reflect the joys, sorrows, yearnings, and aspirations of everyday life. It is sometimes performed as a ritual worship or as a prayer for rainfall by the tea tribe communities.

The tea tribe community possesses a rich heritage of folk stories and beliefs, including practices such as 'Bali Pratha'. Additionally, they celebrate Assam's main folk festival, Bihu, with great enthusiasm. This is reflected in the following lines from a song:

"Karam Puja, Tussu Puja, Durga Puja aamader  
Bohag Bihuta holo sabo kera upore  
Hamnike Assam deshe  
Dholer tale jhumur nachi ja mure dhoni  
Bihu bihu lagechhe mor ga"<sup>1</sup>

**Religious Conversion:**

Historically, Dalits and Adivasis faced discrimination and were marginalized within Hindu society, subjected to social evils like untouchability and deemed uncivilized. This led to their frustration and eventual conversion to Christianity as they sought dignity and acceptance.

**Customs and Rituals in Tea Community:**

The Tea Community is renowned for its traditional attire. Women typically adorn themselves with bangles, mangtika, gajra, and white sarees with red borders, while men wear white dhotis and kurtas paired with red gamosas. They observe Hindu rituals during significant events such as childbirth, funerals, and weddings. During the Gram Puja, there is a tradition of offering 'Bali Pratha'. This ritual marks the beginning of the paddy harvest. Mansa Puja is celebrated on Nag Panchami in the month of Bhadra according to the Hindu calendar. These festivals are accompanied by the singing of numerous folk songs.

Today, many movies, songs, and albums showcase the culture of the tea tribes. These cultural expressions have gained popularity not only in Assam but also across other parts of India, serving as a medium of entertainment. This widespread appeal highlights that

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the culture and language of the tea tribes are unique and cherished, successfully preserving their originality.

**Exploitation of Tea Community:**

Tribal people are accustomed to living on isolated islands and in forests. They are typically hardworking, selfless by nature, and dedicated to their professions, often more so than those in modern civilized society. Their hearts are filled with friendliness, and they are sensitive human beings. However, today, they are among the most suffering and exploited people in society, facing social, economic, and political exploitation by the so-called civilized society. They are often excluded from the benefits of government schemes implemented nationwide.

Despite new employment opportunities, their exploitation persists. This is reflected in the songs of the tea tribes. For instance, a few lines of a song describe:

"Phuslaike Bitishe le aalo Assam  
Khulalo chah ke Bagan  
Chaul bhaja chapane khai mai bape  
Korela kudal mara kam"<sup>2</sup>

This translates to the Britishers luring them to Assam with false promises to work in the tea plantations. They survived on dried rice while toiling hard in the tea gardens. Another song highlights their migration from their native place:

"Sahabe aane rahe kalgari me chapaik  
Ghar-bari chore aili bagane kam korte le  
Sona rupa pate le  
Sahab gelo bideshe choli more dhoni  
Jabo hmara kaha re ghuri"<sup>3</sup>

These lines depict the British bringing them to Assam in overcrowded steam engine trains. They left everything behind in their native places, lured by promises of wealth like gold and silver. After India's independence, the British left, but the tea tribes were left with nowhere to return to.

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Thus, they fully align with Ambedkar's idealism against exploitation. As a result, its impact is evident in the increased awareness among the tea tribes and their resistance against ongoing exploitation. The migration of these tea tribes originated from various parts of India. They primarily belonged to tribes such as Manjhi, Santhals, Gorh, Bhumij, Kolh, Kurmi, Mahato, Koiri, Karmakar, Tanti, and others from regions like Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Telangana, Chhotanagpur, and Chhattisgarh. Upon arriving in Assam, they acquired a distinct identity as tea tribes, which gradually overshadowed their original identities.

It is notable that for Dalits and Adivasis, their original identities were closely tied to their professions, and now their professions have become their primary identities. Despite ongoing issues, their sub-castes are now often recognized through their surnames, as reflected in this song:

"Oriya, Munda, Telenga, Manjhi, Santhals, Saura  
Sobai mili hoi geli aamra bagania  
Natun Assamiya."<sup>4</sup>

These lines indicate that tribes such as Oriya, Munda, and Telenga are now collectively identified as tea tribes. The workers in tea plantations are now known as 'Bagania,' and in Assam, they are further identified as 'Natun-Assamiya' or 'New Assamese.'

**Present condition of Tea Community in Assam:**

The tea community in Assam, particularly those belonging to the tea tribes, remains largely unaware of the various schemes launched by central and state governments aimed at improving their socio-economic conditions. This lack of awareness is primarily due to widespread illiteracy. Consequently, they are often economically dependent on others in society. In times of emergency, they approach affluent members of the community for loans, which are usually given at exorbitant interest rates. This cycle of dependency and high-interest borrowing has perpetuated their economic hardships over time.

Tea tribe members are known for their sensitivity, purity, and kindness, standing in stark contrast to the affluent class. They are



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free from motives of deceit and selfishness, embodying the softness and freshness of green tea leaves in their hearts and behaviors. Their contributions to the economic development of the country are as significant as those of other societal groups. Furthermore, the Adivasi people, a part of the tea tribes, are staunch protectors and promoters of folk culture and art, integrating these into their everyday lives.

Despite their cultural richness and economic contributions, tea tribe members remain politically vulnerable even after 70 years of independence. They are often exploited due to their simple, kind-hearted, and selfless nature. Some political leaders take undue advantage of their simplicity, while certain government officials demand bribes for basic services. This exploitation persists largely because tea workers are unaware of the various government schemes designed to benefit them.

However, there are unions and associations such as the Assam Majdoor Chah Sangh, Bharatiya Chah Parishad, and the Assam Branch Indian Tea Association (ABITA) that strive to protect their interests. Additionally, the Tea Board of India (TBI) and the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 prioritize improving the living conditions of tea workers. Despite these efforts, the gap in awareness and access to benefits remains a significant challenge for the tea community in Assam.

Currently, members of the tea tribes are increasingly engaging in politics. They are running as candidates for various political parties and, upon winning, are taking on roles such as MLAs, MPs, and Ward Commissioners, contributing significantly to the country's development. These individuals are recognized as OBC – TGL (Other Backward Community, Tea Garden Labour) within the political sphere. However, they are now advocating for recognition as a 'Scheduled Tribe' by the current Government of Assam. Recently, a bill was passed in parliament to establish a separate Ministry for Tea, Coffee, and Cotton Production.

With rising literacy rates, tea tribe members are increasingly benefiting from government schemes. Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's call to "Be Educated, Be Organized, Be Agitated," there is a growing

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focus on education and health within the community. Consequently, not only are they becoming more literate, but they are also actively participating in politics. The community shows strong solidarity, coming together to address any problems or discrimination faced by individuals in society.

These things can also be seen in their folk songs:

“Porha suna kanar laathi, nai porhle ki re goti  
Chal bhaya school jabo, chal bohini school jabo  
Porhar bine nai re ujala, Sobai aandhar”<sup>5</sup>

“dukh-bhora jeebon, rohite ne pare mon  
Soche chhili go porhe-likhe gorhibo jeebon  
Nai holo sopna mur di toke pooran.  
Kom boyose sadi dilo, jeebon hamar bhangе gelo  
Mor picche chhena jeebon bemare moron  
Ki hoilo bhabi ke katachhi jeebon”<sup>6</sup>

Tea workers are found very dedicated towards their profession and can do hard physical work. At the time of plucking green tea leaves from the tea garden, they sing songs in groups like:

“Chah gachher maje-maje bhaya-bahini mili  
Tale-tale jarat jhumur, maina dekhiya mor jiya roye  
Eti koli tuti pate pancho unguli nache”<sup>7</sup>

Tea workers sometimes perform the Jhumur dance while singing, especially when they are in a more pleasant mood. While plucking green tea leaves, their fingers appear to dance across the tops of the tea plants, suggesting that they view their work as a form of entertainment. Despite their dedication and hard work, however, their economic condition remains dire. They suffer from food scarcity and live in substandard housing provided by their employers.

After the tea leaves are harvested and processed in the factory, they are branded and sold at high prices, generating substantial profits for the employers. These profits are used to provide luxurious accommodations for managerial staff, including well-

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furnished bungalows with air conditioning. This disparity highlights the employers' preference for managerial staff over the tea workers, who are left with minimal facilities and are exploited by their employers. This exploitation is keenly felt by the children of the tea workers, affecting their outlook and mentality. This sentiment is reflected in the lyrics of a song they sing:

“Moi nai karbo patta tula kam re  
Eskul podhibo moi, aadmi bonibo moi  
Nai bonbo sahib ke gulam re”<sup>8</sup>

The song conveys the children's desire to escape the cycle of exploitation through education, aspiring to improve their family's economic condition rather than continuing in the same profession.

Additionally, the tea tribe community faces issues related to alcohol production and consumption. Almost every household produces traditional alcoholic beverages, such as 'Hadiya' and 'Chulai.' This proclivity for alcohol prevents them from saving their earnings, further contributing to their poor economic condition. Both male and female tea workers exhibit this behavior.

Love affairs are also prevalent among the younger generation of tea tribes, driven by strong attractions to the opposite gender. Their families typically accept these relationships and organize marriages soon after, reflecting the community's open-mindedness and compassionate nature.

**Conclusion:**

The Tea Community of Assam originated from colonial plantations that exploited tea workers within a strict administrative hierarchy. Today, they have become a settled population in Assam, disconnected from their original homes. Despite the diverse cultural backgrounds such as Oriya, Bengali, Bhojpuri, and Assamese among plantation residents, a composite socio-cultural identity has emerged, influenced heavily by the tribal culture of the Jharkhand region. The ideals of Ambedkar have profoundly impacted their lives, directly and indirectly contributing to the upliftment of backward sections of society. Their significant contribution to the economic development of Assam is

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undeniable, despite enduring numerous hardships. Over time, their social, economic, political, and cultural standing has improved, largely due to a growing emphasis on education. Despite existing differences in language, religion, culture, and ethnicity among the tea community in Assam, efforts are underway to unite and empower themselves through education, both individually and politically, aiming for revitalization and recognition.

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