

From ‘Tea Tribes’ to ‘Tribal Assertion’: Quest for Ethnic Identity and Collective Action among the Oraons in Postcolonial Upper Assam

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Abstract

The Oraons, an indigenous ethnic group, have been associated with the tea plantation in Upper Assam for over a century and half, and have contributed much to the economic and cultural growth in its aspirations. They provided labourers under challenging situations with limited economic prospects for themselves. Yet, their pursuit for ethnic identity and getting fair share in resources for their development, has resulted in a complex mosaic of increasing ethnic tension. Lured by the British, during the colonial era to work as indentured labourers on the tea plantations, they endured with the false promises of less work and high wage. Based on ethnographic study in Upper Assam, this article explores the socio-economic condition and quest for identity of Oraons, with a collective action to promote socio-economic advancement and just share in the resources. This paper argues the title ‘tea tribe’ from the colonial approach to the postcolonial Upper Assam.

Keywords: Tea Tribes, Tribal Oraon, Ethnic Identity, Collective Action, Colonial Era, Postcolonial Upper Assam

Introduction

For any origin and development, there is a history which reveals the fascinating truth of the event. About more than hundred years and a half has gone by since the tea plantation began in Assam next to China. This initiative was taken by the British during the colonial period. To work in the tea garden, many labourers were needed. Hence, the local people were recruited for the same. Not getting success with the locals as they were not interested to work, the British during the colonial era with the help of agents, brought the Adivasi community from Chotanagpur plateau. In other words, the Adivasis of Chotanagpur were lured to work as indentured labourers in the tea garden imposing in them and in Assam the colonial rule among the labourers. Not knowing the fact that they were lured into the big trap of making them slave like situations in the future, the huge number of Adivasis came to Assam with the hope to get secured and high-quality economic prospects from the tea garden as the situation in Chotanagpur was not that appealing. The Adivasis (Oraons) moved away from their native home, that is, Chotanagpur plateau comprising Jharkhand the then Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh the then Madhya Pradesh, and other states of central India. It is at this colonial period, the Oraons together with other Adivasi groups lost their ethnic identity. The identity of the Oraon of native which they received after independence of India (Scheduled Tribe [S.T.] status), was curtailed when they migrated to Assam for their better livelihood (Das, 2016).

The supremacy and nomenclature which was vested on the Oraons as 'Tribal Oraons' (S.T.s), is being completely transformed with other titles like 'tea tribes' and Other Backward Class (OBCs). What happened to the colonial government which brought them to Upper Assam to work in the tea garden for the upliftment of the state? In fact, "the Assam tea gardens generate substantial revenue through both domestic and foreign channels. Tea production in Assam contributes significantly to the state's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and export earnings, bolstering foreign exchange reserves and contributing to overall economic stability" (Rajmohan, 2024, p. 415). Tea production plays a crucial role for the growth of the economy of the state, alleviates poverty, creates space for social welfare and provides avenues for socio-economic development. The question lies here: Who are the people sweating day in and day out for the economic development of the state? Who are branding the Assam Tea and defining Assam to India's largest tea production state? These are the Adivasi groups - Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Santhal and other neighbouring communities who are engaged in the tea garden. Yet, they are labeled as 'tea tribes' or OBCs.

Review of Literature

Anna-Lena Wolf (2022), in her article entitled “Beyond “Enclaved”: Postcolonial Labour Mobility to and from Assam Tea Plantation,” asserts that the people with whom she studied have complained about their status in the tea garden. Back in their homes they are called as *Guwala (jat)* an original status, but in Assam they are termed as ‘Adivasis.’ During the colonial era the British brought the Adivasis and others to work in the state unleashing unusual social and political tensions. In the postcolonial era the collective action was taken to mobilize the society to come out of the ghettoized way of living life.

Bristi Neog (2022), in her article, “History behind the Discovery of Assam Tea and its Plantation during the Time of British Colonialism in India,” narrates the fact of the historical discovery of the tea plantation. The author continues to affirm the plantation process and its economic advantages for the state, but to work for the plantation the colonial Assam needed workers to work. In fact, the local population was inducted into the work of plantation, but they were stopped due to insincere work of the locals. Thus, the labourers from outside Assam were brought in with the help of the British and agents. The history reveals the authenticity of the British colonial time which was for their own interest and not for the interest of the labourers.

N. K. Das (2016), in his article, “Making Tea Tribes in Assam: Colonial Exploitation and Assertion of Adivasi Rights,” examines historically during colonial period how the Adivasis-Oraon, Kharia, Munda and other tea garden workers were termed as Tea Tribes in Assam. He further argues of the terminology given by the State government for their administrative and historical purpose. Meanwhile the Adivasi tribals are de -scheduled from the original status before migration to Assam. As a Scheduled Tribe, the Adivasis in their home town get all the privileges and empowerment in the government development schemes. Now, here in Assam all these privileges are not given, but S.T.-like opportunities are given. Migration and immigration to and from Assam took place during the colonial period.

Objectives

1. To explore the historical roots of Oraons in Upper Assam from the colonial era which impacted the indigenous identity.
2. To analyze the context of the use of the term ‘tea tribes’ instead of ‘tribal Oraon assertion’.
3. To investigate the postcolonial narratives on the quest for ethnic identity and collective actions taken to bring back the native identity.

Research Methodology

The present study of ethnic identity from 'tea tribe' to indigenous tribal Oraons, is based on both the primary and secondary sources. For the primary sources, the researcher interviewed the stakeholders and few association leaders. As far as the methodology is concerned, the historical methodology was followed and ethnographic observation to know more about the day-to-day's lifestyle.

For this study, a total of 200 random samples were collected. For data collection, specific household measures were applied focusing on family structure and renowned community leaders who were interviewed. The primary components of the samples were tea garden quarters housing the Oraon population.

To further substantiate the primary data, the secondary sources such as books, articles both online and print materials, journal and websites were also referred.

Area of Study

The primary areas taken for the study are Tinsukia and Dibrugarh Districts of Upper Assam. Nokhroy Tea Estate (T.E.) 184/187 Nir and Tara T. E. (Sokriting) WI No-8 from Tinsukia district and Tingkhong Oraon Line and Khowang 11/164 Nir Grant T.E.s from Dibrugarh district were chosen. "The total geographical area of Dibrugarh is 3381 sq km. The Dibrugarh district is situated between 27° 5' 38' N to 27° 42' 30' N latitude and 94° 33' 46' E to 95° 29' 8' E longitude at an altitude between 99 and 474 metres. The Physiography of the district of Dibrugarh is constituted by a variety of elements such as flood plain, swamps and beels and occasional highlands" (Pan India Internet [PII], n.d. para. 3). The total geographical area of Tinsukia district is "3790 sq. kms. Its location is 27.4 latitude and 95.3 longitude. It is in 143 meters to 124 meters elevation range" (PII, n.d. para. 3).

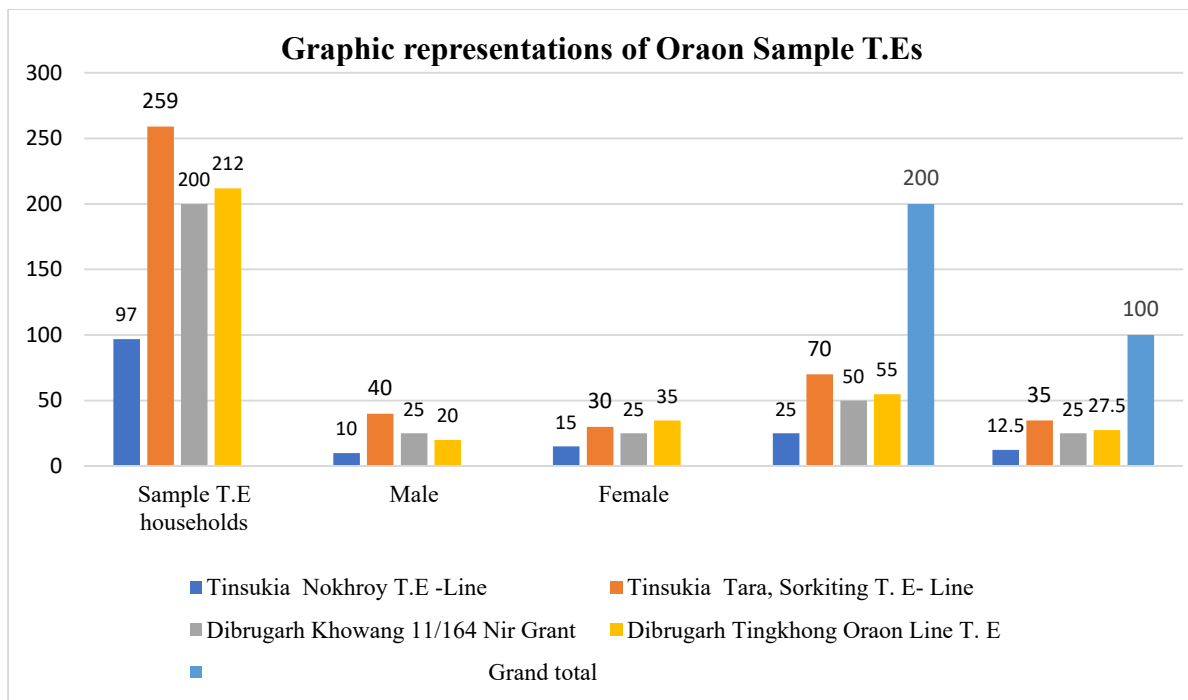
Rationale of the Study

The study focuses on the history of Oraon migration and the British role in bringing them to Assam. It is a painful thing to note that the Adivasis who were brought for the purpose to work in the tea garden were not looked after by the British. History tells us, as recorded by Neog (2022), in 1823 the process of discovering the tea plantation began in Upper Assam by Army Colonial officer Robert Bruce which was later in 1838 experimented at Chabua. Meanwhile, many locals like - Cacharees/Kacharis and others (Asomiyas) were employed, but their lazy and insolent behaviour deserted the tea garden without notice. Besides, these groups of people did not like the colonial rules, which were more of repressive law. Hence, this compelled the

Assam Tea Company during the colonial era to look for the labourers outside Assam. In that process, the Chotanagpur Adivasi people were brought in along with other community members. They were brought in multiple times in different phases. As Das recalls, (2016, p. 4) “in 1858-59 a large number of labourers numbering nearly 84,915 came to Assam. Thus, lakhs of people were brought to Assam. This number increased as the areas of tea plantation increased. During this time a large number of Adivasis died due to diseases.” The question here is, why did the Assam Tea Company during colonial time did not look after the people well? This is another argument which the researcher would like to leave behind. If they are brought to Assam for the tea garden work, it is their responsibility to look after them. This act of imprudence towards the labourers shows that Adivasi Oraons were brought to Assam for exploitation. Table 1 below shows the sample districts with Oraon population in the Tea Estates (T.E.s):

Table 1: Sample Districts with Oraon inhabitants in the T.E.s						
Districts	Name of the Tea Garden Quarter	Total Sample T.E Households	No of Respondents		Total	Total in %
			Male	Female		
Tinsukia	Nokhroy T.E -Line	97	10	15	25	12.5
	Tara, Sorkiting T. E- Line	259	40	30	70	35
Dibrugarh	Khowang 11/164 Nir Grant	200	25	25	50	25
	Tingkhong Oraon Line T. E	212	20	35	55	27.5
Grand total					200	100.00

Source: Field Report Computed (2024)



Source: Field Report Computed (2024)

Discussion and Findings

Colonial legacy and the Formation of the term ‘tea tribe’

“During the British regime, the tea-labourers of Assam were categorized under ‘depressed classes.’ Four seats were reserved in the house of Provincial Council of Assam, and in 1934-1947 they had four elected members. But in the year 1950 they were de-scheduled. The Adivasis of Assam are deprived of their Constitutional Rights and the benefits of S.T. Status including affirmative action (reservation) and positive preferential treatment in allotment of jobs and access to higher education” (Das 2016, pp. 10-11). There is a common understanding that the labourers were brought from Chotanagpur plateau as indentured workers for plantation by the British during colonial era. As cited by Das (2016, p. 5) the term indentures that, “slavery was abolished in the British colonies in 1834; a veiled ‘indentured labour’ was however inducted. Indenture has generally been defined as an economically induced migration combined with coercive contractual obligations. The immigrant Adivasi labourers, following the dictates of the labour contractors, became the indentured labourers in reality.” In the oral narration, it is evident that the older generations were enclaved with the plantation alone. The Oraon planters suffered much since the British in the colonial time engaged themselves into the planting of tea with the colonies’ economic interest. The tea plantation was for colonial political and economic interest of the British for both East India Company and Government. Neog (2022, p. 561) rightly observed:

“Discovery of tea is undoubtedly a silent boon for the people of Assam and it was the British who played the most crucial role in the establishment and advancement of the Tea Empire, but for their own colonial economic interest. In 1826 on 24th February the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed after 2 years of war between the Kingdom of Ava (Burma) and British East India Company (by Sir A. Campbell, representative of EIC and Maha Meen from the side of Burma). This treaty finalized the first Anglo-Burmese war. As a consequence of this agreement, EIC started to control and became the master of Brahmaputra Valley and gradually began to consolidate their role in the region. With British rule, the tea industry had grown and created a new history in the area. In the initial years of the 19th century, the tea planters of British needed many migrants’ worker from various place of India such as Bengal, Bihar, Odissa, Madhya Pradesh to work in the growing tea gardens which also helped in opening up the means of communication in the region such as road and railway transportation had developed.”

Some more oral narrative evidence tells us that the plantation process and management role was played by the local people themselves. The colonial trade policy of the British was closely linked with the local people but from the 1840s onwards, in Upper Assam there has been the major employer of wage labour during colonial rule (Behel, 2006). The tea industry and the planters were in the monopolistic control of the British.

The tea garden labourers of Upper Assam are termed as ‘tea tribes.’ In reality, they are of different backgrounds and follow distinct cultures. The Adivasis from Chotanagpur plateau are of different clans. Some are called Oraons and others Mundas and so on but they are Adivasis. In the writing of Das (2016) we read how the author tries to mention and preserve the nomenclature Adivasi and not ‘Tea Tribes.’ Accepting the Adivasi entitlement is a deliberate step on the part of the tea garden labourers to declare their identity as it also represents a collective demand for the indigenous rights. Hence, there is no clear evidence as to who really termed the tea garden labourers as ‘tea tribes.’ Das (2016, p. 2) opines that “the labour-repositioning of ‘tea tribes’, which started early in the nineteenth century, lasted well in the decades even after the Second World War.” This could be a presumably valid statement that the tea garden labourers, especially the Adivasis were given the designation ‘Tea Tribes.’

Change of the identity from the assertion of ‘tribal Oraon’ to ‘tea tribe’

Das (2016, p. 1) argues that “the tea-garden labourers of Assam, branded as the ‘Tea-Tribes’, generally prefer to be called as ‘Adivasi’. Embracing Adivasi nomenclature is a deliberate move on the part of the tea-garden labourers to assert their tribal identity as also to represent their collective demand for indigenous rights, including the recognition for achieving the status of ‘scheduled tribe’.”

The above statement is conventionally correct. The Oraons are not among the ‘tea tribes’ community. Once inherited into a clan with ascribed status, the change is impossible. It is an indelible status given to the Oraon Adivasis from birth. Immigration should not be the cause of clan and status change. Some of the respondents said, “They call us ‘tea tribe’ or ‘ex-tea-tribe’ but we are Adivasi tribal Oraons. We are termed as Other Backward Class (OBCs) but we are, according to our ancestry lineage, ‘Scheduled Tribes’ (S.T.s). From the time of our inception to the Oraon clan, we are Adivasi Oraons, not ‘tea tribes’.” In the oral testimonies, it is recorded that the change of tribal Oraons’ title to ‘tea tribe’ and S.T. to OBC has come about in the society due to the fear of the status and privileges which would come to the Adivasi Oraons. There will be competitions for the reserved seats in public employment and other government developmental schemes. However, during fieldwork it is observed that the increasing evidence of the colonial approach which perhaps has exploited numerous titles like – ‘bonded coolies,’ ‘Ex-tea -tribes,’ ‘tea tribes,’ and ‘OBCs’ have come about in Assam. If for no reason, the Oraon Adivasis are called under these titles, what is the reason that they are not called ‘tribal Oraons’? Why are they not accepted in the society as tribal? As the oral narration recorded in the chronicles of Assam, colloquially or jokingly someone might have uttered the word ‘Tea tribe;’ hence, the government of Assam adopted this term for administrative and historical purposes.

The ‘tea tribes’ (Oraons) argue that they have been branded as ‘tea tribes’, because their families worked in the tea garden. This historical legacy from the time of colonialism has left a lasting imprint among the Oraons and in the local society including the issues such as social discrimination, labour inequality and labour disputes.

Collective action for ethnic identity and socio-cultural assertion

Adivasi movement founded in 1990s is of utmost importance in the whole of Assam (Upper Assam), because ethnic groups like – the Oraons, Mundas, Kharias, Santhals, etc. who consider themselves as Adivasis, are acknowledged as S.T.s in the central states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and other adjoining state of Northern states and who are not accredited as S.T.s and Tribal Oraons in Assam. The Adivasis, who are not acknowledged as tribal Oraons, feel that they are socially ostracized from the society and feel marginalized in Upper Assam. To support Oraons and their entitlement as indigenous Oraons in Upper Assam (and Assam as a whole), there were originally three interest groups: a trade union called Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS), a student association called Assam Tea Tribe Student Association, (ATTSA) and a newer Adivasi union called All Adivasi Student Association of

Assam (AASAA) (Mishra, 2020). The main objectives of all these collective actions were to create an awareness among the Adivasi Oraons to fight for the ethnic identity and for the grant of fair resources. Although, in 2003 Kurukh Sahitya Sabha (KSS) movement was started by Mr. Binen Chandra Bhagat, prior to the above-mentioned movements for the Oraon homogenous community alone with the same motives. Hence, these collective efforts were made during postcolonial Upper Assam to get identity and entitlement for the Adivasi Oraon tribes as tribal and not to be called 'tea tribes' which is an adopted title given by the government of Assam and the British colonial period.

Their demand for the rights at times was painful which recalls the brutal attack on the Adivasis at the peaceful Adivasi rally held on 24th November 2007, at Beltola -Guwahati, when the AASAA had organized the rally for the demand, granting of S.T. status to the Adivasis of the state. As per the record, one sacrificed their life for the cause of fighting for the rights and a huge number of them were injured (Das, 2016). This incident is a proof that the government and the authorities are silent about granting ethnic identity to the Oraon Adivasis.

Postcolonial narratives towards ethnic identity and entitlement

The process of tea tribes asserting their identity had begun long before their settlement in the state due to differential treatment from the local community. The reason behind this could be because they consider them as outsiders. There was "Plantation Labour Act, 1851 which also underwent amendment and apart from this other act were passed in the legislative assembly measures to protect the labourers such as Workmen Compensation (Amendment) Act 1929 and Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959" (Sharma, 2018, p.77). But these acts were violated from time to time. After the independence of our country and colonial era, the government tries to protect the tea tribes' status, but not as original status of their native origin. The state government, although not recognized as S.T.s of indigenous tribes, tried to provide all necessary resources and facilities that other S.T.s enjoy minus political empowerment, in terms of political consciousness (Sharma, 2018).

The view of forced labour in postcolonial times have changed. The labourers were not legally forced by the British colonialists. Even though, there was an unholy alliance with the colonial rulers and tea planters, the instruction of 'Black Law' of the workmen breach of Contract Act of 1859 and its amendment acts of 1865 which speaks of minimum wage, the Adivasi Oraons are tortured. Initial decades from the 1850s to the 1920s the Adivasis working conditions were akin to slavery. Based on ethnographic evidences of ongoing ethnic identity crises and

collective action towards the uprising of Oraons in Upper Assam, it is noticed that the requirements of the Oraon people's need to be improved. Rajmohan, (2024) has the opinion that even after independence of our country the colonial legacy of exploitation of the tea labourers continued, leading among them the socio-economic disparities and tensions in the communities. Sharma (2018, p, 75) highlights and argues that, "these ethnic groups are recognized as S.T.s in the states of their origin," but here in Assam in the postcolonial period the government is acting like the colonial time. Even the Oraon planters argue that they have been branded as 'tea tribes' because their families are involved in plantations. They argue and claim that their relatives enjoy S.T. status and other rights in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and other parts of India, while they do not enjoy such privileges in Assam because they are seen as belonging to the 'tea tribes.'

Recommendations

- 1. Government's intervention for the social welfare and identity recognition:** As the Oraon people struggle for their rightful entitlement, the government should promptly arbitrate on their demand for ethnic identity beyond the limiting categorization of 'tea tribes.'
- 2. Conduct awareness programmes:** The tea garden authorities and the owners should promote awareness programmes to advocate their rightful support of community development and encourages resources for collective actions.
- 3. Highlight the Colonial and Postcolonial initiatives:** The Oraon Adivasis need to draw the government's attention to the history of colonial narratives of migration that exploited their ethnicity. They should urge both the state and central government to focus more attention on the postcolonial collective movements for ethnic identity.

Conclusion

The article has highlighted the origin and nature of the term 'tea tribe' which perhaps is devaluing the ethnic identity of Oraons as indigenous ethnic group of Upper Assam. The Oraon tribal community who has long been associated with tea plantation, now it is perceived as a sense of deprivation. They provide labour under challenging situations with limited economic prospects. They migrated with the expectation of secured economic standing. From morning till night, the Oraons are on their feet with plantation, yet their assertion to get ethnic identity, socio-cultural and economic prospect remains bleak. From colonial to postcolonial period, the Oraon Adivasis together with other Adivasi communities search for liberation which includes

their quest to defend and promote collective actions. With the continued effort, together with the Adivasi communities (including the Oraon community) must be granted for the long-demanded tribal identity. In future, it may create tension but, India being the democratic country which follows the laws and policies of accommodation should include Adivasi Oraons into ethnic tribal community soon. Oraons in the tea plantations with a collective action to promote ethnic identity beyond 'tea tribe.' Finally, this study would bring to light the colonial legacy which was for colonial interest and covert in the postcolonial strategies with a collective effort to the fulfillment of the assertion to entitle Adivasi Oraons into indigenous or ethnic tribal Oraons and not 'tea tribes.'

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