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- 13 *Economic impact of Tea Industry on Cachar (1855-1900)* 114-122
Leena Chakrabarty
- 14 *Witch Hunting and Violation of Human Right in Assam* 123-131
Jadab Baro
- 15 *Impact of First World War on Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms* 132-138
Ramyabrata Chakraborty
- 16 *Position of Displaced Women as Reflected in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai* 139-147
Abida Begum
- 17 *Influence of Kālidāsa in Harṣa's Dramas* 148-154
Sebabrata Bhattacharjee
- 18 *A study of the Āśvalāyana Śrautasūtrawith reference to Agnihotrāyāga* 155-161
Dipanjona Purkayastha
- 19 *Autobiography: A Milestone in the Development of Modern Arabic Literature* 162-169
Jalal Uddin Choudhur, Nazmul Islam Barbhuiya
- 20 *আবু ইসহাকের সূর্যদীঘল বাড়ী: মুসলিম অস্তঃপুরের অনবদ্য বয়ান* 170-175
মমতাজ বেগম বড়ভূইয়া
- 21 *গল্পকার রণবীর পুরকায়স্থর গল্পে কোড-মিশ্রণ, কোড-পরিবর্তন ও স্বাকৃতির স্বরূপ-সার্থকতা* 176-181
তীর্থঙ্কর চক্রবর্তী
- 22 *মহারাজী ইন্দুপ্রভা উপন্যাসদা য়েকলিবা নুপী চরিত্রদা মীংয়েং অমা* 182-187
টি. এইচ. কাঞ্চনবালা সিংহ
- 23 *अराधम दरेन्द्रजिङ्की 'कंसवध' की लोन अमसुं खुइंगी मशक* 188-194
Dr. N. Nangalei Singha
- 24 *তিবেতো বর্মনি লোন অমা ওইনা মণিপুৰী লোন* 195-200
M. Ninghaiba Singha



Economic Impact of Tea Industry on Cachar (1855-1900)

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Abstract

Tea Industry played a vital role in the development of the economic condition of Cachar. The wild jungles of the district Cachar get the light of modernization for establishment of tea industry in 1855 by the British Government. Tea was exported from Cachar in large quantity which prepared the ground of development of the district in every respect. The major share of income tax was paid by the tea gardens. Besides the production of various grains and rearing of cattle contributed a lot to develop the economy of Cachar. Business centre, markets etc. started to meet the demands of tea garden, communication system was also developed and many roads and railway lines were constructed for the accommodation of tea gardens.

Keywords: Cachar, Tea Industry, Economy

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Introduction

The District Cachar is situated on the remotest corner of India. Today in the 21st century, when the communication system is so developed, Cachar is almost isolated from other parts of the country. Only two roads –one via Meghalaya and other through north Cachar district is connecting this with others parts of the state and the country. The railway line which remains closed for landslides in most of days in a year and the total Barak valley, Tripura & Mizoram become detached from main lands, it can easily be estimated that what was the condition of this area in the mid 19th century.

Most of the areas were full of jungles, roads were insufficient and communication system with other parts of the country was very bad. So at that time what was the economic progress of the district it can be easily estimated.

Objectives

1. To study the development and progress of tea industry in Barak valley.
2. To study the role of tea industry in the economic development of Barak valley.
3. To study the contribution tea industry in modernizing Barak valley.

Methodology

This study will be based on primary, Secondary and oral sources. The primary source includes government records, reports etc preserved in government and tea garden offices. These will be collected and discussed. As regards secondary sources books, articles, newspapers, internet materials etc will be studied. Besides interview will be taken of the persons having experience regarding tea garden and the labourers.

Tea, the two leaves and a bud, is the blessings of nature. Indigenous tea plants were discovered in the jungles of upper Brahmaputra Valley by Robert Bruce, an officer of the British Government in 1823.¹ In 1937 a new plantation was started at Chabua in upper Assam.² This was also planted with China seed. In 1839 the first major tea garden was started in upper Assam by the Assam Tea Company, the first tea plantation company of the world which was established on February 12, 1839 by Duncun Macmillon Group.³ Gradually the number of tea garden increased in Assam. Within twenty years many British companies entered in this state. The planters were very much inspired by the initial success of tea plantation in upper Assam and expanded plantation in various parts of this state. Within few decades, tea producers in Assam had occupied 54% of the market in the united kingdom.⁴

In Cachar first tea plantation was started in 1855-56 near Barsangan by Williamson and co.⁵ Tea industry played a very important role in, the socio economic development of Cachar as well as Assam and this state occupied an important place in the country for its contribution in the production and export of tea.

Many planters were interested to start tea plantation in Cachar. Gradually with the initiative of administrative persons like Capt. Fisher, the

first superintendent of Cachar, then Lt G.Verner & Lt. T. Stewart, many tea industry were established in Cachar. Some important tea estates of Cachar during the period of this study were Rosekandi Tea estate, Irongmara Tea estate, Borjalenga Tea Estate, West Jalinga Tea Estate, Dwarbond Tea Estate, Narshingpur Tea Estate, Katlicherra Tea Estate, Ainakhal Tea Estate Dewan Group of Tea Company etc. During the period of 1865 the tea companies of Cachar suffered a crisis. But in about 1869 the tea industry began to revive and more than one third of all the tea exported from Assam was produced in Cachar district.⁶

Progress of tea Gardens in Cachar

Year	No of Gardens	Total areas (in acres)	Area under Plantation (in acres)	Amount of Production (in pounds)
1861	54	80000	16000	34000
1869	71	86000	24151	455000
1872	80	91000	23000	5000000
1882	152	N.A.	48873	12721000
1895	199	280172	58216	20169133
1898	199	280172	62179	31088000

Source: 1) District records, DC office, Silchar.

2) State and Society in North East India, P Kumar New Delhi 2006

The European planters and the British government tried their level best for the establishment and development of tea gardens for their economic benefit which resulted in a sound economic condition of the district also.

The wild jungles of the district Cachar get the light of modernization for establishment of tea industry. Most of the areas of Cachar was full of hillocks or small hills and habitation of wild animals and snakes. These areas were not fit for agriculture and human habitation. In the true sense people could not think about habitation in the jungles. So most of the areas of Cachar was isolated and depopulated, economically unexplored. The planters found these areas suitable for cultivations and established tea gardens in those hilly areas. Tea Industry is a labour oriented sector which cannot run without labourers. As the local people were unwilling to work under the foreigners, the planters brought labourers from other parts of the country like Bengal, Bihar, Chotonagpur, Gazipur, Sylhet etc. these immigrant labourers settled in these gardens. It was the tea garden labourers who by their hard work prepared the hilly or marshy land for cultivation. To do so many of

them lost their lives, many escaped and many of them were attacked by various disease like kalazar, malaria. Besides the labourers, the planters made quarter of the officials who were appointed in the gardens by the British government. So these departed land and isolated areas became densely populated and started to contribute economically also.

Tea industry is the backbone of the economy of Assam. It is the oldest industry of Assam and Cachar as well. A big part of exported tea from India was produced in Assam and in that Cachar had a major share, which prepared the ground of development of this district in every respect. Tea was annually exported more than five millions pounds.⁷ It is estimated that \$ 250000 in coin and notes were annually introduced in the district by the tea planters.⁸ In 1866 China exported 96% tea to United kingdom whereas India exported only 4%. In 1886 China exported 59%, India exported 38% and Cylon exported only 3%. But In 1903 China exported 10%, India 59 % and Cylon exported 31%.⁹

During 1872 , fifty six thousands acres lands were under tea cultivation in Assam and output was 12million lbs.¹⁰ In this Cachar had 23000 acres of land and production was 5million pound.¹¹ In 1901 cultivable land was 3,38,000 acres and production was 134 million lbs.¹² In the year 1876-77 the total value of export was \$509,554. Among the various item of export tea was 62999 mounds, value \$503992.¹³ 51537 mounds of tea was carried by steamer.¹⁴ But according to the report of the Deputy Commissioner the production decreased to 1s 2d a pound in 1882.¹⁵ Again in 1903 the average price was 6 1/2d a pound and the production was satisfactory.¹⁶ In 1895 number of tea garden in Cachar was 199 and total land under tea cultivation was 58,216 acres and production was 20,169,133 pounds.¹⁷ In 1915 tea garden was 159 in Cachar ,total land was 60,549 acres and production was 30,084,829 pounds.¹⁸ Within twenty years the production increased about 1crore pound. The major share of income tax, which was realized by government in the district, was paid by the tea gardens. In the year 1870-1871 the amount of income tax realized was Rs 1438.¹⁹ and major portion was paid by tea gardens.

The deputy commissioner reported that in 1874 supply bills, money orders and currency notes were cashed on balance to the amount of Rs 252736 .According to him that this sum fairly represents the amount of money introduced into the district every year by the tea industry.²⁰

For time being tea gardens suffered from setback during the years of 1860's but again it revived and for this the European tea planters, labourers had to do work a lot. One thing is clear that like other industries, tea industry

did not suffer from permanent ruination. Various industries like jute industry, sugar industry etc. declined for ever in many areas but the tea industry never declined for ever, of course there may be temporary downfall in production lockout etc. but it was successful to overcome all these difficulties.

In south Assam the Lusais the Kukies and the Manipuries raided many gardens, killed many labourers and employees of management was taken as captive but the British authority was enable to subdue them. The administration and the planters jointly faced the tribal raids, strenghtened the security of the tea gardens and suppressed the raiders. The efforts of T. Fihher, the first Superintendent of Cachar and J. W. Edger, the first D.C. of Cachar may be mentioned in this regard.

Tea industry brought complete change in the socio-economic life of the people of Barak valley. From 1856 to 1900 a large number of tea gardens were established and labourers were imported from various parts of India. Tea garden labourers not only settled in the tea gardens area but also established different villages by cutting jungles and started to live permanently in these villages. Thus these outsiders became an integral part of the society and cultural assimilation started to grow. Besides these labourers worked hard for their livelihood and cultivated the barren lands by shading blood and sweat, various vegetables, paddy and other grains were cultivated by these labourers in the wastelands and as a result economic profit started. Without immigrant labourers it was not possible for the local people to make these jungles or waste lands economically beneficial. So the economy of the Assam is very much indebted to the tea planters and the tea garden community.

Tea industry is helping the economy of Barak Valley in many ways. As tea industry cannot run without labourer many workers & employees were appointed by these garden authorities. Besides the workers and employees of tea garden, many people are engaged in various industries linked with the tea garden viz plywood, aluminum foil, metal fillings fertilizers, transport. Etc.²¹ These industries are supplying various essential materials for tea industries. Tea industries and all others ancillary industries are dependent on each other. So these various industries are getting economic benefit supplying materials to tea gardens. Many labours of tea gardens community are also working in different sectors either independently or in various organizations. The local people and these labourers became interdependent. Without the sweat of tea garden labour community economic progress of Assam as well as Barak valley was not

possible. Not only the labourers, the tea garden authority appointed many local people also in the offices of tea gardens viz, "babu" or office stuff, technicians, drivers, khalashis, and thus many unemployed youths found job, which helped to maintain their families. Thus the tea gardens helped very much to solve the unemployment problems of this region.²² On the other hand these tea gardens gave opportunities to the local people also to meet the challenges of unemployment. Many people engaged themselves in business and supply of various materials like plywood, electrical goods, hardware etc which is very much essentials for tea industry.

When tea industry was established in Cachar gradually many towns and bazaars started to emerge. Because it was the need of the hour. Tea was exported to different parts of the country and even England. The planters settled in these areas with their families. The employees and labourers of the tea garden also started to settle in these tea gardens and they required goods for their daily life. So many towns and markets were emerged centering these gardens. Not only raw materials other materials like electrical goods, motor parts, medicine, tools, machinery were also needed. All these necessities led to development of Silchar town. Business centers, markets, many shops were started to meet the demands of these tea garden. Markets, small, huts & bazaars emerged in every nook and corner of Barak valley. So these industry is mainly responsible for the urbanization of the area.²³

The development and economic growth of an area is basically depends on communication system. The communication system of Barak Valley was not developed in 19th century. In 1853 there was only one road in this district which had not been repaired for years.²⁴ But gradually many roads were constructed in this valley and communication within the district became easier. This advantage is received mainly because of the tea planters, their interest was to have good means of communication between their gardens and the Barak river by which their tea was dispatched and all this suppliers received. Foreign trade is carried on entirely by water but the trade within the district was done through the roads which were repaired and strictly supervised by the planters.²⁵ Many roads were constructed for the accommodation of tea gardens. Some of them were –

The roads in the Silchar municipal union

1. The Borkhola road which connects borkhola with Silchar
2. The Durganagar road connects udarbong with Silchar.
3. The Sonai road connecting the tea gardens of Hatikuri and Binnakandi

4. The east Hailakandi road connecting Samarikona to Matijuri with Hailakandi
5. The Katakhal road connecting Gaglacherra tea garden to Sudarshanpur
6. The Hailakandi road connects Panchgram, Kalinagar.

The aggregate length of all roads in 1873 was 166 miles.²⁶

From the above figures it is clear that the authority of tea gardens were very much responsible for the establishment of various roads in remote areas of Cachar district and also developed the communication system of this area. This improvement of communication developed the economy of Barak valley.

The communication with Bengal was done through river. Boats were the only means of communication which were not sufficient for trade. So to meet the demands a regular steamer service was started by the Indian General Steamer Navigation Company (IGSNC) and River Steamer Company on the Surma river in 1882.²⁷

Railway lines also helped for the development of tea industries because export and import became easier. In 1897 the Assam Bengal Railway line between Chittagong Badarpur was opened to traffic.²⁸ The Assam Bengal Railway carried 92,929 maunds of tea out of the 1,009,691 maunds of tea from Assam.²⁹ With the introduction of railway in Assam as well as in Cachar many ways opened for the economic development. In other words it can be said that the tea industry was a major factor behind the introduction of railway lines in Cachar. Because to export tea from this remote area railway became the easier way and with that, economy of Cachar received impetus.

Conclusion

To sum up, the progress and development of tea garden in Cachar from 1855-1900 was very much satisfactory. Soil and climate of Cachar was favorable for tea cultivation so within half of a decade the number of tea garden increased to 199. The tea industry played a major role to develop the economic condition not only of Barak Valley but increased national income also. The British planters did their best effort for the development of tea industry. Tea industry provided a major portion of income of the Government as tax. Prior to the establishment of tea plantation in this region the area was backward economically and communication system was not sufficient. The tea garden labourers with the guidance of the planters made

the jungle area suitable for habitation and cultivation. It was on account of the establishment of tea estates this valley got the light of modernization . Tea industry contributed a lot for the economic development of Cachar and gave a shape to modern Barak valley.

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