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# **Jhumur folk tradition: A socio-cultural identity of tea community in Assam**

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**Abstract**---Tea is an essential commodity of our daily life and Assam is famous for its best quality of tea production across the globe. However, the driving force of this grown industry is the hardworking labours' force which comprises 99% of migrated workers. With time, the migrated workers who had arrived to the North-eastern India, the region of Assam, came to be known as tea community or tea tribe as they closely related to tea gardens. Although they were migrated by force of time or situation, they carried some rich culture and later assimilated with the Assamese society. Today, the tea communities play a significant role in the society of Assam with their presence of some own traditions, culture. This paper will try to highlight the Jhumur tradition as reflection of their socio-cultural identity in the society of Assam.

**Keywords**---tea plantation, colony, labour, exploitation, tea community, migration, folk tradition, Jhumur, festivals.

**Introduction**

Tea is one of the most popular yet profitable commodity in the world. It is one of the oldest industries in India introduced by British and has been an integral part of the economic development since its discovery. In Assam as well, the tea industry had developed rapidly and still it makes place in strengthening the state's economy. However, most required component of this industry is labour force. In Assam, during the establishment of tea garden and factory, there was shortage of labour to work in this field. Thus, for the convenience of hardworking as well as obeying labourers, the colonial power started to import the labourers within the country. The labourers were belonged from Adivasi who were brought from Central Indian states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, etc. and originally came from several tribal communities like Santhal, Oroan, Munda, Kharia, etc. During the colonial period they were employed as unskilled labourers because of the prejudice held that Adivasi people do not have brains but only physical strength. So, during that period the people were not known because of

their tribal identity but only as labourers', and were labelled as *Bagania* or tea garden workers. The identity issue is still politically quite debatable. However, the concern of our study is to discuss the socio-cultural identity and legacy that has been prevailing through some traditions among these communities with special edition to Assam.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to study the socio-cultural background of the tea community in Assam. Also, the main concern of this paper is to highlight the *Jhumur* tradition as their integral part of cultural life.

### **Methodology**

The approach of the present study is descriptive and analytical. The secondary data forms the basis of this paper. The secondary data are collected from the relevant books, research journals and periodicals.

### **Tea communities in the gardens of Assam**

Migration is not a recent phenomenon, rather it contains a long historical process within the country or outside the country. The history of migration in India has often been closely related with the idea of circulation. India has been always moving since its antiquity to present days for sake of living. Thus, the diverse socio-cultural and economic identity of the people who are living in India is shaped by the process of migration. Notwithstanding, during the colonial period, India witnessed waves of migration in both inside and outside the country. Specifically, the tea plantation economy which required a large number migrant workers, has brought many changes in sphere of economy, society, culture and demography of India as well.

In Assam tea plants were first discovered in the year 1823. Discovery of the indigenous tea in Assam is credited to Robert Bruce, who was introduced to it by the Singphow chief Bisa Gam in 1823. After the annexation of Assam by the East India Company in 1826, probability of tea cultivation was confirmed and Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General allowed to cultivate it in experimental basis under the Government initiative in 1834. The result was satisfying for them and by 1852, European planters began to rush into Assam for tea cultivation. With growing interests of tea cultivation in Assam, the demand of cheap labourers had been equally increasing. The 'Indian Emigration Act, 1873', passed by the Government to recruit labourers within the British colonies was applied in case of the recruitment within the country. The East India Company imported a lot of tea workers into Assam through this Act of 1873. However, behavioural attitude of the colonial government towards the migrant workers was reflected through some bagania songs that they were deceived by the British:

*ki bolibo dukher katha are bolile je gow lage betha,  
mazdur salan karile assame,  
mator garir char saka are railgari der das saka,  
railgari sole ghone ghone, phaki diye Assam anile.*

It indicates that the Britishers were made them to dream a better life in Assam by luring the workers and imported them through railway transportation to the land of lush green forests. Although in initial phase, their condition of living was not descent but with time those migrated tea workers were able to establishing themselves in Assam permanently and assimilated with the Assamese society. They were migrated from various region of the country and carried various dialects. To communicate among themselves and with local people they started using connecting language known as *Bagania or Sadani* language. At present there are different sub-tribes within them and includes they are Munda, Chaotal, kol, Kharia, Bhumij, Ghatowar, Baraik, Sabar, Gauda, Skandha, Baiga, Bheel, Saora, Bhui, Paharia, Urang, Parja, Mali, Teli, Dom, Rajput, Mal, kandapan, Hari, Sarban, Hoo, Nowar, Napit, Patra, Sero etc. The tea tribes are living in various districts of Assam such as Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Golaghat, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Darrang, Nagaon, Morigaon, & North Lakhimpur. Today, the tea community occupies a crucial place in the socio-cultural field of Assam. The culture that emerged due to long interaction of British planters, tea worker tribes and indigenous Assamese is well reflected in the language, way of life, work culture, food habits and many other socio-cultural practices in most of the large tea estates in the state.

### **Jhumur: A tradition in change and continuity**

Every society have their own socio-cultural practices and traditions, the tea communities are not exception of that. They are heterogeneous mixture of more than one hundred aboriginal Indian tribes and castes who hailed from different parts of central India. They were composed of three different distinct linguistic elements such as the Kolarian speaking (Ho, Munda, Santhal, Kharia, etc.) group; Dravidian speaking (Oraon, Khond, Gond, Malpaharia) and the Group speaking Oriya, Bengali and Hindi. Therefore, migration by different tea tribes in the recent past transformed Assam's socio-cultural terrain.

Migration often leads to some changes and continuity within the community in terms of culture and society after settling into other regions over some decades or centuries. The socio-cultural life of the tea community has experienced a tremendous change in course of their new settlement which can be observe now in their livelihood. After the spread of Christianity among the tea garden communities, changed the foundation of their tribal life. Meanwhile, the impact of dominant regional language Assamese, acts as influential characteristic in the formation of linguistic identity of tea communities. Basically, in Assam the language of tea communities has some similarities with Assamese dialects. Although they folded into various transformations since their migration, there have been some continuity as well. Along with some changes, their legacy of traditional and religious customs, beliefs, practices, traditions are still prevailing which are brought during their migration. Here, in terms of religion, language, songs, dances, rituals, and numerous customs where *Jhumur* has been taking a dynamic place among the tea communities of Assam.

*Jhumur or Jumair* is an Indian folk-dance and folk-music mostly performed in Jharkhand, chhattisgarh, odisha and west- Bengal. But, *Jhumur* has been also prevailing in Assam and gets a prominent place in tea garden festivals. The dance

form is performed during the harvest season and festivals. Their festivals notably Tushu puja and Karam puja are related to harvesting season and they worship crops as God of nature for prosperity of agriculture. It says that after settling here in Assam the tea workers were not only confined in tea garden, but later they engaged in rice cultivation or other agricultural activities. Now half of the tea communities have their own lands for cultivation and additionally involved in tea garden for daily income. Nonetheless, they celebrate various festivals where jhumur dance is essential, performed mainly by the girls and presented with traditional songs which are known as jhumur song or bagania song. This community celebrates festival such as dangoria puja, baghut puja, dharma puja, karam puja, manasha puja, sarun puja, kali puja, durga puja, tusu puja, madula puja, etc in almost every month of the year with their own traditional customs and systems. Jhumur is mainly danced on the occasion of Karam Puja and Tushu Puja.

The music and the songs of the performance are managed by the male performers. And the songs are composed in the regional language and therefore have a homely feeling embedded in them. The musical instruments used in Jhumur dance are Madal, Dhol, Flute, Shehnai, Bansi (Flute), Dhak, and a pair of Taal. The attires for the Jhumur dance are very versatile. The attires of the performers change in accordance with the region and the occasion. The female performers usually drape a white saree with red borders, and the male performers wear long kurta like a traditional dress. The songs of Jhumur depict the joys and sorrows, yearning and aspiration of the everyday lives of the common people. Sometimes, the jhumur is performed as a ritual worship for praying rainfall and they believed that jhumur is originally means of recreation between the phases of tedious agricultural work. Digging a little deeper into these songs and closely engaging with certain themes that these songs bring to life and unravelling the fissures in the lives of tea plantation workers tells us a lot about the life of tea plantation workers and how a history of migration and exploitative labour relations mar their lives.\*

Now narratives have changed and new interpretation are evolving around Jhumur traditional songs. Many scholars, enthusiastic persons are now trying to find the deep meaning of these folk songs. *Kali Dasgupta*, a renowned activist tried to bring questions of power and oppression to light with a tinge of softness as these songs dwell on the everyday experiences of those left at the margins of society.† The themes of these jhumur songs are varying but in some parts of jhumur songs encompass the portrait of labour and exploitation which exist in the everyday lives of tea plantation workers. The origin and development of folk songs has been attributed to the productive and labouring process. Stories and different narratives talk about the women workers plucking tea under the blue sky singing Jhumur as they boost their spirits, which make them to work hard and joyful with a sense of togetherness. Therefore, these songs are associated with the working process of folk life. In historiography, these songs are placed as important source of oral tradition which assist to reconstruct the past of tea community that are not recorded before. In Assam, jhumur songs keeps alive the

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\* Shekhawat, 2020, 7.

† Sekhawati, 2020, 7.

memory and shaped the history of migrated tea workers. Some notable references of these Jhumur song can be examined as:

- Chol Mini Assam jabo, Deshe boro dukh re Assam deshe re Mini Chaa bagan horiya, Hor mara jaimon taimon Pata tola taan bo, Hai joduram Phaki diye cholai di assam (translation: Come Mini, we'll go to Assam Misery abounds in our Desh; In Assam, my dear Mini The tea-gardens are green and beautiful; There lies our future, The heavy digging is done somehow, plucking leaves is very difficult Oh Joduram!

The complex history of migration and exploitation are found in Jhumur songs and a song from national award-winning movie Saameli Memsahab, "Axom deshor bagisare sowali" is an example of such representation.

- Axom dekhore baagisaare sowali, Jhumur tumur nassi koru dhemali, Hei Laxmi nohoi mure naam Saameli.....Baap dada aasile kunuba mulukor, Sei aami bihu gaabo jaanu.....Sardar bole kaam kaam Babu bole dhori aan, Sahib bulelibo pithor chaal O bideshi shaam, Phaaki diye aanile Assam. (Translation: I am a girl from the Gardens of Assam, dancing Jhumur in joyous glee, no, my name is not Laksmeemee.....My forefathers came from Some muluk I don't know; However, I have learnt now to perform the Bihu dance.....Sardar says 'Work work'; Babu says 'Catch them'; The Saheb says 'Whip them'; Oh! You Bideshi, you tricked and brought us to Assam!

## Conclusion

The folk song, folk dance, folk fest occupies a special position in the society of tea tribes. It has a big contribution to the greater Assamese culture. Plots of the great Assamese novels like 'Seuji Patar Kahani', 'Dawar Aru nai', 'Ejak Manuh Ekhon Arayna' and famous Assamese feature films like 'Chameli Mamsahab', 'Kesa Xoun', 'Trikal Badhu', 'Arjun' etc. are based on the life style & culture of the tea tribes. Throughout ages the tea tribes have contributed a lot to strengthen the base of the Assamese culture and society. Instead of introducing themselves as a class of people imported by the British in order to establish capitalism and colonialism in Assam, they have adapted themselves as the tea tribe of Assam. Their entry to Assam ended the paik system and a new class of workers emerged in Assam. Together they made a huge change in economic and political scenario of Assam. However, they have been endeavouring to keep alive their traditions in forms of dance and song where *Jhumur* has become inevitable of their culture.

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