



Festivals of the tea tribes of Assam: A study of their socio-cultural significance.

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Abstract

The culture of the tea tribes of Assam, especially their festivals and dances, is increasingly coming into the limelight, gaining recognition and popularity not just in Assam but also in the rest of the country. Long known for being the backbone of Assam's famed tea industry and for their role as plantation labour, not much is known about the cultural dimensions of this community comprising diverse tribes, who were forced to migrate by the British from the distant world of the Chotanagpur highlands in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. This paper seeks to highlight the vibrant cultural practices, festivals, dances, traditions and customs that originated from their native places and evolved in the lush and verdant tea gardens of Assam. This study seeks to gain a nuanced understanding of how the culture and festivals of the tea tribes enrich the diverse and composite culture of Assam. This research paper seeks to understand as to how the cultural practices and festivals of the tea tribes are enjoyed by the plantation workers and also by the other communities of Assam and thereby act as a bridge between the tea tribes and the mainstream Assamese society. It is to be noted that through such festivals, songs and dances, we find that the process of acculturation of the tea tribes with the greater Assamese society is gaining momentum.

Keywords: tea tribes, festivals, socio-cultural contribution, women, acculturation

1. Introduction

The lush green tea gardens of Assam are the home of its tea garden community or its 'tea tribes'. After they migrated to Assam, they played a vital role in the establishment and development of the tea industry of the State. Their culture, which consists of festivals, folk dances, folk songs, folk tales, customs and traditions plays a big role in enriching the Greater Assamese culture.

Tea bushes were found in Upper Assam in 1823. The discovery of tea in Assam by the British set in motion concerted efforts to start the cultivation of tea in an organized and large-scale manner. Commercial cultivation of tea started in the 1850s. To meet the rapidly increasing demand for cheap plantation labour, the British colonial government forcefully induced the mass migration of people belonging to diverse communities from the distant world of the Chotanagpur highlands in present-day Jharkhand, Odisha,

Chattisgarh, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh, never to return to their original homeland. Members of the migrant communities primarily belong to tribes such as Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Kharia, Manjhi, Bhumij, Kurmi, Ghatowar, Baraik, Gauda and many others. Guha, remarks about the tea tribes in the following way: "The tea tribes of Assam constitute one of the most marginalized yet culturally vibrant communities in India. Descendants of tribal and peasant groups ... were brought by the British colonial planters during the nineteenth century from regions like Chotanagpur ... to work in Assam's burgeoning tea industry" (1977 p, 40). At this juncture it is imperative to note that, though they originally belonged to different tribes and regions, and came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, they acquired over time, after their migration to Assam, a separate identity as 'tea tribes', which subsumed and enveloped their original identities.

In this great mass movement of people, entire

families were brought by coercion, deceit, and bribery from the mid 19th to early 20th century by the British companies and their contractors. Women made up a significant proportion of the migrants and were encouraged to join the labour force as they demonstrated superior dexterity and efficiency in vital plantation activities like plucking of tea leaves and also could be paid lower wages than men. The plucking of tea leaves involves *two leaves and a bud*, which "...means that the size of the young shoot to be plucked must be strictly two leaves and the opening leaf at the apex of the shoot" (Ramsden, 2016, p. 20). It is to be noted that women performed such tasks better than men. Women therefore, not only became a key element of the labour force, but also participated in large numbers in the cultural, social, and religious activities of their community.

2. Objectives

1. To examine the major festivals of the tea tribes of Assam
2. To analyze the socio-cultural significance of these festivals
3. To understand the process of acculturation with the Assamese society

3. Research Methodology

This research paper undertakes a study of the festivals of the tea tribes through an examination of their oral traditions, customs, rituals, songs and folk narratives. The songs and folk narratives of the tea tribes performed during festivals are used as primary sources. The secondary sources like books and articles and web sources are also used to help us arrive at an understanding of the tea tribes' ways of celebrating their festivals, their rituals, customs and traditions. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section highlights the socio cultural significance of festivals, songs and dances. The second section is an examination of the various festivals, songs and dances of the tea tribes of Assam. The final section seeks to analyze as to how through these festivals, songs and dances, the tea tribes of Assam create a bridge and acculturate with the mainstream Assamese society and thus develop a rich tapestry of the cultural mosaic of Assam.

Section 1

This section seeks to gather a detailed and critical understanding of the festivals and their socio-cultural significance.

At the very beginning, we can say that festivals help preserve ancestral roots. The festivals keep alive and safeguard the memory, the myths, the narratives,

rituals, folk traditions and folk beliefs. Thus, they help us to know and to understand the history of the people.

Festivals, are lively representations of culture, tradition and the spirit of a community expressed through prayers, songs, dance, dress, community feasts etc. These celebrations provide an opportunity for people of various communities to meet, connect and bond.

Festivals, especially those of the tea tribes, strengthen the solidarity among various communities and help create a common culture and thereby bring together numerous communities. They thus act as a common link, a common thread to bring people of different communities together.

Festivals serve as a medium through which oral traditions and performances are maintained and kept alive. Folklore, stories, music and dance sustain oral histories and serve as vehicles of cultural transmission through generations.

Such celebrations provide a platform for women to play a big role. The women actively participate through songs, dances and rituals and help preserve their rituals, customs and traditions and thus ensure a cultural continuity. They remain as main anchors who ensure the involvement of their families and communities and remain committed to the celebration of the festivals in the best possible manner.

At this point, it is important to remember that festivals help in identity formation reinforcement and tie people to their cultural heritage. Festivals are enablers, and are an effective means of expressing and maintaining cultural identity. Abbas writes: "Festivals are important manifestations of shared values, ties to the community and cultural identity. They act as living reminders of the diversity and depth of human experience, promoting respect and understanding among people everywhere. By commemorating these cultural landmarks, we add to the ongoing narrative of our global society while also paying regard to the past" (2023 p.1).

Section 2

The tea tribes of Assam are often referred to as 'Adivasis' The tea tribes observe numerous festivals which are celebrated with much joy and gaiety. The prominent festivals include Karam Puja, Tusu Puja, Sahrai Parab, Gram Puja, Mansa Puja, Maghe Parab, Phusupani Ma Puja, Sohrul, apart from Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja, Good Friday, Christmas, and Bihu. Music and dance are an integral part of their lives, with their traditional folk dance, the 'Jhumur' dance being especially well known.

Karam Puja is considered to be one of the most

significant festivals of the tea tribes of Assam that is celebrated with great fervour for the well-being of the family and society. “Karam Puja is the most important agricultural festival of tea tribe community of Assam... People gather around the Karam tree and sing in praise of the deity... Women dance to the beat of drums, sing folk songs and rejoice” (Assam State Portal, Fairs and Festivals, 2023). One of the unique features of Karam Puja is that it is observed three times in a year as the celebrations coincide with different stages in the farming cycles. Thus,

1. ‘Jitiya Karam’ happens on Shukla Ekadashi in the month of Bhad
2. ‘Budhi Karam’ takes place on Bijoya Dashami in the month of Ahin
3. ‘Ras Jhumur’ occurs on the full moon of the month of Aghoon

Among these, ‘Jitiya Karam’ is celebrated with the most grandeur and enthusiasm” (Kurmi, Sentinel 2023).

Tusu Puja is another major festival of the tea tribe community. The tea tribes observe the festival in honour of Tusu Devi, the Goddess of agriculture who is regarded as the incarnation of Shakti. It is celebrated during Makar Sankranti in mid January and is associated with the end of the harvesting season. The Tusu Puja celebrations continue for nearly a month culminating on the last day of Poush-Paus Sankranti or Makar Sankranti. During this period, young, unmarried girls make intricately designed idols of Tusu Devi, which are worshipped with offerings, songs and dances. In fact, for twenty nine days, the young women sing and dance before the deity and on the thirtieth day, which is called the ‘jagoron’ or ‘Awakening’, they exchange garlands, fry eight varieties of pulses and present offerings of rice to Tusu Devi. They seek the blessings of the Goddess for a prosperous and happy future.

Saharai Parab is another important festival celebrated by the tea tribe communities. This festival which is dedicated to cattle and livestock is celebrated after the harvest season usually in October-November.

Gram Puja is performed by the tea tribes for the well-being of their homes and to protect their households from misfortune. Tea workers “... believed that in every household there is one spirit or God to take care of that household. Gram Puja is performed to placate this spirit that protects the household from misfortunes” (Dutta, 2012, p. 93).

Another important festival, Mansa Puja, is observed to seek protection from snake bites and for overall well-being, fertility and prosperity. It is usually

observed during the monsoon months of July-August.

Additionally, Mage Parab is a festival observed by Santhals, a tea tribe. This festival is celebrated to express gratitude and thankfulness to nature and the spirits for an abundant harvest.

Phusupani Ma Puja also has a special place in the festivals of the tea tribes. Phusupani Ma, the Goddess of Rain is worshipped for rainfall and “to ward off the pernicious effects of mosquitoes, ants and other insects” (Dutta, 2012, p. 93).

The tea tribes also worship the Sal tree at the beginning of the spring season. This festival is known as Sorhul.

While Jhumur dance is performed during Karam Puja and Tusu Puja, it is a highly popular dance form amongst tea workers, who, “sometimes perform the Jhumur dance while singing, especially when they are in a more pleasant mood.” (Das, 2022 p. 2786). Nowadays, Jhumur dances are not only restricted to the festivals of tea tribes, but also showcased in many cultural programmes across Assam. This is a pointer to the fact that the acculturation of the tea tribes occurs with the greater Assamese society.

Section 3

This section of the paper exemplifies and discusses the socio-cultural significance of the festivals celebrated by the tea tribes of Assam. Hence, as Sharma, mentions: “The festivals of the tea tribes of Assam are not merely occasions of worship or celebrations, but vital cultural practices that sustain community solidarity, preserve oral traditions, and articulate the socio-cultural identity of a historically marginalized people” (2011).

The name ‘Karam’ is derived from the Karam tree, which symbolizes fertility and the abundance of nature. This Puja’s “...object was to ensure the fertility of the growing rice by planting branches of the karam tree in every rice patthar” (Ramsden, 2016, p. 114). For the tea tribes, Karam Puja symbolizes their intimate association with the land, the harvest, and natural phenomena that impact their livelihoods. Verrier Elwin notes that the ritual is deeply tied to agrarian life, where the worship of trees and nature reflects the ecological worldview of tribal societies (1964, p.118). While, Karam Puja is deeply connected to agriculture and nature and puja is performed for a bountiful harvest, women worship the deity to ward off evil and to be blessed with a happy conjugal life. Women are indeed central to Karam Puja, as the festival is closely associated with female energy and fertility.

While Jitiya Karam is the most widely celebrated,

all three Karam festivals involve performing pujas to honour the land, the crops, and the forces of nature that are vital for the communities' progress and prosperity. Jhumur dance and Jhumur songs are integral to the festival, with their vibrant rhythms and moving lyrics highlighting the trials and tribulations as well as the joys of the tea tribes' day to day existence.

Karam Puja is a form of nature worship dedicated to Karam, the deity of youth, fertility, progress and prosperity. Thus, it is mentioned that "Deeply connected to agriculture and nature, Karam Puja is more than just a religious festival. It is a testament to the enduring connection between the tea tribe and the rhythms of the earth that sustain them" (Assam State Portal, Assam Tea Festival, 2023).

Tusu Puja is a festival that underscores the power and purity of womanhood. Unmarried girls seek the blessings of Tusu Devi for a happy marriage and perform songs and dances to celebrate their femininity. Jhumur dance and music are as much a part of the festival rituals as the spiritual offerings made to the Goddess. Hence, it is important to note that Tusu Puja is a celebration of femininity, devotion and community spirit that stands as a testimony to the resilience and cultural richness of the marginalised tea workers.

Celebrations such as Karam Puja, Maghe Parab, Sarhul and Sohrai embody the tea tribes' ecological consciousness, agrarian roots and spiritual connection with nature. These festivals involve rituals of worship, music, dance and communal feasting that strengthen bonds of solidarity among the tea tribes and thus provide cultural continuity in the midst of socio-economic hardships.

Although, festivals like Karam Puja and Tusu Puja are celebrated mainly by the tea tribe community, "they cross the boundary and influence other Assamese people and as a whole the greater Assamese culture." (Sarmah, 2018, p. 127).

It is to be stressed that "... music and dancing seem to be an integral part of the tea worker's life. The untold suffering and hardships they faced during the British days has not been able to stifle the joyous lust for living displayed by them" (Dutta, 2012, p. 92). The tea tribes have a rich variety of music and the themes for their music and songs are based on social issues, their day-to-day lives and their histories.

"Jhumur... is a folk music genre that originates from the Sadani language of the communities residing in the Chota Nagpur plateau" (Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p. 225) and serve as an important means of communicating narratives on the lives, struggles, and hardships of tea workers. Songs like Jhumur have often

been passed down orally from their forefathers and "Through their lyrics and melodies... offer unique perspectives on the events, emotions, and traditions that have shaped different times and places." (Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p. 225). Jhumur songs keep alive the past and the present, seamlessly weaving both into an appealing narrative. It is said that Jhumur songs have changed and evolved over time; whereas in the past they were sung mainly for entertainment, nowadays these have developed into a means for people to express themselves, thereby enabling marginalized people to have a voice.

Among many themes, Jhumur songs depict poignantly how tribals from the Chotanagpur area were deceived into migrating from their homeland only to end up living a life of suffering and misery in the tea gardens of Assam. An example of such a song is given below:

"Chol Mini Assam jabo
Desheborodukh re
Assam deshe re Mini Chaa bagan horiya
Hor mara jaimontaimon
Pata tola taanbo
Hai joduram
Phakidiye cholai di assam"
(Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p. 229).

The English translation is as follows:

"Come Mini, we are going to Assam
The misery is great in our Desh
In Assam, my dear Mini
The tea gardens are green and beautiful
That's where our future lies
The heavy digging is done somehow
Picking leaves is hard
Oh, Joduram! You lied to us
And sent us to Assam"

(Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p. 229).

"Mini", according to Bhowmik and Biswas, "stands for the women workers who are persuaded to go to Assam. They are promised a better future in Assam, where the tea gardens are described as green and beautiful" (2024, pp. 229-230). In essence, the song captures the deep disillusionment, the sadness, and the helpless plight of the women workers who were deluded into migrating to Assam. At the same time, it reflects their mental strength and resilience in coping with their exploitative conditions.

The harsh life on the tea plantations during the British Planter Raj, and the brutal punishments inflicted on the tea workers with regard to their performing extremely demanding tasks is depicted in the song

below:

“Sardar bole kam kam
Babu bole dhorī an
Sahab bole libo pither chan,
Re Jaduram
Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam”
(Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p.232).
The English translation is as follows:
“Sardar says work work
Babu says catch the fool
Sahab threatens to peel the skin off my back
O Jaduram
You betrayed us to Assam”

(Bhowmik and Biswas, 2024, p. 232).

Tea workers sometimes sing and dance while working like at a time of plucking green tea leaves. In this connection, the following song is presented:

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

(Das, 2022, p. 2786).

“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.” (Das, 2022, p. 2786).

Though tea workers have in the past had to toil unceasingly, producing high quality tea that command high prices and generate huge profits for the employers, their economic condition remains pitiable. In order to escape from poverty and marginalisation, tea tribes are putting enhanced emphasis on education as can be seen in the following song:

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

(Das, 2022, p. 2786)

They sing about the importance of education. They encourage the young boys and girls to go to school. Without studies or education, the future is dark (My own translation). It is to be noted that, education induces them to come out of their isolation, promotes interaction with mainstream Assamese society and exposes them increasingly to Assamese culture.

The fact that the tea tribes’ community has become a part of the greater Assamese society is reflected, inter alia, by their enthusiastic participation in Assamese festivals like Bihu. This can be easily deduced from the following song:

“Karam Puja, Tussu Puja, Durga Puja aamader

Bohag Bihu taholo sabo kera upore
Hamnike Assam deshe
Dholer tale jhumur nachi ja mure dhoni
Bihu bihu lagechhe mor ga”

(Das, 2022, p. 2782).

Although, the tea tribes originally belonged to states like Jharkhand, Odisha, Chattisgarh, and West Bengal and although the community is made up of many diverse tribes, they have not only made Assam their permanent home but also acquired a distinct composite identity as ‘tea tribes’. Known as ‘Baganias’, they are now being identified as ‘Notun-Axomiya’ or ‘New Assamese’. This is highlighted by the following song:

“Oriya, Munda, Telenga, Manjhi, Santhals, Saura
Sobaimili hoi geli aamra bagania
Natun Assamiya”

(Das, 2022, p. 2784)

This song notes that tribes like Oriya, Munda, Telenga, etc., are now collectively identified as ‘Baganias’ and also as ‘Notun-Axomiya’.

Festivals, folk songs and dances are not only a central part of the lives of the tea tribes, they are also contributing immensely to the development of a composite Assamese culture. It is to be noted that “the plots of great Assamese novels like ‘Seuji Patar Kahani’, ‘Dawar Aru Nai’, ‘Ejak Manuh Ekhon Arayna’, and famous Assamese feature films like ‘Chameli Memsaab’, ‘KesaXoun’, ‘Trikal Badhu’, ‘Arjun’, etc., are based on the lifestyle and culture of the tea tribes.” (Sarmah, 2018, p. 128).

The tea tribe community has settled down permanently in Assam and consider Assam to be their homeland. The overwhelming majority of tea tribes have no connection with their original homeland. Coming from diverse tribal and caste groups in central and eastern India, they have not only coalesced and evolved into a single community, i.e., the tea tribes of Assam, they have also become an inseparable part of the greater Assamese culture and society. It is said that, “By giving up their ancestral address the tea tribes have been trying continuously to blend with Assamese society.” (Sarmah, 2018, p. 128). While the tea garden community had been confined to their labour lines during the British colonial period, their interface and interactions with Assamese society increased significantly in the post-independence period.

4. Conclusion

Festivals, songs, and dances play an invaluable role in bringing the tea garden community and mainstream Assamese society closer, which

contributes significantly through acculturation, to the evolution of a composite Assamese culture. In this connection, the following observation of Redfield, Linton and Herskovits appears to be relevant: “Acculturation comprehends those phenomenon which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (1936, p. 149).

It is evident that the tea tribes’ increased interaction with, and adaptation to the Assamese society and culture while retaining some distinct aspects of their own culture and traditions, is undergoing a gradual process of acculturation. For instance, many tea tribe members can now speak Assamese fluently along with Sadani/Sadri and other tribal dialects. Tea tribes now celebrate Bihu, Durga Puja along with their own festivals like Karam Puja and Tusu Puja. Besides, tea tribe men often don the Assamese ‘gamocha’, while the women wear ‘mekhela sadors’ during special occasions such as Bihu. It is also observed that Santhali or Munda dance

sometimes incorporates Bihu rhythms when they are performed during cultural programs. Assamese dishes are also being increasingly incorporated into the daily diet of tea tribes. Thus, one can say that the elements of Assamese society and culture are witnessing incorporation into tea tribe culture and way of life, especially with regard to their festivals, songs, dances, dress, cuisine, apart from their language. These developments unequivocally indicate that the acculturation of tea tribes is not only taking place, but also gathering momentum over the past few decades. However, while the tea tribes are adopting various elements of Assamese culture, they also are very particular about steadfastly holding on to their own traditions and cultural practices.

It can therefore, be stated that acculturation of the tea tribe community is occurring, and that culture, songs, dances, and festivals contribute prominently to this process. Festivals, we can say, act as bridges of acculturation and allow the tea tribes to maintain cultural distinctiveness while they participate and engage with the bigger Assamese socio- cultural fabric.

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