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## Ethnicity and the Tea Tribe of Assam

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### **Abstract:**

*This article will discuss an overview of Ethnicity and The Tea Tribe of Assam. In the age of migration, globalization, population transformation it has led to the growth of heterogeneous societies. As a result, diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, culture is found in most of the societies in the world. And in such pluralistic society ethnicity is one of the most expanding social phenomenons. The social scientists have done much work in the study of ethnicity and identity as because these issues constitute major issues of studies on the people and culture of the region. This paper mainly deals with the growing ethnic awareness among the Tea Tribe who is one of the major groups which reveals at present day population formation of Assam.*

**Keywords:** *Etnicity, Identity, Tea Tribe*

### **1. Introduction**

In the age of migration, globalization, population transformation it has led to the growth of heterogeneous societies. As a result, diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, religion, culture is found in most of the societies in the world. And in such pluralistic society ethnicity is one of the most expanding social phenomenons. As according to Ryan and Deci, "The problem of the identity is more salient that any time in history". The social scientists have done much work in the study of ethnicity and identity as because these issues constitute major issues of studies on the people and culture of the region. The North East India is the homeland of different ethnic groups with a variety of cultures and speaking different languages and dialects have been now witnessing a process of ethnicity and identity formation by various social group. Particularly in Assam the process of ethnicity and identity has been becoming a burning problem with political development and raising aspiration of the communities after independence. Again over the last few decades it is seen that the process of formation of Assamese nationality most of the communities have lost their identity for which the problem of ethnicity has become more crucial.

So far the identity problem is concerned the Tea Tribe of Assam is one of such group which has been facing a great problem in the contemporary socio-political phenomenon of Assam. The Tea Tribe of Assam is neither the aboriginal tribe of this land and nor a single ethnic group. They are the people of various origins which were brought mainly from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu by the British tea planters years back to work as laborers in the newly established tea gardens in Assam. Composite of more than hundred caste and tribe these required labourers have a mosaic of different festivals, songs, dance, language, tradition, culture, religion and socio-cultural life. At present demographically the tea garden labourer of Assam represents around 20% of the total population of the state accounting for more than 70 Lakh people which constitutes a significant segment of the present population of Assam. Living and engaged in one tea industry more than one hundred fifty years within the same economic condition and political formation gradually they identify themselves as Tea Tribe. Though, they identify themselves as Tea Tribe and contributed significantly in the economic, social, cultural and political sphere of Assam but still there raises many questions regarding their identity and they have facing a great identity problem since they have come to this land.

What are the characteristic features of the Tea Tribe? What is that they grapple with? The osmosis of identity they face, their language, culture, tradition, religion and many other things situate them apart from the other social group of Assam. With the expose to higher education and politics in the state after independence a gradual trend of identity consciousness is observed among the tea garden labourer of Assam. When we discusses about the identity of the tea garden labourer of Assam we have come across a three folded identity i.e. their tribal or caste identity, the Tea Tribe and Adivasi identity. The tea garden labourer are mostly inhabited in Kokrajhar, in lower Assam, in Marigaon, Nagaon, Sonitpur and Darrang in Middle Assam, in Golaghat, Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in Upper Assam, in North Cachar and Karbi Anglong in Southern Assam and in Barak Valley. It is interesting to note that the identity of the tea garden labourer who live in lower or middle Assam and upper Assam are different. In the time of interview it is found that most of the tea garden labourer of upper Assam identify themselves as Tea Tribe while in middle or lower Assam they more likely to identify themselves as Adivasis. And in this paper mainly deals with the ethnicity and the Tea Tribe of upper Assam. Here a modest attempt is made to study ethnicity of the Tea Tribe with the help of certain specific socio-cultural and socio-political affinities on which basis the Tea Tribe trying to formulate their identity.

### 1.1. Ethnicity

In recent years the problem of ethnicity become to the centre of contemporary debate in the social and political sciences of the world. Though the term ethnicity can be conceived as a clear cut concept, numerous scholars have presented conflicting perspectives on it. One of the classic definitions of ethnicity is that of Glazer and Moynihan, "the condition of belonging to a particular ethnic group". According to John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (John and Smith, 1996, P1/14), the term ethnicity is relatively new, first appearing in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1963 but as a term it derives from the Greek word *ethnikos* which is adjective of *ethnos*, a term referring to a people, race or tribe. In its contemporary uses the term ethnic still retains this basic meaning in the sense that some degree of coherence and solidarity among people who are aware of common origins and interests (Cashmore, 1991, P97). On the otherhand John and Smith (1996, P6-7) definition of an ethnic group or ethnicity consist of six main features that include –

- a collective proper name.
- a myth of common ancestry
- shared historical memories
- one or more elements of common culture
- an association with a specific 'homeland'
- a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.

Urmila Phadnis defined ethnicity or ethnic group as a historically formed aggregate of people, having a real or imaginary association with a specific territory, a cluster of beliefs and values, connoting its distinctiveness in relation to similar groups and recognized as such by others (Phadnis, 1990, p.14). The merit of this definition lies in the fact that it encompasses an objective approach (emphasizing cultural marks such as race, language, descent etc.) as well as a subjective approach ( emphasizing group related feelings of identity distinctiveness) into its fold.

No discussion or theoretical formulation of ethnicity or ethnic boundaries is likely without mentioning the influential contribution of Fredrik Barth. A major paradigm change in the understanding of ethnicity occurred following the publication of Norwegian anthropologist Fredrick Barth's famous 1969 article, "Ethnic Groups and Boundaries." In that essay he questioned the belief that "the social world was made up of distinct named groups" and argued that the identity of the group was not a "quality of the container" (i.e. an "essence" or a fixed, objective reality belonging to a cultural or ethnic group) but what emerges when a given social group interacts with other social groups.

The interaction itself highlights differences between the groups and these cultural differences result in the formation of boundaries distinguishing "us" from "them." "A group maintains its identity," he wrote, "when members interact with others." Ethnicity, Barth insisted, is based on one's perception of "us" and "them" and not on objective reality that actually exists "out there" in the real world. Markers, such as language, religion, or rituals serve to identify these subjective ethnic "boundaries." Since these can change, ethnicity is not fixed but situational and subjective. He believed the focus should be placed on the "boundaries" between groups, not on the groups themselves. It was there, at these "boundaries" that ethnicity was "constructed."

Definition of ethnicity emerges out of specific anthropological and sociological theories. A review of literature on ethnicity reveals that three predominant theories that exist on ethnicity include *Primordialist*, *Instrumentalist* and *Constructionist* theories which are consider as useful tools for understanding the nature of ethnicity and the forces behind formation of ethnic identity among migrant and minority groups. Discussions and the theorization of ethnicity display variety and diversity in their explanation of the ethnic phenomenon. The *Primordialist* approach is the oldest in sociological and anthropological literature. It argues that ethnicity is something given, ascribed at birth deriving from the kin- and-clan structure of human society and hence something more or less fixed and permanent (Isajiw, "Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework,"). These three argument that are ethnicity is an ascribed or assigned status that is inherited from one's ancestor, second that ethnicity is fixed and permanent and third common descent and history provide the foundation of ethnicity. Hence common biological, historical and cultural origins link people together ethnically (Isajiw, 1999, Jenkins, 1996). Schermerhorn (1970) states that it is based on "real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements". Examples of symbolic characteristics include kinship, religious affiliation, place of origin, language or dialect, tribal affiliation, phenotypical features, or any combination of these.

Clifford Geertz is further developed the *Primordialist* theory, which consider ethnicity as an irrational and deep seated attachment to kin, territory, culture and religion. The *Instrumentalist* theory views ethnicity as an instrument or strategic tool to gain access to resources, services and rewards that would be unobtainable if one did not claim a particular ethnic identity. Some benefits that can be enjoyed include political, social and economic resources and status (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, p.68). Glazer and Moynihan, who are the pioneers of this theory, state that like class and nationality, ethnicity can be used as apolitical mobilizing tool. The *Constructionist* theory, gained prominence in the 1970s (Yang, 2000: 43). It is the most recent of the three theories. Unlike the *Primordialist* and *Instrumentalist* theories, ethnicity is not viewed as innate or instrumental. Instead the *Constructionist* theory views ethnicity as a multi-dimensional and dynamic identity, which is "built and rebuilt, and sometimes dismantled over time" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 72). Barth (1994: 12), affirms that ethnic identity is fluid, situationally defined, produced and reproduced in the course of social transactions, and in relation to 'place', time and others. Barth (1969: 5), also argues that ethnic boundaries are maintained when individuals maximize interactions with those within their ethnic group and minimize interactions with other ethnic groups.

### 1.1.1. Ethnicity and the Tea Tribe

Ethnicity is a very recent phenomenon in the history of the Tea Tribe of Assam. Assam is known across the world for the Tea Industry. The growth of this Tea industry and the economic development took place with the intensive labour of the Tea Tribe. But these labourers never get any attention and there was always a contradiction about their identity since they have come to this land. For the tea planters who bought the new settlers to work in their newly established tea plantations more than one and half century ago, they identify them as 'indentured labourer'. Then the labour contractors who were in charge of bringing labourers to the tea gardens, they regard those labourers as they were extremely poverty stricken people who could be easily cheated. And again a little latter period these tea planters identify the labourers as tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers. For the other social group people of Assam they are Baganiyas, Bongali, Coolie, Chah Bonua, Chah Jnagusthi and Chah Shramik. For the Assamese middle class leaders they are Chah Bagichar Asomiya and Notun Asomiya in some critical periods of self interest like census operations and in case of some mass agitation, but none to be felt responsible about at other times. For a section of this social group identify themselves As Adivasi.

For a group of poverty stricken and uneducated people, uprooted from their original soil, engaging in hard physical work the question of survival becomes all the more important. The identity question in such situation therefore remained an object of least attraction for them in the initial period. But as history moved on, the lots of this group also started to improve though very slowly. Primary out of legal compulsions some schools were also established in tea gardens for the children of tea garden labourers which gave to birth a small group educated people. As time passes this educated people of this group and along with the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha (established in the year 1958, 9<sup>th</sup> August) started to think and work for the development of this people. Over the years with the growth of numerical strength and dissemination of education there emerged a number of organizations among the tea garden labourers. Gradually the question of having a proper identity has started to arise an important issue and this issue of not having a proper identity helps to grow ethnicity among this social group of Assam.

Large section of these elites believes that the people of this social group must develop or form a single common identity for themselves. In their consideration 'Tea Tribe' is the most suitable identity which can prestigiously cover every section of this social group. Over the years different organizations and people belonging to this group have been increasingly advocating this identity by various means. They are promoting common Tea labour feeling, developing a common language namely Sadri, seeking political safe-guards and also by preserving common culture that is tea culture within Assamese society. They also celebrate a host of common festivals like Karam Sanmilan, Kali Puja, Jhumor folk dance and songs for preserving their identity. The celebration of such common festivals by themselves for a long time has obviously contributed towards their unification into a cohesive community both psychology and culturally regardless of their distinctive caste entity. For this reason a number of organizations or outfit come out which chiefly includes – All Tea Tribes Students Association(1948), Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha(1958), Assam Chah Janajati Yuba Chatra Parishad(1972), All Adivasi Students Association, Assam(1996), Assam Sramik Parishad, Assam Tea Workers Union, Assam Tea Labour Union(ATLU), Assam Labour Party and many others. Under the banner of these socio-cultural and socio-political organisations the tea garden labourers can assert their Tea Tribe Identity. While takes any cultural procession, different political rally's or any other procession the people of the Tea Tribe carry bow and arrow to showcase that they have their material culture which is considered as a identity marker.

Tea Tribe has now given emphasis on various cultural forms to display their Tea Tribe identity. Nourishing culture and its implication for identity construction is seen a constant process of negotiation among the Tea Tribe. They are not only keeping their culture within themselves but they have now started organizing various conferences like 'Karam Sanmilan', 'Tusu Samaruh', 'Jhumur Programmers' etc. where they are showcasing their distinct rich culture. The shift of Karam Parav venue from individual house to public dais has undoubtedly a symbol of focusing their identity.

Similarly, the Jhumor dance having widespread prevalence among the tea garden labourers have been regarded as one of the most important element for unifying them all with a new identity as the Tea Tribe. In a sense they have by already given recognition to Jhumor dance as an inextricable part of the tea garden labourers folk dance.

## **2. Conclusion**

The main study of the paper is to study about the ethnicity of the Tea Tribe and here only the ethnicity of the Tea Tribe of upper Assam is discussed. In the above we have seen that language, different forms of culture are some of the main dimension on which basis they asserting their identity. The Tea Tribe all throughout has struggled to create own space and asserting an identity for themselves. The effort had been harder than expected especially with hegemonic discourses of the dominant community. Somewhere deep within them lies the intense insist and expectation on to get the Tea tribe identity.

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