Social-cultural changes of Migrated Tea Garden Labourers: A Study of Oraon in Barak Valley of Assam

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Abstract: The process of change is noticeable in human society and culture. Tribes and tribal culture are not static too. So change of tribal society and culture is rather obvious. Oraon is one of the popular tribal communities in India. A large number of Oraon migrated and settled in Barak valley of Assam to work in tea gardens as wage labourer during British Period. After arrival in Barak Valley of Assam they are confined in tea garden. Their mode of living is based on tea garden settler. Most of them think that tea garden is part of their life. Tea garden is shaping their economic, political, social and cultural life. In tea garden they are engaged in new occupation where most of their neighbours are tea garden workers migrated from different parts of India. Coming to new situation Oraon are getting accustomed with dominant culture of tea garden. Their language, religion, food habit, institution of family marriage is no longer remaining same as their homeland. Rather a new culture has become dominant in tea gardens which govern entire way of life of Oraon. Main concern of the study is how tea garden shapes way of life of Oraon living in Barak Valley region of Assam.

Keywords: Oraon, Barak Valley, Tea Industry, Tea Garden Labourer, Social Change.

I. Introduction

Tea plantation in India is a kind initiation vi-a-vis gift of British colonial administration. First major tea venture was started in upper Assam in 1839 by Assam Company and within two decades many more companies with British capital made their debut in different parts of Assam. Vast wild forest land was transformed into beautiful smiling tea gardens, along Brahmaputra and Barak valley. The discovery of tea and its commercial production changed Assam's economy. In Cachar, first tea plantation started in 1855-1856 by Williamson and Co. near Bursangun (near present Bajrangpur Tea Estate) and its success opened eyes of many planters and entrepreneurs who applied for a grant of land in Cachar. Tea industry provided employment to a large number of labourers. Along with various castes and tribes a large number of Oraon came from different parts of India as Tea Garden Labourer. After arrival in the region they confined in tea gardens and engaged them to earn their livelihood from tea industry over generation.

II. Economic Life

Assam use to contribute around 55% of country’s total production of tea which considered as backbone of state’s economy. Despite of huge amount of revenue collection from tea industry by the state as well as private owners, overall economic condition of tea garden labourers along with Oraon in Barak Valley is very poor. Oraons are mostly depending on wages earned from working in tea gardens. Even in present days wages are not quite satisfactory to meet their daily expenses. Coercion, low wages and immigrant labourers are three important components of tea plantation in Assam. These three components ensure high profit for planters. As such planters obstructed growth of a labour market and thereby deprived workers from real market wage. All adult members of the family both male and female are engaged in tea garden work to earn money. Despite of low wage they have to work in the garden. At present only a few Oraons are going outside tea garden and engaged in other activities to earn more money. But due to poverty and illiteracy most of the Oraons do not dare to go outside tea gardens in search of work. Oraon families somehow maintain their family expenditure with the amount they earn from tea garden. Moreover, Oraons spend a substantial amount of their earnings for taking country liquor every day. Many members of younger generation spend a major amount of their income for purchasing non-traditional consumer goods.
III. Cultural Life

Oraons Initially lived their life peacefully without intervention of any force or institution. Now Oraon in tea estates are found to be different. Their house, settlement, socio-cultural institution, family kinship and marriage are of different nature. In tea garden Oraon continuously interact with non-Oraon or other tea garden labourer. It’s rather very irony to note hardly any community’s original identity including Oraon is seen in tea garden. Socio-cultural activities of Oraons in tea garden had started getting new form in due course of their settlement and life. Their interaction with people living nearby their settlement or work place made them to come in contact with non-Oraon people. Tea garden labourers continuously mixed with Bengali labourers in Barak valley. Entire tea community irrespective of their caste tribe identity equally celebrated socio-cultural functions like marriage ceremony, death ritual, and child rearing practice and have equal pattern of food and dress which show a mixed culture peculiar to tea community of this Valley. But traditional cultural aspects like nativity, caste, community, religion, informal organisation, symbolic expression and status determinant are not totally lost by each individual community. Thus cultural aspects of Oraon society in tea garden are not totally lost in new relation. During tea garden festival, Oraons perform their traditional function. Thus, cultural aspects of Oraon labourers in Barak valley show social interaction of language, ethnic and religious group. Progress in assimilation of various group with varied cultural background makes it possible for labourers to live together cohesively adjusting with constraint. They have accustomed to all situations with a healthy and moral aptitude.

A. Family Structure

Family life has undergone a remarkable change of Oraon in tea garden areas. Traditionally their economy demanded joint and extended family structure. Which are essentially required for organized endeavour in economic field like agriculture, hunting etc. However, in industrial setup of tea garden this family structure has changed totally to nuclear family. Family authority is no longer solely exercised by eldest male member. Economic control remains in hand of earning members irrespective of age and sex. On other hand equal job opportunity for all adult members irrespective of sex has minimized parental control over youngsters. Quarter is also allotted to an earning member only. It may be added here that children are also earning. Though they are not allowed to possess authority but they have a say in some economic transactions. The plantation labour and wage system confirmed by available family budgets was that wage earning of an individual worker was much below what was considered by even garden management as normal or regular expenditure, not to speak of what should have been viewed as ‘family wage’ by any reasonable standard. Even a cursory look at available budget figures show beyond doubt that wage earning of an individual worker are so low that these met only a small fraction of subsistence requirements of a family. Such low wage fixation turned out as basic mechanism for forcing whole family including children and women to participate in wage work in gardens or outside the gardens.

B. Marriage

After settlement in tea garden of Barak Valley, institution of marriages among Oraons becomes more or less a personal affair and lost its hold from family and community. They do have socially recognized institution of marriage which prefers endogamy. Unlike their traditional forms of marriage, intercommunity marriages are taking place very frequently among them. Offenders are excused by society by keeping some amount of money as fine. Divorce and widow marriage is also not uncommon. It may be said whole traditional norms regarding marriage has got changed in Oraons living in tea gardens of Barak Valley. It has been observed that to some extent the loss of traditional control result laxity in sex life and irregularity in marital union. Social relation on the other hand, also changing from a relatively closed in kinship type to an open community sentiment. Some of kinship terms are borrowed from neighbouring non-Oraon communities with whom they come in regular contact.

C. Religious Life

Traditionally Oraons religion was based on warship, propitiation and tackling of village god, deity, ancestor and evil spirit. Such traditional belief and practice as a whole losing its appeal particularly among young people. Rather they prefer to participate in national as well as regional festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Laxmi Puja, Holi etc. some of these festivals are organized by tea garden management where Oraons and other labourers are participating voluntarily. In such occasion members of the workforce irrespective of ethnic and religious identity assist and participate.

D. Food Habit

Food habit in tea garden areas of Oraons and other labourers are almost same. Food pattern consists of rice, flour, vegetables, spices, fruits, pulses, eggs, fishes, meat etc. the workers in tea garden are non-vegetarians. Besides these they also chew betel leaf and tobacco. For cooking they use the home made Chulla dugged inside with three tops (traditional Chulla) using firewood. Utensil like aluminium bucket, steel plate, glass and aluminum vessel are used.
E. Alcohol Consumption

Addiction of alcohol is a common in tea garden society. In tea garden areas both male and female are addicted to alcohol. Oraon think that their social and religious activities remain incomplete without drinking alcohol. All labourers in tea garden mostly drowned in hariya (rice beer) and country liquor.

IV. Political Life

Political life of Oraon along with other labourers in tea garden is controlled by tea garden managers, office staffs and bagan panchayat (representative of tea garden labour union). Unlike traditional political organisation of different ethnic groups, tea garden labourers do not have their respective institutionalized bodies to control their political life. For smooth run of community life, a group of persons including Chowkidar, Sardar or a leader of workers, leaders of labour unions and some other influential persons irrespective of their ethnic affiliation look after tea labourer community as a whole. Trade unions in tea gardens are dormant and do not take keen interest in the welfare of the workers. Union leaders are hardly seen in tea gardens. Workers do not get convinced or show interest in union activities and many of them even fail to understand role of union. Trade union in tea-industries is indifferent about activities related to Human Resource Development done by each garden. They do not bargain with authority betterment of labourers. Trade unions and Bagan Panchayat thrive on political consideration rather than on a contended, satisfied, self-dependent and accretive workforce in the tea industries. Tea garden labourers, particularly women are members of union not due to their ideological commitment but under the compulsion of co-workers at the garden level. Politically, they are immature and ignorant. Most of the office bearers of the union or Bagan panchayat are male workers. Women workers remain always in rear everywhere. They are ignored and cornered in the distribution of elective posts even at the garden level. Tea garden workers particularly women workers remain busy with their daily routine works of the garden and whatever time they save are consumed by their domestic works. After hard work they become physically exhausted. Further, they live in the garden society which is cut off from main stream of national life. Their level of political perception, degree of political consciousness and political knowledge is limited and inadequate. This is mainly due to their solitary garden life.

V. Methodology

The study was mainly ethnographic based on field observation. The data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data collected through participant observation, interview guide and case study method. Secondary collected from various secondary sources such as books, periodicals, journals, Magazines, Published and Unpublished research studies conducted by different organizations. The total sample size was 300. The criteria of sampling ‘Random’, taking 100 people, fifty males and fifty females, from each district. The Unit of sample was tea gardens and villages where Oraon live. As Oraon are spread out in entire Barak Valley region of Assam so data collected from exclusively Oraon inhabited tea gardens/villages of different localities of three districts of Barak Valley.

VI. Conclusion

Oraon in Barak valley of Assam is fully controlled and determined by will of tea garden authority. Though they try to retain their own way of life but hegemonic and exploitative rules of tea garden compels them to identify themselves as a new community. Their occupation, accommodation, family life, marriage alliance, religion etc are fully governed and influenced by tea garden. Tea industry can be considered as stimulating factor for making the social change among Oraon.

VII. References