



Interpreting the tea vis-à-vis the waste land rules in Colonial Assam: A retrospective discourse on some issues

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[Abstract:

Tea and the natural resources play an important role in shaping the destiny of a country. Tea industry besieges a significant position in boosting the economy of Assam even today. The discovery of tea in 1823 in the Brahmaputra valley inspired the British to colonize Assam at the earliest. The first experimental plantation was made by the East India Company in 1835 in Lakhimpur and thus, the period of experiment started till 1852. The discovery of tea, its profitability and potentiality had awakened growing interest of the British capitalists in the cultivation of this plant in the Brahmaputra valley from the fifties of the 19th century and this led to confrontation between the indigenous people and the British in Assam as and when the traditional system of crop cultivation started receiving withstand from the Colonial Government. This paper is an attempt throw which some issues are addressed.]

Tea plays an important role in shaping the economy of a country. The role of it in boosting the economy of India cannot be overlooked. Tea industry is the only industry that besieges a significant position in improving the economy of Assam. The article more precious than silver and gold grow wild upon its mountains and the local hill tribes used to call it, *phinak*, and drink its beverage. Tea shrubs of Assam were planted on an experimental basis in the Botanical Garden of Calcutta but this venture had to be abandoned. The discovery of tea in 1823 and also coal and petroleum in 1825 in the Brahmaputra valley during the operations against the Burmese inspired the British decision to colonize Assam at the earliest. Also the strained relation between the British and the Chinese encouraged the farmers to look for tea plantation in India.

But if we believe Trevelyan, there is no denying the fact that Indian tea was within the reach of the mass population of England even in the mid 18th century and the port of London received these ships. The area of waste lands in Assam is so large that it is no necessary to check the freedom of the ryots to transfer his land. Moreover, Assam abounds in many parts with valuable timber, not of the ornament but the useful, order, chiefly adapted for building or for canoes. The main characteristic of the topography of Assam during the British regime was the existence of large tracts of waste land and it propelled the rise and growth of the tea industry in Assam.

The first experimental plantation was made by the East India Company in 1835 in Lakhimpur, one of the districts of Assam. The year from 1835 till 1852 was the period of experiment in the tea sector. The growth of tea plantation largely flourished mainly in the five districts of the Brahmaputra valley and in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar of the Surma valley. The period from 1852 till 1892 has therefore rightly been called as the tea plantation foundation period.

The discovery of tea, its profitability and potentiality had awakened growing interest of the British capitalists in the cultivation of this plant in the valley from the fifties of the 19th century and plantation become much more profitable in Indian and international markets. The economy of Upper Assam changed with the plantations from the middle of the 19th century but Lower Assam retained her traditional character.

The economic resources of the Ahom state, particularly tea, coal and oil mainly guided the British colonial and industrial policy. The foothills, along the Brahmaputra valley were found to be rich in timber, rubber, ivory and other raw materials which could be supplied from Assam. The agricultural land in the valley was highly fertile and it was capable of generating surplus and yielding handsome revenue. These facts impressed the British authority about the commercial prospects in Assam. Therefore, the immediate task of the British authority was to reclaim the land in the plains for the settlement of the cultivators and for the tea plantation. With a view to make their commercial plan viz. tea plantation successful, they contemplated to utilize the vast tracts of waste lands of Assam in practice and this finally gave birth to the waste land rules. Actually, these rules were tools of grabbing the waste lands. Indeed, Colonial government in the name of waste land rules engulfed those lands which were full of forest and natural resources. The planters even usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the jhum rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. The Government brought vast tracts of waste lands under tillage and tried to improve the resource and economy of the people. But they were allergic to the allotment of these lands to the local people and favoured foreign enterprise, skill and capital to serve their motto. The Waste Land Settlement Policy tempted planter to grab more land than they required or could manage.

To give wastelands to the Europeans and deprive the local people of the same, the government however, framed certain favourable rules of land grants entitled ‘Wasteland Grant Rules.’ According to Guha, ‘a set of rules were framed ‘Wasteland Rules of 6 March-1838’ to make these lands available for special cultivation.

As early as September, 1827, David Scott proposed a plan of granting wasteland on the conditions and his successor Robertson also planned the same. But in 1836, Captain Jenkins suggested to the Government of Bengal the introduction of the Gorakhpur rates with some modifications for similar grants in Assam. Finally, after several process and surveys, the Government of Bengal approved it in August, 1836. The terms of the waste land grants were so favourable to the Europeans that a scramble for land took place among the planters. Their intention was not always to plant the whole area with tea; intention was acquiring those wastelands which contained valuable raw materials like timber.

Referring to K.M.Lokesh unpublished thesis, Dr.R.Saikia says, ‘land grants were made at the most liberal rates in Coorg for coffee plantation. The British speculators flocked in, even from Ceylon and Burma; close at their heels came forward the Kodavas (the British called it Coorgs) and all of them took to coffee plantation and their hard work and patience, answered their expectation well. So, this reveals that liberal land grants system of the British was confined not only at one specified regions, rather it scattered various parts of the globe. But noticeable exception is that in Coorg, coffee plantation was done jointly both by the Kodavas and the British but this venture was not seen in colonial Assam. The terms of liberal land grants were extremely liberal, no doubt, but its precedent was set by the king Purandar Singha in 1836. On mere request, the Raja granted to the Assam Tea Company an extensive area near Gabharu hills for cultivation of tea in anticipating that in near future his subjects would be able to reap the benefit of this new enterprise. But his expectation proved wrong. Mills during his visit to Assam in 1853 said ‘ in a country like Assam where there is a super abundance of land and a deficiency of labour, I strongly deprecate the granting of waste land to natives of the province.’ Actually, Mills wanted utilization of these lands and supported grants to the outsiders.

Although no distinction was made between the European and indigenous, but the Government of Bengal on the recommendation of the Board of Revenue laid down that no grant should be made of less than 500 acres in extent and unless the grantee satisfied the collector that he possessed the required capital and implements for its utilization. The local entrepreneurs were debarred from applying for these grants as very few had the necessary wealth qualification. In 1856, on the recommendation of Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam; the Government of Bengal reduced the limit to 200 acres and in special cases even to 100.

Lord Cornwallis’ (Governor General of British India) land rules were too liberal and were objected by the Secretary of the State for India. Under his direction, the Board of Revenue had to revise some of the provisions which received the

approval of the Government of Bengal on the 30th August, 1862. Accordingly, grants were to be limited to an area of 3000 acres. The revised rule enabled the speculators to purchase waste lands at a very low rate. Not only that, there was much laxity in their application. Due to their financial capabilities, the British planters could avail the facilities of the government in opening tea gardens what the local planters could not even dream of such venture and those who could do that, they did that after retirement with their savings.

Thus, with a view to attract and also to encourage investors to take up land for cultivation of tea and coffee; waste land grant rules were passed from time to time since 1838. Under these, some land of a lease was held revenue free while others yielded revenue gradually after certain period. Rules were revised in 1854, 1861, 1874 and 1876. With the help of these tools viz. the Regulation of Wasteland Rules of 1861-62 and the Assam Land and Revenue Regulations Act of 1886- the Colonial Government wanted to grab the vast tract of waste lands more than one half of the extent of the province covering with deep forests, long grasses and bushes.

The Waste and Settlement Rule created another revenue free estate like the Lakhiraj estates. But such type revenue free rule was not framed for the rice cultivation. This type of discriminating rule was incentive to tea plantation and discouragement to cultivation which invited ignition and irritation among the local people. Introduced in 1839, tea was firmly established as the most important cash crop by the seventies. The total acreage under tea increased from 2,311 acres in 1841 to around 8,000 acres in 1859 and almost 31,350 acres in 1871. In 1872, the total area taken up by the tea planters in the Brahmaputra valley was officially reported to be 3,64,990 acres of which only 27,000 acres were under tea.

Up to 1870-71, the British tea planters got settlement of seven lakh acres of land. But only 56,000 acres of land were under tea cultivation; that is one eighth of total settled land. In 1881 and 1891, the area under tea cultivation was 710 and 1310 acres and lands settled with the immigrants were 1400 and 522 acres. According to Atkinson's estimate 'plantations covered only 1.01 percent of the cultivated area of the British India in 1895.

The Colonial Government passed several agrarian legislations viz. Wasteland Settlement Rules of 1854, Fee Simple Rules of 1862 and the Thirty Years Lease Rules of 1876 to favour the planters. Consequently, by 1896-97, a total of 1,82,366 acres of waste lands on fee simple terms were leased out to the planters at a very low cost of little over rupees five per acre. According to the 1881 census, the number of plantation house holds mostly the European individuals and Company share-holders were 35,181. The percentage of increase of land under tea was exceptionally high. The period between 1875- 1914 shows an increase by 158.44 percent. In contrast to it, the land utilization under traditional crops was considerably lower which resulted in multifold reactions in Assam. This also germinated the future seeds of conflict

between the locals and the Europeans resulting great upheavals in erstwhile Kamrup and Darrang districts of colonial Assam in 1893-94 albeit this was not the only factor but prepared the ground of it.

Key-words:

Canoes, topography, propelled, profitability, potentiality, retained, tillage, allergic, tempted, flocked, laxity, venture, grab, tract, agrarian, leased out, multifold

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