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The history behind the discovery of Assam Tea and its plantation during the time of British colonialism in India.

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ABSTRACT

Tea has been occupying a very significant place in Assamese society as well as an important factor of economy in the state. Assam-Tea has an international reputation and significant share in the international tea market. It is the single largest industry of the state, directly and indirectly which provides employment opportunities to a huge portion of people. Discovery of tea in Assam when it was under the role of British Colonial Power is involved with a specific history. This paper is an attempt to discuss and analysis about the role of colonial state and East India Company in the discovery and plantation of Tea in Assam for their own political-economic purpose. Moreover, it also tries to reveal how the initiation of the tea plantation in the region was connected with international trade relation and two war namely Opium War and Anglo -Burmese War.

INTRODUCTION

Every particular commodity and service has its own path of origin and development, history helps to reveal about their specific journey that is why history is always fascinating. Being one of the most popular beverages in the world, tea has a long history. About five thousand years ago it was first discovered in China, during that time it was basically used as a medicinal drink. Slowly, it became a local drink as a result the process of tea cultivation was begun there. The commercial production of Chinese tea began much earlier than any parts

of the world. In the whole world, only Assam and China are the regions with their own indigenous tea plants. India is one of largest tea producers in the world, producing an average 1,325,150 tones each year (as per 2019). Being the largest tea producing state in the country, Assam is supplying one sixth of the world's gross production.

Discovery and plantation of Tea in the region-

Tea is not just an industry in Assam but it is a part and parcel of society and culture of Assam because tea had entered into the Assamese psyche for the reason of history and the evolving socio - economic and cultural (Baruah, 2008). In 1823, an Army Colonial officer Robert Bruce first discovered Tea plant, growing somewhere in the forest of Upper part the Assam. As an adventurer he arrived in Upper Assam in search of trade as an agent of the East India Company and managed a local Seengpho Chief Bisa Gum to provide him tea plants and seeds. But he died in 1824 before he collected the tea seeds. After his death his brother Charles Alexander Bruce made friendship and arrangement with gum to teach the local process of cultivation and production of Tea. They were actually informed by a local gentleman Maniram Dewan. C. A Bruce (who is considered as the father of Indian tea) was a naval officer engaged in the service of the EIC and during that time he was working under the agent of governor general in Assam David Scott. He collected local tea seeds and sent back to David Scott again Scott forwarded to Wallich where he recognized that the leaves and seeds of tea were belonging to *Camellia* species but didn't consider it as the same species that of China.

During that time, Assam was under Burmese occupation. In 1824 first Anglo-Burmese war was started between British and Burmese soldiers. On the Other hand, at the same time Britain's trade-commerce relation with Chinese empire became unsettle and undetermined Understanding the extreme importance of tea in elite English life, British considered the possibility of starting tea cultivation of their own colonies wherever it would possible. In 1834, then Governor-general of India Lord William Bentinck recommended the formation of a twelve- member Committee, main purpose of this committee was to give some advices on the possibility of commercial plantation of tea in company's land in India. Bentick also described about the possible future advantages from the successful introduction of the tea plantation and it's indigenous growth in Indian soil (Ellis,Coulton et al 2015:pp209-210)

At the same year in December, this Committee reported to lordship in council and also to the Revenue Department of the Government that tea leaves founded in the forest of upper Assam was genuine species of tea. With no hesitation the authority of Company declared it was one of the most valuable discovery of them, which had a direct link with the commercial or agricultural resources of British empire. (Griffths 1967).The experimental plantation of tea was first started in 1835 year at Chabua. The first cultivation for commercial purposes of tea in the region was begun in the same year with the establishment of a few tea nurseries in present day Tinisukia and Dibrugarh under the great supervision of C.A Bruce. Seven centuries after their

ancestors sipped the first cuppa in Europe, Robert Bruce discovered tea in the India. The initial consignment of a tiny amount of tea was sent to kolkata for sampling in 1836.

Colonial Political and Economic interest of British (Both East India Company and Government) behind the tea plantation in Assam

Discovery of tea is undoubtedly a silent boon for the people of Assam and it was the British who played the most crucial role in establishment and advancement of Tea Empire, but for their own colonial economic interest. In 1826 on 24th February the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed after 2 years of war between kingdom of Ava(Burma)and British East India Company (by Sir A.Campbell representative of EIC and Maha Meen from the side of Burma)This treaty finalized the first Anglo-Burmese war. As consequences of this agreement, EIC started to controlled and became the master of Brahmaputra Valley and gradually began to consolidate their role in the region. With the British rule, tea industry had growth and create a new history in the area. In the initial years of 19th century the tea planters of British needed many migrants worker from various place of India such as Bengal, Bihar, Odissa, Madhy Pradesh to work in the growing tea gardens which also helped in opening up the means of communication in the region such as road and railway transportation had developed .

M.Sadir wrote that in 1821 Mr. Robert Bruce visited the country on a mercantile exploration first discovered the plant growing wild in Upper Assam. After starting commercial cultivation in 1838 twelve chests of tea were sent to England when the brokers reported very highly on them, though they had been slightly damaged. For the first time in 1840 government formed the Assam Tea Company the main purpose of that experimental establishment was to carry on tea trade Sadir1993). During that time many government officers had left their jobs to engage with tea-plantation may be because they thought that it would be more profitable than their job. Native suitable land was bought and used up by them for tea plantation. In the. In 1859, the 2nd tea company was formed in the Jorhat for the purpose of encouraging the tea gardening in the region, the colonial British government also took a few liberal steps for the settlement of the waste land for tea plantations. In 1911, the Toklai Tea Research Station was established with a purpose of initiation of research on tea cultivation, management and manufacture within the region. This research centre was very essential during that time in the spreading of knowledge in that particular field.

How the initiation of the tea plantation in the region was connected with international trade relation and two international conflicts

In 1838 the East India Company received many feedbacks from the British elite class mainly from royal families, aristocratic section, the merchants and traders class for their recent commodity from their own colony. According to E.Rappaport ,the feedbacks were different, but those who had their imperial or business interest expressed their satisfaction with the new beverage found in one of their own resourceful colonies. Queen Victoria expressed her pleasant that she was very much satisfied with the quality and flavor of that

particular tea. She announced that that this new experiment would exercise a significant influence over the economic improvement and prosperity of the British Empire in the Eastern part of the world, during that time tea wholesalers and grocers also ranked this new product among the top class of Chinese black tea and many others also expressed their satisfaction with its excellent and superior quality.

It is not possible to say that whether those elite consumers of Britain's actually liked and satisfied with the newly produced tea from India or we didn't know that publicly they were forced to express that tea of Assam was indeed a superior and nice one. But their main motive was – started to produce tea in India and supplied those tea to their own domestic market of Britain and made Britain independent from Chinese tea market. British understood that if a nice quality of tea could be produced in Assam or India, their motherland Britain would improve their trade deficit with China. They considered it as a good source of revenue because the EIC had already lost their monopoly of trade because the British Parliament adopted the Charter Act of 1833 which abolished company's trading monopoly on tea with China. These are the factors which helped to grow and capture the market for a newly produced commodity.

The discovery of tea in Assam was closely linked with international conflicts. The first one is British officer came to know about tea in Assam while they were fighting the Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26) because company's armies were invited by Ahom king to help from the invasion of Burmese. So the tea plantation was connected with colonial expansion of British Empire, international conflict, and also international trade and expansion of market. It is noticed that a powerful colonial power assisted in the growth of consumer revolution in England behind it, there was a big contribution of native landlords and rulers but English planters had been dominating the tea industry and labeled it as 'British'.

W. Robinson, described in his book that the whole process of tea plantation as a way to break the Chinese monopoly on tea and stop the merchants of England from bowed low to a number of conditions and irregular interruption of trade. He also demanded to the British government so that they support the tea from India because it was undoubtedly a national item for British. It was certain that they could not live without it and so called English lifestyle would remain incomplete without high quality of tea. But Chinese control of the tea business in the world was threatening the Britain's reputation, the freedom of its traders, and the daily routine of its inhabitants. (Rapaport 2017)

In the initial years EIC had no plan for economic inducement to develop a tea industry suddenly it changed in the decade of 1830s, because they had lost the China monopoly, second one is the Americans were gradually became a significant force in this field, the Dutch were also started to tea plantation in Java Island. The directors Boards of the Company thought that Indian tea would probably give them the opportunity of control the tea trade and there was a strong possibility of making profit from it. During the same time British liberals thinkers were also advocated for free trade in their colonies.

From 17th to 19th century China was developed comparatively a self-sufficient economy and did not want to import and dependent on much of commodities from outside the country. The Chinese commodities such as Tea, Silk, Spices and porcelain were very demandable in Europe. China gave importance on barter with silver for these commodities. But most of the European nations did not have that much of Silver to payments back. Because of high custom duties and imbalance in foreign trade they had begun to search for some other items which could replace silver to trade with China. This hope ended with Opium, which British produced in India and they exported this to China and indirectly forced them addicted to opium. China also wanted to start tea, silk other items trade for Opium. Unfortunately, the ruler of Qing dynasty in China recognized the side-effects of opium tried to stop its trade with EIC. On the otherhand, British did not want to let this happen, they tried to make the use of a kind of scare tactics know as Gunboat Diplomacy.

As a result of China's increased restrained on foreign trade and unwillingness to buy the Britain's commodities. EIC's tried hard to start the plantation of tea in India particularly in Assam. British Free traders seriously wanted to expand the trade with the Chinese Empire, on the other side the China was not interested with them. Initially, China was starting to buy a big amount of Indian opium, but when China imposed limitation on traders to specific ports. They wanted to stop the accession of opium from India and also refuse to share the knowledge about tea because EIC wanted to know the tea production technique from Chinese expert. Britain found the only solution in war. There is a prominent debate among the historians whether the first Opium War (1839-42) was started to defend the trade interest or on behalf of Britain's national reputation. Britain did not want to let their desire for tea bought at the expense of national honor. Free traders used nationalism as an instrument for condemning China for their foreign trade policies and try to promote free trade policy. During this time because of this hostility between China and Britain the Indian tea was seen as captivating.

In 1938, a tea trader John Walker wrote to their government expressing about the capability of Indian tea to overthrow the Chinese monopoly. He also wrote that the uncertain situation of commercial relations with China was not good for the honor of the British Empire. (Rappaport2017:pp89)

Conclusion

During 19th century averagely priced beneficial tea beverage was a freshen inclusion to domestic economy of Britain. In the early part of 1840s, Indian tea was considered as an elucidation to a consequential of interconnected international issues. They presumed that tea from India could fulfill their desire for a comparatively cheap and healthy beverage, helped the government of Britain in the collection of revenue, and wanted to give a lesson to that Britain was the more powerful than Chinese Empire. With the help of military power they captured the land of the region and managed the worker force need for production. Most of the histories written on Indian tea have admitted this aspect of the narrative. Political and economic description of EIC's occupation in the region have also accepted the role of tea. However, the involvement of indigenous

Assamese people had been always undermined in this discovery. But it was the local people who had been playing a very crucial role behind this whole process of tea plantation. The finding of the study reveals that origin of tea industry was closely related with colonial trade policy of British.

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