

LITERARY AND CULTURAL TRADITION OF TEA GARDENS OF KARIMGANJ

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Literature is like a mirror wherein the contemporary events of life and society are reflected (Shaukat Ali, Keno Likhi, Srestha Prabandha, Aritra Prakashan, Dhaka).

The real life stories of the tea communities, their pains and pathos has often stirred the emotion of the littérateurs and has compelled them to pen down the events related with the lives of tea labourers of Karimganj. These writings are not mere black words, but rather every word is soaked in emotion. The tea gardens have made a place for themselves in the novels, short stories, poems, drama and songs. That is why the poet wrote:

এদের শ্রমসিক্ত ধরিত্রীর উপহার যা কিছু
তার সিংহভাগ ওইসব স্বার্থপর উচ্চাকাঙ্ক্ষী
বিলাসী, ধূর্ত, লোভীরা
নিয়ে নেয় ছিনিয়ে, ভুলিয়ে ভালিয়ে
এই ক্রমের কখনো কি হবে ব্যত্যয়
(অশোক ভার্মা)

(Their capability to toil hard is a gift to the earth
However, the lion's share is swallowed by the selfish,
Luxurious, cunning, greedy
They snatch away by cunning lies
Will there be an end to these illegal acts)
(Ashok Verma)

The littérateurs have preferred the means of fictional literature instead of poetry so that the narration and the story could be weaved together to produce a new breed of literature centering round the lives of tea garden community. Herein shines bright the name of Ashok Verma who has well depicted the story of the toiling masses, as for instance, the story of "Shyam Mamar Goppo" (The Story of Shyam Uncle). In this story, while narrating his memories, Shyam also tells about his experiences of the forest and the garden. Another writer, Jhumur Pandey in her story "Binti Burir Golpe" (The Story of the Old Binti) depicts the life and tragedies of the life of a female labourer who became a pauper at the end. In her another story entitled "Kharan", Jhumur Pandey dwells on how the tea labourers started to get organized. She writes "the day when all of their hands will be clutched". The same tune could be discerned in the story titled "Deowal". Another story "Daini" depicts the life of the labourers in the grip of the superstitions. In the story "Adhikar", we find that how a labourer Biren Majhi became while working in the tea garden. He amassed a little sum by working for 20 long years as a labourer but his illness made him penniless. As such, Biren Majhi wonders whether he would still enjoy his right to vote or somebody would cast his vote before he could reach the polling booth. Is not it a farce in the name of voting? In this story also, we find the life of the tea labourers depicted in sorrow and also the deprivation of female labourers.

The family life of the tea labourers comprises of multiple problems ranging from unchanged work culture, lack of awareness and education, involvement in petty unsocial activities and drinking to economic hardships. As a result, the female members of the family have to take in the reigns in their hands. In such attempt, they often have to take private loans and repay them amidst great hardships. This pain of the female is reflected in one such song:

পাহি পাহি পাতা তরি
 টোকারি ভরাই
 হায়রে হায়রে হায়রে হায়
 এ সখি কিয়ে কি উপায়
 একটি কলি দুটি পাত
 তাইতো পেটের ভাত
 দেটাকার বাজার করি বাকি আনি লাউপানি
 হারাদিন পাতা তারে, হাণ্ডেহি তোপাই
 বাবুদের ছেনা পিনা ইকুলে পরে যায়রে

(We pluck the tea leaves and fill the baskets
 Oh my friend, what shall I do?
 Two leaves and a bud
 That is our bread and butter
 I do marketing for two rupees and purchase drinks with the rest
 The whole day I pluck leaves
 The children of the garden officers studies in school
 But our children go astray.)

The song speaks about the misery and mental agony of female labourers and the social and cultural life of their children. The female labourers does hard labour from dawn till dusk in return of low wages from the owners and no wages for household works. Before starting work at 8 AM, they complete cooking and other household activities. From 8 in the morning, they engage themselves in plucking leaves both in sun and shower under strict supervision.

Not only in the literature of Karimganj, but the tea community has also contributed to the growth and development of culture of this region. As the labourers have come from various parts of the country, their own cultural traits have assimilated with the culture of Karimganj. The language spoken by the tea labourers of Karimganj reflects such an instance of assimilation. The rituals and religious beliefs and practices have also witnessed such assimilation. Those who have migrated from Bengali dominated areas, they have a tendency to do Tusu, Bhadu, Durga Puja, Monosa Puja and the like; whereas those who came from Hindi speaking region observes Chat Puja and other such occasions. In the ballads, dramas and play house performances of Karimganj, the culture of the garden has been well depicted. Such play house performances used to take place in the gardens only during certain occasions. Very often the life and its various aspects were depicted in such performances. Apart from this, the “Jhumur Songs” also expressed the everyday events of the life of the tea garden community. They even perform dance to the beats and tune of this “Jhumur Music” which seems like the up and down tides in the life of the labourers. Again, the tea labourers have also moulded Durga Puja in their own way. They construct pandals in the garden and do Durga Puja. They also participate in the Durga Puja organized by the Bengalis with much fanfare. Their prolonged stay in this valley have resulted in a change in their habits and customs, dressing, food habits etc., which clearly bears a stamp of the regional influence. The influence of Bengali culture could be found among the tea labourers of Karimganj, whereas traces of Assamese culture could be discerned among the labourers of Brahmaputra Valley. Apart from this, a conglomerated version in their residential environment and food habitat could also be observed.

Another new addition in the cultural tradition of the tea gardens of Karimganj is Ganghi Puja, Netaji Puja and Bharat Mata Puja. The culture and tradition of the tea garden community has been well depicted by the litterateurs of Karimganj in their works. We find the mention of “Poush Parban” in Jhumur Pandey’s novel “Jol Khaben BonoDurga”. On the day of the festival, BonoDurga went to Dholeswari River before sunrise along with her mother and neighbours to fetch water. After that she went around many houses and had sweets. This resulted in pain in her legs. The grandmother of Lakshmimoni used to sing:

ছোটবাবুর ওই কোঠাটায়

ওই ছেঁড়িটা কে বটে

হাতেতে ডায়মন্ড কাটার বাল

কি মজাতে আইসেছে

(জল খাবেন বনদুর্গা, জুমুর পাণ্ডে, এবং মুশায়েরা)

(Who is that young girl
In the room of the young master
Wearing diamond cut bangles
Came in great joy)

[“Jol Khaben BonoDurga”, Jhumur Pandey, and Mushayera]

Another author from Barak Valley is Kajal Debata. In his stories also we find the reflection of the lives of tea labourers. In the year 1920, two books of Kajal Debata entitled “Aagun” and “Pratha” were released, which describes of the tea garden culture as prevalent in Barak Valley. In the year 1993, Kajal Debata’s story “Dwanda” was published. The main characters of this story are two tribal girls. The author takes us deep inside the customs and culture of tea community through the character of Banamala. In his another story “Fulmani”, the author dwells on the aspect of tea garden in this manner:

“Everyone of the tea garden does not recognise and it is also not expected of them to recognise. The face is full of smile, eyes are tired yet full of dreams. Probably human beings stay like this. Abject poverty also probably fails to snatch away dreams from people’s eyes. I wonder from where does dreams come from; whether from brain or from heart?”

Not only in stories but also in dramas, the litterateurs of Barak Valley have portrayed the pains of tea community. In the decades of 80s, Debabrata Choudhury wrote the drama “Thakur” on the backdrop of tea garden. This drama was broadcasted by All India Radio, Silchar. Apart from this, Chitrabhanu Bhoomick wrote “Jungle Jungle” and Biswajit Choudhury wrote the drama “Ronobhumi”. In all these drama, the multifarious aspects of the lives of the tea garden community were reflected.

The tea labourers have mingled in such a way with the light and air of Karimganj that it has become next to impossible to even imagine the individuality of this area excluding the tea community. Any comprehensive discussion of the society of Barak Valley cannot be done without taking the tea community into consideration.

The literature of the tea gardens of Karimganj exists both inside and outside the gardens. These two trends progressed almost in a parallel manner. However, the lion’s share of the literature created on the lives of the tea community was by the outsiders. This is because of the improved infrastructural facilities; the outsiders were much advanced in education, culture and thoughts. Again, the writers from outside the garden can be divided into two categories.

The outsiders have composed literature both in Bengali and Hindi. There has been a limitation even in the publication and circulation of the literature which is created. The causes for this phenomenon are the dearth of light of education among the labourers and the attitude of indifference by the outsiders towards them. The so-called progressive society seems to exhibit an attitude of apathy towards the literature of the tea garden community. That is why, we find that, barring a few writers and one or two newspapers, none seem to exhibit eagerness in creating or publishing literature of the labourers.

The cultural tradition which we find in the tea gardens includes koromer gaan, jitiya rakha, jhumur, tushu etc. They have well expressed their saga of deprivation through dance and music. The festivals of the tea labourers of Karimganj can be divided into two parts—one is community based which is known as “Tushu Parba”, while the other is universal or common for all which is known as “Jhumur Gaan.”

The tea plantation industry saw the arrival of labourers from various parts of the country on contract basis. However, it was noticed that even after the expiry of their contract, many labourers preferred to stay back permanently in the tea gardens or in the garden vicinity. The labourers in the tea gardens of Karimganj has arrived from different places and different culture. As a result, after dwelling in this valley for 4/5 generations, a mixed culture has taken birth.

Apart from Bengali and Hindi, the traces of colonial language (English), could also be found in their language. “Nach Ghar” (Dancing Hall) plays an important role in the cultural life of the tea labourers. When tea plantation started in Barak Valley, there was no source of entertainment for the tea labourers. So the “Nach Ghar” (Dancing Hall) was started as a source of entertainment for them wherein the labourers used to gather and perform songs, dance, drama etc. There is prevalence of “Tushu Puja” among the tea labourers of Karimganj owing to the fact that most of them have migrated from West Bengal. “Tushu Puja” falls in the Bengali month of Poush. At the end of the Puja, Tushu is bid adieu by telling:

আবার এসো গো টুসু হৃদয় মন্দিরে

আসলে আনন্দ হবে, নিরানন্দ যায় সে দূরে

“Come again Oh Tushu in the temple of hearts
Your arrival will make us happy, sadness will depart to distance.”

“Jhumur Gaan” was also prevalent among these tea labourers. The labourer boys and girls dance to the rhythm of the tom tom drums along with the “Jhumur Gaan”. This particular dance and music form has acquired the form of a popular religious festival in the tea gardens. However, the prevalence of “Manasha Puja” is the most among the tea garden labourers. Though it is clear that the fear of snakes has given birth to this puja but their love for this goddess could be found in the songs they sing during the immersion of the idol of “Manasha Puja”:

মায়ের দুধের দাম অসুল করতে পারলাম না
মা গো তুমি কেঁদে কেঁদে যেওনা।

“I am unable to repay the price of mother’s milk
O Mother, don’t go shedding your tears.”

Both married and unmarried girls perform “Karam Puja” in the Bengali month of ‘Bhadra’ (during Shukla Ekadashi Tithi) so that children are born to them. It’s a process of prayer wherein it is expected that the females be capable of giving child birth just like crop production capability by mother earth. “Bhadu Puja” is done in the Bengali month of Bhadra, when the “Aashu grains” are harvested. This festival is meant to celebrate the grains reaped during the month of Bhadra. That is why “Bhadu” is regarded as the goddess of growth of food plants by the tea labourers. Another initiation (ব্রত) prevalent among the tea community is “Jitiya Brata”. This initiation (ব্রত) is performed by the mothers for the welfare of their children in the Bengali month of Bhadra. This is performed mainly by those labourers who have come to Barak Valley from Bihar. Again, the prevalence of “Chat Puja” can also be found among the tea garden community of Karimganj.

Another labourer community named “Kalpa” observe “Makar Sankranti”, “Holi” and “Pahar Puja”. During holi, all of them gather together and perform the puja of their ancestral God. Apart from this, in every house of the village, people take small sticks and wrap coloured clothes around it. The people also adorn themselves in festive garments and play with the sticks. In the Bengali months of Falgun and Chaitra, a tea community bearing the name of “Baiga” celebrate a festival known as “Naru Puja”. The “Kharia” tea community perform the puja of Sun God for the welfare of their family members.

The tea labourer community observe “Charhol Puja” during the spring, “Magh Parab” during the Bengali month of Magh and “Saharai puja” during the Bengali month of Kartik. Another tea community bearing the name “Chaora” celebrate festivals like “Aam puja”, “Jahar puja”, “Kat puja”, “Alu puja” etc. Holi is also celebrated by many such communities. The “Bhuiya” community perform puja of the seven valiants, named, Tulsi Bir, Balak Bir, Lohong Bir, Dodhi Bir, Bachar Bir, Nag Bir, and Dulali Bir. Hanuman Bir is their prime adorable God. In order to get rid of diseases, the “Paharia” tea community observe “Shitala Puja” during the Bengali months of Falgun and Chaitra. The “Gour” community performs “Boroder Puja”. This puja starts from the Bengali month of Baisakh when the new moon comes to sight. During this puja, fish, banana, coconut etc. are offered. During the new moon of the Bengali month of Kartik, they do the puja of “Gour-Parvati”. Apart from this, some communities perform “Chaitra Navami Puja” during the Bengali month of Chaitra, which is generally associated with agriculture. The “Sabar” community celebrate “Mangla Puja” during the month of Falgun, “Shitala Puja” in the month of Asar and holi. Labourers of the “Karuba” community perform Durga Puja during the Bengali month of Falgun.

The tea labourers came to the various tea gardens of Karimganj around 150 years ago and in the course of time, this has resulted in a mixed culture in this part of the country. As because Karimganj is a Bengali dominated region, so the influence of Bengali culture is most prominent among the tea garden community. This community was and still is in the grip of illiteracy and repression. The owners and the Babus (white-collared man) still exploit these tea labourers. Though the central and the state governments have taken up many projects for the welfare of the tea garden labourers, yet these never reach the doorsteps of this community. Though situated in a geographically remote area, yet the tea labourers of Karimganj have created an identity of their own through their literature and culture, which has enabled themselves to carve out a niche for themselves.