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History of Tea Gardens in Assam: Prospects and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The history of tea gardens in Assam is closely connected with the economic, social, political and environmental transformation of the region. Although indigenous communities in Upper Assam were familiar with tea plants before the emergence of the modern plantation industry, the commercial development of tea began during the nineteenth century under British colonial rule. The discovery and recognition of indigenous tea varieties in the 1820s, followed by experimental cultivation and the establishment of commercial plantations, transformed Assam into one of the world's major tea-producing regions. The establishment of the Assam Company in 1839 and the expansion of plantation agriculture created a new export-oriented economy, but this development was accompanied by the recruitment and settlement of migrant labour under highly restrictive and exploitative conditions. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth Century's, tea had become one of the most important commercial industries in Assam. Immediately, after Independence, the tea industry continued to occupy a central position in Assam's economy. The establishment of the Tea Board under the Tea Act, 1953 provided an institutional framework for regulation, research, marketing and development. The industry subsequently underwent technological change, including the introduction of the Crush, Tear and Curl (CTC)

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method, expansion of small tea growers, modernization of processing, and integration with domestic and international markets. In recent decades, however, Assam's tea gardens have faced serious challenges, including climate change, fluctuating prices, rising production costs, labour and welfare concerns, ageing tea bushes, land-use pressures, declining productivity in some areas, and competition in international markets. At the same time, the sector possesses considerable opportunities through premium and specialty teas, geographical indication protection, value addition, tea tourism, mechanization, digital marketing, climate-smart cultivation, and stronger participation of small growers. This article tries its best to examine the historical evolution of Assam's tea gardens and evaluates their contemporary prospects and challenges. It argues that the long-term sustainability of Assam's tea industry will depend not merely on increasing production but on improving productivity, labour welfare, environmental resilience, product quality, value realization and institutional support.

1. Introduction

Assam is rich in cultivation of tea across the country and it occupies a distinctive place in the history of the global tea industry. The landscape of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys is strongly associated with extensive tea gardens, especially in upper Assam plenty of tea is being producing year after year, tea workers, processing factories and the commercial networks that connect the region with markets throughout India and the world. Tea is not merely an agricultural commodity in Assam; it has become an important part of the state's economic history, cultural identity and social structure.

The advent of the modern tea industry in Assam dates principally to the nineteenth century. The region possessed naturally occurring tea plants, particularly in Upper Assam, and knowledge of tea was present among communities such as the Singphos and Khamtis. The colonial state gradually recognized the commercial possibilities of these indigenous plants. Tea Board India records 1823 as a landmark year in the discovery and official recognition of tea plants growing in the forests around Sadiya. By 1837 an English tea garden had been established at Chabua, while commercial production by the Assam Tea Company began in the early 1840s. by Tea Board of India.

The gradual improvement of the tea industry fundamentally altered the economy of Assam. Large areas were brought under plantation agriculture, European capital entered the region, transport and communication networks expanded, and an extensive plantation labour force was created. At the same time, the history of Assam's tea gardens cannot be understood only as a story of economic success. Colonial plantation development involved land acquisition, labour migration, strict labour discipline and unequal economic relationships. Scholars have documented the coercive features of the indenture labour system through which large numbers of workers were recruited for the plantations. Cambridge University Press+1

Presently, Assam remains one of India's principal tea-producing regions. Yet the industry is undergoing significant structural change. The expansion of small tea growers, climate variability, changing consumer preferences, technological developments and pressure on plantation profitability are reshaping the sector. The central question is therefore not simply how much tea Assam can produce, but how its tea economy can remain economically viable, socially just and environmentally sustainable.

Historical Background of Tea Garden in Assam

Preliminary Knowledge and the Discovery of Assam Tea

The history of tea garden in Assam predates the establishment of European plantations. Indigenous communities in the region were familiar with locally occurring tea plants and used them in traditional ways. The recognition of these plants by colonial officials provided the basis for subsequent commercial experimentation.

Robert Bruce, a British officer associated with the East India Company, is generally credited with bringing the existence of indigenous tea plants in the Sadiya region to official attention in 1823. Later investigations demonstrated that the tea plant growing in Assam was suitable for commercial cultivation. The discovery was historically important because it challenged the earlier dependence of the British tea trade upon Chinese sources and opened the possibility of developing a large-scale tea industry within British India. Tea Board of India

The colonial government subsequently undertook experiments in cultivation and manufacture. Chinese tea experts were brought to Assam to assist with processing techniques, while indigenous plants were cultivated on an experimental basis. The knowledge developed through these experiments eventually led to the establishment of organized commercial plantations.

Initiative taken for the Plantation Industry

The 1830s and 1840s marked the decisive transition from experimental cultivation to commercial plantation agriculture. The first English tea garden was established at Chabua in Upper Assam in 1837, and the Assam Company was established in 1839. Commercial production expanded rapidly thereafter. Tea Board of India

The Assam Company was particularly significant because it represented one of the earliest major attempts to organize tea production through private British capital in Assam. Tea plantations subsequently spread across districts and areas such as Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat and later other parts of the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley.

The environmental characteristics of Assam encouraged this expansion. The region's warm and humid climate, heavy rainfall, fertile alluvial soils and relatively low elevation provided favourable conditions for tea cultivation. Assam tea became known internationally for its strong liquor, brisk character and distinctive malty flavour.

Expansion of Industry under Colonial Rule

During the second half of the nineteenth century, tea plantations expanded dramatically. Tea became an important export commodity, and Assam emerged as a major centre of British commercial investment. According to historian Rana P. Behal, tea production in the Assam Valley increased from about 6 million pounds in 1872 to 75 million pounds in 1900, while the area under cultivation expanded from approximately 27,000 acres to 204,000 acres. Plantation employment also increased substantially. Cambridge University Press+1

This expansion created a distinctive plantation economy. Tea gardens required large numbers of workers for land clearing, planting, weeding, pruning and especially leaf plucking. Since the local population was not sufficient or not readily available for the labour regime desired by plantation owners, workers were recruited from other parts of India.

The recruitment system developed into a form of indentured labour. Workers were transported over long distances and were subject to contractual and institutional restrictions. Historical research demonstrates that labour discipline was central to the functioning of the plantation system and that physical and economic coercion were used in different forms. Cambridge University Press

The tea industry consequently produced a complex demographic transformation in Assam. Plantation communities developed their own social institutions, languages, cultural practices and identities.

The descendants of plantation workers constitute an important component of Assam's contemporary social landscape.

Tea and Colonial Economic growth.

The tea garden represented a distinctive form of colonial economic organization. Land, labour, capital and technology were brought together to produce a commodity primarily intended for commercial markets. British companies controlled substantial plantation areas, while European managers exercised considerable authority over plantation workers.

The expansion of the tea industry also stimulated the development of infrastructure. Roads, river transport, railways, warehouses and processing facilities were increasingly connected to tea-producing areas. These developments facilitated the movement of tea from plantations to ports and international markets.

However, the economic benefits of plantation expansion were unevenly distributed. Colonial tea production generated considerable wealth for investors and contributed to the commercial development of Assam, but plantation workers often experienced low wages, restricted mobility and inadequate living conditions. The history of tea therefore combines economic modernization with a history of labour exploitation and resistance. Cambridge University Press+1

The growth of Tea Gardens after Independence

Indian Independence in 1947 did not diminish the importance of Assam's tea industry. Instead, the industry gradually entered a new institutional and technological phase. One of the most important developments was the establishment of the Tea Board under the Tea Act, 1953. The present Tea Board began functioning on 1 April 1954, with responsibilities relating to the development, regulation, research, quality control, marketing and export of Indian tea. Tea Board of India+1

A major technological development was the spread of the Crush, Tear and Curl, or CTC, method. Tea Board India notes that William McKercher, associated with Amgoorie Tea Company, developed the CTC machine at Borbam Tea Estate in Sivasagar in 1931. The technology subsequently transformed tea manufacture and became particularly important for the production of strong black tea suitable for the Indian mass market. Tea Board of India

The post-Independence period also witnessed diversification of ownership and greater participation of Indian entrepreneurs. Over time, the emergence of small tea growers became an important structural

change. Whereas the traditional industry was dominated by large estates, increasing numbers of small farmers began cultivating tea and supplying green leaves to processing factories.

This transformation has become particularly important in recent decades. Tea Board India's 2024–25 Annual Report records 249,318 enumerated small tea growers nationally as of 31 March 2025 and states that small growers accounted for 54.55% of India's tea production in 2024–25. Tea Board of India

Economic and Socio-cultural Importance of Assam's Tea Gardens

Tea remains one of Assam's most important economic activities. It provides direct and indirect employment, supports transport and processing networks, generates state and national revenues, and contributes to India's export earnings.

The industry is particularly significant because it supports an extensive rural economy. Tea gardens require workers not only for plucking but also for pruning, field maintenance, factory operations, transport, administration and other activities. In addition, tea-related businesses include packaging, auctioning, warehousing, trading and retailing.

The social importance of tea gardens is equally substantial. Plantation settlements have developed schools, health facilities, community institutions and cultural networks. The Government of Assam notes that plantation workers fall within the framework of plantation labour legislation, under which provisions concern housing, medical facilities, drinking water, sanitation, education, canteens and other welfare measures. Labour Assam

Nevertheless, the social conditions of tea workers remain a major concern. The economic viability of plantations, wage levels, housing quality, healthcare, education and opportunities for younger generations continue to influence the future of plantation communities. Thus, the sustainability of Assam's tea industry is inseparable from the well-being of its workers.

Major Challenges faced by Assam's Tea Industry

- **Climate Change and Environmental disparity**

Climate change is emerging as one of the most serious long-term threats to Assam's tea industry. Tea is highly sensitive to temperature, rainfall patterns, humidity and soil moisture. Research based on tea gardens in Assam has found that warmer monthly average temperatures are associated with declining tea

yields, particularly when temperatures exceed critical thresholds. Variability and intensity of precipitation can also negatively affect on productivity.

The problem is not simply a rise in average temperature. Irregular rainfall, prolonged dry periods, excessive rainfall, floods and changes in seasonal patterns can disrupt both plant growth and harvesting. Assam's vulnerability is heightened by the region's exposure to floods and erosion.

Climate change also affects workers. Higher temperatures and heat waves can increase the physical risks faced by people engaged in outdoor plucking and field operations. Climate adaptation must therefore address both agricultural productivity and labour welfare.

- **Labour and different Welfare Issues**

Labour remains the foundation of plantation tea production. Historically, plantation labour was characterized by highly unequal power relations. Although the legal and institutional framework has changed substantially since the colonial period, concerns relating to wages, housing, healthcare, sanitation, education and social security remain important.

The Government of Assam identifies provisions relating to medical facilities, housing, education, sanitation, maternity and sickness benefits and working hours under plantation labour legislation. Labour Assam

Implementation, however, is as important as legislation. Plantation communities need sustained investment in health, education, housing and livelihood diversification. Younger generations increasingly seek opportunities outside traditional plantation employment, creating concerns about the future availability of skilled and experienced workers.

- **Increasing Production Costs**

Tea production involves substantial expenditure on labour, fertilizers, pesticides, energy, machinery, irrigation, transportation and factory operations. Inflation and rising input costs can reduce profit margins when tea prices do not increase proportionately.

Large estates can sometimes absorb technological and infrastructural investments more easily than small producers. Small growers, in particular, may face difficulties in accessing credit, quality planting material, technical advice and modern processing facilities.

- **Price Volatility and Market Competition**

Tea is traded through auctions, direct contracts and other marketing channels. Prices can fluctuate according to domestic demand, international supply, quality, weather conditions, production levels and global competition.

Price realization is particularly important because higher physical production does not necessarily mean higher income for growers. The Tea Board has introduced various measures aimed at improving marketing and price realization. For example, its 2024–25 Annual Report records a pilot initiative concerning dust tea sales in which average prices improved during the period covered by the experiment. Tea Board of India

The challenge is to ensure that higher-value segments of the market generate greater returns for producers rather than merely increasing volumes.

- **Ageing Tea Bushes and Productivity**

Many established tea estates contain sections of ageing bushes. Older bushes can become less productive and may require replanting or rejuvenation. Replanting involves significant costs and temporarily reduces production.

Productivity improvement therefore requires long-term investment rather than short-term responses to market fluctuations. Better planting material, soil management, irrigation, drainage, pruning, integrated pest management and mechanization can contribute to improved productivity.

- **Small Tea Growers**

The rapid expansion of small tea growers represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Smallholders have democratized tea cultivation by allowing individual farmers and rural households to participate in the industry. However, many small growers remain dependent on bought-leaf factories or intermediaries for processing and marketing.

Tea Board programmes have encouraged the formation of self-help groups, farmer organizations and producer organizations, as well as collective input procurement, leaf collection and eventual movement into processing and value addition. Tea Board of India Strengthening such institutions can improve bargaining power and reduce transaction costs.

Prospects for the Future of tea Industries

- **Premium and Specialty Tea**

Assam has an internationally recognized identity. Its geographical characteristics provide an opportunity to market premium orthodox tea, specialty teas, single-estate teas and other high-value products.

The Assam Orthodox tea geographical indication provides a mechanism for distinguishing qualifying products associated with the region. Intellectual Property India records Assam Orthodox as a registered geographical indication administered through the Tea Board. Intellectual Property India

Greater emphasis on quality, traceability and origin-based branding could help Assam move beyond dependence on high-volume commodity tea.

- **Value Addition**

The future of the industry should include greater value addition rather than simply increasing bulk production. Packaged tea, specialty blends, premium loose-leaf tea, organic products, ready-to-drink beverages and tea-based consumer products can create additional market opportunities.

Digital marketing and direct-to-consumer sales can also reduce dependence on traditional supply chains. Estate brands can use online platforms to communicate the story, origin and production practices behind individual teas.

- **Climate-Smart Tea Cultivation**

Climate adaptation should become a central component of future tea policy. Research suggests that interventions capable of reducing tea plantations' sensitivity to warming and precipitation variability can provide both immediate productivity benefits and longer-term adaptation benefits.

Potential measures include improved drainage, rainwater harvesting, irrigation, soil-moisture conservation, shade management, drought-tolerant planting material, agroforestry and improved weather forecasting.

Climate-smart production should also promote biodiversity. Maintaining shade trees, protecting soil organisms, reducing unnecessary chemical inputs and conserving water can improve the ecological resilience of tea landscapes.

- **Mechanization**

Labour-intensive plucking is becoming increasingly difficult because of rising labour costs and changing workforce structures. Mechanization can reduce some production costs and address labour

shortages, although it must be introduced carefully because mechanized harvesting may influence leaf quality.

Tea Board development programmes have included support for equipment such as pruning machines, mechanical harvesters, power sprayers and other field machinery. Tea Board of India

A balanced model combining skilled manual plucking with selective mechanization may be more appropriate than complete mechanization.

- **Tea Tourism and its importance**

Tea tourism represents another promising avenue. Assam's tea gardens possess considerable scenic, historical and cultural value. Visitors can experience plantations, tea factories, colonial-era buildings, local communities and tea-making processes.

Tea tourism can diversify plantation income and create employment in hospitality, transportation, handicrafts and cultural services. However, tourism should be developed responsibly so that local communities and workers receive meaningful benefits.

Research, Resource Mobilization, Skill Development and Innovation

Research institutions and the Tea Board have an important role in developing climate-resilient varieties, improving pest management, enhancing processing technologies and strengthening quality control.

Skill development is equally important. Future tea workers and managers will require knowledge of digital technologies, precision agriculture, machinery, environmental management, food safety and international quality standards.

Measures for Sustainable Development

A sustainable future for Assam's tea gardens requires coordination between government, plantation companies, small growers, workers, research institutions and consumers.

First, climate adaptation should be integrated into plantation planning. Second, labour welfare should be treated as a productive investment rather than merely a regulatory obligation. Healthy, educated and secure workers are essential to the industry's future.

Third, small growers should receive stronger institutional support through producer organizations, affordable credit, extension services and access to processing facilities. Fourth, quality-based marketing should be strengthened so that Assam's unique identity generates greater value.

Fifth, replanting and rejuvenation programmes should receive sustained financial support. Sixth, tea gardens should adopt environmentally responsible cultivation practices, particularly in relation to soil, water, pesticides and biodiversity.

Finally, the historical and cultural heritage of Assam's tea gardens should be documented and preserved. The tea industry is not simply an agricultural enterprise; it represents nearly two centuries of economic and social transformation.

Conclusion

The history of tea gardens in Assam is a history of discovery, colonial enterprise, migration, labour, technological innovation and economic transformation. Indigenous knowledge of tea plants provided an important foundation, but the modern commercial industry emerged through nineteenth-century colonial investment and plantation development. The expansion of tea transformed Assam's economy and landscape while simultaneously producing complex social relationships and Slarge plantation and labour community.

After Independence, institutional development under the Tea Act, technological innovations such as CTC processing, expansion of Indian ownership and the rise of small tea growers reshaped the industry. Assam continues to possess major advantages: a globally recognized tea identity, suitable agro-climatic conditions, established infrastructure, skilled workers, a large domestic market and opportunities for premium products.

The prospects of Assam's tea gardens are therefore closely linked to the ability of stakeholders to balance economic efficiency with social and environmental responsibility. If innovation, institutional support and human welfare are placed at the centre of development, Assam's tea industry can continue to remain an important component of the state's economy while preserving the historical legacy that has made Assam synonymous with tea.

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