



## Voices from the plantations: Folk songs as narratives of the tea plantation workers' migration in colonial Assam

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### Abstract

The tea workers, who mainly brought from economically distressed regions of Chotanagpur, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar and Central India under the cohesive recruitment system during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, have a rich tradition of folk songs that preserve their migration history to Assam's plantations. It is noteworthy that the migration history of Assam's tea workers cannot be fully understood only through the archival and official records. In fact, folk songs offer an alternative oral source, which reveals everyday experiences of the tea plantation workers in the plantation environment of Assam. These folk songs of tea workers narrate their migration journey from the native land to Assam and their economic hardship within the colonial plantation system. Methodologically, this study seeks to reconstruct the history of tea workers' migration - focusing on recruitment of workers, collective sufferings of workers and labour life on plantations.

**Keywords:** Folk songs, migration journey, plantation environment, tea plantation workers, tea estates

### Introduction

"Those in power write the history, while those who suffer write the songs"- Frank Harte

Frank Harte is an Irish singer and music expert. He believes that tribal songs are unwritten history. These songs introduce the daily life and history of ordinary people. Songs are passed down orally from one person to another or from one generation to another. Over time, the composers of these songs become unknown, but they are still a clear picture of the history of the lower classes. These songs are very popular in Assam. The peoples of the hills and plains here are the keepers of these folk songs. The songs are priest of happiness and sorrow, festivals, men and women, etc. However, the rhythm and cadence vary from place to place. The tea tribes of upper Assam are also patrons of these songs. Their songs, which have been in use since before they came to Assam to work in the tea plantations, are a clear means of looking back at the past. It is interesting to note that migration and folk songs are closely linked that reflects the movement of people from place to place. In fact, folk songs have been also influenced by journey of migration, with communities telling their forgotten stories and lure of new destination. Therefore, the main aim of this research paper is to understand how folk songs of the tea garden society of Assam narrate the experience of their migration. In fact, folk songs are the best way of expressing self-identified experiences of the tea garden migrant labourers. The paper also contains a brief discussion on their cultural life in the subsequent period.

### Review of Literature

Although several literary studies have been done on tea plantation workers, only a few works highlight the importance of folk songs among the tea plantation workers. However, the present review of literature section discusses significance literary sources related to tea workers' socio-culture and folk traditions. Griffiths (1967) <sup>[6]</sup> traces a detailed account of the origin and development of tea industry in India. However, Behal (2014) <sup>[2]</sup> critically

examines the migration, coercive nature of workers' mobility and economic transformation of tea capitalism. Renowned social historian, Amalendu Guha (1977) <sup>[7]</sup> presents a comprehensive history of Assam during the colonial period from a Marxist perspective. His work explores many information related to the tea industry of Assam, including the migration of tea workers to Assam, protests and strikes of tea workers during the colonial days. Similarly, Sharma (2011) <sup>[13]</sup> narrates the process of tea workers' migration and tea culture in Assam.

However, Sarma and Thakur (2025) <sup>[14]</sup> describe the emotional and lived experiences of indentured tea garden laborers in Assam, emphasizing on overlooked oral traditions like Jhumur Geet, Damkas Geet and Tusu Geet. Daimary (2016) describes various facets of folklore of tea garden workers in Barak Valley. Similarly, Adhikari (2015) <sup>[1]</sup> highlights various aspect of the tea workers, such as cultural traditions, social rituals and customs and folk traditions of the tea workers.

Despite these important works on the tea workers, most of these studies treat folk songs of the tea plantation society only as a peripheral cultural element, but do not examine them as an alternative historical source. This work, therefore, seeks to address the significance of the tea plantation workers' folk song as an oral source for understanding their migratory history into Assam's tea gardens.

### Objectives of the Study

By moving beyond the constraints of the colonial documents and archival labour reports, the main objective of this study is to critically examine the importance of the folk songs passed down among the tea plantation workers in reconstructing their migration history. Similarly, it also seeks to draw attention to the rise of the tea industry in Assam, recruitment process of the migrant workers and poor living conditions of the tea gardens as shown in the folk songs.

## Methodology

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of information and adopts a historical and analytical approach in order to understand the migration history of the tea plantation workers of Assam. Primary data were collected through the field study conducted among the tea workers inhabiting in the Barbaruah Tea Estate in the Dibrugarh district of Upper Assam. Some primary data also collected from the colonial records. Secondary sources were collected from books, articles, theses, dissertation and newspapers relating to the tea plantation workers of Assam.

## Discussion

Assam is known for its tea cultivation, often called as ‘the green gold’ because of its economic significance in the global market. In fact, after China, India possesses the largest area under tea cultivation and is also the third largest exporter of tea in the world (Singh, 2022, p.166). It is noted that the tea cultivation was commercially began under the British colonial regime. After the treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the British East India Company and later the colonial government took control of Assam province. Soon after, Assam was recognized as a potential land for tea cultivation. But the history of tea cultivation is much older than British colonial intervention. In 1815, Colonel Latter, a British military officer of the British East India Company noticed for the first time the tea drinking among Singphos (Kalita, 2024; Kalita *et al.*, 2026; Saikia, 2014) [8, 11]. The Singphoo tribe prepared and consumed tea, traditionally known as ‘Phalap’.

In this regard, Sharma also noted, “...in Assam, evidence of pre-modern tea use comes from the Singpho and Khamti tribes, pre literate groups who lived in the forested areas of Upper Assam.” (Sharma, 2011, p.30) [13]. This evidence shows that native tribes of Assam had been using tea long before the British arrived. Subsequently, C.A. Bruce, the brother of Robert Bruce, became actively engaged after learning about the existence of wild tea plants in Upper Assam. Later, C.A. Bruce asserted that he was among the first European to discover the wild tea plants at Sadiya of Upper Assam. In the course of his journey, he collected wild tea specimens from a Singpho Chief Beesa Gaum, which later handed over to Mr. Scott, who then cultivated these tea specimens in his own garden (Behal, 2014; Chakravorty, 1997; Kalita *et al.*, 2026) [2, 3, 11].

In order to expand the tea plantations, both British Government and European capitalists soon began acquiring the lands in Assam. In 1838, the British government enacted the Wasteland Grant Rules, which gave the Assam Tea Company about 33,665 acres of land to open the tea gardens. After acquiring vast tracts of land for the expansion of the tea estates, the British Government encountered a severe shortage of workforce on tea plantations of Assam. In the beginning phase of the tea industry, the British Government faced considerable difficulties in employing the native people of Assam to work in the tea gardens. The native people of Assam were not accustomed to wage labour and were able to make a living by farming their own land. So, the British government decided to import the workers from various parts of India as the demand for the tea plantations in Assam could not meet by the native workers. The British government brought the workers from present-day Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and

West Bengal (Adhikari, 2015; Nath, 2016; Kalita, 2018; Kalita *et al.*, 2024) [1, 8, 9, 12]. Famous author Percival Griffiths (1967) [6] describes the circumstances when the plantation workers were brought to Assam by boat as follows:

In 1841, the Assam Company attempted to import labour from Choto Nagpur. An outbreak of Cholera proved disastrous and none of the recruit reached company garden. (Griffiths, 1967, p.39) [6]

The Assam Company started bringing in laborers from outside Assam from the beginning. However, almost all the migrant workers died on the way due to the lack of humanitarian sincerity of the company in the ways and arrangements of bringing them. One of the main reasons for this was the unhealthy environment in the company's transportation system which led to the rapid spread of epidemics like cholera among the migrant workers (Nath, 2016) [12]. We learn the truth of such pain and suffering through the songs that were passed down from their mouths. The folk songs prevalent among them clearly highlight the painful days during their long journey into Assam. Since the workers or migrants were financially and mentally weakened by epidemics, famines, floods, zamindars and British exploitation in their native land, the British recruiters or brokers were able to bring them to Assam with many inducements. In fact, during the course of field work, a tea worker named Doya Karmakar rendered two folk songs, which describe the difficulties faced by tea workers in their native places as follows:

Purab Sey Aayil Baan  
Liye Gel Khetor Dhaan  
Aaire Bosey Bhabsey Kishan  
Zamidarke Ki Dibo Jaban

**Meaning of the song:** The floods from the east destroyed all the paddy in the fields. What will the peasant now answer or how will he tell the zamindar.

Edese Rohite Nari Khaite Boro Dukhgo  
Purab Deshe Jaya Dekho Gachher Patay Takago  
Haire Hai...

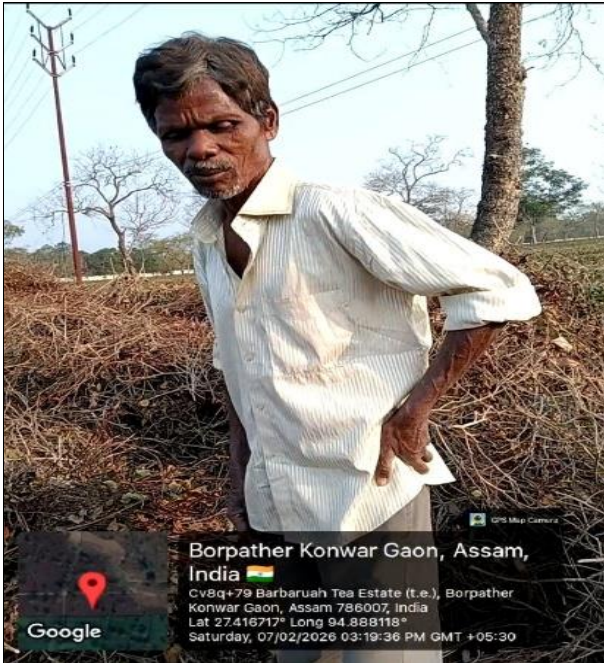


**Fig 1:** Doya Karmakar and his family while discussing the folk songs at Barbaruah Tea Estate

**Meaning of the song:** We can't live in this country anymore. We have to work hard to eat. But if we go east, we will find treasure in the leaves of the trees.

Another tea workers named Sutu Saita Karmakar also sang a famous folk song prevalent among the tea workers as follows:

Chal Mini Assam Jabo  
Deshe Boro Dukh Rey  
Assam Deshe Rey Mini  
Cha Bagan khulibo  
Sobai Mile Gamcha Bichaye Bhat Khabo

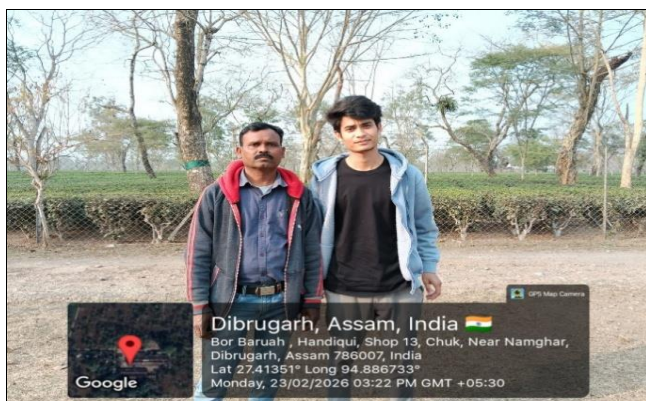


**Fig 2:** Sutua Saita Karmakar describing the folk songs and dance at Barbaruah Tea Estate

**Meaning of the song:** Let's go to Assam, my friend. It is very difficult to stay here. We shall open tea plantation there. And we all sit on the gamocha and eat rice.

Through many of these songs, we can learn about the natural, social and personal aspects that migrants or workers experience in their local places. It is also a clear picture of the concocted impression given to the tea workers by the brokers or British recruiters towards the tea plantations of Assam. The workers on tea plantations were recruited in two ways. (1) Contractual system/ Arkattis and (2) Sardari system (Kalita, 2018; Kalita, 2022) <sup>[9, 10]</sup>. Many workers died on the way during this difficult and painful journey. Some lose their fathers and some lose their sons. Many workers tried to escape but some were caught and forced to work again (Choudhury, 1989) <sup>[4]</sup>. Sankar Rajwar (Barbaruah Tea Estate) also expressed the pain of the forefathers' migration journey to Assam by singing folk song as follows:

Nana Morlek Nadir Majhe  
Nani Morlek Ghatey  
Bapkey Dil Police Thanai  
Bhagai Jabar Doshe



**Fig 3:** Sankar Rajwar a worker of Barbaruah Tea Estate explaining about the migration of his forefather.

**Meaning of the song:** Their uncle died in the middle of the river and their grandmother died when they reached the shore. The police put his father in the police station because he wanted to escape.

Dhani Ram Karmakar and Ananda Karmakar also sang two folk songs:

Paka Khatay Likhaeli Naam  
Re Lampatiya Shyam  
Fhanki Diye Chalali Assam  
Dipughare Mari Tari  
Uthaile Terene Kari  
Hoogly Sahare Dekhali Akash

**Meaning of the song:** Our names were written in the official records and brought to Assam. God, you didn't do it right with us. We were cheated and brought to Assam and beaten up on arrival. Then we were taken by train to Hoogly, where we saw the sky for the first time.

Ki Bolibo Britisher Kotha,  
Bolile Go Laagey Betha,  
Majdur Chalan Korile Assamey  
Railgari Chale Ghane Ghane

**Meaning of the song:** There is nothing wrong with the British. They frequently drove trains and invoiced the workers to Assam.

The folk songs mentioned above are substantiated by literary and historical data, but face-to-face conversations and direct practice give them a new dimension. When these folk songs were discussed with some focus groups of the tea community during the Field Survey, they explained the meaning of these songs and how their ancestors were driven to Assam by the British. Sohagi Karmakar, an elderly woman, mentions in an interview how her father was brought to Assam by the British from Ranchi, Jharkhand. And she heard the reasons why their ancestors migrated to Assam. Many tribal people migrated to Assam for working in the tea estates due to severe economic hardships and the oppressive practices of the zamindars. Furthermore, the new land system and taxes imposed by the British government on the poor farmers in the 19th century oppressed the poor farmers. These circumstances compelled many tribal or indigenous people to migrate in search of employment and better livelihood. Later, when these migrant workers came to Assam's plantations, they encountered a working environment completely different from what they had been led to expect; so, they were very disappointed. The workers were forcibly captured and forced to work hard on the tea plantations under the British plantation regime. The British administration did not provide any sanitation and proper medical treatment (Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021) <sup>[15]</sup>. These plights are expressed by the people working in the gardens through songs as follows:

Sardar Bole Kam Kam  
Babu Bole Dhore Aan  
Saheb Bole Libo Pither Saam,  
Hey Nisthur Shyam Faki Diye Aanilo Assam  
Adha Kame Pare Pura Dam, Hey Nisthur Shyam  
Faki Diye Anilo Assam.



**Fig 4:** Sohagi Karmakar also mention about stories of their migration.

**Meaning of the song:** The chief only talks about working life of the workers. Babu says catch those who don't work. And the sahib says if you don't work, I will tear the skin off your backs. O cruel God, you brought us to Assam by cheating us so much. They say they will pay the full price for half the work and now we work all day breaking bones. An eighty-six years old lady from the tea garden community of Barbaruah Tea Estate also rendered these folk songs by remembering the tragedies she heard from her parents as follow:

Asam Desher Chitla Mati,  
Pichole Poriche,  
O' Hai! Thaaiche Thaaiche,  
Kaile Marishein Shyala (Sahab),  
Aijole Dukhache

**Meaning of the song:** We have slipped again and again on the slippery soil of Assam. There is also the pain that the sahib beaten yesterday.

### Conclusion

A common character of migration, labour control and production that occurred in different parts of the world has greatly contributed to the modernization and industrialization of society. The migration of labourers during the British colonial period marked the beginning of a modern economic system, particularly the emergence of the tea industry.

The early phases of this migration experience are vividly reflected in the folk songs prevalent among the tea workers. These songs reveal the pain of displacement, sense of distance and emotional experiences of the migrant tea workers. The tea community, who transformed from migrants into a distinct ethnic group, represent Assam's cultural evolution and social transformation. In the course of the time, they have gradually assimilated to the mainstream culture of Assam, which can also be understood through their folk songs.

### Funding

The author(s) gratefully acknowledge the funding support provided by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, for the minor research project titled "Migration, Cultural Practice, and Identity Construction: Exploring the Folk Songs of the Tea Plantation Workers of Upper Assam as a Source of Oral History" (File No. 112/2024-25/ICSSR/RP/MN/GEN)

### Acknowledgement

The authors express their sincere gratitude to all the participants for their active involvement and valuable responses to the questionnaire. The authors also gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) for carrying out this study.

### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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