

Origin, discovery of tea, wild tea and early development of tea in Assam, indigenous tea and tea drinking habit among the tribes in Assam of India

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ABSTRACT

Tea is the most popular beverage in the world and its consumption is next only to water. The scientific findings on its health beneficial properties and as a drink of general wellbeing are contributing to make it even more popular and accepted as a beverage of goodness and for a healthy life style. Tea drinking originated in China about 5,000 years ago and gradually the world took to drinking tea. India is a major producer of tea in the world and the State of Assam is the largest tea growing belt in the world. Tea was discovered growing wild in Assam by the British in early 1800. The local population of Assam, some of the tribal people, were in the habit of drinking tea in their indigenous method of preparation. The practice is still continuing. Subsequent tea cultivation in Assam has made it a major agro-industry of the state and the finest liquoring quality of black tea in the world are produced here and consumed all over the world. Tea drinking has rather been gaining further acceptance now due to its natural health benefiting properties. The heritage drink has withstood the test of time and it may well be the drink of the future. The journey of the beverage through the passage of time has been glorious and fascinating. The origin of tea in China, myths associated with it, spread across the world, perceptions, culture and habits, discovery in wild forests of Assam, and tea drinking habit of the tribes of the state are all amazing like the mystic brew itself.

Key words: Assam, Discovery, Drinking, Indigenous, Tribe.

ORIGIN OF TEA

Tea drinking originated in China about 5,000 years ago and was cultivated in South-East China at first. The word “tea” is derived from “t’e” of the Chinese Fukian dialect. In Cantonese, tea is known as “Cha”. The origin of tea is obscured by a maze of legends. One legend associates the origin of tea with Daruma (Bodhidharma) who founded Ch’an School of Buddhism in China. While meditating for years, Daruma fell asleep. When he woke up, infuriated at his sleepiness, he cut off his offending eye lids, threw them away and tea plants grew where they fell on the earth. Thus, tea drives away sleepiness.¹ Interestingly, it might have a connection to the East as Bodhidharma, considered to be father of Zen Buddhism, was a Brahmin prince from the south of India who travelled to China and spent many years teaching his approach to Buddhism, the path of the void. However, the Taoist monks were meditating and drinking tea for centuries before him. The fusion of both gave rise to Cha’n Buddhism which might have come from Sanskrit *dhyāna*. Cha’n became Zen in Japan.²

Another legend associates tea with Shen Nung, a 2737 B.C. Chinese emperor. While on a hunting trip in wild forests, some tea leaves carried by the wind fell into his boiling water pot, and he discovered the properties of the leaves on drinking unknowingly. Shen Nung (2738 BC-unknown), also known as the “Divine farmer”, introduced the beverage prepared from hotpot boiled with tea leaves abundantly found in the forest besides the Hwang-ho River. Since then it has been used as a herb and daily beverage.³

The first authentic reference to tea is found in an ancient Chinese dictionary which was revised about the year 350 A.D. by P' O, a Chinese scholar. Tea leaves were boiled at that time to prepare a medicinal decoction. The first book exclusively on tea was published in 780 A.D. by Lu Yu (733-804), respected as the Sage of Tea. The book "Ch'a Ching" or "The Classic of Tea" in three volumes is divided into ten chapters, each describing for instance, various kinds of tea, cultivation and manufacturing methods and gives information on the tea growing districts of China. Use of tea as a beverage commenced towards the end of the six century in China. Thereafter, tea grew in popularity and the Government levied a duty on tea in 783 A.D. Tea was reported to be a common beverage of China in ninth century by an Arabian traveller who went there.⁴

The habit of tea drinking later spread to Japan in 593 A.D. (approx.) where it gained tremendous popularity and became an integral part of Japanese culture. It is believed that "Tea Ceremony" started in Japan at the close of Heian period in about 1159 A.D. Japanese *Chado* or *Sado* ("way of tea") of *Cha-no-Yu* (hot water tea) is a time honoured institution in Japan, rooted in the principle of Zen Buddhism which is basically founded upon the adoration of beautiful in the daily routine of life. It is an aesthetic way of entertaining guests, where everything is done according to an established order.⁵ Tea drinking spread to other parts of the world only in the middle of seventeenth century. In 1497, opening of a sea route to the East by the Portuguese facilitated large-scale trading between the Europe and the Orient. The Dutch bought tea from Japan and the first consignment of tea in Europe was from the Island of Hirado in 1610 A.D. The Dutch dominated the tea trade to Europe for more than a century and then British emerged as the largest trader. Till the middle of the nineteenth century, China continued to be the main supplier of tea.⁶

Tea had been popular in erstwhile Russia also and they were aware of it way back in 1567. The Empress of Russia inaugurated the overland tea trade from China in 1735. Tea became fashionable and popular as a beverage in Holland and England in mid of 1660s, and it emerged as the most popular beverage in England. Green tea was first used in England in 1715, but black tea had been the popular one in the Europe in those days.⁷ Tea drinking as a beverage spread across the world over the years, and it had developed to be a part of social custom, healthy lifestyle and often a habit.

PLACE OF ORIGIN OF TEA, KINDS OF TEA AND THEIR SPREAD

The place of origin of tea is a matter of speculation and still not fully settled. Though it is widely believed that the place of origin is China, much information is not available and wild tea were not discovered there being in cultivation for more than 2000 years. The situation is different for the Assam and Cambodia races of tea. Since the early part of the nineteenth century, discovery of "wild" plants of these two races were recorded from Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Burma, Thailand and the entire Annamite chain from the extreme north of the gulf of Tonkin to South Vietnam and Laos. However, it could be decisively ascertained if the plants were really wild or relics of migratory tribes inhabiting the region.⁸

While focusing at the origin of tea, the three races of tea are to be understood. The botanical name of tea plant is *Camellia sinensis* (L) O. Kuntze. It has three races, viz. Assam tea plant, *Camellia assamica* (Masters), China tea plant, *Camellia sinensis* L, and *Cambodiensis* or Southern form, *Camellia assamica* sub sp. *Lasiocalyx* (Planch.MS).⁹ Based on morphological characteristics of size and shape of the leaves, these races can be differentiated. India, China and Vietnam are the three countries of the world where the three main cultivated varieties of tea are believed to have originated-Assam in India (Indo-Burma region), China in South China and South Vietnam for *Cambodiensis* or Southern form. It is believed that the three races of tea dispersed to three different areas from its place of origin. According to Wight, tea plant probably originated in the region around the point of intersection of latitude 29° North and longitude 98° East, near the

source of the River Irrawaddy, which is the meeting ground of Assam, North Burma, South-West China and Tibet. The great rivers of South-East Asia flow through this region, Yangtze Kiang, Mekong, Irrawaddy and Luhit dispersed tea to different areas from the place of origin.¹⁰

Kingdom-Ward postulated that tea possibly originated in Central Asia further North of the Irrawaddy basin, as far north as of the 60th parallel or even within the arctic circle or further south in the Altai, or somewhere in Mongolian plateau. According to him, the Assam type is the most widespread type of tea; the China race is the most divergent type while Assam and Cambodia races are far less unlike in appearance. It is possible that China race came from the North by the Pacific seaboard during the glacial shake out and the Assam race took the more direct route from Central Asia to reach the secondary centre near Irrawaddy. If this is so, then the China type had one origin, and the Assam and the Cambodia type together had another common origin. From the secondary centre, the Assam race moved South-East to Indo-China and South-West to Assam.¹¹ As all the three races hybridise freely, it is almost impossible to find any of the three races in pure state even in the terminal areas of their dispersion.¹²

WILD TEA IN ASSAM: EXTENT, DISCOVERIES, LATEST FINDINGS ON WILD TEA AND POSSIBILITIES

The large numbers of tea tracts discovered by Charles Alexander Bruce during 1820s and 1830s were believed to be almost certainly clumps of cultivated tea abandoned by migratory hill tribes, namely the Singphos, Muttocks (presently, the Morans). These tribes usually followed a shifting system of cultivation known as *jhuming*, where they cleared a virgin area and raised crop for a number of years and then abandoned it to move to clear another virgin area for new cultivation. The inhabitants of Northern Burma were known to have used tea as a vegetable (letpet tea) as well as for making a drink out of it.¹³ These tribes with Mongoloid features original inhabitants of Burma migrated to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and also live in Indo-Burma border region of Kachin. According to a description of John M'Cosh on Indian tea (1837), "The tea tree, the identical tea of China, grows as favourable upon the mountains possessed by the dependent hill tribes the Khangtis, Singphos and Muttocks, as in the adjoining provinces of China itself ... tea is the favourite beverage of these tribes and is constantly drunk by them."¹⁴

C.A. Bruce extensively explored the forests of Assam particularly in the country of the Singphos, on the south side of the Brahmaputra, along and down the River Buri Dihing and found wild tea growing there and at other places such as Phakial, Tingri. He made friendship with different tribal chiefs with sweet words and by offering opium and other means to find the places having growth of wild tea. He cleared jungles and made contacts with *gaums* (tribal chiefs) assuring them that they would be taught the method of cultivation and manufacture and that the tea made by them would be bought from them. In 1839, Bruce published a pamphlet which contained a map where he showed the extent of his discoveries of wild tea. He located 80 tea tracts in the Matak Country, 12 in the Singphos and 28 in the west of the Buri Dihing at Namsang, Tipam, Jaipur and in the neighbourhood of the Rangpur (now Sivasagar) and Gabru. He reported that some of the tracts were very extensive, both on the hills and in the plains.^{15, 16}

In 1855, indigenous tea plants were found in the Chandkhani Hills in Sylhet and tea plants were also found growing wild in a number of places along Khasi and Jaintia Hills where they border the Surma Valley.¹⁷ In Assam and the North-East area at present in all the explorations carried out to the original tea areas, hybrids of the three main varieties of tea are found. The real true type original Assam tea variety is yet to be discovered. Wild Assam variety of tea exists even now in remote, inaccessible earlier unexplored areas is being looked into. Recently in December 2012, a team of Tocklai Experimental Station under the leadership of the author of this paper extensively visited the Upper Assam area from Margherita of Tinsukia District to Bordumsa of Arunachal Pradesh with the help of local Singpho guides in search of wild tea and for collection of germplasm. The team was successful in locating many areas with "wild" tea covered with jungle in

the forests. However, whether the plants were wildly grown or remains of earlier cultivated areas of Singpho people could not be ascertained. The areas where such varieties of tea were found included Uloop, Inthem, Dooarmara, Ketetong, Panbari, Bordoomsa (Arunachal Pradesh).¹⁸

The tea plants were found to attain a height of about 20 feet and the local people even collected seeds from those plants and planted in their vicinity and even pruned the naturally grown such plants to bring under commercial cultivation. They mentioned that some of those old plants yielded better than others and were virtually free from pests and diseases. The germplasm were collected from the surveyed areas and collection from Bordumsa area were broad leaf, light coloured Assam type with high pubescence in the buds.¹⁹ The areas with possibility of finding such wild tea in Assam include the border areas of Miao of Arunachal Pradesh, Khonsa and Tirap District of Arunachal Pradesh, and Mon District of Nagaland. Recently, in a major breakthrough, wild tea plants were found for the first time in Ingching Langso and Songlithi Anglong areas of remote dense forest of Sonhlithi hills of Karbi Anglong.²⁰ There has been no earlier record of existence of wild tea plants in that area, or it was unknown to people.

DISCOVERY AND ORIGIN OF TEA PLANTATION IN ASSAM

In 1815, Colonel Latter first reported to have noticed tea drinking habits among the tribes of Assam.²¹ In 1823, tea plant was discovered in Assam when Major Robert Bruce came to know about the existence of wild growing tea in Assam.²² Major Robert Bruce supposedly saw tea plants growing wildly in some hills near Rangpur (present Shivasagar), then the capital of Assam. Major Bruce, an adventurer and trader, went to Upper Assam in search of trade as an agent of the dethroned Ahom King of Assam, Purandar Singha, with the permission of the East India Company. He made an agreement with a Singpho Chief, Beesa Gaum, to supply him with some tea plants and seeds during his next visit in the following year. Assam was then under Burmese occupation and in 1824 war broke out between them. Major Bruce died in 1824 before he could collect the plants. But he must have confided his agreement with the Singpho Chief to his younger brother, Charles Alexander Bruce, before his death.²³ According to Baildon²⁴ and Hannangan²⁵, Major Bruce was informed about the tea plants growing wild in Assam by a local noble man, Maniram Dutta Barua known subsequently as Maniram Dewan as he saw the indigenous plants and he also introduced Bruce to the Singpho Chief.²⁶ Beesa Gaum lived in a Singpho village near Margherita in Upper Assam's Tinsukia District.

Charles Alexander Bruce was midshipman in service of the East India Company. He offered his services to David Scott, agent to the Governor General in Assam, against the Burmese invaders and was sent to Sadiya, Assam, which was near the home of the chief with whom Major Bruce had made the agreement. He collected the promised tea plants and seeds and handed them over to David Scott. Scott planted some of them in his own garden, sent some to the Government of India (Commissioner F. Jenkins at Gauhati) and forwarded the balance to Dr N. Wallich, Botanist to the East India Company and Superintendent of Botanical Garden, Calcutta, with a letter dated 2 June 1825, which stated, "I have the pleasure to forward some leaves and seeds of a plant which the Burmese and Chinese at this place concur in stating to be the wild tea." Dr Wallich identified the leaves and seeds as belonging to *Camellia* family but did not consider them to be of the same species as the tea plant of China.²⁷

In 1831, Lieutenant Charlton, who was serving in Assam, collected some tea plants from Sadiya and sent them to the Agricultural Society, Calcutta, but these plants unfortunately died and failed to secure official recognition from the experts as tea.²⁸ Meanwhile, British trade relation with China became uncertain and considering the importance of tea in English life, they were considering the feasibility of starting tea cultivation in eastern colonies. A Tea Committee was formed in 1834 by Lord William Bentinck, Governor General of India, to advice on possibility of commercial cultivation of tea in India. In a meeting of the Tea Committee in February 1834,

they decided to introduce tea plants from China in the sub-Himalayas and Nilgiris and issued a circular to local officials calling for information on soil and climatic conditions of the areas.²⁹

Captain F. Jenkins, agent to the Governor General for the North-East Frontier, replied informing them that indigenous variety of tea plants were found to be growing “in every part of this hill country; and within our jurisdiction in the Singpho District of Beesa.” Lieutenant Charlton, an Assistant of Jenkins, also wrote that the species found near Beesa may be a spurious or even a *Camellia* and people there had the habit of drinking an infusion of it and hence, introduction of Chinese plants into Upper Assam would be successful.³⁰

Charlton again sent some seeds and leaves of tea trees found in the Upper Assam area to Jenkins and those were sent to Dr. Wallich. However, this time Dr. Wallich and the Committee were at long last convinced. The Committee informed the Revenue Department of the Government that tea growing wild in Assam is genuine tea and identical to that of China. The Committee finally announced to his Lordship in Council on 24 December 1834 that “... the tea shrub is beyond all doubt was the beginning of the journey indigenous in Upper Assam, being found there, through an extent of country of one month’s march within the Honourable Company’s territories, from Suddya and Beesa, to the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf. We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery ... to be by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire.”³¹

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS AND PLANTATION OF TEA IN ASSAM

Before the Tea Committee’s announcement in 1834, Gordon, Secretary to the Tea Committee, was sent to China to secure tea plants and seeds and also to bring some Chinese tea experts to superintend the cultivation and manufacture of tea. In 1835, a scientific panel was constituted with Dr Wallich and others and were sent to Assam to report on indigenous tea and suitable localities for starting experimental tea gardens. In 1836, the team visited several areas but could not agree on the locality for establishing experimental tea garden and also on the use of seeds, that if imported tea seeds from China or locally available seed plants were to be cultivated.³²

The first tea plants grown in Assam to explore the possibility of tea plantation were of Chinese origin. Due to difference of opinion of the experts, all suggested sites were tried and Chinese seeds sent by Gordon were distributed for cultivation in Upper Assam, sub-Himalayan areas of North India and South India. In 1835-1836, 20,000 China seed plants were sent to Assam out of which more than half died on the way due to damage by rats and lack of experience in packing. C.A. Bruce was appointed under Lieutenant Charlton in charge of tea nurseries and the first tea seed nursery was established “at Sadiya, on a *char* near the confluence of the Koondil and Bramahputra rivers” towards the end of 1835. Out of these, tea grew well in sub-Himalayas, but it was Assam where tea grew best. However, the selection of site for nursery at Kundilmukh near Sadiya was a wrong one, as it was a shifting sand bank having only a few inches of alluvial deposit on the top and sandy layer below and Brahmaputra River inundated the area. Due to this, the plants died soon and the nursery was abandoned towards the end of 1836. The surviving plants from Sadiya were replanted at Jaipur. In 1837, a new plantation was established at Chabua which proved successful. This was also planted with China seeds, and from the plants planted earlier, indigenous Assam plants got cross-pollinated naturally and produced hybrid variety found later in great numbers which was subsequently found to deteriorate the quality of Assam plant.³³ Some plants of the re-growths and seeds of the original plantation at Jaipur are still being preserved there.

C.A. Bruce who was promoted as Superintendent later was the pioneer of the tea industry of Assam. In the meantime, he extensively explored the forests of Assam particularly in the country of the Singphos, on the south side of the Brahmaputra, along and down the river Buri Dihing

and found wild tea growing there and at other places such as Phakial and Tingri. He made friendship with different tribal chiefs and cleared jungles and made contracts with the *gaums* (tribal chiefs) with the assurance of teaching them the method of cultivation and manufacture and subsequently buying tea from them. In addition to plantations at Jaipur and Chabua, Bruce setup nurseries at Chota Tingrai and Hukanpukri and he was convinced of its commercial exploitation by 1840. The industry grew steadily and Bruce's tea tracts produced from Assam tea plants and manufactured by the Chinese experts worked by him showed that production in 1838 was 4,220 lb, 5,274 lb in 1839 and it was expected to reach 11,160 lb in 1840.³⁴

The first consignment of a small quantity of tea made in Assam was sent to Calcutta for testing as reported in *Calcutta Courier* on November 21, 1836 that "a small quantity of tea (of green species, from indigenous seed) prepared at Suddya in Assam by the Chinese tea planters brought around by Mr Gordon has arrived in Calcutta" and was "pronounced good". Another specimen sent two months later prepared by the Chinese out of season to teach manufacturing were "considered passable".³⁵

MANUFACTURING AND FIRST AUCTION OF ASSAM TEA

A large sample of indigenous Assam *jat* tea made from Muttock (area between Brahmaputra and Burhi Dihing rivers south of Sadiya) made by the Chinese was sent to the Government of India on December, 1837, and the Governor General was pleased and considered sending a few chests on trial to London. Twelve chests of tea made in Assam which arrived in Calcutta in March 1838 were shipped on board the "*Calcutta*" in May, 1838, to the Court of Directors in London which reached there in November, 1838. The Court of Directors distributed samples extensively and received favourable reports from brokers, dealers, individuals and scientific bodies. Some of the tea varieties were damaged earlier on arrival at Calcutta and eight chests out of them were offered for public sale. These eight chests of Assam tea containing about 350 pounds were the first commercial consignment of Indian tea to be sold. On 10 January 1839, the consignment was sold in the Commercial Sales Room in Mincing Lane, London, by the East India Company. Out of the eight, three were Assam souchong and five of Assam pekoe. Captain Pidding solely purchased the entire importation of Assam tea which generated much competition. The souchong were sold at price of 16 s (shillings) to 21 s per pound and the pekoes at 24 s to 34 s per pound. A further produce of the East India Company was sold in auction in March, 1840, at prices between 8 s and 11 s per pound.³⁶

The first auction sale of tea in India took place in March, 1841, in Calcutta. The tea belonging to East India Company consisted of 35 chests manufactured by a Singpho chief, Ningrula, out of the total 130 chests and rest 95 chests were produced in Government tea plantations in Assam in 1840.³⁷

EARLY COMMERCIAL TEA CULTIVATION IN ASSAM

The highly favourable report of the first auction of Assam tea established the value of the indigenous Assam tea plant and determined the course of tea cultivation throughout the world. The Governors of the East India Company invited private enterprise to undertake tea cultivation in Assam. It was established that tea could be grown in Assam and it fetched high price. Sensing opportunities, a number of enterprising businessmen approached Government in London and Calcutta for transfer of Government plantations to them and to start plantations themselves.

In February, 1839, Bengal Tea Association was formed in Calcutta and a few weeks later another joint stock company, Assam Company, was formed in London for cultivation of tea in Assam and importing the produce to London. The two companies amalgamated as the Assam Company in the same year to become the first private owned tea company to operate in Assam. In March, 1840, most of the plantations of the East India Company except those at Chabuwa and Dinjoy

and two small tea gardens were handed over to Assam Company. It had two headquarters—one at Jaipur and the other at Nazira of Upper Assam. Assam Company emerged as the first successful tea company in the world endeavouring against all odds. In 1840, the area under tea was 2,638 acres and 10,202 lb of tea produced were shipped to London. Initially, the company made losses due to huge vacancies in the garden and high cost of production, but started making profit in 1848. Chabuwa tea plantations were sold to a Chinese in 1849, and resold to James Warren, one of the original syndicate forming the Assam Company. Lt. Colonel Hannay opened a garden near Dibrugarh in 1850-1951, and another one was started by Wagentreiber. Henry Burkinyoung began to plant tea in Numaligarh area in 1851-1852. In 1853, there were three private gardens in Sibsagar District and six in Lakhimpur District.³⁹

George Williamson Senior and his two cousins, George Williamson Junior (in charges of Assam Company) and Captain J.H. Williamson were amongst the pioneers of Assam tea. In 1853, George Williamson Senior who later set up the firm Williamson, Magor & Co, started tea plantations and the three Williamsons began cultivation of tea at Cinnamara area. They produced 45,000 lb tea in 200 acres of land in 1857. The Jorhaut Tea Company was formed in 1859 with central office at Jorhat, Upper Assam with W. Robert as Chairman. It bought Cinnamara, Oating and Kaliabor gardens from Williamsons and Numalighur from Burkinyoung. By 1859, there were 51 private owned tea gardens in Assam-10 in Lakhimpur, 15 in Sibsagar, three in Darrang and the rest in Kamrup and Nagaon districts.⁴⁰ The first tea gardens established in Cachar area of Assam were Bursangon and Gungurpar, planting being done on hilltop and *teelas* (hillocks). Labour was a big constraint in the early years. The tea gardens individually imported labour from Bihar and Chota Nagpur areas through Calcutta contractors initially but from 1859, the labour recruitment was done by the industry collectively. In 1862, the annual production of tea in Assam was 1,250,000 lb. There were 160 gardens under 57 private individuals or private companies and five public companies. The public companies were the Assam Company, the Jorehaut Tea Company, the East India Company, the Lower Assam Tea Company and the Central Assam Tea Company.⁴¹

Maniram Dutta Bar Bhandar Borua Dewan, popularly known as Maniram Dewan, a native of Assam, was the first Indian tea entrepreneur and commercial tea planter, and also a martyr in India's initial freedom struggle against the British rule. Many believe that it was Maniram who in fact informed Robert Bruce existence of wild tea plant in Assam, and might have introduced Beesa Gaum, a chief of Singpho tribe, to Major Bruce. There are many historical references to this claim.^{42,43,44} Maniram started his career as a confidant of the British rulers and helped them in administrative matters in various capacities. He joined the Assam Company as "Dewan" or "land agent" in 1839. However, due to his differences with the British rulers and patriotic nature, he resigned from the Company in 1845. In fact, he started developing a garden in 1842 "possibly with Company's labour and seedlings" and after his resignation in 1845, he concentrated to fully develop two tea estates of his own—one at Cinnamara in south of Jorhat town and the other at Senglung near Sufrai of Sibsagar. Maniram became a successful tea planter and it is in record that in 1853, Cinnamara garden comprised of 270 acres of land which was further increased in the subsequent years by planting young tea and the 200 acres of mature tea produced a crop of 45,000 lb in 1857 which increased to 70,000 lb in 1858. Maniram was hanged in February 1858 on charges of treason as he plotted to bring back the rule of old Ahom monarchy to Assam and both his tea gardens were confiscated along with other properties. Both the tea gardens were purchased by George Williamson which were resold later.⁴⁵

Although Maniram's Cinnamara tea garden is a vibrant one, what happened to the other tea garden at Senglung was not known and was supposed to be abandoned and lost in course of time until recently. The author of this paper along with a team of nearby tea garden executive and garden workers discovered the remnants of the original plantations of Maniram in January,

2014, in Assam Nagaland border on the hills of Abhaipur reserved forest which was a difficult area to reach in the midst of forests. Big plants of 20 to 30 feet in height lay scattered all over the area.^{46,47, 48} It is possible that the original plants might have died due to age and the present plants were natural re-growths from the seeds falling from the original plantation of Maniram. A nearby division of a tea garden, Suffry, is known as Singlo at present which might have come from original Senglung. The execution of Maniram Dewan acted as a setback for Assamese people but towards the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century a number of Assamese pioneers took up tea cultivation. The most prominent among them were Rasheswar Barua, Hemadhar Barua, Rai Bahadur Jagannath Barooah, Krishna Kumar Barooah, Col. Sibram Bora and Sarbananda Barkatoki.⁴⁹

ASSAM-ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD OF TEA

The north-eastern state of India, Assam, popularly called as the “land of the red river and blue hills” is famous all over the world for its tea. The name “Assam” is synonymous with the best liquoring quality black tea in the world. Since its beginning about 180 years back, the tea industry has become part of Assam’s way of life with major contributions in the socio-economic sphere of the state. It is popularly called as “Tea-the-pride-of-Assam” and “Tea-the-green-gold”. In fact, analysis of tea in Assam depicts the socio-economic development of the state of Assam. Tea is the official state drink of the Assam and its recognition as the national drink is awaited, though it is the most popular and highest consumed beverage of India.

The tea growing areas of Assam are traditionally divided into two tea growing areas-Assam Valley and Cachar-due to difference of physiography and quality. Assam has an area of 78,438 sq km which constitutes 2.4% of total geographic area of the country. The mighty River Brahmaputra flows through the breadth of the state. The tea growing areas of the Assam Valley consists of the tea districts of Darrang, Goalpara, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Nowgong (Nagaon), Sibsagar and the hills region of Karbi Anglong and Notrh Cachar Hills districts.⁵⁰ The production of Assam is predominantly (Crush Tear Curl) CTC type along with orthodox and green tea.

The area under tea in Assam is about 10% of the area under tea in the world and 7% of the world production of tea. India produces about 13% of the world tea in an area under tea of 17% of the world. In India, the area under tea and production of Assam has been around 53% to 56% consistently. In 2011-2012, the total production of Assam was 581.26 million kilograms which was about 53% of India’s total tea production and 13% of the world production. The area under tea for the same year was 322.21 thousand hectare out of India’s 579.35 thousand hectare which was about 56% of area under tea in India. The productivity of tea (kg made tea per hectare) of Assam is 1,804 (Assam Valley 1,859) against the all India level of 1,891 (figures correspond to the year 2011-2012). Growth of small tea growers sector since 1978 is a significant development in the tea industry of Assam and also in the socio-economic sphere of the state. According to a recent estimate, there are about 80,000 small tea growers in Assam and the small tea growers of India of about 200,000 contribute about 30% of the country’s production.

TRIBES AND THE ABORIGINALS OF ASSAM

Assam is inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups and anthropologically the population of Assam consists of Negroid, Proto Australoid, Mongoloid, Mediterranean and Nordic races. They migrated to Assam from various parts of the country and the neighbouring countries over the ages. The migration of the Mongoloids continued till seventeenth century and they dominate the population and culture of the state. The Aryans (Nordics) who came much later and influenced art, culture and literature of the state and Assam now is a grand mixture of all of them. Though there are many tribes of Assam anthropologically, the constitution of India recognizes 23 tribes as scheduled tribes further classifying them into hills and plains tribes.⁵¹

Tea drinking is prevalent among the tribes of Assam but it is the Singphos with whom tea drinking is associated traditionally and as a cultural drinking habit since time immemorial. The Singphos of the Mongoloid race migrated to Upper Assam originally from Hookong valley of Burma (present Myanmar).

KINDS OF TEA AND INDIGENOUS TEA OF ASSAM

The tea can be classified into various kinds in many ways and based on the technique used as traditional, handmade or handcrafted and conventional. “Phalap” prepared by the Singphos of Assam, “leppet tea” of the Shan tribes of Burma are the traditional forms of tea. The conventional classification of tea based on manufacturing method is four-black tea, green tea, oolong tea and instant tea. Black tea and green tea are further divided into several types. Handcrafted or handmade tea by the present indigenous population of Assam, almost all of whom are small tea growers of the state, are increasingly becoming popular though small in quantity.

TEA DRINKING HABIT AMONG THE TRIBES OF ASSAM

As early as in 1815, Colonel Latter first reported to have noticed tea drinking habit among the tribes of Assam.⁵² However, though tea drinking is common in socio-religious festivals of various tribes of Assam, it does not form a part of performance of any ritual like offering to God or spirit by the tribes of Assam.⁵³

The role of Singpho tribe in discovery of tea in Assam and early development of tea industry in the state is most significant. The discovery of wild tea in Assam was because of the Singpho tribe, and there are records of their tea drinking habit, knowledge of medicinal properties and indigenous method of preparation. Singpho chief, Beesa Gaum, first showed a wild growing tea plant to Robert Bruce in 1823. Singpho is a tribe who lived “intermixed with the Khamtis, the country watered by the Burhi Dihing, the Noa Dihing and Tengpani, which formerly belonged to the Ahoms”.⁵⁴ According to a description of John M’cosh on Indian tea (1837), “The tea tree, the identical tea of China, grows as favourably upon the mountains possessed by the dependent hill tribes; the Khangtis, Singphos and Muttucks, as in the adjoining provinces of China itself, ... Tea is the favourite beverage of these tribes and is constantly drunk by them.”⁵⁵ It may be mentioned that “phalap” was the word used for describing tea at that time of its discovery in Assam. It is a Singpho word used to describe the tea plant at the time of handing over the seeds to Robert Bruce by the Singpho chief.⁵⁶

A detailed account of tea drinking and method of preparation among the tribes of Assam in the early days is available on William Robinson’s *Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841):⁵⁷

Tea has hitherto been the favourite beverage of these hill tribes in whose vicinity the wild plant has been found. The Singphos have long known and drank the tea, but their mode of preparing is very different from that we have already described. The young and tender leaves are first plucked and dried in the sun; by some they are exposed alternately to the night dews, and the heat of the sun for three successive days; whilst by others they are put into flat hot fans and turned about till quite dry. This done, the leaves are placed in the hollow of a bamboo and driven firmly down by means of a stick, the bamboo being at the same time held in the heat of a fire, when full, the ends of the bamboos are tied up with leaves, and hung up in places where they may be exposed to the smoke of the fire. Thus prepared, the tea is said stay good for years.

In other places, the natives have a different mode of manufacture. Holes are dug in the earth, the sides of which are lined with large leaves. The tea is then boiled, the decoction thrown away, and the leaves themselves are buried in the earth.

This is done with the view of reducing the leaves to a state of fermentation; and when this has been effected, the leaves are put into hollow bamboos, and thus prepared and taken to the market. When intended for use, the leaves are boiled and the infusion is drunk.

The Butias are said to be particularly attached to this beverage. Their supplies are, however, imported overland from Peking. The liquor they drink is extremely unlike what we are used to under the same name. It is a compound of water, flour, butter, salt and bohea tea, with some other astringent ingredients, all boiled, beat up, and intimately blended together.

From the well-known fact of tea being the favourite drink of those tribes in whose vicinity it has been found, as well as from the immense quantity expanded in the adjacent kingdom of Bhutan, it would appear far from chimerical to anticipate a very successful result from the general culture of the plant in Assam, were it with the view of rendering it a staple article of trade with the regions in which it is so extensively consumed, and where from the peculiar mode of preparing it for use, less skill in its culture would be necessary, than in those varieties intended for European market.

Sir Percival Griffiths in *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* also recorded a communication worth quoting of Lieutenant Charlton to Captain Jenkins in 1834 to a circular of Tea Committee calling for information on tea (Jenkins in 1834 became agent to the Governor-General for the North-East Frontier with headquarters at Jorhat and was deputed to report on economic potentialities of Assam).⁵⁸

I have little doubt but that found near Beesa is a species of tea, and though it may be spurious or even a camellia, Dr Wallich suggests, its growing there indigenously and in great abundance affords good grounds for supporting that introduction of the Chinese plants into Upper Assam would be attended with success. I have not had an opportunity of making any experiments on the leaves; they are devoid of smell in their green state, but acquire the fragrance and flavor of Chinese tea when dried. The Singphos and Kampteas are in the habit of drinking an infusion of the leaves, which I have lately understood they prepare by pulling them into small pieces, taking out the stalks and fibres, boiling and squeezing them into a ball, which they dry in the sun and retain for use. I have written to Suddya for a specimen of tea prepared in this manner, and for plants and seeds; I will send you some if I am able to procure them ...

A few months after Tea Committee's acceptance of indigenous tea found in Upper Assam to be genuine tea, on 24th December 1834, Mr. Gordon, Secretary of the Tea Committee, was sent to China to bring tea plants and also select rather than numerous body of planters; men qualified to conduct any operation connected with the production of good tea, from the selection of a proper site for plantation, to the gathering of the leaf, its preparation and packing.⁵⁹

The Chinese experts applied advanced technique of Chinese know-how on manufacturing of tea, and they started manufacturing of tea in Assam from indigenous tea plants of wild tracts of Upper Assam forests. The first dispatch of 20 chests of Assam tea to London in May 1838 for auction was made by the Chinese from Assam jats. The Chinese experts taught the local Assamese people the technique of plants to manufacturing of black and green tea. In the years that followed, kinds of tea made with Chinese technique were despatched to London from Assam, and slowly the habit of drinking black tea grew among the local people.

An analysis of tea drinking habit amongst the various tribes of Assam reveals its regular use in day-to-day life, forming an unavoidable habitual drink of daily life. Most of the tribal people drink tea without adding milk and sugar occasionally to regularly two to three times a day. Tea is found to be not very popular among some tribes – the Deoris, the Hmars, the Karbis, the Mishings; while it is drunk twice to thrice daily by the Barmans of Cachar, the Sonowal Kacharis, the Zeme Nagas, the Khasis, the Dimasa Kacharis and the Lalungs. The Meches though mostly drink tea without milk or sugar; they are not averse towards drinking tea with milk. However, there have been tremendous changes in the lifestyle of the tribal people living in semi-urban or urban areas, who are in the habit of drinking tea regularly two to four times a day with milk and sugar.^{60, 61, 62}

Among the large population of tea garden workers of Assam, drinking tea is a part of their daily life. The practice of offering them the hot brew while working in tea plantation is still continuing. It may also be mentioned that preparation made of tea flowers is also very popular among them.

The present generation of the Singphos has endeavoured to make the original method of tea preparation popular abroad. The concept of making tea coins of organic tea made in that way (a mixture of oolong and green tea) has been used by entrepreneurial descendants of the present Singpho tribe. Such kind of tea and coins made of “phalap” have found buyers in export market.⁶³

The traditionally tea drinking Singpho people are known for their vigour, better health and longevity. There is need for scientific study on the nutritional and therapeutic properties of “phalap” and handmade natural kinds of tea of Assam.

HANDMADE (HANDCRAFTED) TEA OF ASSAM

A study was carried out on the handmade (handcrafted) tea of the small tea growers of Assam. Such tea is all organic though the manufacturers who are small tea growers prefer to name it as natural tea as they do not possess organic tea certification. Such hand rolled tea of indigenous method of preparation are of black and green orthodox type. Although the entrepreneurial manufacturers prefer to call the kind of tea they make as handcrafted, such kinds were found to be hand rolled or processed in local indigenous tools and any special handcrafting was yet to be fully developed. However, out of a total about 80 000 small tea growers of Assam, only a handful of them had taken up manufacturing and marketing of such handmade kinds of tea.

Locally available plants with insecticidal properties and cow dung, vermicompost, oil cake, among others, are used for pest control and nutrition. The manufacturing technique is all using hand for rolling in *dola* (bamboo tray) to pounding in *dhenki* (locally made foot operated wooden pounding tool used generally paddy husking or grinding), frying in iron pan and the subsequent operations of drying and grading, among others, in improvised locally fabricated machineries. Due to its organic nature and care and attention in manufacturing in smaller quantities, the quality is distinctive, unique and liked by any tea drinker. An international NGO, Fertile Ground of Canada, is particularly active in extending support to such venture and they purchase tea at a premium importing to Canada. Apart from exporting to Canada, the handmade natural kind of tea of Assam are increasingly becoming popular in the metros of the country, industrial areas of Assam and the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh in particular. However, proper marketing is the major problem faced by them.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The most popular beverage of the world since time immemorial had its origin in the south-east China and Assam in India and South Vietnam for the three main cultivated varieties of tea. The Assam type is the most widespread type of tea and the China race is the most divergent type. Existence of wild kinds of tea in the forests of Assam is still a subject of further research

with immense possibilities to contribute to advancement of tea science development. Since the discovery of tea in the wilds of Assam in early eighteenth century, tea plantation grew in Assam rapidly in spite of all the difficulties and now Assam tea has its pride place in the world of tea and is known for its exquisite liquoring quality. Assam alone produces exclusive quality tea of about 13% of world tea production and more than half of the total production of India. Assam tea has also contributed to development of tea cultivation in other parts of the world. The indigenous people of Assam, particularly the Singpho tribe, prepare tea in their own traditional method and tea drinking is prevalent since time immemorial. Growth of small tea growers in large number since the later part of the twentieth century is a significant development in Assam and handmade natural tea of entrepreneurial small tea growers is gaining in popularity in the country and around the world. Research on wild kinds of tea of Assam and marketing of the traditional, indigenous and diversified types of tea would contribute to further development of the tea industry.

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