



# INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

( Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal )

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.71 (SJIF 2021)

## MAPPING A DISCOURSE ON HISTORY AND FOLKLORE OF THE TEA WORKERS OF ASSAM THROUGH THE LENS OF POSTCOLONIALISM

**Dr. Dipen Bezbaruah**

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Pub Kamrup College,

Baihata Chariali, Kamrup (Assam, India)

Email: [bezbaruah.pkc@gmail.com](mailto:bezbaruah.pkc@gmail.com)

DOI No. [03.2021-11278686](https://doi.org/10.32021/11278686) DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.32021/11278686>

### **ABSTRACT:**

*While mapping a discourse on an aspect through the lens of postcolonialism, the first two things that struck one's attention are to discover the writer's concern for cultural consciousness and self-awareness, which are the hallmarks of postcolonial writings. The writings on the Tea Workers of Assam may be limited, but these writings are reflective of their cultural consciousness as well as self-awareness which demand the study of these writings in postcolonial strain of thought. Further, the community may, however, find marginal place in postcolonial Indian writings, but there are certainly a few poets and novelists who have genuinely attempted to focus on their life and culture along with their struggle for existence and voices against the oppressors. A reading of their writings are vital for understanding their culture and folklore, their history of immigration and their trials and tribulations, since the available historical books give only a bald picture of these people who have in course of time have become an indispensable part of the greater Assamese society and most importantly how they gradually acculturated to the Assamese society or at least ended up creating a hybrid syncretized culture. Hence, this paper attempts to make a survey into the postcolonial Indian writings concerning the Tea Workers of Assam, to understand their history of immigration, to get a glimpse of their folk life and to understand how they manage to retain their identity.*

**Keywords:** *discourse, folklore, history, immigration, postcolonial, Tea Workers*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Representation of the Tea Workers of Assam in the postcolonial Indian writings can broadly be grouped into Pre and post independent writings. Though Sir Edward Gait's "History of Assam" was published in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it gives a very bald account of the life of the Tea Workers, since its main focus rested on highlighting their importance in relation to the tea industry only. It has to be noted that the Tea Workers is a group of people with distinct customs, creeds and belief systems who were brought by the British colonists to work in the tea gardens of Assam either

forcefully or by luring them of a better fortune. The few available books, be it a story or a novel, deal with multiplicity of aspects concerning these people. During the pre-independent period one of the most notable works concerning the life of the Tea Workers is Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Two Leaves and a Bud*. It was first published in 1937 AD. Apart from that *Dawar Aru Nai [No More Clouds]* by Jogesh Das (1948), *Seuji Patar Kahini [Tale of Green Leaves]* by Rasna Baruah (1959), Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhon Aranya [A Herd of People and a Forest]* published in 1986 are the monumental works. For understanding the life of the Tea Workers, this paper has referred to, discussed and analyzed a few writings from postcolonial Indian literature including Anand's novel *Two Leaves and a Bud* though it was written during British imperialism in India simply because there are various critics who wish to use the term postcolonialism to refer to 'all culture and cultural products influenced by imperialism from the moment of colonization' (Encyclopedia).

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

While discussing postcolonial Indian writing in connection with the tea workers of Assam, it is Mulk Raj Anand, an Anglo-Indian author, whose *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937) has to be mentioned first, for it is the first novel which dares to voice against the British modus operandi of duping the poverty-stricken Indian people of engaging in the tea plantation activities of Assam. The novel deals with the passion, simplicity and sufferings of the Tea Workers through a sad tale of how Gangu, his wife Sajoni and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Leila, struggle for survival. The first chapter of the novel gives a description of how they were brought to Assam by Buta, the Sardar of Mac Pherson Tea Estate with a promise of better life and better fortune. However, after arriving at the tea estate Gangu realizes that such promises were just a temptation to convince the poverty stricken ill-fed people of a better livelihood. Gangu's first experiences of coolie lines 'A gust of breeze bearing the smell of urine from the foot of a coolie's latrine by the road assailed his nostrils' (Anand 15) and 'no septic tank latrine' (16) refers to the unhygienic condition in which they were settled. The conversation between Gangu and Narain, Gangu's neighbour, further gives an image of how coolies were imported from other states of India. Gangu says, 'Yes, all the coolies here are brought by the agents of the planters. Not one would come here of his free choice. What curse upon your fate has brought you?' When Gangu asks Narain whether he is happy or not, Narain replies 'I suppose it was in our *kismet*; but at home it was like a prison and here it is slightly worse'. The conversation between Gangu and Narain reveals how they have been left with no choice, but to succumb to whatever their White masters dictate. The novelist shows how Gangu's wife, Sajani, dies of an epidemic disease.

Anand's *Two Leaves...* also narrates how they possess a distinct belief system in their day-to-day life. Narain's statement: 'the ghosts will keep a vigil to-night' (32) is indicative of their belief in some supernatural forces. The conversation between Narain and Gangu is reflective of the prevailing

supernatural beliefs which can be marked from their belief that no tea plant would grow if it is planted on the spot where the shrine existed and whoever walks across the spot would surely die. Again, they believe that every year on the day of Durga Puja, the goddess appears at night, 'howling and shrieking vengeance on the land and always on that day there is a fierce storm of wind and rain, till anyone is struck dead by the lightning and the goddess's wrath appeased' (15). The novel also focuses on how drinking brew and smoking of hookah are indispensable in their life and society.

There are a few novels which are associated with the life and livelihood of the Tea Workers. These novels are written by Assamese novelists and have occupied a very distinguished place in the field of Assamese literature. One such novel is *Dawar Aru Nai* [No More Clouds] by Jogesh Das. The novel gives a pen picture of the simplicity of the people, whom the British called *coolie*. Drinking of brew in the evening is a common sight among these people and society never discourages it. The novelist has mentioned the religious change in the tea community of the garden. Characters like Duryodhan and Bhim are seen to have devotion for the *Kirtan* (a holy book composed by Shrimanta Shankardeva, who pioneered New Vaishnavism in Assam). There is a reference in the fourth chapter of the novel that the labourers of this garden have started to perform *naam-kirtan* (religious song sung by the New-Vaishnavites) and a community house is also built for the purpose, where performing religious songs in the accompaniment of Assamese musical instruments such as, *khol* and *tāl* becomes a common sight. Bhim remembers a sentence of Bakhor, the head master of the garden school, 'Understand, this is a strange country. Here you will hear hue and cry of people quarrelling with each other after drinking alcohol on one hand and worship the gods together. The use of *khol* and *tāl* as musical instruments for singing holy songs and their worshipping of god in the *kirtan ghar* establishes how the community gradually acculturated to the Assamese society.

Another Assamese novel is Rasna Baruah's *Seuji Pator Kahani* (A Tale of Green Leaves). The protagonist of the novel is a boy, named Nareswar, who belongs to the tea community. In the novel he is seen to be leaving his own place towards an unknown destination. On his way he meets a British officer, who happens to be the Manager of Naharani Tea Estate, and his wife. The couple brings him to their bungalow and later he is appointed as the attendant of the Manager's wife. In the course of the novel the writer very well comments and presents the life of the Tea Workers in general. A realistic picture of their beliefs, way of life, happiness, stories of exploitation they experience every day, family and love relationships, their immense capability of endurance and their forgetfulness of everything once they start drinking *hariya*.

The novelist has beautifully given a picture of how all the tea labourers of the line assembled in the courtyard of Alomini's house in the night after getting their weekly salary. It reflects the way of life of the tea community. They work hard for the whole week and get their wages in the weekend.



That night most of them drink *hariah* (they also called it as *madhu*) and keep on singing and dancing almost throughout the night in the accompaniment of musical instruments. The author very elaborately refers to the societal liberty they enjoy in every walk of their life. There is no social binding that can stop them from expressing their natural course of action. The novelist has also given a picture of opening of the tea gardens when the labourers were engaged in clear jungles. As a part of clearing jungles, they had to fell trees. Some of the trees were so huge in size that the workers employed had the suspicion that these trees might possess ghosts or witches. So, they sacrificed animals to prevent such supernatural forces from doing any harm to them. All the expenses for the ritual were incurred by a British officer (32). Budhu's description of the past indicates how the workers felt the presence of ghost or witches in the dark jungles (34). The novel also refers to various methods of marriage. As mentioned in the novel, elopement is a very common method of marriage. Usually, it is a custom of asking a girl to marry by presenting cocks to the bride's parents. Marital relationship is not governed by any fixities among them; the women may opt for her second marriage leaving her first husband and live in the house of the second husband if she finds her first one to be incapable of fulfilling her needs or if she finds him to be very much in the habit of beating her after drinking *hariya*. A woman returns to her first husband if she finds the second one worse than the first one. The novelist says that woman's going to another man is a small matter and their society is unmindful of such activities.

Likewise, Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya [A Herd of People and a Forest]* gives a pen picture of the unhealthy circumstances in which the Tea Workers were imported from different States to work in the tea gardens of Assam. It gives an impression of the desire of the tea community to come into contact with local Assamese people which was discouraged by the garden authority. But despite all kinds of prohibitions, the process of assimilation between the Assamese and the tea community started and acculturation was in force. Characters like Dugga and Bijli wear Assamese *mekhela chadar* (indigenous dress worn by an Assamese woman) while dancing. The novel also refers to their belief that diseases are the working of ghosts or witches. It also gives a reference to witchcraft and witch-hunting that takes place in the community.

After 1947 AD, as India became decolonized, a host of poets and story writers were born from amongst the community who has given a realistic portrayal of their life and livelihood. Some of them are: Samir Tanti, Sananta Tanti, Sushil Kurmi, Deuram Tasa, Dineswar Tasa, Hari Prasad Kurmi and Prahlad Kr. Tasa. They have produced a number of poems and stories in relation to the community. These poems and stories are documents of the socio-economic condition, customs and belief system of the community reflecting their cultural consciousness and self-awareness.

The texts discussed in this paper avowedly express the tendency to go beyond what the British attempted to focus on or at least a dichotomy between what the British stated and what the

Indian authors have shown. As mentioned in Gait's *A History of Assam*, the Tea Workers were imported to Assam 'providing for them a proper and sanitary system of transport, and securing their good treatment and adequate remuneration during the term of the labour contracts'. (Gait 413). But Anand's *Two Leaves...* and Umakanta Sarma's *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya* expose the hypocrisy of the British by referring to how the two workers were imported to Assam by using all sorts of fraudulent means and the unhygienic condition amidst which they were transported. There is no mention of the pain and agony of these tea workers as well as the diverse cultural milieu of them find place in Gait. In all the novels concerning the Tea Workers, an attempt has been made to focus on their rich culture and folklore along with how they acculturated to the greater Assamese society. Similarly, the poems and stories written by the poets and writers belonging to the greater Tea Workers community are reflective of the culture and folklore of the community. The two extracts of the poems referred to epitomise the postcolonial sentiment of cultural consciousness and self-awareness for establishing their identity as a community.

#### CONCLUSION:

The Tea Workers does not have enough literature, but the available writings on them are expressive of their life, culture and sufferings. These writings also reflect how the Tea Workers were practically alienated from their native culture and how they have tried to identify as one community in the tea estates of Assam and more importantly how they identify simultaneously as a part of the Assamese society. The sense of alienation certainly put them into a deep identity crisis in the initial stage. The novels, stories and poems written on them are all written realistically and these are the best tools to get a glimpse of their life and livelihood, history of immigration and folklore. Thus, when one looks into the writings on them through the lens of postcolonialism, one is bound to sense their cultural consciousness and self-awareness.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Anand, Mulk Raj. *Two Leaves and a Bud*. Arnold Publishers, 1988.
2. Baruah, Rasna. *Seuji Pator Kahini*. Jarnal Emporium, 2002.
3. Das, Jogesh. *Dawor Aru Nai*, Chetana Prakash, 1955.
4. Gait, Sir Edward. *A history of Assam*, Surjeet Publications, 2006.
5. Kurmi, Hariprasad. "Malati". *Scah Janagosthir Cinta-Cetana*, edited by R. Gohai, Asom Sahitya Sobha, 2001, p 155.
6. "Postcolonialism". *Literary Movements for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Literary Movements*, Encyclopedia.com, www.encyclopedia.com, Accessed 8 Sept 2021.
7. Sarma, Umakanta. *Ejak Manuh Ekhan Aranya*, Bani Prakash, 1986.