

A new ray of hope for the tea tribes

Rouhin Deb Updated on August 05, 2021

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Assam's geographical location and its complex social mosaic encompassing a host of tribal communities and their limited development have always been an interesting domain for researchers. One of the most marginalized among these tribes have been the multi-ethnic groups of the tea garden communities officially referred as the "*Tea Tribes*".

Around 3 million laborers dependent on the Assam's tea industry have faced issues of social isolation, economic development and inequity since the time they settled in Assam at around 1820's. However, given their significant population in the state across 40 odd constituencies in the state, governments after governments have tried to lure them with false promises. Till 2014, the tea workers were paid an abysmally low daily wage of 94 a day, far below the state minimum wage of 169 rupees. However, since the BJP came to power in the state for the first time in 2016, things seem to have changed for the community significantly. This has also been evident in the BJP's performance across the tea tribe dominated constituencies across Assam in the recently concluded state assembly polls.

Many existing schemes of the government such as steps in the field of education like facilitating 37,138 scholarships for pre-matric and post matric students belonging to tea tribes, engaging 1000 youths in ANM/GNM training, building 119 new model schools in tea

gardens, [10000 tea tribe youths receiving Simon Sing Horo \(Special Post-Matric\) Scholarship](#) and financial assistance to 2051 students from the community who successfully cleared HSLC and HS [examinations have been the steps in the right directio.](#)

Healthcare sector has also seen significant improvement in the last few years. As per a survey by the [Regional Resource Centre for North Eastern States \(RRC-NE\)](#), 247 of 758 tea gardens had no doctors. However, the present government proactively took this as a challenge stationing [80 Mobile Medical Units \(MMUs\) across the state](#) and conducted 66,396 medical camps in 445 tea garden areas benefitting 27,60,017 citizens residing in the tea gardens. Maternity healthcare schemes also played an important role in improving the healthcare scenario in the state. Assam which accounted for a large number of infant and maternal mortalities in the [country has seen a sharp decline](#) owing to the government's Wage Compensation Scheme for pregnant women of tea garden areas under which 36000 tea workers received ₹12000 in the last 5 years. The [sum has been increased to 18000 rupees in Assam](#) Budget 2020-21, in an attempt to ensure holistic nutrition to both mothers and new born.

Use of technology in the last few years to empower tea tribes has been one of the forefront initiatives of the government in an attempt to ensure benefits of the schemes reach the last mile tea worker. Be it [providing smartphones to 11858-line sardars or connecting the tea workers](#) of Assam to the banking system, the government has tried to bring community to the mainstream. The Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme of the government along with Jan Dhan Yojana has played a significant role in disbursing a sum of 8000 rupees to over 7,46,667 tea workers from the flagship scheme of the government, [“Cha Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela’](#).

Further, to boost entrepreneurship in the community and handhold the youths of the community to become Atmanirbhar, the government provided 25000 rupees financial aid to 14000 beneficiaries under [the 'Swahid Dayal Das Panika Swaniyojan Achoni'](#) and 2587 women SHG's were provided with 25000 rupees each.

Apart from schemes that ensured economic benefits reach the tea tribes, there has been a considerable amount of work in the field of giving social recognition to the community. Steps like observing 23rd Nov, Birth anniversary of great tea garden leader, [Santosh Kumar Topno's birth- anniversary celebrated as 'Shramik Divas'](#) and erecting statues of two great leaders Santosh Kumar Topno & Simon Singh Horo built at Chaulkhua and Dibrugarh respectively are efforts that have been made to bring along the tea-tribe along the mainstream culturally connect to them.

The incumbent government's recently presented budget 2021-22 under the leadership of Himanta Biswa Sarma have continued with several developmental measures that is intended towards the holistic all-round development of the community. These include 805 tea estates earmarked for assistance, taped water connections, piped gas supply and free electricity to 2,69,648 people from the community. The new government has also negotiated with the industry players who remained apprehensive about this wage increase and have come to an amicable solution.

Notwithstanding the efforts made by the government, there still remains a considerable distance that needs to get covered. Issues like long withstanding demand for ST status arising from the assertion of identity is yet to be addressed. Wages in spite of a considerable hike in the recent times still stands low compared to what tea tribes get in states like Kerala and most importantly recognition of unmet needs of such community by other communities has to grow. However, with a

decisive government in power in the state, there is a hope for better tomorrow.

(Dr. Deb is an empirical economist and was a member of Assam BJP's Election Manifesto and Data Committee)

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