Plantation Capital and Appropriation of Commons in Global Peripheries

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Abstract

When colonial capital saw prospects of developing tea plantations in eastern Himalayan foothills, it turned the nature's jungles and rural commons to the botanical garden in present-day Northeast India first to fulfil the demand for tea in western markets. Nature was the lynchpin between the crop and colonial capital. By setting up indentured labour based plantation systems, a steady stream of the tropical primary consumption good was maintained. The agro-ecology that sustained tea plant growth also gave rise to blights and pests and diseases for humans and Plants. The commodity history of tea played a variety of roles in shaping the environment. Chemically synthesised pest, weed and growth management of the plant become overwhelming. But products only with low chemical residue products goes to developed importing nations. Others mostly dumped in domestic markets. Till the neoliberal era, the doctrine of foothills as terra nullius, without understanding the itinerant form of land use in highlands, become hegemonic and the result is more commercialisation of common land in hills replacing indigenous food system with plantations, exposing local land and labour to global capital. Along with tea, the new enthusiasm is for palm oil. Thus the fragile ecology of highland, biodiversity and food sovereignty of natives is being remoulded. Apart from that, there are additional aspects in NE highlands. As the state ally with capital, the sentiment for safeguarding commons and control over land is expressed as a struggle for federalism. Reflecting on discourses used for accumulation needs and how people and institutions have internalised them the paper concludes on necessity of intellectual self-reliance in global south.

Introduction

Labour is not only nature's life but also socially constructed. Any commodity needs labour to work in nature. Only labour can produce the use value of nature while at the same time having a social nature. Relation of a given society with Nature is also 'social', which in essence, reflects the spirit of existent production relations. Capital

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in the peripheries mapped Nature as a potential resource for furthering accumulation and cloaked suitable narratives and discourses.

The paper discusses the different discourses used to acquire ‘common’ natural resources for capitalist accumulation. The paper takes the case of tea plantations in the eastern Himalayan foothills. The tea estates at the foothills of the sub-mountain track, which more or less constitute present-day hill states in the Northeastern region of India, came to trigger changes that have far-reaching consequences. For the tea business, the first-time mountain land was commercialised, which paved the way for capitalist accumulation (Goswami, 2010). The plantation is one of the few areas of scholarship where fields developed in the global South have found resonance in other parts of the South in terms of the reinstitutionalisation of coercive labour and dimensions of the Agrarian question of it. But contemporary forms of primitive accumulation through plantation are rarely discussed.

A brief introspection into the history reveals the dual role of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession of customary land in non-capitalist spheres from the colonial to the post-liberal times with different modus operandi. The present study will show how the encroachment over rural commons presupposes a process of privatisation of commons which started even in the dirigiste period of national liberation. The concept of private property as a single integral right and an over asset hardly existed in precapitalist spaces, particularly in highlands. Privatisation of commons excluded other members of the community to be used by a few members only. That is part of a process that Marx called Primitive Accumulation.

Tea became a national drink in England in the 16th century without a single tea plantation in its boundary. Then it was primarily dependent on imports from China. But after the Opium War with the Chinese emperor, British mercantilists started looking for alternative options, preferably a suitable location where they could produce tea. Thirteen years before that, in 1923, in the eastern Himalayan foothills of the British colony that is in present-day India’s Assam Arunachal border, where a village head of Chingphow community called Bicha Gaam, showed Robert Bruce, a British Cornel, how their community people were using leaves of locally available tea tree as medicinal plants[2]. That opened a new door for to British tea trade. Though the Assam variety tea was discovered 13 years before the opium war, the sample was lying in a botanical laboratory for many years. The discovery of tea in the colony gave the colonisers an alternative environment to produce tea rather than remain solely dependent on China (J. Sarma, 2012). That point of contact affected the historiography of a much wider region that is referred to as Northeast India today (Fernandes and Barbora, 2009)

[2] The re-uttering colonial myth of “discovery” indicates the history of the Assam tea bush is attributed to Robert Bruce, who encountered it in 1823. Bruce found the plant growing “wild” in different forests of Assam. Maniram Dewan, then a service provider under British, directed him to the local Singpho chief Bessa Gam. Robert noticed the Singphos brewing tea from the leaves of the bushes and managed Bessa Gam to provide him the samples of the leaves and seeds (J. Sarma 2012).

Geographical and Political Overview of the Study Area

Politically Northeastern region is a peripheral part of India, surrounded by eastern Himalayan highlands and foothills. Assam and six other states, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya, constitute the Northeastern Region of India. Except for Manipur and Tripura, other parts were administratively under 'Assam province' for a significant period of colonial rule. During the 1970s, the region disintegrated after a prolonged and violent self-determination movement, and Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram came into existence. The Brahmaputra river and the valley mostly form the region's central part; there are foothills and sub-mountain tracks, and beyond that, the highlands. The sub-mountain way and highland constitute the six states of northeast India, with an overwhelming tribal population. At the same time, Assam is mostly the Brahmaputra river valley and Barak valley towards the south. Sanjib Baruah described the region as a 'resource frontier' of the Indian nation-state (S. Baruah 2020), the highlands of the region also come under the geographical categorisation of 'zomia' by James Scott (Scott 2010). In terms of area, the region is bigger than many countries like Ghana, Uganda and Senegal.

The Northeast region of India is a very diverse area of its ecological, economic, institutional and cultural aspects. Some of the regional differences include mountainous regions and uneven plains; a varied social composition concerning religion, caste, and languages, and ethnicity are present in the region. The presence of a large number of tribal groups with distinct cultural and institutional patterns and locally managed access to resources are essential features of this region. Although the term 'north-eastern region' is a gross oversimplification of the complexities and diversities, still its role as an overarching framework that has underpinned the policy interventions of the central and, to a lesser extent, state governments in the post-independence phase justifies the focus of the term (K.Mishra and Upadhyay, 2017)

Traditionally the economy of the indigenous communities in northeastern India depended on subsistence agriculture and foraging, with forest and land as the primary resources. It depended on community ownership, also known as collective management or co-ownership or common property resources (CPRs), in the modern language of governance. The CPRs include the common grazing ground, *jhum* (shifting) cultivation land, forests for non-timber forest produce such as edible fruits, leaves and vegetables, small timber and medicinal herbs, watersheds, rivulets, rivers, ponds and other community assets that give other protein foods like fish crab etc. (Fernandes, 2020). The tribal population in the hill states in this part of India got some protection under constitutional safeguard under the "sixth schedule" in the Indian constitution. Indian constitution provides special autonomy to tribal-dominated states in North-Eastern India under which rights over land and forest remain with the communities or local bodies. The same constitutional safeguard gives the native communities autonomy over land ownership and use (Chaudhury, 2013).

The presence of hundreds of other estates and millions of small growers in Northeast India and neighbouring Himalayan foothills makes this one of the most prolific of all tea regions in the world. However, the Brahmaputra valley and the surrounding sub-mountainous track was the leading site of tea estates by the British. Other States like Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, South District of Tripura, N. C Hills District of Assam and Karbi Anglong District of Assam has also embarked on tea cultivation in the recent past. The commodity of tea becomes the lynchpin between the global plantation capital and northeast India or eastern Himalayan foothills. The commodity history of tea played various roles in shaping the history of capitalist exploitation of non-human nature[3] in this part of the world.

Tea, Colonial Capital Discourse of 'Wasteland.'

In 1837 British exported 46 boxes of tea leaves to England From NEI for the first time. With the arrival in London of fine quality tea in 1938, the commercial circle of the city took a keen interest in tea plantations in Assam and a company known as the Assam Company was formed[4] in 1839 to take over the experimental holdings of the East India Company's administration over the tea gardens established in Assam till then. East India, the British merchant that colonised India, was willing to finance the Indian tea enterprises after it saw the tea monopsony over China going out of hand after the Opium war. Assam Company was the first company in India to undertake the commercial production of tea. It was, in fact, the direct successor of the East India Company in the tea business. Within two decades, many more British companies entered different parts of Assam. Between 1859 and 1866, the British Authorities cleared the hills of Assam for tea gardens and tried to attract enormous investments for the industry. That way British empire unleashed primitive accumulation in Asia. The colonial rule in India, like any other colony colonised by western empires, had a resource extraction and allocation system that determined not only who had access to natural resources but also the 'biotic system' (Tucker, 1988). The plantation estates in the highly biodiverse Brahmaputra valley and surrounding foothills were classic example.

The British East India Company offered incentives to prospective investors in a tea plantation in NEI by providing land at cheaper terms, minimum revenue and even

[3] Human being is also a part of the nature. So non-human nature means the natural world outside human being where human labour is deployed to produce things.

[4] A group of British merchants formed the Assam Company in London on February 12, 1839. The Assam Company was formed in a meeting of merchants in London with a capital of 5,00,000 pounds in 10,000 shares of 50 pounds each, of which 8000 were to be allotted in Great Britain and 2000 in India. It was also India's first joint-stock company in the non-banking sector to have the liability of its shareholders limited by an Act of Incorporation in 1845. The Assam Company initially dividing the operations into three divisions (Northern, Southern and Eastern) and headquartered at a place called Nazira. Yet a characteristic nature of the joint stock companies (like Assam Company), with a decisive control over operation and expenditure with the board of directors and shareholders, removed from the scene of production and often determined by profit and fluctuations of the markets, had a significant bearing in conditioning the nature of management and work on the plantations (Mishra U. , 2003).

as a grant (Guha, 2006) by introducing a series of new land lease rules. The colonial administrators saw the idea of land, land holding and ownership with its oriental gaze.

John Locke's theory of property influenced the colonial land policy in India. The category ‘wasteland’—and its variants “dead,” “idle,” “vacant,” “fallow,” “and unutilised” land—facilitated state seizures of public commons for colonial capitalist exploitation in British India, Malay, Dutch East Indies, and imperial central Vietnam (Bhattacharya, 2020). The Lockean understanding of land created a binary opposition of “State of nature” and “State of Civilization” and considered that, to evolve from a state of nature to a state of civilisation, "individually enclosed” lands must be put under commercial cultivation. So common lands were termed as ‘wastelands'. In other words, ‘value’ became the criterion for ordering land and the people associated with those land.

Here ‘common land’ means Land where people relished the fruits of the soil in “common”; the inhabitants had no proprietary rights over land. That means wastelands were not barren or infertile land but rather a social category where anything beyond the domain of private enclosures (as well as state-appropriated land) was categorised as the same (Chakraborty, 2018). The “wasteland category also defined who would and would not become most vulnerable to dispossession and enclosure” (Whitehead, 2010). People in hills and foothills played an essential role in creating these spaces, often resisting state formation. Such misunderstood categorisation of common land as ‘wasteland’ was not limited to India. Such notions were used to justify access and control of land use across the global south. In central Vietnam also, “Colonial engagements with land clearing and customary uses of “open” lands gave shape to the colonial discourse of “wasteland” and later spurred colonial environmentalist critiques, even calls for a new form of green colonialism via exotic tree plantations” (Biggs, 2018). In Myanmar, the livestock grazing common land that was not generating revenue was also declared a ‘wasteland’ (Ferguson, 2014). In Ghana, such notions were used to bring in laws to smoothen the way to acquire land for gold mining (Nti, 2013).

In India, colonisers transferred large tracks of rural common land, agricultural land and forests to tea plantations. It also put the colonisers in a far better position to extract surplus from the land than the original inhabitants. The pressure on cultivable fallow land increased immensely due to the grant of land leases for tea estates. But as applications were made seeking more significant blocks of land by foreign capital holders, vast tracts of the ‘wastelands’ in eastern Brahmaputra valley and Himalayan foothills were alienated from the marginal rural folk to the tea planters, which were once used for cultivation without holding the land permanently. The government also alienated large areas of forestlands for tea plantations (Brandis, 1879). Over time, the tea estate owners became the largest landowners in the region. That changed the land relations and altered the conditions under which land can be held, occupied and managed.

The handover of large tracts of so-called wastelands to European tea planters subverted the region's old economic and social networks and property regimes. There were frequent attacks on the plantations by “tribesmen” protesting their dispossession during the early years of tea plantations in Assam and surrounding foothills. Colonial writings portrayed them as marauding barbarians. The solution found by the British government was to introduce the Inner Line system in 1873 to fence off the plantations. At that time, an imaginary line was drawn along the northern and eastern foothills of Assam province (A. J. Saikia, 2011) to place a perceived boundary with ‘unruly’ hill tribes. The hills with tribal populations were considered inside the Inner Line. These regulations also prevented entrance into the hills except with special permission. That also restricted British tea planters from acquiring land in the Hills, which were later 1935 demarcated as excluded areas and remained outside the direct jurisdiction of the British administration[5]. That’s how Inner Line served as a “territorial frame to capital” (Kar, 2009). The division between hills and plains assigned the valley as a world of capital, while the tribal population in hills were perceived as premodern and primitive. The primary aim of colonisers was to establish a clear and defensible property right in plantations. Though the Inner Line was redrawn repeatedly “to accommodate the expansive compulsions of plantation capital” (S. Baruah, 2020). But the plantation regime of the British more or less remained restricted to the valley and foothills in the colonial period.

After encroaching on rural commons and forests, British capital established monopoly control over the tea plantations in Northeast India and accumulated a high-profit margin. The Assam Company did not raise any additional capital from 1854 to 1901 but managed to treble its acreage more than while paying out Rs 9 million in dividends (Guha, Medieval and early Colonial Assam 2015). By the end of the nineteenth century, there were only a few tea enterprises in northeast India outside the control of British companies control. A. K. Bagchi, citing The Indian Industrial Year Book for 1911, shows that seven British Managing Agencies controlled 61% of the rupee tea companies and that the London correspondents of four of these controlled a further 34% of sterling tea companies (Bagchi 1972). That means there is only encroachment of resources by colonial capital and concentration of wealth within that. Tea Planters adopted the policy of indentured labour[6] and earned absolute surplus by suppressing the workers’ wages by extra-economic measures. The rest produced by these workers was accumulated by Colonial capital and invested in Industrial development in Britain to subsidise the war. At the same time, the plight of indentured labourers in the tea estates created a new history of exploitation.

[5] With the exception of collecting revenue and controlling hill tribes, who were perceived as savages, the British administrators stayed away from the day-to-day functioning of the tribes and villages in hills.

[6] For detail see (Behal 2014) (Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj 2006)

Political Liberation and Development of Agrarian Capitalism

After the political liberation and shift in the global balance of power after the second world war, the process of primitive accumulation was restricted for another four decades till the advent of neoliberalism. However, the operation of surplus extraction within the tea sector continued despite few pro-labour legislations by the newly independent nation-state.

In the post-independence period, in the tea industry (also mining and other initiatives developed by colonial power), the exploitative nature of the rule[7] engineered by the British continued in the North-eastern region with just a change in the stakeholders from British to Indian capitalists (Haokip, 2015). The tea estates were not nationalised, and the new sovereign government did any intervention in the ownership of tea estates or factories for a long time. The colonial capital remained dominant till the mid of 1960s. Till 1965 there were 60 sterling companies and 44 Rupee companies (Awasthi, 1975). During that time, the global trade of Indian tea grew significantly, and as late as 1967, tea remained India's largest export earner (Nayyar, 1977). But since colonial capital remained dominant in the industry, profits were sent back to British lead firms and little capital was left for reinvestment in India (Raman, 2009). The Central government of newly sovereign India first attempted to remedy this by creating the Tea Board of India in 1953. The Board established a tax system, leading to tighter control of the industry[8].

In 1973, further government interventions were done through the introduction of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA). The FERA placed restrictions on the ability of foreign companies to maintain holdings, with all non-financial subsidiaries required to dilute foreign ownership to a maximum of 40 per cent or to close operations. These changes allowed Indian firms to acquire a greater share of tea production. However, Hindustan Lever, the largest domestic lead firm[9] in India and a subsidiary of global firm Unilever, was insulated from the FERA. The company retained a 51 per cent equity on the condition that 60 per cent of the subsidiary's output was in the core sector (a set of capital-intensive industries prioritised by the government at that time for investment) and at least 10 per cent of the company's output was exported (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017). These changing ownership structures were accompanied by increased domestic consumption of tea and increased export diversification. New Indian tea companies tried to capture a domestic market. But following Section 29

[7] A new law had been brought for minimum wage and social protection of tea estate workers in 1951, called Plantation Labour Act (PLA), but that also retained the provision of paying major part of wage in kind and services by estate owners as was in colonial period and left the issue of fixation of minimum wage collective bargaining to tripartite discussion of estate owners, workers union and government.

[8] Today, the Tea Board continues to be responsible for authorizing, registering and licensing all industrial activities pertaining to the industry.

[9] Having acquired Lipton tea brand in 1972, the firm subsequently acquired Brooke Bond in 1984 leading to the further expansion.

(2) (a) of the FERA Act,1973 Reserve Bank of India agreed to grant permission to carry on business to the Sterling Companies subject to the takeover of their Gardens by an Indian Company to be formed. After that, many amalgamations and mergers happened[10]. Direct and absolute ownership of gardens by sterling companies was almost abolished. Many new Indian companies came up. But big beverage companies continued their dominance, creating a near monopsony over procurement of semi-processed tea at Auction centres.

The plantation industry was flourishing but was not accompanied by any significant development in the agricultural sector within Assam to raise farm productivity and marketable surplus; neither the peasantry had any direct economic connection with the plantation industry nor the estates just near villages[11]. The land inequality created by colonial land revenue policies (Saikia and Das, 2011) continued after independence, despite a mild wave of land reform that touched upon the province of Assam, at least in legislation. Because the government failed to carry forward the land reform programmes to their logical end, the overall agrarian scenario of Assam remained in a situation of unusual backwardness. Gradually the peasantry became pauperised did not hinder the surplus extraction from tea plantation enclaves that continued to supply exports produced by the workers at a wage rate lower than other sectors. But new land reform acts restricted the expansion of tea plantations to new areas, and on the contrary, large tracts of land had been acquired from tea estates.

Another constitutional provision that restricted the expansion of big tea estates in tribal-dominated highlands (like Nagaland, Mizoram or Arunachal) was the special autonomy to such regions. After independence Indian constitution provided special autonomy to tribal-dominated highlands in Northeast India,[12] under which rights over land and forest remained with the communities or local bodies. The same constitutional safeguard gives the native communities autonomy over land ownership and use (Chaudhury, 2013). The special protective rights for the tribal people of the Northeast were, however, not palatable. It was the post-independence Constituent Assembly debates of 1949[13] that saw tribal leaders like Reverend J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, a Khasi from the hill areas of then Assam Province (now Meghalaya), and Jaipal Singh Munda from the Central Indian tribal belt, putting up a fierce argument in constituent assembly debate for special protective rights for the tribal people of India. It resulted in the

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[10] For example, Eight sterling tea companies viz., The Assam-Doors Tea Co. Ltd., Hope Tea Co. Ltd., The Lebong Chulsa Tea Co. Ltd., The British Darjeeling Tea Co. Ltd., The Chulsa Tea Co. Ltd., The Leesh River Tea Co. Ltd., The Danguajhar Tea Co. Ltd., and The Meenglas Tea Co. Ltd., were amalgamated with Goodricks Good Ltd Company.

[11] Except 'haat', the local weekly markets emerged at the vicinity of tea estates where local peasants sell their meagre amounts of marketable surplus from own fields.

[12] Two more regions, Manipur and Tripura, which were princely states under British rule and Union Territory in Independent India were given statehood in 1971 and become constituent part of Northeast India.

[13] For more detail see "How the Tribal Leaders Defended Their Rights in Constituent Assembly", Raiot, 27 January, 2019. https://raiot.in/how-the-tribal-leaders-defended-their-rights-in-the-constituent-assembly/

incorporation of the 5th and 6th Schedules of the Constitution, applicable to the Central Indian tribals and the Northeast, respectively. The hard-earned Sixth schedule in the Indian constitution that gave autonomy to tribal states and regions continued the restriction on expanding large tea estates to the hills of Northeast India.

A New Form of Primitive Accumulation

By the late 1970s and 1980s, the structure of the tea supply chain and production organisation transformed in a new direction as tea production once again started expanding to fresh lands, even in restricted regions, with the introduction of the idea of Small Tea Growers. Until the early 1950s mighty tea estate format was thought to be the only way to produce tea commercially. The minimum acreage for tea plantations was fixed at 10.12 hectares in the Tea Act of India 1951; peasants could not venture into it. The concept of smallholding tea cultivation came into the limelight in the mid-1950s after a rigorous and successful experiment in Kenya[14]. This successful venture pushed tea production to make a steady shift from big plantations to small holdings. Today, small holding tea growers contribute to total tea production in most tea-producing countries like Kenya, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Nepal. The definition of a Small Tea Grower (STG) is based on holding size, which varies across different countries[15]. However, the average holding sizes in most countries, irrespective of the upper limit, tend to be on the lower side. In India, a small grower who cultivates 10.12 hectares or less and not possessing a tea processing factory is considered STG.

The small holding tea plantations as a driver of another transformation of the tea plantation landscape in North-eastern India started in the late 1970s. In 1978, the then Agriculture Minister of Assam province took the initiative and encouraged the rural youths of the state to take up tea plantations in the homesteads and fallow land to "improve their economic conditions" (P. Baruah, 2015). Since then, plantations in the small sector have shown a considerable rise, particularly in Eastern and Northern Assam. By the 1980s it also started expanding to foothills in sub-mountain tracks surrounding the Brahmaputra valley in other states in Northeast India. The number of Small Tea Growers (STGs) in Assam is counted as 78,350 as per registration with the Tea Board, which shares almost 30% of the state's total tea production (Economic Survey of Assam, 2016). More than fifty per cent STGs of India is situated in North-East India. According to another report published by the All Assam Small Tea Growers Association th,e STGs of Assam have successfully utilised 20 million

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[14] In Kenya too under colonial policies subsistence peasants become largely dependent on commercial maize production. But got disturbed by instability of Maize production farmers turned to more 'permanent' tea production. already existing tea gardens also influenced to make that move. For detail see, Sally Jemngietich Kosgei. "Commodity Production, Tea and Social Change in Kericho, Kenya. 1895-1963". A PhD Thesis submitted to Department of History, Stanford University. 1981.

[15] In Kenya, a grower cultivating tea in a small piece or piece of land who does not possess a tea processing factory is an STG. In Sri Lanka "small-holding" means the area of land less than 20.2 ha. In Indonesia, smallholders/small growers are those who grow tea on land size between 0.8 to 2.0 ha and sell tea without processing.

hectares of wasteland' (Borah and Das, 2015). In other words, the small tea growers brought in rural commons and forest land under the ambit of the export-oriented commercial plantation. That is nothing but the adverse integration of them and their land with the spiral of capital accumulation. This was the second phase of Primitive Accumulation in the region. The Tea Board of India promoted small tea growers since the 1980s primarily because STGs can provide better quality green leaves from 'fresh land' brought under tea plantations and additional quantities (P. Baruah, 2015). Since Assam is a century-old location of a big tea plantation, the old tea tree bushes gradually become less productive. Finding alternative sources from new fertile land was precedence then bearing the cost and gestation period of replantation[16].

The small tea growers' entry changed the rural scenario once again. Many people from a local agrarian society started tea plantations in the agricultural sector, where already the peasantry was destitute by income-deflationary macroeconomic policies. In practice, dispossessed people also kept some farming to compensate for the low wage or tried to adapt to the new condition by doing cash crops, however tiny scale possible. Section of wealthy farmers and the urban middle class also joined them (Sharma and Baruah, 2017). These new production relations demanded integration into global capital circuits, increasing competition and more unpaid labour.

The value chain is much broader in production level, with a vast number of small tea growers and workers. The hegemony of TNCs is orchestrated by intermediaries, Bought Leafe Factory (BLF) and Agents. The Bought Leaf Factories (BLF) are tea green leaf processing factories with their tea garden. Still, processed tea leaves are aggregated by agents from small tea growers Small local capitalists mostly own BLFs have to take the price decided at auction as dictum, and they accordingly pay to the small tea growers. A growing reserve labour force consisting of unemployed or seasonally employed 'plantation workers'[17] from big tea estates and pauperised peasantry keeps the wage in the STG sector low. That way, STGs can provide green leaves at a low price to BLFs. From BLF, semi-processed tea is sold in the international market through Auction centres[18]. Auction centres are harbingers of controlling the industry as everything from price to quality check is standardised in auctions. The semi-processed tea from factories (Tea Estate factories or Bought Leaf Factory, where

[16] In India 51% of the tea bushes in large tea gardens are more than 40 years old, which is one among the major reasons for stagnant productivity. Further, the re-plantation rate has never been more than 0.4 percent of the aggregate acreage in a year in recent years, though the prescribed annual norm is 2 percent (Barua, 2013).

[17] The labour relation in tea estate sector is casualised, undermining the PLA 1951. The process started in 1970s but actually got momentum in neo-liberal period when Tea Sector of India started facing immense pressure in domestic market also and lost a assured international market with the fall of USSR and east-European socialist block. India had a trade treaty with USSR. It was the biggest importer of tea from India. (White, Mishra and Upadhay 2009). The casualisation created pool of workers without in kind payment, seasonal unemployment and daily wage earners.

[18] The sophisticated techniques involved putting the tea arranged neatly in ceramic cups and smelling the aroma carefully to determine taste and quality.

small growers sell green leaves) is sold, usually through auction with the help of a broker or directly to big tea companies. At the auction, the large beverage TNCs are the biggest buyers and controls the selling price. The purchased tea is blended and packed by beverage TNCs for their tea labels. The international tea supply chain is characterised by a concentration of market power, with only a few companies controlling a significant share of the value chain and market share[19]. That is how the "Monopoly capital reaps super-profits—meaning over and above-average profits—by establishing and reproducing control both at the level of procurement and the market t" (Shivji, 2017). The monopsony buyer TNCs include Unilever- which controls the world's most popular brand Lipton Yelthe low Label, and it's subsidiary Brooke Bond, followed by Tata, which owns estates and packaging facilities in the Indian subcontinent and Kenya and the second biggest tea brand Tetley (Langford, 2021). (Bhashin, 2019). These TNCs blend, process and retail much more than they produce. They are leaving the plantation activities to small growers and other medium-range local or national companies, concentrating more on the stages above auction in the value chain, selling various brands of tea worldwide, and charging differential prices according to the market and quality of tea.

The global capital, represented by TNCs dealing beverage business, is on a spree to get high-quality and speciality tea from fresh land at a low cost of production. Expanding tea production by Small Tea Growers appropriating untapped land is suitable for such needs. STGs do not come under plantation labour law (applicable only to tea estates above 10.12 hectares with a residential labour force). The STG regime's most significant change was the expansion of plantations in the Northeast Highlands, where land ownership and management are constitutionally protected. People in hills doing biodiverse and sustainable shifting cultivation (Ramakrishnan, 1993) took plantation (along with coffee and rubber). Particularly highland provinces like Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Nagaland have shown a significant increase in the number of STGs. As per the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Association, 210,225 STGs will have a tea plantation area of 215,886.40 hectares by 2019 in the NEI region.

The Discourse of 'Development'

Traditionally the economy of the tribal communities in NEI highlands depended on subsistence agriculture and foraging. In the customary practice of highland people, community ownership of resources is the nucleus of the society. These commons and collectively owned resources are also called Common Property Resources (CPR) in the modern language of governance. The CPRs include the common grazing ground,

[19] Three multinationals, namely Unilever, Tata Global Beverages (formerly Tata Tea) and Associated British Foods, which owns the Twinings brand, control one-fifth of the market. Unilever and Tata are the main tea packers globally, and therefore control the most profitable nodes of the supply chain apart from retail. McLeod Russel, another large multinational, focuses on the production and processing of tea (Langford 2021)

jhum[20] (shifting) cultivation land, forests for non-timber forest produce such as edible fruits, leaves and vegetables, small timber and medicinal herbs, watersheds, rivulets, rivers, ponds and other community assets that give other protein foods like fish crab etc. (Fernandes, 2020).

Almost all tribes of Northeast India highlands do shifting cultivation. The colonial state did not understand the itinerant form of land use in hills and imagined foothill forests as *terra nullius*. In the post-colonial period, the Indian nation-state demonised shifting cultivation. It is a historical fact that during the past centuries, the ‘sedentarisation’ of people has taken place in most nation-states leading to a transformation of various customary land tenure systems into a uniform modern property regime based on individual ownership (Scott, 2010). Nation states, including India, that took the path of capitalist development, introduced new land laws based on individual ownership, modern taxation and revenue system. For that, shifting cultivation was increasingly seen as antithetical. Policies and actions by the Indian nation-state were to make land and products from NEI highland taxable, assessable, commercial or, failing that, to replace that with a Cash crop, mono-cropping or plantation-style. Such land use has been encouraged in place of the more biodiverse form of production prevailing in the highland areas (Darlong, 2004).

From a capitalist perspective, highland tribal people were seen as poor, dispossessed, and landless. State governments in NE have also fallen prey to such hegemonic ideas. And the paternalist notion is that the tribal population should be ‘rescued’ from such poverty by ‘developmental’ activities like sedentarisation or cash crop plantations. This shift took place in two steps. The first was the commercialisation of their traditional crops. It was followed by introducing of modern cash crops and plantation crops like tea, coffee, rubber and palm oil (Behera, et al., 2016). The attempts to incorporate modern cash crop cultivation have been overrated as “development”. Scholar Melville Pereira mentions how during a field trip to Churachandpur, Manipur, in 2012, he was surprised to hear a village elder appreciating the ‘gesture’ of the Coffee Board providing Rs 60,000 per acre as a subsidy to start a coffee plantation in the jhum land of the village. (Pereira 2016). In 2007, the Tea Board started a promotional subsidy scheme of Rs 76,000 per hectare for small growers in Northeast India.

To avail the benefits of the government schemes for plantation, an applicant must have registered land documents. For that, even the customary political institutions also started issuing No Objection Certificates, which became a major source of privatisation of rural commons. Thus, the cropping and land-use pattern changes towards export-oriented plantations proved perilous to the ordinary tribal population in this region. At

[20] Shifting cultivation or Jhum is a method of cultivation on temporary fields. The fields are abandoned after one or two years of cultivation generally, allowing shrubs and trees to grow back. People then cultivate another plot. The alternation between periods of 'cultivation' and 'fallow' ensures the continuation of a jungle cover that helps to maintain biodiversity (Maaker, Kikon and Barbora 2016). Cultivated land, and fallow land all are CPR and commonly managed by the community, the village or the clan.

the same time, the self-aggrandising individuals within communities, either through primitive accumulation or through accumulation by dispossession, amassed enormous land resources in their hands. When the elites of the tribal society became part of the power structure, they started mediating the process of primitive accumulation[21]. For example, powerful politicians and relatives control almost all tea and large horticultural estates in Arunachal Pradesh. They benefit from substantial state support in direct subsidies, marketing assistance, and indirect subsidies, such as the illicit use of workers on the government's payroll in private estates (White, Mishra and Upadhay, 2009). By 2014 Arunachal Pradesh had a handful of big growers and tea estates and had 4500 STGs [22]. These STGs failed to receive government subsidies since they could not get clearance from the Environmental ministry[23] since they had converted forest and fellow land into tea plantations. With the change in the political economy around and internalising the narratives of 'development', even small growers became mediators of primitive accumulation. They appropriated fresh land for plantation and integrated it into global capital.

In Nagaland, the state government and Tea Board officials pointed out tea plantations as a suitable alternative to jhum cultivation. The abandoned jhum land can be transformed into tea plantations (Konwar, 2017). In Nagaland,[24] the pace of shifting to tea plantations from mixed cropping has been increasing since 1995[25] (Konwar, 2017) Today, vast areas of the Nagaland-Assam foothill border are covered with tea plantations. As per statistics available with the state Agricultural Department, about 800 acres of land in Mon and 300 acres in Mokokchung district have been brought under tea cultivation, and per hectare production of tea in some areas of Nagaland is more than that in Assam. However, only one tea factory in the state is located in the Mokokchung district. The factory is fed by a plantation of small tea growers of neighbouring districts like Zunheboto and Wokha Mokokchung. While the significant bulk of green leaves is exported to Assam at a low price[26]. That way, the industry gets

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[21] Archana Prasad also came to similar conclusion in the context of indigenous politics. She mentions, "….once the adivasi elites were incorporated into thepower structure, they became part of oppressive institutional structures" (Prasad 2022).

[22] https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/small-tea-growers-in-arunachal-unable-to-avail-tea-board-subsidy-44221

[23] In 2000, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) made it mandatory for small growers (even those planting tea on less than four hectares of land) to obtain a clearance to ensure they are not violating the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, and a 1996 Supreme Court order to prevent deforestation in Tirap and Changlang districts. The clearance is necessary to register with the Tea Board of India. Though this has not prevented small growers from converting their croplands to tea, they are unable to avail subsidies from the Tea Board of India

[24] Apparently tea plants were already growing wild in the Naga Hills, in Manipur, in Lushai Hills and Burma (Konwar 2017) British discovered tea in Assam. The culture of growing tea was limited to home garden for domestic consumption. The monoculture tea plantation as a cash crop is a recent phenomenon

[25] WWW.One India.Com News: "Naga Tea Fetches Record Price", August 28, 2006.

[26] Livelihood and Employment Opportunities in Nagaland: Sectoral Issue: A thematic Report, A GoI UNDP project 2009, p-24.

high production, quality tea from fresh land at lower cost. As has been shown price of tea for producers is controlled by TNC through the near monopsony at auction level.

Conclusion

Global capital and its onslaught on land continues to destroy the fabric of rural society, be it communal or private, traditional or formal lands. Vast areas around colonial tea estates there is a change of attitude of people with (non-human) nature. In this form of primitive accumulation, land that were under customary rights of indigenous people, like common land, fallow forest land had been brought under the production of export oriented commodity production. In colonial period its was done in coercion by directly occupying land and creating enclaves. In neo liberal era it is happening through persuasion. The objective of promoting free trade by international financial institutions under the project of neo-liberalism is nothing but the further intensification of the international division of labour in Agriculture, where tropical countries are conditioned to produce the exotic primary product for rich advanced countries (Patnaik and Moyo , 2011). In country after country in the developing world, there has been a diversion of land under the paradigm of free trade, from food grain production to export crops.

The state, in support of the Capital, encourages individualization of land and challenged the historical process of collective ownership of land and other natural resources in the hills of NEI. Plantation has been encouraged in place of the biodiverse form of food production that prevailed in Northeast India's hill states. It is not only tea, various export-oriented crops are encouraged to produce in land which were earlier used for agricultural and livelihood practices that ensured food sovereignty. Land inequality is increasing and market dependency is increasing with change in land use. With the rise of commercial plantation production of essential food crops has declined.

British neither understood itinerant form of agriculture and rural Commons and non their intrinsic relation with natural resources like forest. in semi tribal and tribe societies and saw them with a view of revenue generation only subjected to Primitive accumulation. Liberalised nation state did not critique such notions. In fact once the nation state enters in a neoliberal age, it also creates dubious discourse of development to bring in constitutionally protected lands under the ambit of global capital by projecting export oriented commodity production as development. Same can be said about political institutions for local self-governance. Who failed to understand resist, in most of the cases, such onslaught of capita. After the shift from sustainable agriculture to commercial plantation a corresponding change occurred in the ways people understand land and its use. This shows why intellectual self-reliance in global south or former colonised countries is important. Which shows that without intellectual self-reliance, local self-governance and constitutional protection of customary rights over land and resources is a misnomer.

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