

Tea Tribes of Assam Through Time: A Historical Review of Social, Cultural and Economic Transformation from the Colonial Era to the Present

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Abstract

The history of Assam's Tea Tribe communities began with the expansion of colonial plantations and the movement of workers from several regions of India. Over time, their descendants formed diverse communities whose social and economic lives became closely connected to tea gardens, although their identities cannot be reduced to plantation work. This qualitative historical review examines migration, labour, community formation, education, culture, livelihoods and recent welfare measures. It draws on historical scholarship, government programme documents, legislation and a performance audit. The evidence shows substantial changes in legal protection and in the range of opportunities available to some households. Scholarships, training, maternal health support, employment reservation and recent residential land-settlement measures address needs that were not recognised within colonial plantation arrangements in the same way. However, the existence of a programme does not establish its effectiveness or reach. Research identifies shortcomings in wage and welfare implementation, while evidence on long-term educational and occupational mobility remains limited. The history of Tea Tribe communities is therefore best understood as a process of transformation in which continuing connections to the plantation economy coexist with expanding opportunities for education, livelihood diversification, political participation and residential security.

Keywords: Tea Tribe communities; Assam; Colonial plantations; Migration; Plantation labour; Socioeconomic transformation; Adivasi identity.

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I. Introduction

The tea gardens of Assam were established by people brought from different parts of colonial India. Since the nineteenth century, the planters have been importing labour from what is now Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and other parts of India. The workers and their descendants came from different linguistic and social backgrounds, but common experiences of labour and plantation settlement gradually created a shared history that is now often referred to as the history of the "Tea Tribes" (Comptroller and Auditor General of India [CAG], 2024; Magar & Kar, 2016).

This is one of the reasons why migration became so important: the sheer expansion of the tea industry created a sustained demand for labour. According to Behal (2006), Assam Valley tea production increased from approximately 6 million pounds in 1872 to 75 million pounds in 1900. During this expansion, plantations became not only workplaces but also settlements where employment, housing and family life were closely linked. Recruitment through contractors and 'sardars' often relied on village and kinship networks, while indenture and plantation discipline limited the choices and mobility of many workers (Behal, 2006, 2010; Sen, 2010).

Independence changed the legal framework governing plantation labour. The Plantations Labour Act, 1951 established employer responsibilities regarding health and welfare, while the Assam Tea Plantation Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959 provided a state framework for additional support (CAG, 2024; Government of Assam, 1959). More recently, the role of the state has expanded through support for education and health, employment reservation, livelihood programmes and residential land settlement. The effects of these measures, however, have not been uniform across households. As new forms of public support have emerged, the question remains to what extent the historical legacy of the plantation continues to shape the social and economic opportunities available to Tea Tribe communities.

It is therefore important to understand the trajectory of tea garden communities from the colonial period to the present, as their current social conditions cannot be separated from their historical relationship with plantation labour. At the same time, the Tea Tribe communities of Assam today are not the same as the plantation society created under colonial rule. Education, occupational diversification, cultural change, political participation and government intervention have altered their social and economic lives. The present paper therefore examines how tea garden communities in Assam have transformed over time and how the structures and experiences of the plantation past continue to influence their lives in the present.

II. Objectives and Research Questions

The general objective is to examine the social, cultural and economic transformation of Tea Tribe communities in Assam from the colonial period to present through a historical narrative review. Specifically, the paper traces migration and community formation; considers changes and continuities in education, livelihoods, identity and culture; and examines the role and limits of recent welfare and employment policies.

Three questions guide the discussion:

- How have the communities' social, cultural and economic lives changed since colonial rule?
- Which features of plantation life persist alongside new opportunities?
- How have government interventions shaped contemporary conditions, and what can the available evidence establish about their reach?

III. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative historical narrative review** to examine the social, cultural and economic transformation of Tea Tribe communities in Assam from the colonial period to September 2026. The review is limited to Assam and brings together peer-reviewed articles, books, historical and ethnographic studies, theses, government reports, policy documents, official statistics, audit reports and documented community narratives.

Literature was identified through Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Shodhganga and relevant government and institutional sources, including the Census of India, Tea Board of India, Government of Assam, Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Labour and Employment and reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Searches used combinations of terms such as "Tea Tribes" AND Assam, "tea garden workers" AND Assam, "tea plantation workers" AND Assam, along with migration, education, culture, identity, livelihood, welfare and social mobility. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and Assam-specific evidence rather than through a systematic-review protocol.

The analysis combines historical periodisation of the colonial, post-independence and contemporary periods with thematic analysis of labour and migration, community formation, education, culture and identity, livelihoods, welfare and social mobility. Findings were synthesised narratively rather than through statistical pooling or numerical quality scoring. Quantitative data from official sources were used only to provide historical and contemporary context, while the original year and population definitions were retained.

IV. Historical Formation of Tea Tribe Communities in Colonial Assam

The formation of Tea Tribe communities in Assam was closely linked to the expansion of the colonial tea plantation system. As plantations expanded, British planters faced a shortage of local labour and increasingly depended on workers brought from outside Assam. Large numbers of labourers were recruited from present-day Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Bihar and neighbouring regions. They came from different tribal, caste, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their migration gradually became a major source of labour for the tea plantations.

Recruitment was often based on promises that did not reflect the actual conditions of plantation life. Recruiters and intermediaries, including "sardars", approached people in their villages and presented plantation work as an opportunity for regular employment, better wages and improved living conditions. In some cases, the information provided to prospective workers was misleading, and people were not fully aware of the distance they would travel, the nature of plantation work or the restrictions they would face after recruitment. Recruitment therefore involved not only the search for labour but also a process through which vulnerable populations were persuaded to leave their home regions.

The recruitment system became increasingly organised through intermediaries and personal networks. "Sardars" often relied on kinship, caste, village and community relationships to recruit workers. These connections

made it easier to persuade groups of people to migrate together. The recruitment process was therefore embedded in existing social relationships rather than being based only on individual decisions to seek employment. Research on the “sardari” system shows that these intermediaries became an important link between plantation employers and prospective workers, although recruitment practices could also involve exploitation and abuse.

Once recruited, workers entered a highly controlled plantation labour system. Indenture and other forms of contractual regulation restricted their freedom to leave employment, while plantation authorities exercised considerable control over work and everyday life. Workers lived in plantation settlements, commonly known as “coolie lines”, close to the gardens where they worked. Their employment, housing and social lives were therefore closely connected to the plantation. Low wages, demanding work and disciplinary practices created conditions very different from the expectations that had sometimes encouraged migration in the first place.

Over time, the plantations became more than places of employment. Workers settled there with their families and formed communities that extended across generations. People from different regions brought their own languages, religious practices, food traditions, festivals, music, dance and social customs. These practices were maintained, adapted and combined within the plantation environment. At the same time, interaction with surrounding Assamese society introduced new cultural influences. This process gradually produced distinctive social and cultural practices among plantation communities.

The Tea Tribe community therefore did not emerge as a single pre-existing ethnic group that simply migrated to Assam. It developed gradually through migration, plantation labour, settlement and community formation. People with different regional and cultural backgrounds came to share a common experience of plantation life. Over generations, this shared experience contributed to the development of a collective identity that later became associated with the Tea Tribe community. Scholars have also linked this historical experience to the later development of Adivasi consciousness among plantation communities in Assam.

The colonial plantation system consequently shaped not only the economic position of these workers but also their social organisation, settlement patterns and cultural identity. The close connection between work, residence and community life created a social environment that continued across generations. These historical conditions became an important foundation for understanding the social, economic and cultural position of Tea Tribe communities in post-independence Assam.

V. Post-Independence Transformation of Tea Tribe Communities in Assam

The transition to independence did not immediately alter the economic structure of tea plantation communities. Plantation employment remained central to household livelihoods, while the new state gradually introduced legislation and institutions intended to regulate working conditions and expand welfare. The major changes can be traced chronologically through the development of labour protection, welfare institutions, targeted community programmes and, more recently, measures addressing education, employment and land.

Table 1 Major Legislative and Institutional Developments Affecting Tea Plantation Workers and Tea Tribe Communities in Assam

Year	Major development	Relevance to Tea Tribe communities
1951	Plantations Labour Act	Established statutory provisions relating to plantation workers' welfare, including housing, health, sanitation and education.
1959	Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act	Created a welfare fund supporting education, literacy, community development, recreation and subsidiary occupations.
1983–84	Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare	Created a dedicated administrative structure for Tea Tribe and Adivasi welfare in Assam.
2018	Maternal wage compensation scheme	Introduced financial assistance for eligible pregnant women in tea garden areas.
2025–26	Land settlement initiatives	Began providing residential land rights to eligible households living in tea garden labour lines.
2026	Expanded employment reservation	Provided a 3% allocation within the existing OBC/MOBC quota for eligible Tea Tribe and Adivasi candidates in specified Class I and II direct recruitment.

Source: Government of India (1951); Government of Assam, Legislative Department (1959); Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare, Government of Assam; National Health Mission, Assam; Government of Assam (2025, 2026); National Informatics Centre (2026).

These developments marked a gradual expansion of state responsibility beyond the plantation employer. The Plantations Labour Act, 1951 was an important early step in the post-independence transformation of plantation labour. The Act placed welfare responsibilities on plantation employers, including provisions related

to housing, health, sanitation, drinking water and education (Government of India, 1951). This represented a shift from the colonial plantation system towards a statutory framework in which worker welfare became a recognised legal responsibility. The change was significant, although the existence of legal provisions did not necessarily guarantee uniform implementation across plantations.

Assam subsequently developed its own welfare mechanism through the Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959. The Act provided for activities including adult education, literacy, libraries, sports, community education and subsidiary occupations (Government of Assam, 1959). Welfare therefore began to extend beyond the immediate workplace. Education and supplementary livelihoods were recognised as relevant to the wider social development of plantation workers and their families.

A further institutional shift occurred in 1983–84 with the establishment of the Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare. The creation of a dedicated administrative structure reflected the growing recognition of Tea Tribe communities as a social group with needs extending beyond their role as plantation labourers. Welfare interventions subsequently expanded into areas such as scholarships, higher education, technical training, health assistance and other forms of financial support.

Education became particularly important in changing the possibilities available to younger generations. The Directorate's 2026–27 programmes include pre-matric and post-matric scholarships, the Simon Sing Horo Special Post-Matric Scholarship, assistance for ANM/GNM and technical courses, higher-study assistance and support for students who have cleared UPSC or APSC preliminary examinations (Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare, 2026). These programmes indicate a shift from welfare focused primarily on the plantation worker towards interventions that also address the educational and professional aspirations of the next generation.

However, the availability of educational assistance should not be treated as evidence of universal educational mobility. The CAG (2024) identified weaknesses in the implementation and monitoring of welfare programmes and reported educational disadvantages among the workers covered by its audit. The evidence does not establish the educational attainment of all Tea Tribe households in Assam, but it does indicate that access to education remains shaped by factors such as household income, distance from institutions and the need for young people to participate in paid work.

Economic transformation has similarly been uneven. Plantation work continues to provide an important source of household income, but some families have diversified into cultivation, small trade, construction, transport and other forms of employment. Younger generations have also increasingly looked beyond garden labour for educational and occupational opportunities (Magar & Kar, 2016; Sa & Gogoi, 2021). This diversification represents an important change from the plantation-centred livelihood structure, although its extent varies between households and generations. Women's economic participation is particularly important because plantation employment is often combined with domestic and care responsibilities.

Wages provide another way of examining this transformation. The cash component of plantation wages increased over the post-independence period, with successive revisions in 2017, 2018, 2022, 2023 and 2026. The reported daily cash rate reached ₹280 in the Brahmaputra Valley and ₹258 in the Barak Valley from April 2026 (CAG, 2024; Press Trust of India, 2026). These figures, however, represent nominal cash wages and do not by themselves indicate changes in purchasing power, total household income or the value of benefits provided in kind.

Table 2 Historical Daily Cash Wage Rates for Tea Plantation Workers in Assam

Effective period	Brahmaputra Valley	Barak Valley
January 2017	₹137	₹115
March 2018	₹167	₹145
August 2022	₹232	₹210
October 2023	₹250	₹228
April 2026	₹280	₹258

Note: Daily cash wage rates. Historical figures through 2022 are reported by CAG (2024); the 2023 and 2026 revisions are reported by Press Trust of India (2026).

The distinction between the notified wage and what workers actually receive is important. In its audit of 40 tea estates across four labour administration zones, the CAG (2024) found instances where workers were paid below the applicable cash rate during the periods examined. The audit also identified shortcomings in housing, education, health and other welfare provisions. These findings apply to the estates examined and should not be treated as a statewide estimate for all plantations in Assam.

The post-independence period also brought changes in cultural life and public recognition. Tea Tribe communities retained cultural practices associated with their diverse historical origins while adapting to interaction with wider Assamese society. Magar and Kar (2016) describe plantation culture as neither an unchanged survival of migrant traditions nor complete assimilation into Assamese society. Instead, cultural practices developed through continued interaction and adaptation.

Jhumur provides an important example of this process. Gogoi (2022) identifies Jhumur as an expression of Tea Tribe cultural identity and collective memory. Its public visibility has expanded beyond the plantation environment. The **Jhumoir Binandini** programme held in Guwahati in February 2025 brought approximately 8,000 performers together and placed a cultural tradition associated with Tea Tribe and Adivasi communities on a major public platform (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This increased visibility is significant as a form of cultural recognition, although its effects on material conditions cannot be assumed without separate evidence.

More recently, government policy has addressed areas that extend beyond traditional plantation welfare. Current measures include educational scholarships, health assistance, maternal support, employment reservation and land settlement. For example, the 2026 employment order provides a 3% allocation within the existing 27% OBC/MOBC quota for eligible Tea Tribe and Adivasi candidates in specified Class I and II direct recruitment (Government of Assam, Personnel Department, 2026). The provision creates an institutional route towards representation in public employment, although the order itself does not demonstrate how many candidates have ultimately benefited.

Land represents another important dimension of post-independence change. Historically, residence in tea garden labour lines was closely connected to plantation employment. Recent land settlement measures seek to provide greater residential security to eligible households. The first phase of patta distribution under Mission Basundhara 3.0 covered 106 tea gardens across 20 districts in March 2026 (National Informatics Centre, 2026). The initiative is significant because secure residential rights can potentially weaken the historical connection between a family's home and its continued dependence on an estate. However, the long-term effects of land settlement on livelihoods and social mobility require further assessment.

Taken together, the post-independence period shows a gradual expansion of the institutions shaping Tea Tribe life. The plantation remains an important employer and, for many families, a place of residence and access to basic services. Alongside it, education, welfare institutions, labour administration and community organisations have created additional avenues of support and recognition. The transformation has therefore been substantial but uneven. Changes in wages, education, cultural visibility, employment opportunities and land rights have created new possibilities, while the historical dependence on plantation employment and continuing gaps in implementation remain important features of contemporary Tea Tribe life.

VI. Discussion

The central change since the colonial period is that the plantation is no longer the only institution shaping Tea Tribe lives. The estate remains an employer and, for many families, the setting of residence and access to essential services. Alongside it, public education, welfare institutions, labour administration, alternative employment and community organisations have created additional opportunities for social and economic participation. This change, however, has not occurred at the same pace for every household.

Historical evidence helps explain why these changes have not completely removed plantation dependence. Colonial recruitment and control brought labourers into settlements where paid work, housing and family life were closely connected (Behal, 2006, 2010; Sen, 2010). These arrangements continued to influence community life after independence. The expansion of education and welfare has created new possibilities, while occupational diversification has allowed some households to enter cultivation, small trade, construction, transport and other forms of employment (Magar & Kar, 2016; Sa & Gogoi, 2021; Kalita & Choudhury, 2024). However, the available evidence does not support treating this diversification as a uniform transition away from plantation work.

Education illustrates both change and limitation. Government support now extends from school scholarships to technical education, higher studies and assistance for students appearing for civil services examinations. These measures have widened the formal opportunities available to Tea Tribe students. However, the existence of a scholarship does not establish that students can access it, complete their education or obtain employment afterwards. The CAG (2024) identified weaknesses in implementation and monitoring, while available studies do not provide sufficient longitudinal evidence to establish the extent of intergenerational educational mobility across Tea Tribe households.

Economic change shows a similar pattern. Plantation wages have increased in nominal cash terms, with the reported daily cash component rising from ₹137 in the Brahmaputra Valley and ₹115 in the Barak Valley in 2017 to ₹280 and ₹258 respectively from April 2026. These figures demonstrate changes in the notified cash component but do not by themselves establish changes in household living standards. Purchasing power, regularity of employment, statutory benefits and benefits provided in kind also influence the economic position of workers. The CAG's audit of 40 estates found instances of payment below the applicable cash rate and shortcomings in welfare provisions, but these findings relate to the estates examined and cannot be treated as a statewide estimate (CAG, 2024).

Cultural transformation has also involved both adaptation and persistence. Tea Tribe communities have maintained festivals, music, dance, religious practices and other traditions while interacting with wider Assamese

society. Jhumur illustrates this process. It remains associated with community identity and cultural memory, while its presence in major public programmes has increased its visibility (Gogoi, 2022; Magar & Kar, 2016). The participation of approximately 8,000 performers in the Jhumoir Binandini programme in 2025 placed Jhumur on a prominent public platform (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Such recognition demonstrates increased cultural visibility, but it should not be treated as evidence of improvement in material conditions.

Identity has similarly developed beyond the historical experience of plantation labour. The formation of Tea Tribe and Adivasi identity is connected to migration, plantation settlement and shared labour experiences, but contemporary identity also involves questions of recognition, classification, representation and rights (Sa & Gogoi, 2021; Sharma, 2015; Lakra, 2024). Cultural expression and political mobilisation therefore form part of the broader transformation of community life.

Government intervention has become more extensive and diverse over time. Welfare measures now include educational assistance, health support, maternal compensation, public employment reservation and residential land settlement. These interventions demonstrate an expansion of state responsibility beyond the earlier plantation-centred welfare structure. At the same time, the available evidence is stronger for documenting what programmes provide than for establishing who receives them and what changes they produce. For example, the 2026 employment reservation creates a specified route to public employment, but the order does not establish how many Tea Tribe and Adivasi candidates have secured jobs through it. Similarly, the first phase of labour-line land settlement covered 106 tea gardens across 20 districts, but the programme's longer-term effects on residential and livelihood security remain to be established (National Informatics Centre, 2026).

The same distinction applies to health and welfare programmes. Maternal wage compensation, hospital partnerships, scholarships and other schemes specify forms of assistance, but programme documents do not necessarily provide evidence of coverage, regularity of delivery or long-term outcomes. The CAG (2024) findings reinforce the importance of examining implementation rather than assuming that formal policy provision translates directly into household-level change.

Taken together, the evidence answers the three questions guiding this review. Tea Tribe communities have experienced substantial social, cultural and economic change since the colonial period through expanded education, occupational diversification, welfare support, cultural recognition and political participation. At the same time, plantation employment, residential dependence and unequal access to resources remain important features of community life. Government interventions have expanded the range of support and opportunities available, but the evidence is still insufficient to establish the full reach and long-term impact of many recent measures. The transformation is therefore uneven: new opportunities have developed around the plantation structure without completely replacing it.

The evidence base also has limitations. Much recent government material describes scheme design, eligibility and implementation rather than long-term outcomes. The CAG provides important evidence from the estates and programmes included in its audit, but it does not constitute a statewide causal evaluation. Existing studies also tend to focus on particular communities, locations or aspects of Tea Tribe life. These limitations make it difficult to determine the extent of change across all Tea Tribe households in Assam.

VII. Conclusion

The history of Tea Tribe communities in Assam is a history of formation, adaptation and gradual transformation. Their emergence was closely connected to colonial labour migration and plantation settlement, which shaped their economic position, social organisation and cultural identities. After independence, legal protection, welfare institutions, education and new forms of employment gradually expanded the opportunities available to sections of the community.

The central conclusion of this review is that Tea Tribe communities have experienced substantial transformation without a complete departure from the plantation economy. The plantation is no longer the only institution shaping their lives. Education, welfare institutions, alternative employment, political participation and cultural organisations have created new spaces for social and economic mobility. Yet plantation employment, residential dependence and unequal access to resources continue to influence many households.

Government interventions have consequently played an important role in broadening opportunities and addressing historical disadvantages, but the available evidence does not justify assuming that policy provision automatically produces improved outcomes. The distinction between the existence of a programme, its reach and its actual effects remains important. Tea Tribe society in contemporary Assam is therefore better understood as a changing social and economic system in which new opportunities have developed around an enduring plantation structure.

Future research should move beyond documenting the existence of welfare programmes and examine their actual effects on households across generations. Longitudinal studies of education, employment, income, land ownership and women's economic participation would help establish whether recent interventions are producing sustained changes in the lives of Tea Tribe communities. Such evidence is necessary to understand the

extent to which the historical relationship between plantation work, residence and social identity is being transformed in contemporary Assam.

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