

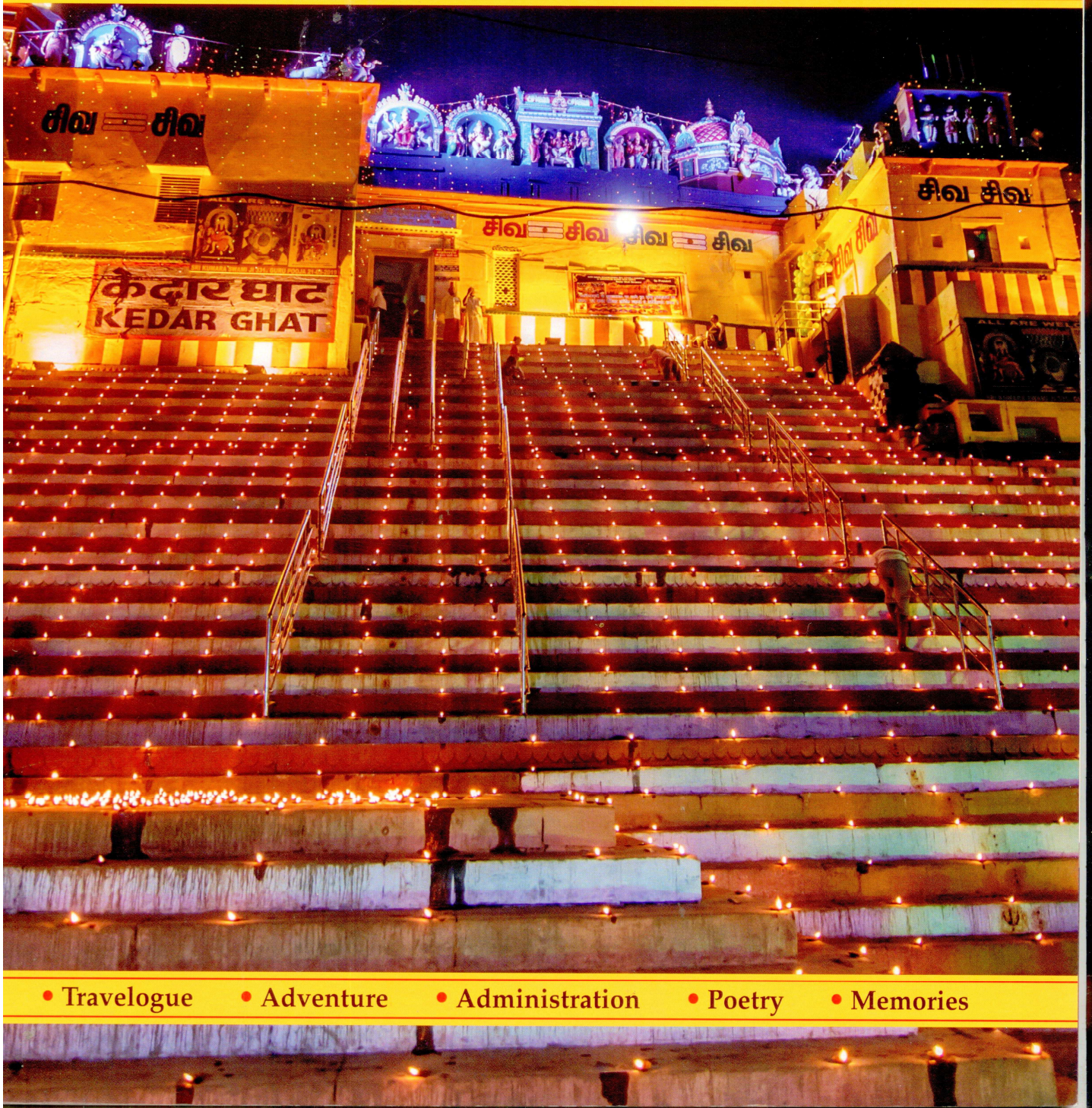
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-Pawan Kumar
IAS (2008)

Assam Tea

*Aa tere sang zara paing badhai jaye
Zindagi baith... tujhe chaay pilani jaye*

(Shamim Abbas)

This is the unique colour of tea's companionship to life. I can't say for sure what the poet's thinking but the truth is that tea is the most commonly used beverage in the world after water. This is something that seems even truer when one is roaming in the tea gardens of Dibrugarh in Assam. Dibrugarh is the largest tea producer in the country, known as the "Tea City of India". Dibrugarh is a perfect blend of natural beauty, tradition and culture. Acres of lush tea estates, some even dating back to the British era, frame the backdrop of this small town, set on the banks of the River Brahmaputra. Dibrugarh acts as the perfect gateway to Assam's tea districts. The districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar collectively account for 50 per cent of India's Assamese tea crop. A drive around Dibrugarh shows fecund tea plantations flanking every road.



The umpteen shades of green in a single expanse of a tea garden are bemusing. The mind kept on looking at the green tea gardens which were running on the tips of the side of the road. It is a gospel truth that regardless of class or community, this beverage is acceptable everywhere- be it a matter of fun, politics or love, to take care of guests or to work in offices, whether it is to relax for a while or to get rid of headaches or to just to quietly celebrate togetherness. The need for tea is everywhere. Go anywhere in the world, tea is found everywhere across the world, each tea as unique as the country in question. Talking of India, it may be Gujarat's Masala Chai or Kashmir Kahawa, Mumbai's 'Tea Chai' or Hyderabad's 'Iranian Tea'. Assam, Darjeeling, Kangra or Nilgiri are the places where tea is produced with its local technique and distinctive fragrance.

How tea came into the world as a beverage is also a strange anecdote. It is said that Chinese



Emperor Shen Nong was drinking hot water while sitting on the lawn in 2737 BC when some leaves from tea bushes came flying and fell in hot water. When the king tasted it, he liked it very much. When the king inquired about the leaves, he found that these leaves belonged to the tea bushes. The earliest mention of tea is found here. It is believed that Indian Buddhist monks started the tea tradition in China 2000

years ago. A Buddhist monk named Zen broke and chewed the leaves of these bushes in an attempt to gain energy without falling asleep. These leaves kept him revived and enabled him to stay awake. These examples also provide evidence about the tea tradition. The first mention of the tea-drinking tradition is found in the year 350 A.D. Later the practice of tea would have started in China. However, from the business point of view, in 1610 some high traders took tea from China to Europe and gradually it became the most loved beverage of the whole world.

Tea production in India takes place in many provinces, but tea is grown in Assam in abundance. The tradition of tea production in Assam is two hundred years old. In 1815, the attention of some British travellers came to the shrubs growing in Assam. The leaves of these bushes were used by the local tribal caste Singpho as beverages. In 1823 Robert Bruce, an employee of the company become interested in these bushes. A local businessman named Maniram Dutta Barua told Bruce about the tradition of using tea as a beverage by the Singpho tribe. It



was from here that Bruce took information about these leaves and discovered that tea was produced in Assam. Bruce pursued his quest. He sent the leaves and seeds of these bushes to the Botanical Gardens in Kolkata. While this was being researched, Bruce died. Bruce was followed by his brother Charles Bruce. A few days later, when the company got permission to make tea,

Charles Bruce was given the job to promote the plant. He invited two Chinese manufacturers to Assam and learnt the method of tea production from them to create an environment for tea production.

In 1832, the company asked Captain Jenkins to submit a report on the resources of Assam. Charles Bruce made a report before this committee to identify tea as a resource. After this, the company understood the importance of tea. China had a monopoly on tea till now. Later, a committee was formed to recommend the company on commercial matters of importance regarding tea. It included seven citizens, three



businessmen, two local representatives and Dr Wallich of the Botanical Garden. Charles Bruce thus succeeded in his efforts. Later Charles Bruce was also made Superintendent of Government Tea Gardens.

Tea plant production in India started in Lakhimpur in 1834 as a trial by the British Government. The production started following the recommendation of a committee constituted by the Governor-General of India, Lord Batik. After this, tea gardening was started in Assam in 1835. In 1839, a company was established in the name of Assam Tea Company. As a result of government encouragement, by the time 1862 rolled around, 160 tea gardens in the Assam region had started producing tea under this company. In 1859, another company was established in the name of Jorhat Tea Company. Assam's tea cultivation was eventually monopolized by the company. Charles Bruce prepared 46 boxes of tea in 1837 and sent it first to Calcutta and later to England. However, a large amount of this tea went bad in transport and only a small amount of tea reached England. Despite this, it was believed in England that Assam's tea was able to compete with China-produced tea.

Presently, Assam is considered to be the largest tea growing region in the world. Its climate and its location on the banks of the Brahmaputra is very favourable for tea



production and the taste of tea here is easily distinguishable from other teas. The climate of Assam is best for tea production. If we talk about the environment of tea, its plant grows in shade and grows very fast. Temperatures ranging from 20 ° C to 26 ° C are considered suitable for this plant. Cold wave and hail cause the most damage to the tea plant. Rainfall averaging 150 to 180 cm of rainfall creates ideal conditions. In this situation, the leaves of tea can be broken four to five times from the plants grown. Since tea leaves are damaged by water logging, drains are made in tea gardens to shield and drain water. Assam is the only region where tea is grown on the plains. Tea is sown in October-November. From April, the season for picking leaves from these plants begins. Plants are first grown in beds, when they grow a little, they are planted elsewhere. These bushes are pruned from time to time. Which brings out soft leaves again. It is extracted from a plant called *Camellia sinensis*. There are also many types of tea - black tea, semi-fermented oolong tea, green tea which is unripe and white tea which is made from plant buds.

It takes a lot of labour to choose and break tea leaves. Tea leaves are plucked one by one with tenderness, so there is a demand for female workers. Although the prevalence of machines is also large, even today there is a high demand for hand-broken tea leaves. Living quarters are



made for these workers in each tea garden. In terms of production, Assam yields 1500 kg per hectare. Apart from Assam, it is also produced in Bengal, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala all over India. Assam tea is



famous for its sharp aroma and colour. Darjeeling tea is known for its taste. It is also pertinent to mention that Darjeeling tea is considered the best in the whole world. A large number of tea gardens are seen in Assam, especially in the Upper Assam region. These gardens spread far and wide are called T-estates.

There are tea making factories close to these tea gardens. Since independence, a large number of Marwari communities have established their dominance over the tea gardens of Assam. The plantations which were formerly owned by the East India Company have now been taken over by the Marwari community. There is growing conflict in these regions as tea garden workers have raised the issue of an increase in their wages. India is a major exporter of tea. In terms of figures, in 1960-61, India exported 124 crores which increased to 2034 crores in 2007-08. Tea is exported from India to about 80 countries. Only 25 per cent of the total production of the country is exported, the rest is consumed in the country itself. However, the global tea export figures show that India's tea exports were 37.8 per cent in 1955, which is

now 11.7 per cent. Tea from China, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka continues to challenge Indian tea. It is noteworthy that 27 per cent of the world's total production is produced in India. Currently, more than 1 million workers are engaged in tea

production. More than four lakh workers are engaged in Assam alone. In terms of production, more than 40 per cent of the total national production of tea is in Assam.

There are more than 650 tea gardens in the Brahmaputra river valley. Two types of tea in Assam are grown- Orthodox and CTC. Orthodox simply means tea with leaves. The name CTC comes from the technique by which these tea leaves are manufactured i.e. crushing, tearing and curling of tea leaves. This method was introduced by William McCare in 1930. The granulated tea commonly used in households is the CTC. The tea made directly by breaking the leaves is called green tea. However, some innovations have emerged here. Tea makers now mix basil, ashwagandha etc. with leaves which gives it the brand of herbal tea. Surprisingly, tea with names like English Breakfast, Irish Breakfast is also made from Assam's Black Tea.



Remember, when you are having a cup of tea, you are not only drinking a beverage but enriching an ancient culture and paying homage to the labour of the tea garden workers who lovingly grow them. □