



The Indigenous Noctes and the Tea Saga, with the Advent of Reverend Miles Bronson

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Abstract: The Tai-Khampti and Singpho tribes have been consuming tea since the dawn of time. A British army commander and East India Company official named Colonel Latter first reported about an indigenous tea type consumed by the Tai-Khampti and Singpho people in 1815 and in 1823 the tea was introduced to Robert and Charles Bruce by Maniram Dutta Baruah. This article stretches around the green gold camellia sinensis and the emergence of Miles Bronson and his input on tea for the Nocte people, his expeditions and how his attention turned towards the Noctes, who lived close to Joypyur and whose field seemed more promising to him.

Keywords: Tea, Missionary, Noctes.

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Introduction

The initial recorded visit of the Christian missionaries to northeast India were two Jesuit missionaries named Frs. Stephen Cacella and John Cabral in 1626, who were probably in hunt for a way to go to China and Tibet. They made it as far as Pandu, which was the boundary between the Mughal and Ahom kingdoms, a few miles west of Guwahati. Merely as a prelude to encroach on China from the West, the American Baptist Mission took over Assam in 1836. From a missionary perspective, the strategic value of Assam's location as a route to Tibet and Western China was recognized. Adjacent to what was thought to be a feasible Pass from India to China was another significant feature. As the Board at Home had long wished to spread Christianity in the Northeast and to utilize them as a gateway to access China via inland ways, as China's seaports were then restricted to foreigners, that is why the American Baptist Mission of Burma chose to enter Assam. Meanwhile, Guetzlaff's

book, 'Journal of Two Voyages along the coast of China in 1831 and 1832,' which was published in 1834, further ignited American enthusiasm in establishing a Mission station in China. In the words of Guetzlaff, the missionary endeavours would be met with resistance by the Chinese and The American Baptist Mission Home Board believed that because the beaches of eastern China are heavily guarded, that is why the entry may occur from the living in Bangkok. However, the Home Board looked to Burma as a potential base for a China Mission when Jones advised them that such an approach could not be carried out through Thailand. This was precisely at that moment when the American Baptist Mission in Burma got an official invitation to serve in upper Assam in early 1835 from Captain Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam. They viewed it as an opportunity for entry into China (Sangma, 23-24:1987).¹

The Tai- Khampti, Singpho and the Nocte people were well acquainted with tea the green gold from the age-old period. A. Charlton, the lieutenant stationed at Sadiya also informed Captain Jenkins, the agent to the Governor General about Singphos and Khamptis, the two indigenous groups, who had a habit of consuming an infusion made from leaves that they had boiled and sun-dried² And with the appearance of Bronson it helped to find out the way to the Nocte hills where the tea was found flourishing wildly.

Research Methodology

This paper is a historical analysis of the advent of Miles Bronson to the North-East India and his contributions for the Noctes and Tea. The paper is based on both Primary and Secondary sources. Primary sources are collected from the Assam state archives and National archives of India. Secondary sources are collected from different missionary magazine volumes, books, and articles. This paper has attempted to cover the history of the glorious history of the Noctes and their indigenous wild tea and the contributions of Bronson.

The Advent of Bronson to the North- East

In a letter to Charles Trevelyan, a civil officer in Bengal, Captain Jenkins, the Governor-General's Agent, and Commissioner of Assam, invited the English Baptists to carry out Christian service in the north-east district of Assam occupied by two tribes, the Khamtis and the Singpho's. The Baptist Missionary Society of Calcutta's secretary, William H. Pearce, notified Captain Jenkins that the American

Baptist Mission of Burma could be interested in taking on the new project, even though the Baptist Missionary Society was not in a position to launch one. This seemed like a workable answer to Captain Jenkins, who valued Adoniram Judson much as a pioneer American Baptist missionary in Burma. As a result, Captain Jenkins stated to the American Baptist Mission in Burma that the mission would be under the Government Protection. Capt. Jenkins has been described as a ‘man of activity, intelligence, and benevolent feeling, who’s personality and efforts stand very high in the eyes of the Government,’ and it appears that the Home Board in America was moved by both the Burma Missionaries’ enthusiasm and the invitation from Jenkins. Two of the Burma Mission’s missionary families, the Nathan Browns and Oliver Cutters, were sent to the Sadiya Station. Jenkins promised to pay the cost of setting up a printing press with Rs. 2000, with the first Rs. 1000 and the remaining amount after a year if the installation functioned well. They took three boats in total—one for each family, one served as a floating kitchen and the third one did the work for storage facility. The boats measured around five or six feet in width and twenty or thirty feet in length (Brown, 111:1890)³ Thus, they travelled until they arrived at their destination through extreme hardships which were nearly intolerable. On March 23, 1836, they successfully reached Sadiya, which was at that point completely in turmoil. (Sangma, 29:1890)⁴

To assist Nathan and Cutter, Miles Bronson and Jacob Thomas were sent as associate missionaries, they reached Calcutta in April, 1837. They left Calcutta on 26th April, 1837. When the monsoon arrived, they began their arduous and lengthy voyage up the Brahmaputra valley. ⁵At that time, the river’s current would often flow in erratic whirlpools, bringing branches and debris from crumbling banks, jeopardizing any type of native vessel that was traveling up the river. The initial part of their journey till Guwahati was successful with sound health but in their second phase of the journey, tragic incident haunted them in the remaining journey. As they advanced, the river current grew to the point that the boat carrying them was unable to move further and Bronson got contracted with malaria and were forced to dock just below the mouth of the Dibru River in a low, unhealthy forest. Thomas headed to Sadiya, which was just a day’s voyage away, in a tiny boat to provide medical aid.to Bronson. Two enormous trees fell on Thomas’s boat while he was just three hours away from Sadiya. The two boatmen managed to get away, but Thomas got trapped and got drowned to death on his way to fetch medical assistance for Bronson. Thomas’s death was a devastating blow to the mission. Bronson with his

wife and Mrs. Thomas reached Sadiya on 15th July, 1837. In addition, they constantly were in the risk of hostile raids by Singphos and the Khamtis. The ongoing conflicts severely restricted their activity and dashed their aspirations of gaining acceptance among the hill tribes. The loss of, their daughter, totally disturbed Bronsons state of mind. Following a full week of translating, preaching, and tending to the ill family, Brown spent a Sunday evening visiting their daughter's burial. He arrived to the horrifying discovery that their daughter's grave had been dug up and the coffin was on display. He struggled hard to convince and get some of his workers to assist him in covering the grave before dusk hit. The missionaries continued their work to the best of their abilities despite all these depressing encounters and setbacks. Jaipur, a tiny military station, was chosen based on recommendations made by C.A. Bruce, the British commander who was in charge of the company's experimental tea plantations. In April of 1838, the Bronson family moved to Joypur to work among the Singphos along with Mrs. Thomas where their accommodation was provided. (Sangma, 35:1987)⁶

Tea and the Noctes

Ever since the inception of time tea was known as Khelap or Phalap in Nocte language. For the first time, in 1776, British botanist Sir Joseph Banks suggested that tea could be produced in India. Robert Kyd, who created the botanical garden in Kolkata in 1787, started to experiment with tea in India in 1780, using Chinese tea seedlings. Several decades later, in 1815, British army commander Colonel Latter, according to his reports the Tai-Khampti and the Singpho indigenous communities collected a native tea variety and consumed it with oil and garlic.⁷ The world was previously unaware of the native tea growing in the jungles of the Nocte and Singpho countries. Lieutenant A. Charlton, who was stationed at Sadiya, also provided Captain Jenkins, the Governor General's agent, with information on the two indigenous communities, the Singphos and Khamptis, about their custom of consuming an infusion prepared from sun-dried and cooked leaves. (Revenue Report 1835)⁸

Reverend Miles Bronson's attention was drawn to the Noctes who resided in the surrounding areas of Joypur, besides the singphos. As the Noctes were seemed to have a more promising field to the Noctes and decided to dedicate all his focus to the Noctes. Concerned about Noctes' initial encounter with an outsider, Bronson persuaded his family to wait in Joypur before setting off on January 7, 1839, for Namsang, with a rubber tent, a few presents, and an interpreter. Bronson had long

wished to set up a mission station among the Noctes. But after undertaking the mission, he discovered that this endeavour was harder than he had anticipated. It did not take long to realize that the hills were inaccessible, roads were non-existent. The routes that the aboriginal people took were not intended for outsiders, making it almost challenging for the missionary to perform any lengthy visits among the villages. Upon arriving in the Namsang area, Miles Bronson recorded the following exact entry in his diary: 'The village approach is frequently meticulously adorned with bamboos, jackfruit trees, and mangoes. Beneath the shade of these groves are small houses that conceal or drape the remains of their deceased.' The frontier tribes at the time held the Company men in low regard since, to them, they were all white men and it made no difference if they were British or American. As anticipated, the Namsangias prevented Bronson from entering the chieftom right away, believing him to be a spy sent by the Company to gather data prior annexing their land. As a result, he had to pitch their tent next to the chieftom and wait with the interpreter. (Sangma, 61:1992)⁹

Bronson was granted entry by the Chief's Council, following a span of seven days. When Bronson was called before the chief, he explained that his mission was to become fluent in their language to preach the messages of the gospel. By giving the Chief presents and relics, Bronson won the Chief's trust. Bronson was able to communicate with the Namsangias in broken Assamese since they understood the language from their commerce with the Ahoms. He gained the trust of the Namsangias, and the Chief even let his two sons teach Bronson their Nocte language. (Nocte Digest)¹⁰ He relocated his family to Namsang permanently in 1840. It was a difficult journey of Bronson and his family from Jaipur to Namsang and they took the journey on elephants provided by C.A Bruce. Initially, the noctes were seen wary of the invader but later he was successful in meeting with some of the Nocte people from the Namsang Village. The Noctes are counted among one of the major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Before Indian independence, the Noctes were divided into several chieftoms, such as Bordurias, Panidurias, Borkhunma or Borkoorma and the term "nocte" was first named after the Indian Independence. The districts of Tirap and portions of Changlang are home to the Nocte Tribe. They found are also found in some parts of Assam in Sivsagar and in Joypur in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. (Lowang, 11:2022)¹¹

His mission was supported by the Mission Home Board and the British Officials of that area. The commissioner of Assam Francis Jenkins as well as Charles

Bruce supported Bronson's mission and made donations of Rs-1200-Rs. 500. Ruth, Bronson's wife wrote on her journal about the visit of Bronson to the tea gardens of the Noctes which was located on a one-day journey and these tea gardens were not cultivated by the Noctes, the tea grew naturally in the distant hills of the Noctes. (Baptist Missionary Magazine, 1841, p.319)¹² All these events inspired Miles Bronson to teach and share the knowledge of tea cultivation among the Noctes. He wanted to aid them in the art and knowledge of manufacturing tea. The Noctes were seen to be suspicious about the new endeavour, in the initial phase they were reluctant to venture into the tea trade. According to the noctes, they have always survived by using the salt that God provided them, thus this task fits them very well. In response Bronson further suggested them that they can form a small village on the tea area out of the several villages that were connected to them, the members of which need to do the work and will obtain a portion of the profit, they responded by stating that '*we gave the tea to the Ber Sahab (Charles Bruce), let him do with what he pleases as far as we have salt why do we want the tea.*' (Barpujari, 522-529:1971).¹³

Jenkins recommended Bronson's proposal to the government for permission and assistance in funding after being motivated and inspired by the groundbreaking work among the Nocte people. The government acknowledged Miles Bronson's achievement among the Noctes. The request to provide funding for the Namsang project aligns with the principles that have guided the government's actions up to this point: providing support to organizations that publicly profess missionary beliefs. However, the government allowed to spend up-to hundred rupees per month for the enhancement of the Noctes. Bronson was the first Christian missionary to settle and start a mission among the Noctes, but from the initial phase of his advent odds were too high against him. After his shift to Namsang with his family, his entire family fall sick and Bronson was also not spared. Unfortunately, for the majority of the time, Bronson and his family remained miserably unwell. The lack of medical assistance made it clear that staying in the hill would jeopardize not only his health but also his ability to serve as a missionary in the future. Consequently, Bronson was devastated to have to uproot himself and depart after a brief eight-month stay in the hills. He wrote that they weep and mourned as they left the place, devoid of health, and no one to continue the labours of love among these dying folks. (Sangma, 63:1992)¹⁴

Tea was referred to as Phalap in Miles Bronson's work, *A Spelling work and Vocabulary in English, Assamese, Singpho, and Naga*, 1839. With the formation of tea committee, the forests of Joypur town were cleared for the establishment of

Namsang and Hukanjuri tea garden, presently in Assam's Dibrugarh district. The forests were cleared with the aid of groups of wild elephants were trained to topple trees that were as much as twenty-five feet. And these lands belonged to the chiefs of Namsang and Borduria villages and it was cleared as per Bruce's instruction. Bruce was well acquainted with the place; he was succeeded in cleansing their suspicion and was able to make the Namsangians and Borduarias agree to work for the Assam Company. After the tea got successfully flourished Charles Bruce sent consignment of forty-six chests of tea to the Tea committee, eight chests of tea weighed more than one-hundred and fifty kg were sent to London for auction on 10 January, 1839. (Lowang, 2022, pp.16-17)¹⁵ Bruce had successfully located one hundred and twenty sites bearing the native tea, the most of which were in the Nocte hills. (Ukkers, 144:1935)¹⁶

Conclusion

Tea being indigenous to the people of Tai-Khampti, Singpho and the Noctes which was much later when the world came to know about it and it became the most commercially viable commodity. This was not feasible without the contributions of Maniram Dewan, the Nocte and the Singpho chiefs, the Bruce brothers, and the American Baptist Missionary. It was accomplished through several expeditions, experiments sending out deputations in search for wild tea plants in the Muttok, Singpho countries, and the Nocte Hills finding tea tracts, and sending the tea seeds to the Botanical Garden of Calcutta, which subsequently confirmed that the tea leaf, or *Camelia Sinensis* is native to Assam.

Notes

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