

## AN OUTLINE OF TEA ASSOCIATIONS IN NORTH BENGAL

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**ABSTRACT:** Tea plantation industry in colonial North Bengal was started both by the European tea planters at first and the Indian tea planters at a later stage. The European tea gardens both in Darjeeling hill, Terai and Jalpaiguri Duars were managed and controlled by the white tea men associations such as Duars Planters Association, Darjeeling Planters Association. These associations have grown up to safeguard their own interests and sometime to assist the employers in time of need. The Indians did not get entry there. This resulted in setting up the Indian planters own associations such as Indian Tea Planters Association, Terai Indian Planters Association which worked as a umbrella to safeguard the interests of the Indian tea planters. After the partition of India, the European association became Indianised and the Marwari traders took prime role in such tea associations. Unfortunately this phase of tea industry is still remaining obscure. Hence an attempt has been made here to write the history of tea associations in colonial North Bengal.

**KEYWORDS:** Calcutta, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Tea planters Association, Bengali tea planters, Marwari traders, partition of India

### INTRODUCTION

#### **An Outline of Tea Associations in North Bengal**

The formation of the Indian Tea Districts Association in London in 1879 had made it more necessary that there should be a corresponding body in India. The Indian Tea Association Calcutta was the brain child of A. Wilson of Jardine Skinner & Company and D. Cruickshank of Dunlop & Company. In a meeting took place in Calcutta on 18<sup>th</sup> May 1881 under the president ship of A.B. Inglis Dunlop & Company, decision was taken on the subject of the formation of an Indian Tea Association in Calcutta. A provisional committee was appointed to frame rules relating the Bonus Rules, re – engagement of time – expired Coolies, sanitary condition of

garden and so on. The first honorary secretary was D. Cruickshank. Later G.M. Barton became secretary of the Association. Being observed the importance of the Association in tea world, a large number of tea gardens in North Bengal showed their interest to join the Association and consequently, by 1884 a good number of gardens expanding in Darjeeling and Terai region became its members. Tea in Dooars in contemporary period was in its infancy but one Dooars garden joined the Association in 1884. By 1885, however, membership of Dooars garden continued to grow incessantly. It was decided that the Indian Tea Association and all other tea associations should be administered under the aegis of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. Thus in the year 1885 the Indian Tea

Association Calcutta became the member of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. The first member on behalf of Indian Tea Association in Bengal Chamber of Commerce was Mr. Barton who served the Indian Tea Association as its secretary for a long period. In this way the tea industry in north – east India derived the benefit of the wider experience of collective British business. In 1894 the Indian Tea Districts Association London proposed that the Calcutta and London Association be formed into one Indian Tea Association having it branches both in Calcutta and London (Griffiths, 1967) <sup>1</sup>.

The tea planters of Darjeeling hill from the very beginning were individualistic and showed little interest to such organisation than those of Cachar and Sylhet. The incessant request of the Indian Tea Association Calcutta to the Darjeeling tea planters to form organisation proved no result. Finally a Darjeeling – Dooars sub – committee was formed in 1892 and the tea planters of Darjeeling district formed their own association ‘Darjeeling Planters Association’ (DPA) in the same year. The first general meeting of the association was held in 1893 to discuss the problems of tea estates in Darjeeling district. This association was finally got its affiliation to the Indian Tea Association Calcutta under the tutelage of Mr. Irwin, the then president of ‘Darjeeling Planters Association’ in the year 1908. It was decided that prior to inform the Government on any matter relating tea industry, the Darjeeling planters at first would communicate with Indian Tea Association and ‘endeavour to attain co – operation as possible’. In this

context the main credit went to the chairman of Indian Tea Association who always endeavoured to set up a cordial relation with the ‘Darjeeling Planters Association’.

In 1900 the Indian Tea Association Calcutta made an attempt to cement up the relation with the tea districts of North Bengal. This resulted in the formation of a sub – committee to deal with the matters of the Jalpaiguri Dooars and the Darjeeling district. Proposal was further assumed to appoint a European barrister as the branch secretary of Indian Tea Association in tea districts of North Bengal. Unfortunately the proposal did not work as per month salary for this post was comprehensively low (Rs 200 a month). As a consequence, this post was fulfilled by such a personage who was formerly a tea planter. In 1915 the committee of the Indian Tea Association made an attempt to convert the district associations of Darjeeling and Dooars into branches of the Indian Tea Association. Attempt was further made to introduce uniform constitutions for all branches and associations but the attempt did not work properly. In august 1941, the ‘Darjeeling Planters Association’ recommended that the time had arrived for action to be taken to compensate the labour forces of the tea gardens in Darjeeling district on account of the increase in the cost of living and this was accepted unanimously by the General Committee of Indian Tea Association, Calcutta. The committee also expressed their proposal that compensation should be given to the supervisory staffs of gardens in Darjeeling district on account of the increase in the cost of living. Towards the end of the year the

Dooars Planters' Association also accepted the same proposal to grant compensation for the increased cost of living to the workers of tea gardens in the Dooars (ITA proceedings, 1941)<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond this institutional activity, the 'Darjeeling Planters Association' played a key role in fostering the cultural spirit in Darjeeling hill. The first hill men's sports meet was organised by the tea planter's association in 1885 during *Dussera* festival. This association also took prime role in promoting elementary education among the children of coolies. Mr. Blad the then president of the 'Darjeeling Planters Association' was the key figure in this respect (Dewan, 2008). After 1947 the 'Darjeeling Planters Association' was finally dissolved and formed as a sole independent association namely the Darjeeling Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA) under the chairmanship of S.K. Bhasin. In 1957 the Darjeeling Enquiry Committee appointed by the Government of West Bengal reported about the existence of 55 schools in the tea gardens under the Darjeeling Branch of Indian Tea Association (De, 1969).

The 'Terai planters' Association'(TPA), a purely European managed body and branch of the 'Darjeeling Planters Association' (DPA) came into being at Bengdubi in order to run the European managed tea gardens properly. This association have grown up to safeguard their own interests and sometime to assist the employers in time of need. The 'Terai planters' Association' under the chairmanship of Mr. G.P. Mepherston in the year 1935 approached the other four association of North Bengal to bring uniformity in labour rules (ITPA

proceedings, 1936). Mr. Robertson, Mr. Cox were few eminent president of the association who overwhelmingly ruled the tea industry of the whole Terai region. Both of them had good relation with Indian tea planters such as T.P. Banarjee, Kusum Dutta. Mr. Cox along with Mr. George Mehbart the then Vice – president of Terai Planters Association started the ware fair for the first time at Siliguri. T.P. Banarjee, President of Terai Indian Planters Association (TIPA) and Sishir Gupta SDO (Sub – Divisional Officer) of Siliguri helped them very much to make the process success. Mr. Cox was the president and key figure behind the formation of Siliguri Sports Association (TPA proceedings, 1936). After independence the association was finally dissolved and reconstituted as the Terai Branch Indian Tea Association (TBITA). In the turmoil period of Indo – Chinese war (1962), the association was closed for a few years and with the annulment of the war the association further came back to its prior place at Bengdubi (office, TBITA, Bengdubi).

The Dooars Planters' Association (DPA) was formed in 1878, just four years after the beginning of tea cultivation in the district. Till 1917 the association was purely a European affair – the member gardens were European – owned, the managerial staff was European. But from the annual general meeting of 1911 one or two distinguished Indians of the Jalpaiguri administrative district were always invited to attend as visitors (DPA Report, 1917). In 1917 Mr. Travers invited Indian – owned gardens to join the Association. To avoid the European planters misusing the franchise he also asked the Indian gardens to

elect a representative to the Association executive. A.C. Sen was elected that year (Majumder, 1992). The situation changed in 1950 because the Indian Tea Association (ITA) put it: "whether we like it or not, further legislation will be imposed on us and it is better for your interests to be guided by one parent Association with its various branches as part and parcel of it". The question of negotiations with trade unions was also referred to.

However, in spite of shortage of European manpower during World War I and II the British – owned gardens did not engage Indian managerial staff. After World War Second especially in 1946 a demobilized emergency commission officer of the Indian Air Force, Ratan Lal Dasgupta was given the post of an assistant manager. Two years later P.K. Roy was taken in and from 1954 Indianisation in a regular way has proceeded. In the year 1948 a paid whole time secretary was appointed and Brigadier F.H. Stevens was the key figure of 'Dooars Planters Association' activities for a long period. Ratan Lal Dasgupta in 1969 became the first Indian chairman and though there were one or two European Chairmen after him for several past years the Chairman have been all Indians (Centenary Souvenir, DBITA, 1979). The Dooars Planter's Association thereupon dissolved itself and became the Dooars Branch Indian Tea Association in 1950. In short the greatest change was the replacement of British planters by Indians. However, the transition was smooth (Ghosh, 1970). In the initial stages the Dooars Planters' Association had no fixed headquarters and moved from place to

place depending upon where the Chairman's garden was. After the Association became a branch of the Indian Tea Association, fixed headquarter station was established at Binnaguri from 1950 onwards. Now the European elements of D.P.A. are nearly absent, as after the freedom of India, the non – Indian elements have been replaced by Indian industrialists where all members do not live out of India (Annual Proceedings, DBITA, 1950). In 1951 the Darjeeling Planters Association followed the suit and became a branch of the Indian Tea Association.

The dazzling appearance of the Bengali entrepreneurs in the tea industry of North Bengal was challenged by the European planter's tumultuously (DPA Report, 1917). The dominance of modern industry by European business houses before the First World War was supported and reinforced by a whole set of administrative, economic and political arrangements within India. The European businessmen very consciously set themselves apart from native businessmen; they claimed a cultural and racial affinity with the British rulers of India which was denied to the Indians who might compete with them (Bagchi, 1972). All this afforded European businessmen a substantial and systematic advantage over their Indian rivals in India. This position was also same in Jalpaiguri tea enterprise. It is true that since the beginning of the twentieth century the Indian tea gardens were enrolled as members of the monopolistic "Duars Planters' Association (DPA)" because during the period it was not easy for a native planter to avail the privilege of the War time profit market without taking

the membership of this Association. With the outbreak of the First World War in Europe there was a rapid expansion of the market as the war office in Britain began making large purchases. This situation was surely culminated in the process of unprecedented augmentation of Indian membership in "Duars Planters' Association (DPA)". Since then the number of Indian planters as a member began to rise surprisingly. In the year 1917 it was rose up to ten. A.C. Sen was the first Indian who was allowed to be elected as the representative of the Indian members of this Association. In a letter written by notable tea planter Moulavi Rahaman in October 1917 he expressed his regret that "in the past not a single tender from the Indian planters were accepted by the War office" and hence he requested the Chairman of DPA that "Indian people may not be deprived from Government patronage" when the Government brought tea in future for the civil population or for the War office. In spite of that cordial behaviour approached from the Indian planters, the white tea planters always maintained a racial difference with the Indian planters to a large extent. Till 1915 the membership in "Duars Planters Association" (DPA) was not made open as a whole to their Indian counterparts. There was a proverb prevailed that "Indians and Dogs are not allowed" ((DPA Report, 1909). No land was available for the Indians for opening up new tea gardens. Another major hurdle was that under the European – controlled financial and banking system, institutional finance was not available to the Indian planters. As a result, they sometime procured money by pawning family ornaments

(Dasgupta, 1992). In short, the socio – political and economic environment was not suitable for the growth of Indian entrepreneurship. In the contemporary period the whole of India was then under the flame of independence movement. Now the Indian planters began to be intimately associated with the Indian independence movement along with the greater society from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. They felt a strong desire to be identified with their own social exclusiveness blended with Indian heritage, nationalistic ethos and Indianisation of the trade. The 'Divide and Rule Policy' of the British Raj always endeavoured to frustrate the Indian planters. It resulted in the formation of various Associations owned by the Indian planters only during the British – Raj (Banarjee, 1990).

It was in the year 1915 when the red letter day came out after a long wait, when the "Indian Tea Planters' Association" (ITPA) took birth under the earnest patronage of several renowned Indian tea planters like Tarini Prasad Ray, Jyotish Chandra Sanyal, Aminur Rahaman, Jogesh Chandra Ghosh, Rai Jay Govinda Guha Bahadur, Rai Bahadur Joy Chandra Saha and several others. In this context, however, it is important to mention here that Sir Rajendra Nath Mukharjee, Kt., Senior Partner of Messrs. Martin, Burn Ltd. Calcutta was the brainchild behind the formation of this Association. He was said to have requested the Bengali tea planters of Jalpaiguri town to constitute a council of their own which would safeguard their interests in future. The first signboard of the ITPA was

hanged by Jyotish Chandra Sanyal on the building of the Gopalpur Tea Company.

Indian Tea Planters' Association (ITPA) was an organisation of Indian section for the growers of tea in North – East India. With the establishment of ITPA as a trade umbrella the Indian planters received a formidable momentum both in terms of bargaining power, group cohesion on the one hand and growth of the Indianised tea industry with rapidity on the other. Its establishment and development synchronises with the expansion of Indian capital and management in an industry which was wholly non – Indian in its inception and which notwithstanding steadily increasing Indianisation for about a century still continues to be predominantly non – Indian. Once ITPA started functioning, the subsequent expansion of Indian section in tea was phenomenal and it was very largely influenced by the strength and solidarity of the Indian growers united in the association (Golden Jubilee Souvenir, ITPA, 1966).

In 1915 Jyotish Chandra Sanyal, a pleader of Jalpaiguri who was connected with a few companies made a proposal that Indian managed tea companies should form their own association for safeguarding the legitimate interests of Indian planters. Sri Sanyal's proposal received enthusiastic support from the planters of Jalpaiguri many of whom were the pioneers in Indian tea industry. The first formal meeting of these leaders was held at the residence of planter Tarini Prasad Ray where discussion regarding the formation of this body took place for the first time. The second meeting took place at the residence of Nawab Musharruf Hossain

Khan Bahadur where the association was registered under the Section 2 of Act XXI of 1860. The first chairman of the Indian Tea Planters' Association was Tarini Prasad Ray; Aminur Rahaman as the vice – chairman and Jyotish Chandra Sanyal as the Honourable Secretary (Mukherjee, 1978).

The next purely Indian Association to be established in the tea districts was the "Terai Indian Planters' Association" (TIPA). The carrier and the personality of the Association has been unique since its inception on February 21, 1928. Bijay Basanta Bose, Tarapada Banarjee (T.P. Banarjee), Saradindu Bose, Jitendra Mohan Dutta, Abdul Bari Khandakar, Ila Pal Choudhury and Kusum Dutta started an association at first with only eight gardens (Thanjhora T.E., Bijoynagar T.E., Fulbari T.E., Naxalbari T.E., Atal T.E., Ashapur T.E., Domohoni T.E., Chandmoni T.E.) as its members in the year 1928, but more and more Indian managers joined the Association. T.P. Banarjee was its second chairman since its inception until 1949. Its first chairman was Bijoy Basanta Bose, manager of Thanjhora Tea Estate. It was essentially an Association of Tea Garden Managers. The patrons of the Association were Ila Pal Chaudhury of Mohorgaong Gulma T.E., Biren Chandra Ghosh popularly known as B.C. Ghosh, Hon'ble Member of Indian Tea Association (London). The first participating planters of the association were Bijoy Basanta Bose of Thanjhora T.E., Gopal Lal Sanyal of Bijoynagar T.E., Braja Gopal Sinha of Fulbari T.E., Abdul Bari Khandakar of Naxalbari T.E., Jitendra Mohan Dutta of Atal T.E., Aswini Lahiri of Ashapur T.E., Saradhindhu Bose of



Domohoni T.E., Sarat Chandra Bose of Chandmoni T.E.) They had their problems also. Responsibilities were thrust on them but they lacked resources of all descriptions. They were determined, however, to overcome all the difficulties and to march ahead side by side with British tea planters (Golden Jubilee Souvenir, TIPA, 1978)

#### **List of Chairman of TIPA (1928 – 1978)**

Bijay Basanta Bose

Satya Roy

Tarapada Banarjee

Gopal Sengupta

Gopal Lal Sanyal

R. Ghosh

K.K. Dutta

B.R. Varman

A. Khandekar

S.K. Sanyal

Bhupendra Bakshi

R. Banarjee

(Source: office, Terai Indian planters Association.)

In the year 1955 yet another association, the Tea Association of India (TAI), came into being. Its most prominent members belonged to the Marwari Community like Jalan, Birla, Goenka, Mintri and this may be the reason for the formation of a new body. It is, affiliated to the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta (Annual Proceedings, TAI, 1960). Since its inception the Marwari traders coming from various parts of Western India and finally after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, began to take interest in the tea plantation industry of this region. This Association actually strengthened the hands of the Marwari businessmen (most of them were jute traders)

to advent in the tea plantation industry (Pal, 2010).

The Tea Association of India (TAI) has seven branches all over India. In North Bengal this Association have two branches like TAI Ethelbari, Dist - Jalpaiguri and TAI Siliguri, Dist - Darjeeling (Office, TAI). Debesh Chandra Ghosh (popularly known as D.C. Ghosh in Indian Tea Industry), honorary secretary of ITPA was also the chairman of the Tea Association of India, North Bengal Branch in between 1957 – 58 (Chairman's List, TAI). He was also nominated by the Indian Tea Planters Association (ITPA) and Terai Indian Planters Association (TIPA) as the member of the Indian Tea Licensing Committee (Annual Proceedings, ITA, 1941) . The Tea Association of India (TAI) North Bengal branch operated since the year 1964. At initial stage, its main office was at Siliguri and operated under the chairmanship of RS Sharma. Its first Secretary was B. Chakrabarty (1964 – 1979) and then came NK Basu (1979 – 1983). After few years the office was shifted to Birpara and finally at Ethelbari. The finest building of TAI Ethelbari was inaugurated on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2003 by Sashank Prasad, the then Secretary of Tea Association of India (TAI). Tea industrialist Aravind Poddar, Vijay Dhandania and Suraj Bansal Managing Director Ambootia Tea Group were some key figures behind the history of its establishment at Ethelbari. Now a day the TAI North Bengal branch has two offshoots like Ethelbari and Siliguri (office, TAI, Ethelbari).

Thus we may draw the conclusion by saying that the ownership of tea estates was overwhelmingly European and the Calcutta

based British managing agency houses controlled the majority of tea estates in colonial North Bengal. The Duars Planters' Association, Darjeeling Planters' Association, Terai Planters' Association – all were established to safeguard the interests of the European tea gardens. The majority of Bengali entrepreneurs owned small tea gardens and did not have enough resources to dominate the tea industry. They could not enjoy other privileges in tea industry like their European counterparts owing to have such powerful European tea associations. This disdain attitude boldened our Bengali entrepreneurs to do something for themselves and thus their tireless effort ultimately culminated in the formation of their own associations like Indian Tea Planters Association (ITPA), Terai Indian Planters Association (TIPA). The fundamental objective of these associations was to safeguard the interests of the Indian tea planters. However, the year 1947 was a watershed in the history of Indian tea industry. The ownership of European tea gardens changed their hands and the European associations became Indianised as well. The Dooars Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA), Terai Branch Indian Tea Association (TBITA), Darjeeling Branch Indian Tea Association (DBITA) are indeed worthy to be mentioned here. Finally, the dramatic Indianisation of ownership took place in 1950s and 1960s with the sale and takeover of European tea houses by the prominent Marwari business houses in Calcutta bought a new dimension in tea plantation industry of post – independence North Bengal. This led to the birth of another tea association namely

Tea Association of India (TAI) in North Bengal which is fully dominated by the Marwari tea traders since its emergence.

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19. Source: Office, Terai Branch Indian Tea Association (TBITA), Bengdubi, Dist – Darjeeling.
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