

Badagas and Their Difficult days as Small Tea Growers

R.Andu Gowder,
Ketti Village & P.O.
The Nilgiris - 643215

Badaga community is the single largest community inhabited in the Nilgiti district of Tamil Nadu numbering more than two and half lakhs, whose origin in the hilly district has been traced back to the third century B.C. Badagas lived in the hills with their simple life style and their nature loving sense is phenomenon. They accustomed to live with wild animals and inclement weather and made the hills and valleys as healthy living places. The wild flowers and birds, the clear streams and grass inspired them to live with nature. Their ethical value considers it is a sin even to harm a snake or pluck a green tender plant.

“Badaga ethics appear to have arisen from the historic experience of community itself and are shared with no other community. Their proverbs are thus unique and there is certainly no evidence of their having been given a set of ethical prescription by a god” so remarked Paul Hockings, an American professor who did extensive study on Badagas.

Badagas history reveals that they started their livelihood as buffalo herders and then pursued as millet cultivators. Badagas produced the necessary grains to the hill tribes of the Nilgiri plateau for a longer period i.e. for centuries. After Britisher’s innovation they gradually started to cultivate vegetables (potato, cabbage etc.). Population of the Badagas expanded slowly to about 2200 in 1812, the year of first British attempt to census. The Britisher’s initiation brought towns, markets, roads, governmental administration etc., to the people who have previously lived without the benefit of any such facilities. Up to 1930’s Badagas continued to be cattle herders and millet farmers. Since then Badaga farmers had gradually given up millet cultivation and were cultivating potatoes, cabbage etc., for national markets.

After 1960’s for various reasons, the government weaned people from growing potatoes and other vegetables and offered wonderful subsidies to grow tea. Due to this all most all small farmers switched over to tea plantation and their number is now around 65,000. Now Nilgiri finds it pride of place in the map of the tea plantation of India.

Since the commercial introduction of tea after the 1850’s in the Nilgiris, the extent of land under tea cultivation has grown phenomenally. About 8000 hectares of land was under tea cultivation until the 1950”s. Since then no European plantation enterprise or corporate plantations have emerged. On the other hand extent of tea has grown to 26,000 hectares by the 1990’s. This growth is ascribed to small growers around 65,000 of the cultivating about 100,000 acres of tea, apparently more than 90% of these small growers are Badagas. These small tea growers cultivate tea in about 14,000 hectares and the tea manufactures is about

21,00,000 kgs (out of total 35 million kgs tea trade being in private hands produces in the Nilgiris). With tea fetching even Rs.20/- per kg the economy of the most Badagas is obviously in doldrums.

Since 1999 for more than ten years the tea prices fluctuated as low as much as Rs. 6-8. On some occasion it hit the rock bottom for Rs.4/- . Of course after the Madras High court judgment the price is around Rs.15/-

The return derived from tea cultivation for Badaga livelihood is hence very detrimental welfares. The tea trade being in private hands and globalization issues influencing the economy, just an increase in subsidy cannot be a permanent solution. So a radical re-look at the whole issue is required. So, how far, how long Badagas can be survive with the tea –crisis is a crucial question.

The prosperous Nilgiri was severely subjected to abject penury on account of the prevalence of steep fall in green tea leaves. This melody afflicting the tea plantations and tea industry of Nilgiris since 1999. The continuing down slide in prices for green tea leaves affected badly the financial stability of the whole Nilgiri district. Many energetic youths migrated to nearby plains to fetch employment whatever available there, even for meager wages. In fact there is a great exodus and it is expected more such things in coming days.

These tea- crisis had the potential to change the age old customs and cultures of the people for worse. There is no denying that these are bad times for the hard working and peace loving Badaga community.

As a ray of hope the Madras High court delivered a favorable judgment for fixing a realistic price for green tea leaves. The great souls which toiled hard for this case are to be remembered by all. Especially, the Madras High court lawyer R.Sivakumar's labour of love on this regard is to be acknowledged once for all.

