

## Club culture of colonial Assam with special reference to the tea gardens in Assam

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### ABSTRACT

*The tea culture in Assam has its roots in the British era of the 1800s. The Tea Bungalows and colonial clubhouses perfectly represent the colonial culture, showcasing the classic European style architecture of that period. These clubs functioned as socialising areas for the British where they met, danced, listened to music, played polo/cricket, read newspapers and magazines, and held conversations. The present study attempts to spotlight the colonial period of Assam and the formation of the club culture in the Tea Gardens of Assam. The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. Secondary data are collected from reliable sources like research papers, journals, books, periodicals, gazetteers, and the internet etc. This study aims to shed light on the club culture in tea gardens during Assam's colonial period and their potential for tourism and economic growth in the region. Tea garden bungalows' colonial architecture offers a glimpse into the British period lifestyle and can boost tourism and the state's economy.*

**Keywords:** Club culture, Colonial Period, Tea Garden, Assam Province, Golf course, Tea tourism

### INTRODUCTION

The tradition of British clubs in India has a deep-rooted history dating back to the colonial era. These clubs were established for British expatriates and served as a source of community and familiarity in a foreign land. Most of these clubs were housed in colonial-era buildings featuring distinct British architectural styles. Originally exclusive to the British elite, including government officials and military personnel, these clubs played a significant role in shaping the social fabric of London society and beyond. Over time, they inspired the emergence of club culture and spread as institutions to meet the needs of Englishmen abroad.

During the 201-year rule of the British Empire in India, Assam came under British rule in the 1820s. Their economic and political control over India had a significant impact on the social and cultural lives of the native people, initiating the process of colonization in India. Assam is well known for its tea, which was reportedly discovered by Briton Robert Bruce in 1823 among the Singpho tribal people who have been cultivating tea for generations. The state boasts vast and verdant tea estates dotted with vintage bungalows. Many of these estates also have a traditional Clubhouse, complete with a golf course these properties, located in colonial clubhouses, offer exceptional services that transport guests back to the golden era of tea in Assam and these locations are fascinating because they bring together the past and the present. To revive the tea industry and promote tourism, locals are restoring golf courses in the lush tea estates, which are a significant part of Assam's colonial heritage. This initiative could lead to Assam becoming India's golf capital.

## **Review of Literature**

On the formation of club culture, İmren YELMİŞ discusses in his paper "British Clubs in India and Reinforcement of British National/Imperial Identity: Tom Stoppard's Indian Ink" (2021) how the British colonizers in the colonies maintained close links with their own culture and national identity. They constructed new buildings such as bungalows, schools, and clubs, which were open only to the British and Europeans. These places symbolized British cultural, nationalistic, and imperialistic ideologies and created artificial differences between the dominator and the colonial subject, European and non-European, "self" and "other," and East and West. He also states that during Britain's colonial expansion, the establishment of clubs in colonies like India provided a familiar cultural and political atmosphere for the British.

The club, before its emergence in the British colonies, had already been a place for entertainment, for the socialisation of the British, for the discussions of literature and politics in Britain, particularly in England at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It seems that in the emergence of many clubs in England, coffee houses were influential (Sinha, 2001).

However, an Englishman's club was like his second home, where the members were his friends and family. The club was exclusive and for men only, and this aspect was reflected in the club's architecture (Guha, 2019).

According to historian Tom Girtin, "...London clubs eventually established and housed by the middle of the nineteenth century could be summed up as confident, serious and masculine...the stronghold of masculine society at a period of great national power" (Girtin, 1964).

There is existing literature on the emergence of club culture in India, but there is a notable scarcity of works focusing on club culture within the tea gardens of Assam. Additionally, there is a lack of in-depth studies on the political and economic aspects of tea estate clubs in Assam and their impact on society. This presents an opportunity for further research in these areas.

## **Objectives of the study**

- To understand the colonial period of Assam
- To highlight the club culture of the tea gardens of Assam
- To understand the Club culture and its Prospects in tea tourism of Assam
- To understand the significance of club culture

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered by visiting the tea garden clubhouses namely Jorhat Gymkhana Club, Dibrugarh District Planters' Club, Moran Polo Club, Naharkatia Planters Club, Doomdooma Golf Club, Margherita Planters Club, Golaghat Gymkhana, Thakurbari Planter's Club and Misa Polo Club distributed in six districts of Assam, namely

Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Golaghat, Nagaon, and Sonitpur. All of these clubs were selected using a random sampling method and before commencing fieldwork, foundational research was conducted using available published materials and other documents. Throughout the study, conventional anthropological methods were employed for data collection, including the interview method, case study method, and informal conversations. Interviews were conducted with both the tea garden management and the members of the tea garden clubhouse to collect primary data. For the study, a sample of 30 tourists was randomly selected and interviewed using a structured schedule.

### **Colonial period and Assam**

The term 'colonialism' originates from the Roman word 'colonia' means 'farm' or 'a place for agriculture'. Colonialism refers to the practice or policy of one nation exercising control over people residing in different areas or countries through the establishment of colonies, to achieve economic dominance. Through the formation of colonies, the colonisers from advanced capitalist society enforced their political, socio-cultural and religious aspects on the people who were their dependencies belonging to the backward region. Therefore, colonialism is an act of exploitation of valuable natural and human resources of one country by another. In India, the Britishers' colonial rule was first formed in the Bengal region. In 1757, the British established their headquarters in Fort William and proceeded to conquer the rest of Bengal the following year. This marked the start of British rule in India., with the administrative subdivision of The British Government known as the Bengal Presidency established in 1765. This colonial period developed political institutions and social relations which have a direct effect on the native people and it continued up to the post-independent period. One of the colonial features that was introduced to India under British influence was club culture, which remains prominent today. This residual feature of colonial British culture has left an indelible mark on India's social and cultural life.

### **Club culture in the tea gardens of Assam**

The club culture of India dates back over a century. Most of these clubs were originally formed as sports clubs. However, over time, these clubs changed their policies and purposes. The British established these clubs to promote social inclusion, and eventually, the natives also became involved. These clubs embraced modern European social living, with classic European-style construction making it an exclusive world. British tea planters established clubs in the tea gardens of Assam to socialise with other Westerners and participate in sports from their home country. In the club, they could spend vibrant time instead of in their bungalow. These tea clubs were run by the tea estate authorities like the garden factory, Burra bungalow, or manager's bungalow. At those clubs, various sports such as golf, tennis, and swimming were popular, and competitions between clubs were frequent. Delicious lunches and high teas often followed these events. Additionally, movie nights were a highlight at some clubs. Once a week, an English movie reel was obtained from the nearest big town and projected in the theatre room. The library room was also quite popular as television was not yet available, and borrowing books and magazines helped pass the long hours on the plantation. Club culture is an enduring element of colonial British culture that remains embedded in several tea garden areas. Several elite clubs were established during the British era, such as Jorhat Gymkhana Club,

Golaghat Gymkhana, Misa Polo Club, Thakurbari Planter's Club, Dibrugarh District Planters' Club, Doomdooma Golf Club, Moran Polo Club, Margherita Planters Club, Naharkatia Planters Club, etc. These clubs continue to maintain their exclusivity in terms of membership, with lengthy waitlists that appear to go on indefinitely.

Jorhat Gymkhana Club is one of the oldest golf courses in Asia and the third oldest in the world. The Jorhat Gymkhana was established by tea planters from the tea estates in and around Jorhat, led by J. Huttman, the former superintendent of Jorehaut Tea Co. The club is located in Seconidhara village of Jorhat. Initially, the club was set up in a small wood house as a 'planter's club' for the tea planters of Assam in 1876. In the later period, D Slimmon the secretary of the club built another building aside from the old small wooden club in 1885. Being the venue for horse races the club became more popular. The club boasts a 9-hole golf course that was constructed during the British era. The course fulfils all the requirements for a golf course and is characterized by a beautiful tree line and small bodies of water that can challenge even the most patient golfer. Additionally, the club has a distinctive tradition of pony racing, which is famously referred to as the historic Jorhat Race. This race attracts numerous sports enthusiasts and tourists alike. The club offers a variety of amenities, including grass courts for lawn tennis, a swimming pool, billiards, polo, a gentlemen's bar, and a cinema theatre. The cricket ground, known as Jorhat Gymkhana Ground, has hosted matches for the CK Naidu Under-19 Indian Cricket tournament.

The Golaghat Gymkhana was a heritage clubhouse built in 1910. The original Gymkhana Club was similar to the Jorhat Gymkhana Club which was demolished during the time of the Quit India Movement. Later on, this club became the centre of entertainment and refreshment for Military personnel.

The Misa Polo Club was founded in 1888 as a Polo Club for the planters and the British District Administration to socialize. Tea planters brought this club culture to promote social interaction through sports and other celebrations. Therefore, this Club is a remarkable establishment that was built to provide a social and educational hub for the tea-planting community. Its location is quite breathtaking, as it is nestled within the picturesque Kellyden Tea Estate. The club boasts of a serene atmosphere that is perfect for relaxation, and it also serves as a stimulating environment for learning and networking opportunities. During World War II, the US Army took advantage of the club located in Misa, using it for a certain period. It is worth mentioning that the wooden floors of the club were maintained in impeccable condition, as a man would sit on a cloth while two others would drag it up and down the length of the room. It is important to note that the tea planters of Assam were introduced to the game of polo by the royal family of Manipur, which led to the establishment of several polo clubs in the region. This sport proved to be an alluring option, especially considering that horse riding was already a routine activity for Europeans during that era.

Thakurbari Planter's Club is situated in Rangapara of Sonitpur district. The club *was built in 1924*. The club has the oldest golf and multipurpose ground set up by the British tea planters of surrounding tea gardens.

Dibrugarh District Planters' Club was established in 1955 in Bokel Tea Estate of Dibrugarh district. The club features a 9-hole golf course that spans 5880 yards in length, with a rating of 67.3 and a Par of 67. In 1998, the 18th Hole was changed to a Par 4, increasing the course length to 5910 yards and maintaining the same rating of 67.3. Originally a Polo Club, it was formed after the Maden Memorial Gymkhana Club was lost to the Brahmaputra. Many of the major Tea companies had their top employees as members of this club. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, many Tea Planters shifted to the Madden Memorial Gymkhana Club, which transformed the original Polo Club into a regular club with amenities such as tennis, golf, and movies. After India gained independence, the number of Europeans decreased, and the interest of the Dibrugarh District Club members waned. Eventually, the club was sold, and it was dealt a final blow by the river, which caused it to close permanently. While the MMGC building was well-maintained, it couldn't compare to the old Dibrugarh District Club. On the first floor of the building, there was a spacious hall that doubled as a bar. It had a casual and comfortable atmosphere, and people often sat there to observe others coming and going. Members would return to change after participating in games and linger for a drink. There were separate washrooms for men and women, an office, and a pantry. The hall also featured a billiard table for entertainment. Climbing the stairs led to another large hall with a bar tucked into a corner and a formal seating area. This area was frequently utilized by senior members for socializing and discussing weekly events while enjoying a drink. It also functioned as a venue for conferences, dances, and movies. During weekends, as the night went on, the sweet melodies of piano music could be heard throughout the area, and couples would elegantly dance on the floor.

The Plateau Golf Club, now known as the Doomdooma Golf Club, is situated on the Samdang tea estate in Doomdooma. It is a historic golf course in the district, covering an area of 6339 yards and having a par 71 course. The course was designed and constructed by Dr. D.P. Williams, who served as the club's first Golf Captain from 1922 to 1935. It's worth noting that a caddy at the club had an impressive feat of getting a 'hole in one' with a unique club made of bamboo and wood. The Doomdooma golf course is stunning, and it was originally used only by senior British expats. Even junior expats were not welcome, let alone Indians. At present, the Club is constituting 40 golfing members. The club's internal tournaments have been around since 1922, and they still play the Presidents Challenge Cup on Captains Prize Day. Golfers at the club compete for various trophies, including The Daman Singh Trophy, the P.L.S. James Trophy etc. These trophies are in addition to the monthly medals and UAGA trophies that golfers also strive for. Throughout the years, The Golf Club has had numerous remarkable moments, as demonstrated by the HOLE-IN-ONE Board. There's one specific event that stands out, where a Caddie accomplished a 'hole in one' with an unconventional 'multi-purpose' club made of bamboo and wood. It's captivating to witness the club's history and accomplishments showcased. The golf course is presently maintained by the gardens in and around Doomdooma, and it's kept in excellent playing condition year-round.

The Thowa Golf Course is part of the Moran Polo Club in the heart of Thowra Tea Estate. This 9-hole course spans 5836 yards and features 2 par 3s and 1 par 5. Although the course is mostly flat, it is intentionally challenging with strategically placed bunkers and streams throughout.

The Margherita Planters Club Golf Course is located at Namdang Tea Estate, owned by Mcleod Russel India Limited under the Williamson Magor Group of Enterprises. It is roughly 2 kilometres away from Margherita Town. The Golf Course is renowned in Assam for its exceptional topography, scenic surroundings, undulating fairways, and the picturesque hills to the north. This golf course is a 6010-yard par 72 course with 9 greens, and it has a USGA rating of 66.50. The course maintenance is excellent year-round, with full support from Dehing, Dirok, Margherita, and Namdang Tea Estates.

The golf course of the Naharkatia Planters Club is located at Achabam Tea Estate in Naharkatia town. It features a par 72 course that spans 6469 yards and has 9 greens. The most challenging hole is the 9th, which is a 616-yard dog-leg par 5. The first competition held on this course was a 9-hole Bogey competition on November 2, 1974. Seven adventurous individuals, namely A. Borgohain (18), M. Mathews (22), G. Dua (24), R.T. Bedi (24), P. Singh (18), M. Singh (18), and G. Singh (18), took part in a Stableford tournament consisting of 18 holes. The course was formally inaugurated on November 3, 1974, and a total of 24 men and 6 women participated by teeing off. The Golf Course of the club has been maintained by several gardens, namely Achabam, Langharjan, Namroop, Naharkatia, Azizbagh, and Umatara. During the early years, tournaments had an average attendance of 15-20 golfers. However, there has been a pleasant increase to about 20-30 golfers. The highest recorded attendance was in 1997 during the Captains Prize tournament with 46 golfers. The Course has seen some impressive golfing action.

The tea planters who came to Assam from Scotland, where golf originated, invested in numerous golf courses within the lush tea estates. These golf courses became an integral part of Assam's colonial legacy. Organised golf in the tea estates began with the establishment of the Jorhat Gymkhana Club in 1876, which became a recreational hub for the planters of central Assam.

#### **Club culture's significance in today's era**

Even after seventy-seven years of independence, the people of the tea gardens of Assam continue to be influenced by the legacy of British colonial rule. The social and cultural practices established during the two hundred years of British presence have enduringly shaped the way of life in these communities. Notably, individuals in higher administrative positions within the tea gardens proudly adhere to British social etiquette, reflecting the enduring impact of colonial influence. Even in the post-colonial era, certain aspects of life established during colonial rule, such as the tradition of club culture, persist as prominent features of the community's social fabric.

In the 19th century, club culture began to emerge in the tea gardens of Assam, and this culture continued to evolve into the 20th century. The club culture in the tea gardens was closely intertwined with the political and economic landscape of the time. Over the years, the clubs became more sophisticated, offering facilities for various games and sports. In the late 19th century, European members began hosting their events on the lawns or banquets of these clubs. Eventually, membership was extended to the local population.

The clubs mentioned are esteemed sporting institutions that have played host to numerous iconic sporting events. They are known for their aspirational membership and are widely respected as high-quality institutions within society. Housed in a colonial heritage building with a central veranda, the clubs offer a range of sports facilities and restaurants. Regular members typically come from elite positions in tea gardens or various sectors of the state or central government, who find comfort in the club's familiarity. Members enjoy participating in a variety of sports and engaging in the club's social activities, which often leads to the formation of lasting friendships. Members expect the club to provide high-quality spaces with a pleasant atmosphere for recreational activities at reasonable prices. They also look forward to the club organising exciting sporting and social events for their families to create a similar sense of familiarity and comfort with the club.

The clubs in Assam still maintain a membership quality that embodies etiquette, dignity, and mutual respect. The heritage buildings housing these clubs are not just architectural marvels; they are a pivotal part of the region's colonial history and identity. These colonial structures, characterized by their unique designs, indigenous materials, and eco-friendly construction methods, serve as a reflection of the rich cultural heritage. These buildings resemble those constructed in Great Britain and other English colonies, and the blend of Indigenous construction techniques and cultural symbolism within them stands as a testament to the region's colonial history. Club members prioritize these heritage structures and recognise their historical and aesthetic value. Nevertheless, some of these structures need restoration and maintenance. It is imperative to protect these built heritages, as they serve as reminders of the colonial era and should be conserved for future generations and academic exploration.

### **Club culture and its prospects in tea tourism**

Assam tea has a rich history of its long-standing tradition of tea cultivation with great tourism value. In the scenario of world tourism, tea tourism is a contemporary new concept that emerged in the early period of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The term tea tourism has been defined in literature as “The art of travelling around the world in the quest for pleasure that comes with exposure to tracts of green tea farms”. Tea tourism has been identified as a niche tourism segment that is based on both sustainable and nature-based eco-friendly tourism (Cheng et al., 2012) where the tourists get the opportunity to explore the tea gardens and assist the information and experience associated with tea from tea plucking, nature walks and trekking, tea tasting sessions to cultural experiences with local communities. In India, Assam occupies a distinct space in tea tourism which provides its guests with a pleasant unique tour experience. Assam tea tourism program added different new areas to attract tourists to Assam where colonial club culture and bungalow culture are the most popular attractions that tourists can visit. An Assam Tea Club golf course is unique. The Britishers not only established tea plantations in Assam but also transformed some of them into golf courses. There are approximately 20 nine-hole courses in the region, all of which blend seamlessly with the natural surroundings of the tea estates. Unlike artificial sporting facilities, these courses have been intricately designed to merge with the tea areas. By visiting these colonial club houses the visitors can play a game of golf at the luxurious golf courses. Tourism has played a significant role in the national economy. In Assam, Tea tourism helps to

enhance a magnificent revenue opportunity for the state. However, it creates job opportunities and boosts the rural economy. It helps to sustain the environment and preserve the tea culture and heritage. locals are trying to revive the tea industry and boost tourism in a state that could well be on its way to becoming India's golf capital.

### **Conclusion**

During the British colonial period in India, the clubs played a significant role as social centres in the civil stations. The British club culture in India originated from their social life revolving around the clubs after establishing tea plantations in Assam. Most of the clubs around the tea gardens of Assam were known as gymkhana clubs due to their focus on sports, particularly golf. The British passionately played golf and tennis, meticulously organising sports events and social evenings. Besides Great Britain, India was the first country to have a golf course in 1829. Though India offers different world-class greens from Himalayan heights to forests and lakes, Assam's golf courses in tea estates are in a class of their own. The Department of Assam Tourism reports that there are approximately 20 golf courses located in Assam. Each course boasts natural surroundings and nearly nine holes. These golf courses were created within 200 km of each other to improve the quality of life for British planters. Those clubs are esteemed landmarks that have stood the test of time and thrived through the years. Despite various modifications implemented by different individuals and cultures, the clubhouse, racecourse, and golf course continue to serve as a living testament to the illustrious heritage and history of its members and Assam as a whole. Tourists hailing from India and abroad to visit the club, never fail to leave awestruck by its grandeur and magnificence.

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