

A Festival of Tea



Is there a tea connoisseur who doesn't love Assam tea? The story of this great tea would however be incomplete without the effort of the tea tribe community who work tirelessly on the fields. These workers have an interesting history. With the growth of plantations, the British indentured people from places like Bengal, Bihar, Odisha; even as far as Andhra Pradesh to work in Assam. Their descendants are today called 'the tea/ex-tea tribe community' and comprise 15-20% of the State's population.

'Sirish', a brain-child of APPL Foundation, was an initiative started in 2015 which aimed to celebrate this rainbow community and unearth their own heritage. This festival has now completed four editions, with the last one held at Misa in 2018. The name is derived from the Sirish tree, which grows abundantly in the estates and is also the site where the garden workers congregate after their day's work for music, dance and games. The name thus draws instant appeal.

'Such festivals are important for it provides an opportunity to bridge the gap between workers and management. It also provides a platform to showcase our culture, which is disappearing,' says Ashoke Tippo of Damdim Tea Estate.

'Jhumoor' is often thought to be the end-all of tea tribe culture, but it is only a beginning. With people from such diverse regions, there is bound to be a lot of vividness. Since the first edition, Sirish has unearthed at least 10 different dance forms, such as Sawra dance, Kurug Dance, Santhali dance, Sabar Dance, Satnami

Dance and Odia dance. Moreover, there are variations within Jhumoor itself-there are bhajans performed during 'Karam Puja' and songs sung by boys for courting women. Even industry veterans who have seen these performances first hand at Sirish were amazed at the diversity. Apart from folk dance, Sirish awards stalwarts from the community in the field of literature and culture with a cheque of ₹1 Lakh and a citation. Already, 8 icons have been awarded. Dulal Manki too, was awarded the cultural icon in 2018. Popular sports, like kabaddi, greased pole climbing and archery are also a part of the festival and draws scores of people.

Ranjit Barthakur, Chairman of APPL Foundation, beautifully sums up his reason behind creating Sirish. 'Since the 1830's and over 8 generations, the tea tribes have been fundamental to the scaffoldings of rural Assam and has been a step towards creating bright futures in these remote but breathtakingly beautiful landscapes. It is in our best interest to promote the creation of sustainable rural futures in these rural locales'.

The 5th edition of Sirish will be kicked off with regional rounds to be held at the following estates - Malbazar (Jalpaiguri, 20th January 2019), Hathikuli (Golaghat, 27th January 2019), Hattigor (28th January 2019), Teok (Jorhat, 2nd February 2019), Chubwa (Dibrugarh, 3rd February 2019) which would culminate in the finals at Naharoni (Sonitpur, 17th February 2019). The festival is free and open to all.