

Inscribing the Migratory History of Tea Plantation Labours of Assam: A Journey from Ignorance to Experience

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Abstract

The tea garden labours of Assam have an absorbing history of their own. They were imported to Assam from various parts of Bengal, United Province, Central Province, Madras, etc. At the time when they were facing economic hardships in their day-to-day life, the agents of the tea planters of Assam visited those areas and tempted them with plenty of facilities and economic incentives. Believing the false promises of these dishonest agents, these innocent people decided to follow them to get relief from economic deprivation and reached Assam. Thus, the process of importation of labour into Assam started and gradually their number was increasing year by year. But as soon as they left their native place, they met with adversity and it was increasing day by day. On their way to Assam also, many of them died of various diseases and eventually when they arrived in Assam, they were subjected to inhumane conditions. No one was known to them and unhealthy food and unhygienic habitation added further misery. On many occasions, they were even physically assaulted which increased their mental instability. Despite this, they gradually adopted themselves in Assam and started to treat Assam as their land. Now, the tea garden labour community of Assam is a part and parcel of Assamese society and in politics also they have been performing a major role.

Keywords: Migration, Labour, Tea, Importation, Misery

Introduction:

The migration of tea garden labours to Assam during the Colonial rule left behind an interesting history of their own. The discovery of indigenous tea in Assam in the first half of the 19th century and proof of its genuineness led to the growth of tea gardens in Assam. Colonial annexations in Assam opened the way for planter capital. Plantations needed a large permanent labour force to plant new territories. Just as Indian indenture system transported Indian coolie labour to colonial sugar colonies in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, internal indenture brought labours to Assam. And also, the scarcity of cheap local labour force in Assam led the Colonial Government of the province to think of other sources of labour and it ultimately motivated the planters to import labours from other parts of India namely, Chota Nagpur, Bihar, Orissa, Bengal, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Madras, etc. (Barpujari, H.K, 1993: 40). The innocent people of these



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parts of India did not have any practical knowledge of Assam who believed the agents who made false promises to them. Believing these dishonest agents, they reached Assam, an unknown place for them, and here they experienced an unpleasant, unexpected, and unbelievable situation. The miseries of these innocent people knew no bounds. Their miseries started at the time when they left their native places and it continued for an unlimited time. They were treated inhumanly like the bonded labours in Assam. Despite this affliction, these innocent labours gradually adopted themselves in Assam and started to treat this place as their land. Thus, a new community called the tea garden labour community came into existence in Assam and at present, this community has become the part and parcel of Assamese society.

Objective:

The tea garden labour community of Assam is an inseparable part of the Assamese society. They have a notable contribution to the socio-economic history of Assam. So, the prime objectives of the present study are:

- a) To study the historical background of the tea garden labour community of Assam.
- b) To study the circumstances which led them to migrate to Assam.
- c) The role of the dishonest agents in the migration of these people is also to be studied.
- d) The miserable and deplorable condition of this section of people in Assam is also to be discussed.

Methodology:

The present study of the migration of the tea garden labour community of Assam is based on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources like Immigration Reports and Labour Committee Reports have been consulted for gathering the data related to immigration of this class of people. Besides, books and journals have also been collected for making the study informative and authentic. So far as methodology is concerned, the historical methodology has been followed for preparing the work.

Discovery of Tea in Assam:

The discovery of tea in Assam resulted in the establishment of a big industry called the tea industry. This labour-intensive industry of Assam has been contributing a major share in the economy of the country. Interesting to be noted that the discovery of tea in Assam has an interesting history of its own. It is a well-known fact that Mr. Robert Bruce and his brother C.A. Bruce, Scottish by born initiated the process of the discovery of tea in Assam. (Gait, Edward, (2006:129). Mr. C.A. Bruce collected a large number of tea plants and seeds from the Singpho Chief of Sadiya and some of them were handed over to David Scott, the agent to the Governor-General on the North-East Frontier of Bengal. Consequently, after a series of experiments, the tea plants which were found in Upper Assam were proved to be genuine ones. (Griffiths, P.,1967: 36-

41). The letter of the Tea Committee which contained the matter of the discovery of tea in Assam reads thus, "It is with feelings of the highest possible satisfaction that we are enabled to announce to his Lordship in Council that the tea shrub is beyond all doubt indigenous in Upper Assam, being found there through an extent of the country of one month's march within the Honourable Company's territories, from Sadiya and Beesa to the Chinese frontier province of Yunnan, where the shrub is cultivated for the sake of its leaf. We have no hesitation in declaring this discovery to be by far the most important and valuable that has ever been made in matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire. We are perfectly confident that the tea plant, which has been brought to light, will be found capable, under proper management, of being cultivated with complete success for commercial purposes, and that consequently the object of our labours may be before long fully realised." (Mann, Harold, H,1918: 7).

Interestingly, after the successful discovery of indigenous tea in Assam the attempts were initiated to start tea nurseries and then tea gardens. Consequently, at the end of 1835, the first tea nursery with the Chinese tea plants was established at Sadiya at the confluence of the Kundil and the Brahmaputra rivers. In these attempts, no good result was found. Then in 1837, a tea garden was established at Chabua, 18 miles away from Dibrugarh which was a successful one. Gradually, the discovery of tea and the opening of tea gardens gained momentum in Assam and after that, the production activities were also undertaken. Interesting was that the quality of tea produced in Assam was also good. It is a fact that the attempt of manufacturing tea in Assam was started by following the Chinese technique. In the Calcutta Courier the news of this tea manufacture was published on 21st November 1836 which reads thus, "a small quantity of tea (of the green species, from indigenous seed) prepared at Suddaya in Assam by the Chinese tea-planters brought round by Mr.Gordon has arrived in Calcutta." (*The Calcutta Courier*, 21 November 1836)

Important was that Chinese, as well as indigenous seeds, were used to grow tea plants in the Upper Assam and a satisfactory result was also found. According to Perceval Griffiths, "It will be convenient here to review the position which had been achieved in Eastern India by 1839. There were at that time East India Company's nurseries were planted with Chinese seeds at Jaipur, Chabua, Chota Tingri, and Hukanpukri. Bruce also appears to have established a nursery with the indigenous plant at Sadiya, near the official China nursery. At the same time, tracts of indigenous tea had been discovered in many parts of Upper Assam and native chiefs had been encouraged to care for them." (Griffiths, P.,1967:53)

The letter written by the Court of Directors to the Tea Committee on 23rd January 1839 shows that the tea produced in Assam was of good quality. The letter reads thus,

"We receive with much satisfaction the samples of Assam Tea (twelve Chests) alluded to in your letter dated 23 May 1838, and which arrived in November last, under the

designation of *paho* and *souchoung*. Specimens of each sort have been very extensively distributed, and it affords us much pleasure to communicate to you, that we have received very favorable reports regarding it, as well from the most respectable brokers and tea dealers as from several individuals and various corporation towns and scientific bodies to whom it has been submitted." (Griffiths, P.,1967:53)

Scarcity of Labour:

In this way, the production of tea in Assam started and now the demand for labours was experienced by the planters. As it has already been noted that tea is a labour-intensive industry, a large number of cheap labours are required for the newly established tea gardens of Assam. The labours needed for the cleaning of jungles, leveling of soil, pruning the bush, plucking the leaves, etc. (Akhtar, S.M 1939:16), But this demand for labour could not be managed locally. Amalendu Guha mentions that the Kachari tribes of Darrang district of Assam were recruited for the tea gardens. As most of the people of Assam engaged in agriculture, some of the cultivators from nearby villages of the gardens preferred to render their services as garden labours during the odd season. (Guha, Amalendu,2006:13), The people of Assam always opted to enjoy an independent life and the labours who were engaged in the tea gardens often demanded an enhancement in their wages. (Gait, Edward,2006: P412). S.M. Akhtar mentions that due to the opium addiction the people of Assam showed lethargy and apathy towards their works and it proved their incompetency for working in the tea gardens of Assam (Akhtar, S.M,1939:16). Griffiths states,

"In the first half of the nineteenth century, the lands now occupied by the Assam tea planters were mainly dense and uninhabitable jungles. In the clearings here and there, the villagers enjoyed an almost self-sufficient economy and were therefore not much interested in the employment offered by the early planters, while the population of the more developed parts of Assam was, as a rule, neither inclined nor compelled by circumstances, to leave home in search of work."

As mentioned by Griffiths, the Royal Commission on Labour also observed the problem of the scarcity of labour for the tea gardens of Assam. The report says,

"From the point of view of the employers, the outstanding problem during the whole history of tea planting in Assam has been the scarcity of labour. Where the bulk of the tea gardens stand today was, seventy years ago, uncultivated and nearly uninhabited jungles, and for the expansion of the industry it has been necessary continuously to import fresh labour." (Griffiths, P,1967:267-268)

Edward Gait also mentions that most of the people of Assam had land in their possessions and always preferred an independent life. So, it was inevitable for the planters to import labours from elsewhere. Gait, Edward,2006:412). S.M. Akhtar again writes, "The Cacharis, however, was a better and finer race, but they were very limited in number, while the hill tribes- the Bhutias, Abors,

Mishmis, and the like- were of predatory habits and preferred a more 'lively' way of getting their living than toiling on the limited area of an Assam tea garden. Some of these latter classes, however, were employed by the Assam Company and later by the Jorehaut Company but it was realised soon after the establishment of the industry, that the local supply was not enough to meet the growing demand for labour." (Akhtar,S.M 1939:17).

Under these circumstances, the process of importing labour from other places in India started. The main target for collecting the labours was poverty-ridden areas like Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Madras, etc. The people of those areas who were facing hardships in their day-to-day lives were tempted with false promises of high wages and other enumerable facilities. Important to be noted that in Chota Nagpur plateau uprisings were broken out frequently in the 2nd half of the 19th century. The revolt of the Kols was broken out due to the oppressive land laws introduced by the English. E.T. Dalton reports in this way,

"Up to A.D 1831, when the most serious revolt of the Kols of Chutia Nagpur occurred, there can be no doubt that the changes of government which had taken place were not beneficial to them. They were neglected by their new masters, oppressed by aliens, and deprived of all the means they had formerly possessed of obtaining redress through their own chief." (Dalton, Edward, Tuite 1872:170)

On the other hand, J.C. Jha mentions that the main reasons for the migration of labours to Assam were natural calamities, unemployment problem discrimination of caste, etc. He rightly says,

"...the recurrent floods, epidemics and scarcity conditions in the Gangetic plains compelled them to escape as emigrants. The social oppression of the lower castes at the hands of the higher castes also led to emigration." (Jha, J.C.,1996,23).

It may be noted that between 1896 and 1897 famine occurred in Chota Nagpur, Santhal Parganas, the North West Provinces, Oudh, and the Central Provinces, and in this period of natural calamity the highest number of labours immigrated to Assam. (*Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*,1906: 14).

Thus, it has been found that both 'push' and 'pull' factors of migration acted in the case of the migration of tea garden labours to Assam. The factors like epidemics, the hardship of life, barrier of caste, etc. pushed the people to migrate to Assam as labours and opportunity of employment and other facilities as promised by the *sardars* and other agents pulled them to migrate to Assam.

Importation of Labour:

The importation of labours to Assam was held mainly by four systems:

- a) The free Contractors' System.

- b) The Licensed Contractors' System.
- c) The Garden Sardar's System and
- d) Recruitment under Local Agent.

Initially, the contractors' system was introduced to import labour for the tea gardens of Assam. The contractors collected labours in Chota Nagpur and Cooch Behar and brought them to the depot in Calcutta and from there they were again brought to Assam by steamer boat over the mighty river Brahmaputra. The journey from Calcutta to Assam was for about 3 weeks to 4 weeks (Akhtar, S.M 1939 & Kurmi, Rameswar,2019:72).

The Licensed Contractors' System:

According to the Licensed Contractors' system, the contractors employed several unlicensed persons to collect labours for working in the tea gardens of Assam. The persons who consented to go to Assam were made present before a registering officer to declare his willingness to emigrate and also his understanding of where and why he was migrating. After the completion of this process, the name of this person was registered and then he was kept in the depot for three days. Then a contract certificate was signed and then he was sent to Assam (Grunning, J.,1909: p.3).

The Garden *Sardars* System:

Under this system, an ordinary coolie or labour of a garden was allowed to collect labours for the garden he worked in. As a rule, the labours recruited by the garden *sardars* should be their relatives and friends because the newly recruited labours should have an idea of the nature of work they would have to perform, the knowledge of the place where they were going for work, etc. These labours should also be offered all possible help to reach Assam and also in the future in times of difficulties (Grunning, J.,1909: p.4).

Thus, various systems were formulated for the migration of labours to the tea gardens of Assam. It may again be mentioned here that the Bengal Act-II of 1870 recognised the *sardari* system of labour recruitment for the tea gardens of Assam and the Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 regularised the system of recruiting labours through *arkattis* (Guha, Amalendu,2006:13-14). The *sardars* and *arkattis* were the commissioned agents who visited the labour recruitment districts to collect the labours for the tea gardens of Assam. The *sardars* and *arkattis* used to visit the places like Bengal, Bihar, Chato Nagpur, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Madras, etc. where the landless people were feeling hardships in their day-to-day life and tempted them by false promises of high wages and other innumerable benefits. The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee,1906 mentions,

"Contractors collected coolies by the hundred on false promises of high pay and light work and despatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their

welfare on the journey; the result was shocking mortality on the voyage up, while many of the emigrants were of caste or constitution which precluded all hope of their surviving for many months in the jungles of Assam." (*Report of Assam Labour Enquiry*,1906, p.135.)

Similarly, Dwarkanath Ganguli says,

"*Arkatis* infiltrated into the remotest villages and towns in disguise as honest recruiting agents. Whenever a suitable opportunity occurred, and such opportunities came frequently, they restored to all sorts of nefarious and fraudulently practices for tempting or forcing unfortunate men and women in the countryside to sign what was ostensibly an honest labour service contract, but was practically a trap for reducing them to slavery." (Ganguli, Dwarkanath (1951: v).

According to the emigration Act III of 1863, the labours who have immigrated to Assam should know everything like the nature of work, place of work, tenure of contract, etc. But the Tea Commissioners' Report shows that the labours were brought to Assam avoiding all such provisions of labour act. This is to be noted here that according to the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, the labours to be imported to Assam had to register themselves after satisfying the Registering Officer. The labours had to answer some 'stereotyped' questions. For example, a) Where do you go? b) For how many years do you go? c) What work will you do? d) What will be the rate of your wages? Before presenting the labours before the registering officer, the labours were taught the 'stereotyped' answers to the above questions. Everything was done as per the prevailing labour act and also for record-keeping only (Ganguli, Dwarkanath (1951:3).

Thus, the process of recruiting labours from outside Assam for its tea gardens was felt and required measures were also undertaken. To motivate the labours to come to Assam the monthly wage of the labours was increased to Rs.5/-. It has been found that the number of imported labour was increasing and from 1858 to 1859, 400 labours were imported to Barak Valley (Griffiths, P,1967:268). During the period from 15th December 1859 to 21st November 1861 a total number of 2,272 labours were imported by the Assam Company and from 1st May 1863 to 1st May 1866, 84,915 labours were imported to Assam (Guha, Amalendu,2006:15). The Bengal Administrative Report,1867-68 shows that a total number of 22,600 labours were imported from outside Assam in 1867 compared to 11,633 local labours (*Annual Report on the Administrative Report of Bengal Presidency,1867-68*).

The number of immigrants imported for the tea garden of Assam from 1880 to 1881

Nationality	Under Act		Under Non-Act	Total
	Imported by Garden Sardars	Imported by Contractors		

		1881	1880	1881	1880	1881	1880	1881	1880
Bengal	Men	609	487	958	681	223	320	1,790	1,488
	Women	515	434	757	554	239	249	1,511	1,237
	Total	1,124	921	1,715	1,235	462	569	3,301	2,725
North-West Provinces	Men	918	667	1,162	613	738	276	2,818	1,556
	Women	558	505	387	234	402	228	1,347	967
	Total	1,476	1,172	1,549	847	1,140	504	4,165	2,523
Chota Nagpur	Men	2,431	3,080	1,201	842	288	502	3,920	4,424
	Women	1,567	2,237	601	425	291	463	2,459	3,125
	Total	3,998	5,317	1,802	1,267	579	965	6,379	7,549
Nepal	Men	-----	3	388	10	177	----	656	13
	Women	-----	----	26	----	16	----	42	----
	Total	-----	3	414	10	193	----	607	13
Madras	Man	-----	1	44	17	----	3	44	21
	Women	-----	----	19	5	1	5	20	10
	Total	-----	1	63	22	1	8	64	31
Bombay	Men	32	----	----	----	----	----	32	----
	Women	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
	Total	32	----	----	----	----	----	32	----
Total	Men	3,990	4,238	3,753	2,163	1,426	1,101	9,169	7,502
	Women	2,640	3,176	1,790	1,218	949	945	5,379	5,339
Grand Total		6,630	7,414	5,543	3,381	2,375	2046	14,548	12,841

Source-Report on Labour Immigration into Assam 1881, Shillong, 1882, p.8.

In the year 1880, 7,502 male labours and 5,339 female labours were imported and in 1881 the imported male labours were 9,169, and female labours were 5,379 and most of the labours were imported

from Chota Nagpur area. Number of labours imported into the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam from 1863-68:

<u>Year of Importation</u>	<u>Number of Labour Imported</u>
1863-64	4,558
1864-65	11,768
1865-66	27,761
1866-67	7,901

1867-68

2,364

(Source: *Tea Commissioners' Report*, p.26 in Bose, Sanat Kumar, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry*, All India Trade Union Congress, Bombay, 1954, p.73.)

The area under tea cultivation, the total number of labour force, and average number of adult labours per 100 acres of tea cultivation from 1883 to 1899

Year	The area under Tea Cultivation (In Acres)	Total number of Act and Non-Act adult labours	Number of adult labours per 100 acres of tea cultivation
1883	189,453	153,739	81
1884	189,852	177,622	93
1885	197,510	188,262	95
1886	203,993	192,076	94
1887	211,079	203,023	96
1888	216,676	219,861	101
1889	227,249	241,297	106
1890	231,038	250,113	108
1891	241,823	265,315	109
1892	247,192	283,819	114
1893	254,126	302,558	119
1894	268,796	310,767	115
1895	276,014	334,298	121
1896	291,909	366,460	125
1897	310,550	402,205	129
1898	325,823	404,446	124

1899	331,151	400,105	120
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Source: *Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1899*, p.43.

The data in the above table show that the area of tea cultivation in Assam was increasing year by year. In the year 1883, the area under tea cultivation was 1,89,453 acres and this figure raised to 3,31,151 in 1899 acres. The main reason behind this increase was the availability of cheap labours and the profit from this cultivation.

Number of Labours Emigrated to Brahmaputra and Barak Valley from outside Assam during the period from 1885 to 1904-1905

Year	Total No. of Emigrants (Including Children)			Nationality of Emigration (Adult only)						
	Assam Valley	Surma Valley	Total	Chota Nagpur and Santhal Perganas	Rest of Bengal	United Provinces	Central Provinces	Madra s	Others	Total
1885	18,043	11,335	29,398	9,790	4,542	5,445	--	80	1,287	21,144
1886	18,844	12,050	30,894	12,160	3,649	5,934	--	189	783	22,715
1887	26,027	10,436	36,463	16,385	3,901	7,496	--	160	1,143	29,090
1888	30,839	15,454	46,293	20,252	4,408	7,995	--	285	377	33,317
1889	36,562	19,096	55,658	22,877	5,372	7,860	--	689	750	37,548
1890	24,551	11,529	36,080	13,162	3,533	6,032	--	1,895	1,533	26,205
1891	32,439	17,469	49,908	16,557	8,036	10,524	--	2,018	804	37,939
1892	36,134	19,916	56,050	17,910	9,740	9,196	1,260	2,894	802	41,802
1893	33,778	16,897	50,675	17,837	10,474	6,188	896	767	981	37,143
1894	30,321	16,209	46,530	17,833	7,662	6,954	2,014	976	267	35,706
1895	35,041	37,796	72,837	18,369	10,214	18,957	7,932	969	60	56,501
1896	42,384	38,731	81,115	16,122	8,102	19,135	17,285	568	89	61,301

1897	66,952	28,979	95,931	28,078	6,848	9,391	19,876	2,113	22	66,328
1898	33,762	15,407	49,169	18,594	3,908	4,565	7,100	1,284	65	35,516
1899	24,449	7,459	31,908	11,192	3,829	1,960	7,197	1,632	62	25,872
1900	44,534	18,199	62,733	17,605	4,029	3,617	16,962	2,749	82	45,044
1901	20,764	5,459	26,223	7,558	2,368	1,272	7,805	821	63	19,887
1902-03	22,173	4,511	26,684	6,661	4,706	966	7,112	747	7	20,199
1903-04	17,574	4,588	22,162	6,513	6,348		3,983	827	98	17,769
1904-05	19,337	4,872	24,209	7,048	7,257		3,975	673	97	19,050

Source: *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, Calcutta, 1906, p.14.

The adult labours who immigrated to Assam from 1885 to 1904-1905 show that there was a gradual increase in their importation. In 1897 the highest number of labours imported to Assam. It was because of the expansion of the area of tea cultivation. In 1896 tea was cultivated in the land measuring 2,91,909 acres and in 1898 it reached 3,25,823 acres. But the number of importation was dropped from 1901. Like the previous years, the maximum number of labours were imported from Chota Nagpur. As the area of tea cultivation was larger in the Brahmaputra Valley, the maximum number of labours were imported for the Brahmaputra Valley.

The following table shows the number of emigrants including children imported for Assam and the areas from where they were recruited:

Year	Recruiting Area							
	Bihar	Bombay	M.P	Madras	Orissa	U.P	Bengal	Total
1938-39	14,817	539	3,511	200	8,937	388	529	28,871
1844-45	16,906	1,249	8,483	635	18,485	553	535	46,846
1945-46	20,306	818	7,561	836	12,631	476	311	42,939
1946-47	18,697	1,624	7,632	838	10,427	605	226	40,049
1947-48	16,979	2,864	7,403	1,085	8,500	415	296	37,542

1948-49	13,651	1,554	8,285	1,489	8,987	251	23	34,213
1949-50	10,038	1,185	4,564	880	9,670	112	19	28,468

Source: *Annual Reports of the Tea District Emigration Labour Act in Personal Administration in the Tea Industry of Assam*, Phukan, Amrit Chandra, Jorhat, 1979.

Labours in Assam:

As it has already been mentioned that the labours were imported to Assam for work in the gardens from different parts of India. Undoubtedly, these innocent labours consented to come to Assam for a handsome wage and for living a better way of life in the future. They did not have any idea of the place of their job and also the nature of work to perform here. They innocently believed the words of the contractors like *sardar* and *arkattis* and decided to come with them. But unfortunately, everything told or promised by the contractors were false ones and their sufferings started as soon as they left their native places. The *sardars* or *arkattis* left them and all the people they met from the depots to their working gardens were dishonest in nature. After the completion of the registration process, the labours were kept in the depots for a few days likely for 3 days, and then they were brought by steamer boats over the river Brahmaputra. It needed three to four weeks to reach Assam from Calcutta in this journey. As the sanitary precautions for the welfare of the labours were ignored, there was shocking mortality of these labours. No separate provisions for males and females were done in the steamers and various heinous activities were performed at night by the staff of the steamers (Chattapadhaya, Kanailal, 1987:5). Important was that Cholera also occurred in the steamers by which the labours were brought and many of them died of this fatal disease (*Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1990:5*). In the tea gardens also diseases like *Kala-azar*, dysentery, malaria fever, etc. were common and many of the labours fell prey to these diseases. An alarming fact was that despite the prevalence of these diseases no proper medical treatment was provided to these innocent labours. The quarters allotted to them were also not suitable for healthy living (Karotemprel and Roy Dutta.B., 1993:98). In the Sanitary Report of 1884, Dr. Eteson, the Deputy Surgeon-General and Sanitary Commissioner of Assam states thus,

"The condition of the emigrant labourer alters greatly for the worse immediately he is landed from the river-steamers and discharged from Government Sanitary protection. In many important respects, he is thenceforward left to his resources, in others he receives only modified and often injudicious care; in all the conditions of life, he is less favourably placed than before. His food is no longer dietetic and carefully cooked; his clothing and bedding (beyond a blanket) are left to himself to provide; his lodging is often inadequate against the variations of climate; his work exposes him to all weathers and often too dangerous disease-causes; he is unprotected against drinking to excess; even if he falls ill, the hospital is a namely." (Ganguli, Dwarkanath, 1951:6).

Thus, the life of a tea garden labour was worse than the life of a common man in Assam. In 1884 20% of tea garden labours died of Cholera which was greater than that of the general population of Assam. Similarly, 24.5% of such labours died of a bowel complaint (Ganguli,Dwarkanath,1951:6). The number morality rate of the labours on their voyage from the port of embarkation to the various destination in Assam was as under:

Number and Causes of death

<u>Year</u>	<u>Cholera</u>	<u>Other Causes</u>	<u>Total</u>
1896	-----	-----	1,245
1896	-----	-----	768
1898	84	49	133
1899	72	18	90
1890	528	66	594

(Source: *Labour Immigration into Assam, 1900,p.4.*)

Dwarkanath Ganguli further says, "But the exploitation of the labourers become rampant in the tea gardens of Assam where the unfortunate coolies after reaching the gardens, passed their days more ignominiously than even the Negro slaves in the U.S.A before their emancipation." (Ganguli, Dwarkanath,1951: iv-v) Thus the untold miseries of these labours had become the order of the day. The inhabited area of the labours called coolie lines were situated near the tea gardens surrounded by jungles. The condition of their houses was below the general norms. The leaky roofs and damp floors of their houses made them physically poor. The labours were also not even provided with beds for sleeping. They had to sleep on beds made of bamboo or *machang*. They were paid nominal wages which were less than the wage of the Public Works Department. Thus, lack of proper sanitation and the supply of unhealthy food further added to their miseries. The impure drinking water also was one of the major causes of their poor health (Bose, Sanat Kumar,1954:74-79). Both the male and female and even the children of the labours were often physically tortured. Flogging and canning by the garden authorities had become a common phenomenon. Dipankar Banerjee rightly says, "Abduction of married women, unlawful engagement of children of even five years of age, fraud, wrongful confinement, intimidation- all these become an integral part of the Planter Raj and had its spiral effect- many died in the very first year of their arrival in Assam." (Banerjee, Dipankar, 2006:105). Thus, the labours were exploited physically, mentally, and economically by the planters. But they had no right to raise their voice against the garden authorities. Even the law in almost all cases favoured the planters

and their European authorities if there was the case of abuse of garden labours. Sir Bampfylde Fuller mentions,

"On some gardens, there was a good deal of flogging, and I will mention two cases which had some interesting features. In one of them, a woman was stripped and flogged. Her husband brought a criminal charge against the garden overseer. He was acquitted by an Indian Assistant Magistrate on the score that he acted under the orders of his European manager. No further action was taken." (Fuller, Sir Bampfylde, 1930:118).

According to N.C. Bardaloi the tea gardens of Assam were like towns where labours, managers, and their assistants stayed. No one even a policeman could enter the garden without the permission of the managers. In his words,

"A manager may assault a labourer, insult him, and take girl after from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority. It is only at sometimes when the manager's cruelty surpasses all bounds that the labourers set upon him and assault him." (Guha, Amalendu, 2006:86).

It is pertinent to note here that the inhuman behaviour of the tea planters was such that on some occasions this could not be borne by these innocent labours which made them mentally imbalanced. The Tezpur Lunatic Asylum, presently known as Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health was established on 1st April 1876 for offering treatment to mentally deranged people. The most alarming fact was that from 1876 to 1900, 306 tea garden labours were admitted to this asylum which was more than that of the cultivators. During this period 272 cultivators were admitted to this asylum. So, the reasons behind the frequent arrival of the tea garden labours at Tezpur Lunatic Asylum were nothing but the social, economic, and physical torture of the planters (Sharma, Ajanta, 2006, 16 & 61-62).

The interesting fact was that the tea garden labours were not allowed to leave their gardens on any occasions and also as it has already been mentioned they could not raise their voice against the oppression of the managers. The sufferings and oppression of the planters and managers and the betrayal of the *sardars* were expressed in their own composing traditional songs in the following ways (Gogoi, Rajen, 2001:116.):

Paka Khatay likhaeli naam

Re Lampatiya Shyam

Fhankidieya bandhu chalali Assam

Dipughare Mari Tari

Uthaile terene kari

Hoogly sahare dekhali akash

Mone kari Assam jabo

Jora pankha tanabo

Saheb dilo kodaler kam

Dina Udaya bhane aakale peter tane

Tipik tipik pore gham.

(Our names have been written in a permanent register. The cheater *Shyam* or the recruiter cheated us and sent us to Assam. In the depot (where the labours were kept) we are beaten. We are brought to Hoogly town by train where we can see the sky for the first time. We expected that after reaching Assam we would be engaged to draw fans but Sahib or the manager give us spades to work.

Sardar Bole kam kam

Babu bole dhaire aan

Saheb bole libo pither cham

Re nithur Shyam

Phanki diya Aanili Assam. (Gogoi,Rajen, 2001:116-117)

(*Sardar* orders for more work and *Babu* or the manager orders to bring in presence of him and Sahib threatens to peel the skin of the back. You cruel *Shyam*, you have brought us Assam by making false promises.)

It has come to know that the tea garden labours were imported to Assam from various parts of India having different languages, customs, and traditions. Despite these differences, they gradually adopted themselves in a new atmosphere in Assam. They developed new languages to communicate among themselves and at the same time they also followed their customs and traditions and gradually the language, culture, and traditions of Assam had become their language, culture, and traditions. Bihu, the festival of Assam has now become their festival and the Assamese language has become the mother tongue of the tea garden labour community of Assam. But it does not mean that they have forgotten their own customs and traditions. *Jhumoir*, a traditional folk dance of this community that is performed in Assam after *Karam puja* has become an important part of the culture of Assam. Interesting is that the culture and tradition of this community have made the Assamese culture more colourful and richer. The participation of the tea garden labour community in the freedom movement of India also shows that they treated Assam as their motherland and they were ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Assam.

Conclusion:

The discovery of tea and the migration of tea garden labours to Assam has led to the creation of a colourful chapter in the history of Assam. The people of this community consented to come to Assam with new hopes and aspirations to materialise and also to have a better way of life here. But as soon as they left their native place, sufferings and misfortune met with them and it stayed with them for an unlimited period of time. On their journey to Assam, they were tortured physically and mentally and when they reached their destination, they were in an undesirable situation. The promise made to them by the agents were proved to be false ones. There was no one to listen to them and no one was there to help them. The *sardars* or the *arkattis* also deserted them. On the other hand, the English planters showed their unsympathetic behaviour towards them. The labours were not provided with minimum requirements and in contrast, they had to work hard to expand the area of tea cultivation. But these labours did not lose their heart and gradually adopted themselves in Assam and started to consider it as their motherland. They have now become Assamese by heart and soul. The most important fact is that these indentured labour community united themselves into a new community called the tea garden labour community and this community has an important socio-cultural and economic contribution in Assam. The natural beauty of Assam has become more beautiful and vibrant with the beauty of the tea gardens of Assam which helps to develop tea tourism in Assam. In all these aspects the hard labour of this community can never be denied. From tea production to politics this labour community has been playing a vital role in Assam.

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