

# Problems and Prospects of Tea Labour in Assam during the Colonial Period

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**ABSTRACT:** Assam became a part of East India Company's territory in India with the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo (1826). The British, from the inception of their rule kept their colonial interest as the foremost objective. Assam had vast natural resources and economic prospects and thereby they tried their level best to utilize them to satisfy their colonial interest. Tea plant was discovered first by Robert Bruce in Assam in 1823. It was sent to Calcutta Botanical garden for experiment. Subsequently the subject of the tea plant was brought to the attention of Jenkins by C. A. Bruce in 1832. In 1837 tea plantations were started in Upper Assam. Tea industry is an agro based and labour intensified industry of Assam. The company brought labourers from China and other parts of India. They also engaged local labourers. The labourers were deceived providing false assurance that badly affected their normal life. The enactment of Laws made by the British for the benefit of tea labourers were being not properly implemented, sufferings of the labourers knew no bounds. As a reaction, nationalism emerged, tea labour unrest and trade union movements started in various tea districts through their participation in the freedom movement after the advent of Gandhiji to Assam in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though legislations were made by the government for the betterment of the general condition of tea labourers of this region, their condition remained unchanged for the maltreatment meted out by the European planters upon the tea labourers. So Government should take initiatives for the development of this community in Assam. It will make the tea labourers more energetic, vibrant to work in tea gardens that might improve the general condition of the labourers in tea industry and it will provide a vibrant path in enhancing the economy of Assam. In preparing this paper, both primary and secondary sources were exploited in an analytical method to find out the problems and prospects of the tea labourers of Assam.

**Keywords:** Assam, Tea industry, labour, colonization, exploitation, nationalism, legislations, economy

## Problems and Prospects of Tea Labour in Assam during the Colonial Period

Assam, situated in the North Eastern part of India, was ruled by the Ahoms (1228-1826) for about six hundred years and then it was annexed by the English East India Company after the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) through the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo(1826).The British East India Company established their domination in Assam through the annexation of Lower Assam(1828),Cachar(1832),Upper Assam(1838) and North Cachar(1854) keeping colonial interest in mind. Assam had vast natural resources and economic prospects and thereby tried their level best to utilize them to satisfy their colonial interest. Already tea plant was discovered by Robert Bruce in Assam in the year 1823 which was sent to Calcutta Botanical garden for experiment by David Scott. Subsequently the subject of the tea plant was brought to the attention of Jenkins by C A Bruce in 1832.Accordingly Tea Committee appointed in 1834 found out that tea shrub is indigenous in Upper Assam and tea plantations were started in Upper Assam from 1837. Assam was a land of jungles but its lands were suitable for tea plantations. So, First Waste Land Settlement Rule was introduced in Assam in 1838 to clear jungles for the cultivation of tea in various tea districts of Assam. Accordingly huge lands were leased to the European Companies from 1838 through the enactment of a set of waste land settlement rules in Assam like Assam Rules of 1854, Fee Simple Rules of 1861, Junglebari settlement Rules of 1864 etc to clear jungles for tea plantations in Assam. As a result large numbers of tea gardens were opened in various tea districts of both the Brahmaputra and Barak valley region of Assam. Initially the trained Chinese labourers were recruited in the tea gardens of Assam who demanded Rs.40 per month as

labour wages which was expensive for them. So, as an alternative to minimize their expenditure, the Company recruited local labours like Singphos, Cacharis, Nagas, Kukis and some Hindu-Muslim peasants in the tea plantations of Assam. It is to be noted that most of the local inhabitants of Assam engaged themselves in agriculture. But the peasants of this region suffered heavily for the maximization of land revenue from 1836-37 the process of which continued throughout the whole colonial period. This resulted the outbreak of four consecutive peasant movements in various districts of Assam no doubt, but it could not reduce their sufferings due to the colonial atrocities upon the peasants of Assam. As a result peasants of Assam compelled to work in tea plantations of Assam at a very minimum labour wages in spite of their dissatisfactions rampant in their minds.<sup>1</sup>

The indigenous tea labours of Assam were reluctant to work in tea gardens of Assam as labour force at a very low wages. So, Tea planters resolved to import labourers from the west like Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces, Madras, Andhra, Pradesh, Bengal, Tamilnadu, Chotanagpur, Jharkhand on contractual basis by the Arkatis making agreement for three years on commission basis at a rate of Rs.12 to Rs.20 for each labour. The Arkatis provided assurance to the labourers of getting handsome remuneration in tea plantations of Assam. Accordingly large number of tea labourers was imported by the Arkatis and Sardars from the famine affected densely populated region during the colonial period to work in the plantations of Assam. Practically all these were false assurance regarding easy work, better pay based on pull and push factor made by the labour agents of the British tea plantations of Assam.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the tea labours of Assam consists of local labour, imported labour and Chinese labour who were engaged by the European planters in various tea gardens of Assam from the commencement of tea industries both in the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley region of Assam. This labour force engaged in the tea plantations of Assam had to suffer for the colonial economic policy of the British government in Assam. Subsequently it led to the socio-economic and political discontentment among the tea labours of Assam. But they could not raise their voice against the British exploitations for long though this class of people was not given proper labour wages and other facilities as promised earlier when Arkatis the labour contractor made agreement with them. The tea labourers were promised by contractors to pay Rs 12 to Rs.20 at the time of recruitment in the tea gardens of Assam. Practically

they were given Rs 4 for male, Rs.3 for women, and Rs.2 for male child labour and Rs.1 for girl child labour. The labour wages were not increased during the period between 1865 to 1934. Ultimately they were compelled to work in the tea gardens of Assam for their livelihood. Their conditions were not better than the serfs of Russia. So in the first half of twentieth century, tea labours of Assam, inspired by national movement started by Gandhiji, became conscious about their legitimate rights and thereby joined in the freedom struggle against the colonial rule. As a result national awakening cropped up in the minds of tea labourers in various tea plantations of Assam.<sup>3</sup>

However, Labour Legislations were made to minimize the sufferings of tea labours in Assam, but unfortunately those were not practically implemented during colonial and even post colonial period. Even today, in most of the tea gardens of Assam, plantation labourers have been suffering due to the negligent attitude of our government towards these people. Accordingly their pathetic and sorrowful feelings were expressed through some folk songs of tea garden labourers of Assam. Tea labourers came to Assam from the west for their extreme hunger which is evident from the following folk songs:

Chal mini Assam jaibo, Deshe baro dukhre  
Assam Deshere mini  
Cha bagan harial!

After their arrival, the tea labourers were not at all satisfied in the gardens of Assam and there by expressed their feeling in this way: Haire nirmohi Shyam –Faki Diya Anloi Assam. It is to be noted here that the tea labourers after their arrival in Assam did not get the facility as promised by the contractors and thereby expressed their sorrows through such folk song.

Another event regarding the transportation of tea labourers by contractors from the west without proper consent from guardians providing false assurance to come up to Cachar district of Assam clearly indicate the nature of colonial exploitation. Moreover these labourers specially husband and wife were separated and sent to different gardens along with separating father, mother, children to stop their voice against exploitation. Such type of activities of tea planters led to the growth of national consciousness among the tea labours of Assam.<sup>4</sup>

The miserable plight of the imported tea labourers is evident from the fact that though the Government provided facility, but for the negligence of corrupt officials, the contractors reduced the necessary civil supplies to the coolies on their voyage to Assam like -medicine, rations

etc. for their personal benefit for which a large number of them lost their lives on their voyage to Assam.<sup>5</sup>

The imported tea labourers, who were brought together in different batches from various parts of the country, were separated and sent to their allotted gardens. Their mobility was restricted and confined within the tea garden and factory and isolated from the outside world. They were allotted lands in the adjacent area of gardens in their respective tea districts of Assam. Not only this, in the initial stage, they were given rations and advance money but later on it was deducted from their labour wages.<sup>6</sup>

However the tea labourers of Assam had to suffer in socio-economic and political aspects during the colonial period for the inhuman behavior of the planters' in spite of government initiatives in favour of tea labourers. This economically backward tea labour community of Assam after their arrival in both the valley of Brahmaputra and of Barak suffered physically for the absence of proper medical treatment in Assam due to the absence of trained doctors in garden hospitals. So, they had to depend on kaviraj or nature to cure their diseases. Dr. Nelson visited Cachar and practiced in tea plantations once in a month and his attention was mainly confined only to European planters, not the tea laborers. Of course, R Stewart, the last Superintendent and first Deputy Commissioner of Cachar district made every attempt to provide medical treatment for the benefit of tea labourers. So, it is observed that health and sanitation system in the gardens of Assam was poorly managed which can be confirmed from the death of large number of coolies attacked by Kalajar.<sup>7</sup>

There was no proper educational facility for the tea labourers in Assam during the early British rule. Some primary schools were set up in 20<sup>th</sup> century no doubt but labour community of this region was not ready to send their wards to school for their economic backwardness. Children of tea garden labours worked in the gardens of Assam at a very nominal labour wages which is a abuse for them. So, this group of people of our society could not come out to the mainstream of society. Study reveals that most of the female workers plucked tea leaves in the tea gardens and at the same time had to look after their children and household works. Most of the male coolies were found as drunkard and thereby female workers became the victim of garden managers in various ways.<sup>8</sup>

There was no good relation between local and imported labourers. Because, the planters made discrimination between the two as local labourers

were given more wages than the imported labourers. Local labourers were given Rs.6 to Rs 7 whereas imported tea labourers were given maximum of Rs.4 and minimum Rs 1 keeping colonial interest in mind. Naturally such type of discrimination between the local and imported tea labourers created a sort of discontentment in the minds of tea garden workers of Assam.<sup>9</sup>

The tea labourers of Assam were also victimized by the tea planters in all aspects of life. They were rigorously punished by the planters. In the tea gardens of Assam, inhuman torture and flogging system was common in the tea gardens especially in the Cachar plantations along with the other tea districts of Assam. Moreover, the runaway coolies were captured by the planters engaging Nagas on payment of Rupees five as reward. At all, tea labours of Assam were provided rigorous punishment by the European planters at any situations which can be confirmed from the folk songs sung by the coolies:

“Sardar Bale Kam Kam  
Babu Bale Dhare Ann  
Saheb Bale Nebo Pither Sal  
Baba Dhoni Ram  
Kodal Mara Boro Kathin Kam”

This folk song reflects that the coolies engaged in tea gardens had to work hard even at the time of illness. If anybody was found absent in their duty, authority of tea garden specially Sardar, Babu, Saheb entitled officials rigorously punished them. Of course, the Government measures to stop such atrocities upon the tea labourers through flogging system could not reduce their sufferings.<sup>10</sup>

The tea labour community of Assam especially of Cachar region also had to suffer for the atrocities made by frontier tribes like the Luchais, Nagas etc. It is to be noted here that government measures for the security of tea labour minimized their sufferings no doubt, but it could not provide complete safety to this community.<sup>11</sup>

So, all these dissatisfied the tea labourers of Assam and subsequently, it led to the emergence of nationalism both in the Brahmaputra and Barak valley of Assam among the tea labourers of this remote north eastern region in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of the emergence of nationalism, tea labour unrest and trade union movements started in various tea districts of Assam in spite of legislations made by the government for the betterment of the general condition of tea labourers. The tea labour community of Assam being reacted started their return journey called exodus in both the valleys of Assam encouraged by Gandhiji in 20's of 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup>

However, our present government have been undertaking measures to upgrade the general condition of this community providing proper labour wages, land patta, educational, hospital facilities etc to these coolies (tea labours) of the tea districts of Assam. It will make the coolies more energetic, vibrant to work in tea gardens of Assam that might improve the condition of tea industry and Assam's economy in near future. So, it is said that the development of tea industry in Assam not only improve the fate of Assam's economy but it also improve the fate of tea labour of Assam and flourishing tea gardens of Assam definitely help in protecting our environment and maintain the ecological balance. In this regard it is to be noted that the development schemes undertaken for the betterment of tea labourers by our Assam government should be implemented properly for the betterment of tea labours of Assam.

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'My house is at Barrackpore and I have for the last 20 years served Shahiles as Khidmatgar and Khansomah. When they leave for North Western Provinces, I accompany them but leave my wife and children behind. Every two years I was in the habit of returning to my family, sending them remittance in the meanwhile. I last went with a gentle man to Lucknow and I stayed there two years, when I left the service to return home—I found no one at my home, it was deserted for two months. I sought traces of my wife and children and at last found that they had gone to a coolie contractor. I went to the contractor and enquired about them, after some delay he told me that they had come to him and engaged them as coolies to serve in Cachar. I was in despair and asked how I was in to get them back and was told it was impossible. At last the Baboo said "you had better go to them yourself. How can I do that said I" "Oh! I will give you a free passage and you can go and join them in Cachar. I signed the agreement and here I am "Whether this man's wife and children ever actually came to Cachar or not or whether he has found them, if they did, I do not know." Sd/R Stewart, Superintendent. (No. 12 of 1864, Book no 8, DCRRS)
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