CHAPTER – II

(LABOUR RECRUITMENT AND ISSUES)
The gradual expansion of tea plantation in Cachar during the British period compelled the authority to recruit a large number of workers to achieve the highest scale of productivity. As the tea plantation is a labour oriented industry, a large work force was required constantly from nursery to final dispatch of tea chest to the market. Moreover, in the beginning, manufacturing process was not done with machines, everything was done manually. The female labourers on the other hand, plucked the leaves, at the same time, they also dried the leaves and chopped and sorted them into grades for packaging.\(^1\) Thus, the labourers having agricultural background could alone bear such hard work.

In the early stages of the tea plantation in Cachar, the British administrators cum planters did not worry for the labourers to do work in the tea plantation. They thought that this would be managed locally, through the labour force available in Sylhet and Jayanteah, the inhabitants of which come willingly to Cachar and settled down. Quoting Captain Stewart, Superintendent of Cachar, ‘with regard to labour I do not anticipate there will be any great difficulty in obtaining quantity which may be required, if not in Cachar, in the neighbouring district of Sylhet, the inhabitants of which district and of Jayantia come very willingly to Cachar and settle down in it’.\(^2\) But their contemplation in regard to the availability of the local labour went on opposite direction. In the subsequent period, the British administrators cum planters faced the scarcity of labour in the growing tea plantation in Cachar. Unfortunately, during this period, there was a dearth of local labour. It had various causes, the local administration had been stopped the growth of population, the Burmese rule caused a steep fall about 75 percent, cholera and small pox further reduced the population. Moreover, due to high rate of opium consumption, the local people did not want to undertake hard labour.\(^3\) Without knowing this, the British administrators totally relied on the local people for doing work in the tea plantation in Cachar.

\(^2\) Commissioners Letter Book, File No. 211, 1855, Districts Record Room, Silchar.
Subsequently, knowing about the scarcity of labour in the tea plantation and to seek better guidance from the known people, Chinese skilled labourers were recruited in the Cachar tea garden. But their high rate of wages and the difficulties involved in managing them, compelled the Planters to look elsewhere for labour. They now turned their mind towards the local people, such as, Kukis, Nagas, Kacharis, Bengali and Tripuri. But at this time also the Planters did not come out successful because of various reasons, such as, the local labourers were found to be lazy, indolent and opium addicted. They were found absent on simple pretext of illness, stomach disorder, religious festivals, domestic works or other ritual functions. Moreover, in their opinion, employment in the garden was below their dignity and status. Their self-sufficient economy discouraged them to join tea plantation. This is evident from the folklore of the people of this valley.

‘Angrezor chakri na lage
Na lage thakibo dhan
Gharote bohibo Ramayan poribo
Take suni thakibar man’
(English Translation)
We do not want job of British
Our wealth would not be reduced
We would sit at home, read Ramayana and
Console our heart and soul.

The result was that, the growing tea plantation in Cachar were threatened by serious labour crisis, while the tea mania was influencing the minds of European Planters to have ‘labour more labour’ in the tea gardens. Although, Col. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam in 1859 had given emphatic warning with regard to the unwise expansion of tea cultivation without justifying the labour supply.

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5 Anil Kumar Dosadh, an interview conducted on 25th October 2010 at Katakhal Tea Garden, Silchar.
Having failed from all attempts to obtain labourers from the local population and the neighbouring areas, the Planters started pursuing the policies of labour immigration. On May, 1858, to meet out the labour crisis, the Manager of Goongoor Tea Estate, Mr. Sunderman put a proposal before the authority to import labourers from North India, the place the then was affected by constant flood and severe famine. Mr. Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar readily agreed and opined, ‘it would be a measure attended with much benefit to the country and to the planting interests’. He also expressed his opinion that the labourers be given the opportunity to take up cultivation of their own while labouring in the tea gardens. This facility would motivate the labourers to settle in Cachar permanently and would be a permanent source of labour to the industry. A proposal was submitted by the Tea Committee to the Government of Bengal to import labourers from North India. The Government of Bengal knowing fully the scarcity of labour force in the district accepted the proposal and allowed the immigration of labourers with immediate effect. Thus, the immigration of labourers into Cachar from the flood and famine affected areas of North-West India started from 1858.

**Reasons of Immigration**

There were several factors for which ultimately the immigration took place and finally a large number of labourers settled in Cachar during the colonial period for tea plantation. It appears from the folk songs, which goes thus –

Bhojpuri Language

i. ‘Chal Mini Assam Jaibo,

Desh Boro Dukhre

Assam Deshre

Cha Bagan Hariyal

English Version

‘Come lets go to Assam my girl,

as there is great misery in our country

Let’s go to Assam the land of

lush green tea plantations.’

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8 Bhattacharjee, J B, *Cachar Under British Rule in North-East-India*, Radiant, New Delhi, 1977, p.192
9 Dutta, D, *Cachar District Records*, Silchar, 1969, p.15
10 (See Annexure – I, Letter No. I & II) A Government letter written by Mr. Stewart, Superintendent, Cachar, addressing to Mr. Senderman, Esq., 13th and 15th May 1858, District Record Room, Silchar
11 Anil Kumar Dosadh, an interview conducted on 25th October 2010 at Katakhal Tea Garden, Silchar
ii. ‘Asome Jabo Aar Harir Karone
   Bellpotra Torbo Aar Aaram Kare Khabo
   ‘we shall go to Assam
   pluck leaves of hard apple and would
   live comfortably

   Chal Sarada, Chal Mini
   Desher Boro Dukh Go’
   O Sarda, O Mini let us go to Assam
   There is discomfort in our place.’

iii. ‘Gach Hilale Paisa Jhare,
    Whoa Kono Dhukha Naika Ba
    Whoa Bahut Paisa Ba’
    Money falls from the tree if shaken,
    there is no misery,
    a tree in Assam gives fruit in form of
    money.’

These folk songs, composed and sung by the labourers, who were recruited in Cachar from North India, explain the reasons for their forced immigration to the tea districts of Assam Cachar. It is reflected in these folk songs that it was their extreme poverty, debt, social disorder and inhuman torturing by the Zamindars which compelled them to emigrate to Cachar tea gardens with a hope of making better livelihood. Moreover, while recruiting the labourers, the Agents or Contractors, gathered a lot of experience and knowledge with regard to the reasons behind their migration. One of the opinions shared by one of the Contractor says, ‘the reason I generally found for labourers wishing to leave their house were the following – failure of crop, debt, pressure being brought to bear on them by the Zamindars and no kind of labour being obtainable, hence, they readily take hold of the opportunity offered by the recruits and emigrate’.

Some of the major causes that forced the labourers to immigrate to Cachar tea plantation are mentioned below –

To begin with the famine affected areas in the 19th century, there were severe famines occurred in North-West Provinces (1860-61), North Bengal, Orissa, Madras (1865-66), Central Provinces, Rajputana (1868-1870), Bengal and Bihar (1873-

in which more than one million people lost their lives. The people of these places were the worst victims of circumstances and this compelled them to fall into the trap of agents of the Government. Thus, labourers from famine and poverty stricken areas were recruited for Cachar during the colonial period without any trouble.

Added to it, excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the landlords, Zamindars and their Amlahs were the main reason of people’s migration to other places in search of livelihood. As the peasants were hailing from the poor economic background, most of the time for various reasons they involved themselves into the debts to Zamindars and Mahajans (Money-lender). Later, due to their poverty and illiteracy they were easily exploited as much as possible. To get free from these, the labourers agreed for migration and thus they became an easy prey for the Arkatis and recruiters for emigration to the Cachar tea gardens.

The peasant unrest in Bihar and Bengal had also accelerated large scale emigration. The period of 1850-1880 was the period of unrest in many parts of Bihar and Bengal. Mention may be made to ‘the Sardari Larai’, ‘Birsa Movement’, ‘Tana Bhagat Movement’ in Chotanagpur division and the ‘Kharwar Movement’ in Santhal Pargana which had caused great turmoil in the tribal belts of Bihar. These uprisings led to destruction of men and crop which caused miseries to the local people. Many innocent people were dying of hunger. Taking the advantage of their helplessness, the recruiters took undue advantage of the situation and recruited them to the tea gardens of Cachar in large numbers.

Destruction of handicraft industries and availability of cheap machine made goods in Indian market led the artisans and craftsman into simple wage earners. Besides this, forced by circumstances, the peasants were bound to sell their crops to the Mahajans (Money-lenders) at a price dictated by them. In case of the failure of

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13 Singh, S N, Socio-Economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006, p.14
14 Ibid, p.44
the crops the peasants were compelled to mortgage their agricultural land as security. Once a loan was taken it was impossible for a peasant to come out from the loan till he parted away with the land mortgaged. Such a miserable situation forced the people to emigrate to the tea gardens of Cachar.

In some villages of the North-West province, the tribals, such as, Munda, Manjli, Manki, Parganait etc. had completely lost their proprietary rights. Under the ‘Kamiauti System’, they almost became slave for life. Sometimes, even their children were force to serve as long as their debt was not cleared. Under such a situation it was necessary for them to find an alternative means of survival. It is also found that social and economic oppression of the lower castes at the hands of upper castes also led to emigration.

Further, the reason for emigration to Assam and Cachar as in any migration can be sought in the push and pull factors. Push factors like famine, earthquake, epidemics were sufficient to cause emigration. On the other hand, the pull factors like gold lust may be a good ground for immigration.

Last but not the least, while recruiting, the Arkattis brainwashed the ordinary workers by giving them provocations such as, ‘easy work better pay, ideal condition of work and unlimited land available for cultivation’. Besides, people who were involved in criminal cases also ran away to the tea gardens of Cachar, as they had no other option than to escape to Cachar in order to keep secret their criminal records.

Thus, due to the above circumstances, the exploited people of this region finally decided to come to Cachar as tea plantation labourers and the nature of their migration was based on the ‘indenture system’. Under this system, the migrants were recruited by contract to serve in the plantation for a few years under the terms and conditions which were in no way better than slavery. It is known from various sources that the main districts which supplied the indentured labourers to Cachar.

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18 Singh, S N, *Socio-Economic and Political Problems of tea Garden Workers*, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006, p.44
were – Bihar (Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Chaibasa and Dumka); Bengal (Santhal Parganas, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore); Orissa (Sambalpur, Balasore, Cuttack and Koraput). As regards Madhya Pradesh (Central Provinces), most of the migration of labour was from Raipur, Balghat, Bhandara and Jabalpur. There were also a few workers from Bundelkhand, Ghazipur and Gorakhpur. A small number of worker families came from South India and Maharashtra. Workers, belonging to tribal or semi-tribal societies, known as ‘Adivasis’ or ‘Medasis’, were also recruited. Dr. Grant was formally appointed Superintendent of Emigration for those immigrated provinces. A list of the number of imported labourers to the Cachar tea plantation during the colonial period is displayed in the following –

The following table shows the number of emigrants entering Cachar during 1863-1947.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>No. of Emigrants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1863-64</td>
<td>11,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864-65</td>
<td>15,598</td>
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<td>1865-66</td>
<td>16,008</td>
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<td>1866-67</td>
<td>4,212</td>
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<tr>
<td>1867-68</td>
<td>5088</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>11,398</td>
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<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>12,050</td>
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<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>10,436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>15,454</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>19,096</td>
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<td>1890</td>
<td>11,529</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>17,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>19,916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
21 The number of emigrant labourers in respect of Cachar district during the early period has been collected from various sources, Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906; Proceedings of NEIHA, 7th Session, Pasighat 1986, p. 430 and Anil Chandra Phukan, ‘Personnel administration in the tea industry of Assam’, Archita Publications, Jorhat(Assam), 1979, p.62.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>MEN</th>
<th>WOMEN</th>
<th>CHILDREN</th>
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<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>16,209</td>
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<td>1895</td>
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<td>1896</td>
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<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>7,459</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>18,199</td>
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<td>1902</td>
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<td>1940 - 41</td>
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<td>1942 - 43</td>
<td>1,155</td>
<td>1,107</td>
<td>1,113</td>
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<td>1944 - 45</td>
<td>1,309</td>
<td>339</td>
<td>1,153</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945 - 46</td>
<td>1,495</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>1,105</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946 - 47</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947 - 48</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The figure in respect of Cachar for the year 1934 – 35 to 1945 – 46 also includes the then Sylhet district, which now falls in Bangladesh.
Modes of Labour Recruitment:

In order to get the labourers from different parts of the country for the labour short Cachar tea gardens, two distinct agencies for recruiting emigrants and forwarding them to their destination under the provisions of the law were in operation. To implement this, mainly two system of recruitment were followed, namely – Contractor System and Sardari System. These two systems were operated from 1859-1915 and from 1870-1959 respectively.

i. The Contractor System – A Contractor was a licensed person whose only object was to collect as many coolies as possible, without reference to their fitness for work in Assam including Cachar or any considerations beyond their willingness to emigrate. He was also assisted by sub-contractor who was an unlicensed person for the same job. Since there was no restriction upon the contractors, the system became known as the ‘free contractor system’. Recruitment to the tea plantations in Cachar from 1841-1870 was entirely in the hands of these contractors known as Calcutta Contractors or Arkatti, (a place called Arkattipur in the neighbourhood of present Silchar still bears the reminiscence of the torture of the coolies) who had link with the individual planter in Cachar. The contractor was to be paid Rs/- as commission for every man dispatched to the respective tea gardens, Rs.1/- for every woman and child and himself Rs.150/- monthly towards his own maintenance and traveling.

The contractors used to recruit men, women and children from the North-West parts of the country, such as – Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Madras without restraint and supervision of any kind and bring them from their villages to the different tea estates of Cachar. It is found from various sources that, under this free contractor system, the coolies were neither medically examined nor

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22 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
23 Kanain, Elizabeth, Status of women working in the tea plantations, Akansha Publication House, N Delhi, 2003, p.31
24 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
registered and most of the time they adopted all kinds of fraudulent methods while recruiting them. The Arkattis generally enticed young girls and unmarried youths from the protection of their guardians and brought them to the local depots and from there the coolies were dispatched at once without giving their unfortunate guardians the opportunity of tracing them out.\textsuperscript{27} They signed contracts with the poor and innocent peasants by narrating fantastic stories of abundance of land, high wages and bright prospects in tea plantation in Assam and Cachar. Regarding the nature of their recruitment, Father Hoffman, a Jesuit Missionary stationed in Chota Nagpur says, ‘it included potential victim, tempting men with liquor and women and kidnapping young girls and marrying them off in the depots – a system known as Depot Marriage.’\textsuperscript{28} It also appears from the Assam Labour Enquiry Report, 1906 regarding their recruiting method that the ‘Arkattis’ as the professional recruiters were regarded by the people as ‘the scum of the earth and the heartless scoundrels’ and were feared as much as man-eating tiger.\textsuperscript{29} From a government letter, the activities of the free recruiters have been known, while they recruited the coolies to the different tea gardens of Cachar.\textsuperscript{30}

The abuses and inhuman behaviour done by the Arkattis on the recruited labour is still fresh in the memories of tea garden communities which is reflected through folk songs and folklore\textsuperscript{31} which goes thus -

\begin{tabular}{ll}
Bhojpuri Language & English Version \\
Hai Re Nirmohi Shyam & O cruel Lord Krishna \\
Fanki Diya Anlo Assam & We were brought here by the agents on false promises.
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{27} Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Revenue and Agricultural Department, Govt. of India, January, 1884, No. 216J, dtd.Chota Nagpore, the 11\textsuperscript{th} June 1883.
\textsuperscript{28} Singh, S N, \textit{Socio-Economic and Political Problems of tea Garden Workers}, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006, p-46
\textsuperscript{29} Assam Labour Enquiry Report,1906, p.23
\textsuperscript{30} Letter from J F Hewitt, Esq., Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, to the Under Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, General Deptt. (Emigration), No. 216J, dtd. Chota Nagpur, the 11\textsuperscript{th} June 1883. (see annexure - J)
\textsuperscript{31} Anil Kumar Dosadh, an interview conducted on 25\textsuperscript{th} October 2010 at Katakhal Tea Garden, Silchar
Having received such reports describing the horrible condition of the emigrant coolies, the Government finally interfered in the affairs of immigration and this led to the passing of series of Government Acts to control the recruitment policy of the *Arkattis*.

So far as the labour law of the Cachar is concerned, there was no labour law which came into force in Cachar before the Act of 1863. The implementation before the Act was mainly related to the labour of Brahmaputra Valley and it was not extended to Cachar Valley.

In 1861, an enquiry commission was formed by the Government of Bengal to investigate into the working of free contractor’s recruitment system, which led to the passing of Act III (Bengal Government Judicial) of 1863. This was the first legal Act in respect of labour immigration to Cachar. According to the provisions of the act, it was required to

i) License all the recruiters.

ii) All intending emigrants were required to be produced before the magistrate of his own district.

iii) All emigrants were to be examined by a medical doctor to see whether they were fit enough to emigrate.

iv) The emigrant was to be sent to a central depot, where he was to be put under contract for a period of four years.

v) The steamers and boats carrying the labourers were also required to be licensed.

Unfortunately, the legislation remained merely a legislation. There was no arrangement for proper inspection from the side of the Government and the tea management. It is also found from the sources that the Act did not have any provision for protecting labourers after their arrival in the gardens. The labourers who wanted to go back to their homeland after a short experience in the garden life

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were forced to stay back. Flogging was a common method of punishing the workers when the latter was discovered of an attempt to abscond or performed his duty unsatisfactorily.\textsuperscript{34}

As the Act of 1863 did not improve upon the conditions that prevailed during the free contractors system, the Government amended the Act in 1865. This Act provided for minimum wages, limited hours of work that is 9 (nine) hours per day and 6 (six) days per week and contracts were not to be extended beyond three years. It was also mandatory to maintain a hospital. A protector and an Inspector of labourers were empowered to visit gardens to supervise everything including the authority and labour relation.\textsuperscript{35}

The Act of 1863 and the subsequent Act of 1865 did not remove any of the abuses in the recruitment system. This was revealed by another Commission of Enquiry in 1868. The Commission reported that recruits were still induced to emigrate by misrepresentation, mortality in transit were high and unfit persons were sent in large numbers. It also came to light that individual Planters sent out their Garden Sardars to recruit labourers from outside Cachar. Such recruitment was not provided in the Act but the Commission observed that in such cases many who abused of the contractors system were absent. The Act of 1865 was therefore amended in 1870 to legalise recruitment by Garden Sardars. Though the sardari system of recruitment was recognized under the Amendment Act of 1870, even then the arkatti system was not immediately abolished.

It is observed that, recruitment through Garden Sardars was growing in popularity and the sardars usually brought labourers without any contract. It was after their arrival that a contract enforceable under Act XIII of 1859 was executed. It was like free recruitment carried out by the Planters. In later years of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the immigration of the labourers in the valley took place in a large scale. In 1880, a Labour Commission was appointed by the Government of Bengal to review the conditions of migrant labour, so that abuses of recruitment could be removed.

\textsuperscript{34} Tea industry in Bengal, Bengal Secretariat, Kolkata, 1873, p. 115.
The Commission’s Report led to the passing of Bengal Act I of 1882. This Act is also known as Dhubri System. Under this system, coolies were sent to Dhubri and from there contracts used to be executed. The Act introduced

i) A statutory minimum wage, subject to completion of the daily task.

ii) It provided for payment of subsistence allowance in case of sickness.

iii) It gave inspectors power to reduce scheduled tasks.

The Act I of 1882 abolished the contractors system but it gave rise to many abuses. This is established by the Government letter which said that, the women who emigrated to Cachar without their husbands become prostitutes in the garden or contracted unlawful marriages with others. Mr. Owen, Assistant-Superintendent of Police, who worked for some time as a tea-planter also corroborated this view.

Further, it is also stated by Babu Gunga Nund Mukerji, Deputy-Magistrate and in-charge of emigration, Manbhum that he had received 58 applications in 1882-83 complaining of the elopements of wives, brothers and sisters; and out of which only three cases of applicants succeeded in tracing out the lost women while fifty-five cases were unsuccessful.

In order to amend the Inland Emigration Act I of 1882, the Act of 1893 was passed. But it is found that, no improvement in the condition of recruitment took place up to 1901. The Act of 1901 was amended in 1908 and again in 1915. This amendment put an end to Contractors System and established what is known as the ‘Garden Sardari’ system of recruitment. It made the Garden Sardars the only recruiting agents in the recruiting districts.

ii. The Sardari System – The recruitment through Garden Sardars was commonly known as Sardari System and this method was used to recruit labourers

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36 Guha, Amalendu, Planters Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, Indian Council of Historical Research, N Delhi, 1977, p.40
37 Letter from J F Hewitt, Esq., Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division, to the Under Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, General Deptt. (Emigration), No. 216J, dtd. Chota Nagpur, the 11th June 1883, p.16.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
directly. Under this system, a labourer, either a male or female who is working in the garden, was chosen by the garden management and sent to his original place to bring his own relatives and friends to Cachar tea garden as tea labourers. The recruitment generally began from November and lasted up to three to four months. The Garden Sardar had to produce his certificate or license when he appeared with a recruit before a Magistrate for registration. He had to wear a badge and anytime his license or certificate could be cancelled under section 21, 36 and 41. The Sardar influenced his kith and kin to come to Cachar showing all the advantages of work and prospects of ultimate settlement. Many joined out of their desire to work with their relatives and some joined out of poverty. This system of recruiting labourers was especially prevalent in Cachar. The recruitment made by the Garden Sardars proved to be more satisfactory than that of Arkattis which continued for long period. Regarding their salary, the Sardars were paid a fixed bonus per head on all coolies brought, which was much less expensive than the first method that is Contractor System.

It is to be mentioned here that, though the Sardari System was to some extent more under control than the Arkatti System and even they maintained license for themselves and register for their coolies, yet they were not free from serious abuses. According to one Government letter, in 1880, there were 24; in 1881, there were 27 and in 1882, there were 20 complaints which had been made against the recruitment system of the Garden Sardar and it is found that one Garden Sardar’s license or certificate had been cancelled because of his misconduct.

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41 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
42 Kaniar, E, *Status of women working in the tea plantations*, Akansha Publication House, N Delhi, 2003, p.34
43 Legislative Department, Government of Bengal, File No. 303 B G, 25th August 1873.
45 Govt. letter from J W Edgar, Esq, C S L, Officiating Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division addressing to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Judicial Deptt., no. 479CR, dtd. Ranchi, the 3rd Nov.1882, p.19
46 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
Some of the cases happened during the time of the recruitment of Garden-Sardar depicted in this letter are as follows—

1. The Deputy-Commissioner of Lohardugga has given me lists of 24 such complaints made to him in 1880 against Garden-Sardars only; of 27 complaints made in 181, and of 20 up to the end of August of the present year. The Reverend Mr. Whitly has also given, besides the list above alluded to, another list of 16 Christian lads, between the ages of 10 and 15, who have disappeared within the last few years from a small area, and who are believed to have been taken to the tea districts. As I have been unable to ascertain the actual facts in the majority of these cases, I shall confine myself here to a few specific instances. I may state, however, that both the Reverend Mr. Whitly and the Reverend Mr. Onasch have stated to me confidently that they can substantiate many more cases and expect to be able to do so after the cold weather, having been hitherto prevented by the difficulties of communication in this division during the rainy season.

2. One case is described in the following passage, extracted from a report of the Deputy-Commissioner of Lohardugga—

‘I must state what I consider the greatest evils connected with these abductions and elopements. They are the total obscurity which enshrouds the girl’s disappearance, the expense incurred in attempts to trace her, and the large number of cases where such attempts are unsuccessful. I can best illustrate this by an instance related to me by the Reverend Mr. Habu of Lohardugga. A young woman, living near Lohardugga, suddenly disappeared; her husband suspected that she intended eloping to Assam, so he went to Ranchi, 46 miles off, with funds for several days search. No trace could be found to the girl in any of the Ranchi depots, but he got a clue to her being at Hazaribagh; returning home, he raised all the money he could, and started for Hazaribagh, about 70 miles off; was refused admittance to the depots at first, but obtaining permission to search by petitioning the Deputy-Commissioner, he succeeded in ascertaining that a girl answering to her description had been registered and forwarded to Assam under another name. Meantime his funds were

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47 Govt. letter from J W Edgar, Esq, C S L, Officiating Commissioner of the Chota Nagpore Division addressing to the Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal, Judicial Deptt., no. 479CR, dtd. Ranchi, the 3rd Nov.1882, p.19
utterly exhausted, so he returned home after two month’s absence. His position now is almost intolerable; he is heavily in debt to the mahajans, having separated and got his share of the family property on his marriage, he simply cannot manage his farm without some one to cook and keep house for him; but is unable to sue for restitution of conjugal rights, or for divorce or to proceed against any one for adultery and if he takes a concubine his minister will excommunicate him. Of course, it will end, or had by this time ended, in his accepting excommunication and relapsing into heathenism.’

3. The following case has been reported by the Reverend Father Mullender, of the Chyebassa R C Mission. I give it in his own words –

‘In the 8th of Nov. 1881, Ejudula married in the R C Chapel of Burudi, Dobo, a ryot of Sarwada, and followed her husband to Sarwada. Karam Singh, a pagan boy of the same village, enticed the married woman to the forest; and suspecting some mischief, the husband complained to Deosai, the village Munda, who promised to make bichar and to punish Karam Singh, if found guilty. The young pagan was afraid, and most probably in order to escape punishment was easily persuaded in the munru market to escape with Gundula, equally more or less afraid to Assam. They were enlisted by Anthony Sirdar of Sukni, left the same day for Ranchi, where they declared themselves husband and wife. Dobo Amborse, the true husband went two days later to Ranchi to claim her but it was already too late, they had been sent off already to Assam. This happened in May 1882.’

4. The following extract from a letter from Mr. Whitly is worth consideration –

‘A few cases of which I send details show that the coolie depots offer great facilities to runaways –

i) The wife of a man named Sulema of Hesahatu, left her home and was supposed to have gone to a coolie depot. Her husband came to Ranchi, but found that she had been already sent off. This woman remained in Assam for about four yeas, living with a heathen and returned to this district about two years ago.

ii) Sufia, wife of a man of Bari, went on a visit to her father’s village; from thence she went away secretly with a sardar. The father at once followed her, and
overtook her on the road to Ranchi; she refused to return with him. Her husband was not informed till afterwards.

iii) Salmi, wife of Anandmasdi of Deogain, was staying in the same village as the above (ii) and went off with her. She also got off to Assam.’

Though a number of abuses were found in regard to the recruitment method of Garden Sardar, yet it proved to be more satisfactory in the Cachar tea garden than the Arkatti recruitment and it became more favourable in the plantation where recruitment was done without much harassing the labourers.48 Their operations come directly under the notice of the district officers rather than those of recruiters i.e Arkattis. The people generally were less ready to complain against men of their own village and caste than against the up-country men usually selected as recruiters.49

In addition to these two agencies working within the Emigration Act, there was also a third system operating outside it, under which unlicensed recruiters of free emigrants collected labourers in the recruiting districts and took them to Assam Valley without registration or other assistance from government.50 In some cases, such recruiters were supervised in the recruiting districts of European Agents in the employment of various tea companies who occupied the same position as local agents under the Act, except that they held no license from Government.51

To make the recruitment system more accurate and free from untold miseries for the emigrants, more Acts were introduced and it was the Act of 1932 that the Tea District Labour Association was formed for the purpose of recruitment of labour. A new agency with Controller of Emigration as the head was also appointed by the Government to supervise recruitment of labour. But, even then, these Acts could not solve the problem of wage-rise and recruitment process. Because the white Planter’s interest reigned supreme, the labourers were to suffer until the end of the colonial

49 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
regime in 1947. It was only after India attained independence that the condition of labourers of Cachar underwent a gradual improvement by the passing of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951, which is a landmark in the history of tea plantation. The Act is most exhaustive and covers a wide range of concessions for the improvement of tea labour problems. Basing on this Act, the state government enacted the Assam Plantation Labour Rules 1956, which opened the gate of various labour welfare measures.

**Mode of Transportation of Recruitment Labour**

The transportation of labour during the British period to the remote tea estates in Cachar was a difficult task. The steam navigation was not yet introduced, neither the boats were available in large number nor there were any expert boatman. Rail or road link was extremely a difficult task during those days. During the rainy season, the strong velocity of the current and accumulation of big trunk of the trees and boulders on the rivers banks made the navigation of the boat more difficult.\(^{52}\) It took nearly four and half months to reach from Calcutta to Sadiya and similar period to Cachar.\(^{53}\) The impending problem of the transport of the labourers to Cachar was not unaware to the Authorities. However, it is found from one letter corresponded by Messers F Harley and Company to the authority that proposals were made for introduction of Steamer line between Kolkata and Cachar in regard to the transportation of labour to the Cachar tea gardens.\(^{54}\) In this regard, the Authority felt necessary and agreed, and opined that it could meet out the existing transportation problem. Thus, necessary steps were taken in this regard and beginning from 1860s the transportation of labour by Steamer boat to Cachar and Sylhet started.

\(^{52}\) Barpujari, H K, *Assam in the days of Company*, (2\(^{nd}\) edition) Gty, 1980, p251  
\(^{54}\) A Government letter written by R Stewart, Superintendent, Cachar addressing to Messers F Harley and Company, 28\(^{th}\) December 1830, File No.296 of 1860, District Record Room, Silchar. (See Annexure - K)
It was found that from various parts of the country, the labourers were brought to the depots on foot at Calcutta, from where the labourers were sent to Cachar.

The journey was tiresome and it took a long time to reach the different tea estates, which caused sickness and high mortality. In the subsequent years, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar requested the Bengal Government to sanction the acquisition of two plots of land in 1863, one at Sadar Station of Cachar and another at Panchgram where depots were to be built for disembarked labourers imported under the Act I (Bengal Government) of 1863. The proposal for acquisition of another piece of land at Katigorah which was also sanctioned by the Bengal Government in 1865 for the same purpose under the Act III (Bengal Government) of 1863.55

In Silchar town, there were two concentration camps – one at Itkhola(near Idgah) and other near District Civil Hospital,56 from where these emigrants were sent to Silcoorie and Arcuttipore. By interviewing with senior personal of tea gardens of Kathal Tea Estate, Poloi Tea Estate and Derby Tea Estate, it is found that from Silcoori, the labourers were sent to Bhubandhar, Dholai, Motinagar, Moniarkhal and from Arcuttipore, they were sent to Dewan, Polarbond, Kashipur, Arunabond and other places.

In Cachar, labourers were dispatched in country boats which started in 188357. It took more than a month and while on journey the indentured labourers faced a lot of difficulties. The Magistrates were to give each labourer a ticket containing his name, residence etc. There were rules for the guidance of the commander of vessels transporting labourers to the Cachar.58 He was responsible to inspect the provisions, drinking water etc. For every group of labourers four Sardars

55 Singh, S N, Socio-Economic and Political Problems of tea Garden Workers, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006, p-49
56 Ibid. p.50
57 Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
would be appointed, each of them would be in charge of a gang. Two sweepers and two professional cooks (bhandaris) would be shipped for every 100 labourers.\textsuperscript{59} During the voyage, the commanders of steamers would ensure the proper cleaning of the desks and the bathing of labourers regularly. The cooks were to be warned against the pilfering of the labourers stores. There were also guidelines for the Civil surgeon or Officer in charge of disembarkation at the depot.\textsuperscript{60} Though all the recruits were given provisions of clothing, food, medicine and other necessary materials by the management so as to reach their destination, but the whole provisions emptied before the boat reached only half of the journey. The long journey without proper food, medicine, sanitation and other comforts accompanied with unfamiliar climate was most horrible and painful. Labourers were virtually packed up in the boats like animals and no human consideration was there even with regard the privacy of women. Many ill nourished labourers and their small children died enroute due to their inability to withstand the hostile climate of Cachar. The dead bodies were not given proper burial honour and were thrown in the river water like animals.\textsuperscript{61} It is found from the sources that during the period from May 1863 to January 1868, a total of 52,155 labourers were imported to Cachar, of them 2456 died during the voyage.\textsuperscript{62} Another source reflects that, out of 2336 emigrants registered for transmission from the following recruiting districts to Cachar by way of Goalundo, only 1994 arrived, 17 were left behind, 19 died and 306 or 13.09 deserted.\textsuperscript{63} Thus, it became difficult to send labourers by boat upto Cachar. A list is displayed in the following, which reflects the death rate of the imported labourers to Cachar in specific years.\textsuperscript{64}

**Statement showing the death rate of Coolies in the tea gardens in Cachar district in the different months of the year 1866 – 1871.**

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p.36.
\textsuperscript{61} Singh, S N, *Socio-Economic-Political Problems of Tea Garden Women Workers*, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006 p.51
\textsuperscript{62} Bhattacharjee, J B, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East-India, Radiant, New Delhi, 1977, p
\textsuperscript{63} Revenue Agriculture Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner, Assam, September, 1884, pp.3-12.
\textsuperscript{64} Letter no. 586 dtd. October, 1896 addressing to Secretary, Govt. of India, from, E A Gait, Officiating Chief Commissioner.
Towards the close of 1898, Railway communication was extended to Cachar connecting Chittagong.\(^{65}\) The Government of Bengal took initiative in the matter and constructed shelter houses in some of the railway stations from where labourers were sent to different Cachar tea gardens. Thus, from 1898 labourers were sent to Cachar either by steamer or by railway and the use of the country boat was abandoned altogether.\(^{66}\)

Thus, the transportation of the labourers to the Cachar districts became better in later years as improved means of transport were brought about. The labourers who came to Cachar all these years stayed on even after the expiry of their contract. In course of time, they formed a separate community of tea gardens of their own. The subsequent chapter will reflect their socio-economic-political status in the tea gardens of Cachar.


\(^{66}\) Bengal Government Proceedings (Emigration) Act 1988, file no. 49-55, para-12