CHAPTER – IV

(WORK AND LEISURE: LIVING CONDITION
OF THE TEA LABOURERS)
In this chapter, an attempt has been made to picture the living condition of the tea garden labourers relating to their work and leisure during the colonial period in Cachar province (covering present Cachar and Hailakandi district). Here the concept of living condition of the labourers meant the surrounding happenings of the labourers in their respective tea gardens, which include all facilities, difficulties, problems etc. faced by the labourers during the time of their engagement in the tea gardens. In other words, we can say that it referred to the involvement of a labourer in the sphere of socio-economic-political activities in the tea gardens. Thus, in the present study, it is intended to examine all the aspects of the living condition of the labourers pertaining to their daily life, such as, socio-political-economic life.

Having failed in all attempts to obtain labourers from the local population and the neighbour areas, the Planters decided to bring the labourers from outside Assam. Accordingly, the labourers were recruited from the different parts of India by the recruiters from the flood and famine affected areas, such as, present Bihar (Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Chaibasa and Dumka); Bengal (Santhal Parganas, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore); Orissa (Sambalpur, Balasore, Cuttack and Koraput); Madhya Pradesh (Raipur, Balghat, Bhandara and Jabalpur). Workers, belonging to tribal or semi-tribal societies, known as ‘Adivasis’ or ‘Medasis’, were also recruited from Chotanagpur, Midnapur, Poortiah, Barrakpur, Sylhet and other places.¹ These labourers were brought to Cachar by the Planters through steamer and country boats in the early part of the 19th century to work in the newly established tea gardens of the province. The workers had shown great enthusiasm as well as eagerness to come to Cachar to make good money and to pass happy life as the Arkattis or Sardars told them. This was revealed from their folk songs, sung by early workers while recruits to Assam tea plantations. The folk song goes like thus,

‘Chol Mini Assam Jaibo

Deshe Baro Dukhre
Assam Deshere Mini
Cha Bagan Hariyal!  

(English Version: Come let’s 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).

It explains their enthusiasm and reasons for mass migration to tea plantations. Moreover, the Contractors induced the tea labourers to come up Cachar by convincing them of less work and better pay. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906, reported the nature of recruitment and stated, ‘Contractors collected coolies by the false promises of high pay and light work and dispatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary measures for their welfare of the journey.’

Traditional Dance Of Tea Garden Labours (Jhumur)

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2 Ibid, p.18.
3 Singh, S N, Socio-Economic and Political Problems of tea Garden Workers, Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006, p.44
4 Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 and also Dutta, Arup Kumar, Cha Garam, The Tea Story, Paloma Publications, 1992 p.82.
But when the immigrant labourers put their feet on the soil of Cachar in a particular area of the tea plantation, they received great shock to see the pathetic situation of the garden life, and with utmost regret they cried out ‘Hai re nirmohi shyam faki diya anlo Assam’ (English version – O! cruel God, Agents brought us here by giving bluff). They now, became sure that the Arkattis gave them false promises. Tears tickled down from their eyes but there was none even God to help them. They blamed themselves on their own fate. However, with the passage of time, they gradually adjusted themselves with the situation and settled down in different tea estates of Cachar. Thus, they became part and parcel of the tea plantation of Cachar, which they never thought of and this made them cut off from their ancestral places.

After arriving at the Cachar province, they were sent to an isolated area where there was no human settlement and no communication line; it was only an inaccessible jungle having a great number of wild animals. They were asked to clear the jungle first and then to erect a common barrack for their dormitory life. With their help jungle areas were cleared, grasses and seeds were removed for plantation, labour lines, factory, Manager’s Bungalow and staff quarters were thoroughly planned and skillfully laid down. The tea Planters had placed Chowkidar to have a keen notice on the garden labourers so that they could not run away from the tea garden and if it happened they were whipped mercilessly by the Planter. If a person could produce an escaping labourer, he was given a reward of Rs. 5/- and the treatment on the escapee was very ‘barbarous’. The escapee was tied to a pole and flogged mercilessly and the oppression was so rigorous that

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sometimes even caused death. The reward of Rs. 5/- was deducted from the wage of the runaway labourer and generally the runaways were not made over to the police as laws required.

**Proceeding To Start Plucking In Early Morning Hours**

The labourers life in the estate was totally controlled by the Planters, the owner of the particular estate. The Planters enjoyed extra-authoritarian power over the labourers, who were not only the masters of the labourers but also had the power of magistrates to decide disputes, arrest and impose of punishment on them. They were vested with enormous powers, who could arrest the labourers in any moment and even could imprison the labourers on any minor reasons. As they were the ruler or master of its own estate they could do everything as they want, provided depending on their own will. The Planters thus, exploited the labourers in every sense and it is found that they were not given any human treatment, for them

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the labourers were looked upon as ‘beast in a menagerie’\(^{13}\). In case of any resentment, boots and kicks of the Planters were the only reply.\(^{14}\) The Planters had taken undue advantage of their illiteracy, ignorance and socio-economic backwardness. There was complete absence of socio-political awareness in them and as such they easily become the victim of various evils of the garden life. Thus, the condition of the labourers in the tea gardens seemed to have no change for better. The suppression, oppression and restriction were the day to day features for the control of the labourers during the colonial period. They also could not escape because they had left their homes far away and often there was no way of going back.

After arrival in the particular tea garden, the labourers were accommodated in barracks, which was made of mudthatch and temporary in nature.\(^{15}\) Life in these places were terrible and beyond description. Such places were normally the ‘hotbed’ of malaria, kalazar, cholera, dysentery, leprosy and many other diseases. They were most unhygienic places with thick population, but without provision for drinking water, latrine and urinal.\(^{16}\) Naturally, the labourers were easy prey to dangerous diseases. It was because of this, the mortality in the garden was so high that the manager left the dead bodies indisposed and the dying ones uncared for.\(^{17}\)

The work in the beginning of the tea plantation was very much physical and continued to do so. Regarding their daily works in the garden, it is stated, “For a tea garden worker, the day begins generally at 7 A M. At this hour a whistle or a gong is sounded from the factory to announce the start of the working day. At 7-30 A M and at 8 A M the whistle or the gong is repeated to summon the labourers to work. There is, however, no hard and fast rule regarding the commencement of the

\(^{13}\)Ibid.
work. There is no morning muster of the workers as in most parts of South India, but they are free to report any time they like and the only requirement is to finish their allotted task. The day is long and hot particularly during the flushy season and usually the workers are anxious to finish their task before it is hot. They, therefore, go out to work early. At mid-day, during the break period, the workers are supplied with liquid tea. Most of the men will have finished their work but the pluckers have by then finished only the first session of work which is called a ‘bela’. During the break, the morning’s leaf is weighed either in the field or at the factory. The second ‘bela’ lasts till about 4 to 5 P M and the workers have invariably to take the leaf to the factory for weighing.”

Women Pluckers Lining Up With Baskets Of Plucked Leaves For Weighing

The socio-economic-political condition of the Cachar tea garden labourers in the colonial period was most pathetic right from the day they put their feet in the garden. The following discussion will give a clear picture regarding their living condition within the tea plantation during the British period.

Social Life –

Social life of the tea labourers in the tea gardens denotes the happenings of surroundings and passing one’s entire life which may include many aspects. In fact, in ordinary parlance, it encompasses so many events or aspects of one’s entire life beginning from his birth to death, such as, the manner of living, religious, social customs, traditions and culture etc. Here, an attempt has been made to study their living condition, their duties in the plantation, education, medical facilities, drinking habit, which evolves surrounding life of the plantation.

Socially, the tea garden labourers were looked down upon and in the society their social position was nil. Since they came from different background, it was difficult for them to adjust themselves with the local people and the latter too took little interest in mixing with them. In fact, it was rare that the tea communities were invited by the local population for any social function and always they used to be called ‘coolies’ by the people. The labourers had no freedom at all in their respective gardens as they used to remain confined in their own gardens only. They could not move or meet their neighbouring tea garden labourers, even with their relatives, separated earlier at the time of their recruitment without proper permission from tea Planters.19 Even, if a worker’s daughter was to be married to a resident of another tea garden, the Manager’s permission was necessary.20 The workers were like the prisoners within the four walls of the tea garden under the protection of Chowkidar in every day and night. It is assumed that such restrictions

20 Guha, Amalendu, Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, Indian Council of Historical Research, N Delhi, 1977, p.44
were made mainly to suppress the unity of labourers of various gardens so that they could not raise their voice unitedly against the authority or Planters.\textsuperscript{21}

The general living condition of the Cachar tea labourers was very pathetic during the beginning of the tea plantation. The entire family with average 5-8 members was housed in a small one or two roomed houses, furnitures were scanty, the clothes were minimum and it becomes more pathetic during winter.\textsuperscript{22} Articles of modern amenities like - radio, TV, electricity etc. were not known to workers during that period.\textsuperscript{23}

![Tea Garden Of Cachar In Teelas](image)

\textbf{Tea Garden Of Cachar In Teelas}

The living standard of the tea labourers were very low and they were very careless regarding maintenance of their families. As soon as they got their wages, they used to spend the same quite generously without thinking for the future. To be specific, they used to spend their earnings in gambling, drinking alcohol and purchasing unnecessary articles without keeping any provision for the essential

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{21}] Saadin, 13\textsuperscript{th} August, 1999.
\item[\textsuperscript{22}] Singh, S N, \textit{Socio-Economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers – A Study of Assam}, Mittal Publication, N Delhi, 2006, p.22.
\item[\textsuperscript{23}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
commodities, like – food stuff, clothing etc.\textsuperscript{24} It is the habit of drinking alcohol that corrupted their social life. They did not even pay little amount of money from their wages to their family members for their maintenance and it was necessary for them to have savings after meeting the necessary expenditures, which they did not do.

One of the worst feature of the labourers in the plantation area was the addiction of liquors and narcotics. The habit of consuming the country made liquor, opium and ganja (an intoxicating preparation of Indian hemp) prevailed so extensively among the labourers that ultimately ruined the life of the labourers.\textsuperscript{25} They were so addicted to this that they could not live without it and it mixed up with their blood. A major portion of their income was spent over liquor, which spoilt their health, economic status and social life.\textsuperscript{26} Even the labourers sold their utensils for purchasing liquor and other intoxicants.\textsuperscript{27} Thus, it was the habit of drinking alcohol that led to degradation in every walk of life. The following story will reflect their careless with regard to their maintaining families. It is stated, “It was Puja (festival) time, and the workers had received their bonus. One worker, having received Rs. 800/-, decided to live it up. He hired a taxi and went to town. At a wine shop he bought an expensive bottle of whisky. At another shop he bought an expensive ‘sari’ for his wife. Then he ordered the taxi driver to drive all over the town while he imbibed the contents of his whisky bottle. Hours later, thoroughly drunk, he returned home. After paying for the taxi ride, he was left with a solitary hundred rupee note. As he entered his abode, he saw his cow tethered within the compound. His heart was filled with pity for the poor animal. ‘Ah,’ thought he, ‘I am a selfish, heartless wretch. I buy a sari for my wife and liquor for myself, but nothing for the cow, which is like a member of the family.’ So he hugged the poor cow, brought out the hundred rupee note, and fed it to the animal. His wife saw him, and too late to stop him, began hurling abuses at her husband.

\textsuperscript{24} Chakrabarty, R N, \textit{Socio-Economic Development of Plantation Workers in North-East-India}, N C Publishers, Assam, 1997, p.104
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p114.
\textsuperscript{26} Kumar, Purnendu, \textit{Tea Plantation Workers of Cachar: A Socio-Political Study}, in journal of North-East-India Council for Social Science Research, 28\textsuperscript{th} year of publication, Vol. 28, No.2, Shillong, 2004, p.31.
This angered the husband, and he shouted back: ‘You ungrateful woman! The cow gives us milk and dung. She is like a daughter to us, yet you grudge her the money that I gave her. You don’t deserve the sari that I bought for you. So he tossed the sari into the fire and went contented to bed, having spent his bonus in a manner that even royalty might envy!’

As a result, hardly they could continue to manage the expenditure of their families for one or two weeks, thereafter, they began to take loan from the moneylenders which they had to return the same after getting wages for the next period. But, practically this did not happen, they could not return the principal amount and even the interest, due to their unplanned expenditure. Therefore, in the subsequent period, they were bound to sell their belongings like – land, ornament or utensils to meet their loan. At last, they had nothing remaining with them and totally ruined. Thus, this was the regular feature of the living condition of the tea garden workers.

After engagement of labourers in the tea gardens, it is found that proper medical facilities were not provided to them by the management in the early period, it was totally inadequate in the tea estate. They lived in most unhygienic condition, suffered from various diseases and were ill nourished, and there was no provision for drinking water, latrine and urinal. Because of this, including their poor diet, they easily become the victim of various diseases like – malaria, kalazar, cholera, dysenteries, leprosy and many other diseases. Though in the later years, some development had taken place with regard to the field of medical by establishing garden hospital in every tea estates. But, still, condition of all these were most deplorable. These were running without properly trained doctors, without medicine and without nursing assistants. F G Foley, in his ‘Reminiscences of a Pioneer Tea Planters (1867)’ gave his own first hand experience, stating, “As

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29 Ibid, p.104
30 Ibid.
31 Kumar, Purnendu, *Tea Plantation Workers of Cachar: A Socio-Political Study*, in journal of North-East-India Council for Social Science Research, 28th year of publication, Vol. 28, No.2, Shillong, 2004, p.34
32 Ibid.
for the tea gardens, the Manager did the doctoring with an intelligent high caste coolie as dresser to dose the patients. There were no hospitals and if fracture accorded, the only thing to do is to send the patient to the government hospital. When epidemics arose, the most that could be done was to segregate the patient. When I was assistant my duty was to administer the medicine to all sick who were brought up to me by the line chowkidars, With the aid of doctors Geodesic’s book I did my best. The specifics were quinine, chloridine and castor oil, with a simple ointment or two for dressing sores, etc. Naturally, the mortality on the gardens was of high percentage, Even today, the same condition prevails in garden. Thus, the tea labourers of Cachar in the early period had suffered a lot for absence of proper medical treatment, therefore, they without getting any alternative may depended on ‘Kaviraj’ or natural treatment.

In the beginning of the tea plantation, there was scarcely any provision for education within the tea garden of Cachar. Neither the tea planters were interested to promote education in the tea estates, nor workers had any interest in education. Planters held the view that, the introduction of education would make the children unfit for work, while the labourers themselves regarded, the earnings of their children as a greater value than the time spent in primary education. However, with the passage of time, situation went on changing. The local garden priests and some educated persons kept the workers aware through religious books (like – Ram Charita Manas, Mahabharata and Hanuman Chalisa) and created interest among them to read and write in their own mother tongue (particularly Hindi). In the subsequent year, the Government of India in Home Deptt. in its letter no. 412(Education) dated the 14th June 1906 deputed W M Kennedy, Deputy Commissioner on special duty for the purpose of enquiring into the existing

33 Kumar, Purnendu, Soio-Economic and Political Conditions of Tea Garden Labour of Cachar district of Assam, in The Tea Labourers of North-East-India, edited by Sarthak Sengupta, Mittal Publication, N Delhi, 2009, p.95.
34 Guha, Amalendu, Planter Raj to Swaraj Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947, Indian Council of Historical Research, N Delhi, 1977, p.17
condition of education upon the tea estates of this province. Accordingly, he submitted in consultation with the planters, proposals for providing increased facilities for the education of the children of tea garden coolies in the tea estates of the Cachar province. Circular were accordingly issued to the managers of respective tea estates through Collectors and Deputy Commissioners for submitting the report with regard to the existing condition of education upon the estates. Mr. Kennedy interviewed with the managers of the different tea gardens of Cachar, such as, Hailakandi on 30th September 1906, Lalamukh on 1st October 1906, Silcoorie on 3rd October 1906, Dewan on 6th October 1906, Silchar on 8th October 1906, Dullabcherra on 10th October 1906, Longain on 11th October 1906. He collected the note of opinions expressed by individual manager of the respective tea garden.

After a long meeting held between Kennedy and the planters of Cachar, the latter have the opinion that, “in the case of estates on or near which no Government school has been opened, the most satisfactory way of providing instruction for the children of tea-garden coolies who desire to avail themselves of it, is for gardens to establish private schools under their own control, either aided by Government on the capitation fee system or unaided and subject only to an informal inspection by the Deputy Commissioner, at the option of individual managers. Where Government schools existed on or close to estates, they considered that the addition of an experimental evening class, in the cold weather to begin with, would be sufficient to meet present requirements. They thought that any system of compulsory attendance would be very unpopular with the coolies and would be impossible to work and that instruction should be given in the language which would be useful to the coolies on individual gardens.”

39 (See Annexure - ?), Ibid, p.16
40 Ibid, pp.20,21
Further suggestions were made for the improvement of education and types of schools in these estates by the Committee\textsuperscript{41} –

i) An ordinary Government Lower Primary School managed and maintained entirely by Government.

ii) A Private School was to be opened for two hours in the day or evening under the complete control of the manager, who would appoint and dismiss the teacher and receiving aid from Government calculated on the results of an annual examination held by an officer of the Education Deptt.

iii) Purely Private unsubsidized evening schools.

Thus, a year later that is beginning of the year 1907, the Government extended help for the construction of Primary Schools in the selected tea gardens of Cachar and also extended help with grants for books, appliance and pay of the teacher where such assistance was required. Even then, the literary among the tea workers of the isolated plantation area was negligible, due to lack of encouragement from both parents and managers.\textsuperscript{42} Later on, to improve the education system in the Cachar tea gardens, a Royal Commission for Education was passed in 1931.\textsuperscript{43} But, this Commission also did not try to improve the education in the tea plantation. It was only in 1938 that the ITA (Indian Tea Association) took positive steps for establishment of primary schools. From this stage there had been steady progress and by 31\textsuperscript{st} March 1942, there were 547 schools in Assam Tea Gardens, 467 of which were maintained entirely by the Companies concerned at annual cost of Rs. 1.5 lakhs.\textsuperscript{44} However, even during this period the garden labour’s attitude towards education of their children was not encouraging.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, p.10
\textsuperscript{42} Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Committee Report, 1921-22, p.100.
\textsuperscript{43} Singh, S N, *Socio-Economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers – A Study of Assam*, Mittal Publication, N Delhi, 2006, p.108
A table is given below which shows the number of schools in tea gardens and number of students from 1938 – 1947.\(^{45}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Children living on tea gardens</th>
<th>Number of Schools</th>
<th>Number of Children attending school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938-39</td>
<td>5,64,147</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>20,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-40</td>
<td>5,71,950</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-41</td>
<td>5,67,401</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>21,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944-45</td>
<td>5,65,040</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>11,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945-46</td>
<td>5,60,217</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>10,706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-47</td>
<td>4,73,308</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>12,498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947-48</td>
<td>4,86,597</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>20,628</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the subsequent period, Labour Investigation Committee in 1946, suggested to increase the number of schools in the tea gardens and asked to stop the employment of children below 12 years of age. The suggestion was accepted by some planters and there was an increase in the attendance in these schools.\(^{46}\) However, in comparison to the population of tea garden labourers and their children, this increase was insignificant.

Thus, it is assumed from the above fact that regarding the field of education in the Cachar tea gardens, education was not so much improved and they remained educationally backward. It was only after the attainment of Indian independence, that steps were taken to develop the education system in the Cachar tea gardens. Further, more important progress was made in this field when the Government of India passed the Plantation Labour Act in 1951, which made it

\(^{45}\) Phukan, A C, _Personal Administration in the Tea Industry of Assam_, Archita Publication, Jorhat, 1979, p.519

\(^{46}\) Pio, Sunil, _The facilities of education in the tea estates of Assam_, in journal North East India History Association, Vol-XII, 1991. p.424
compulsory to establish garden level schools for primary education at the cost of the management.\textsuperscript{47}

In the beginning, recreational facilities for the labourers were very limited, because of their long time engagement in the garden. The strategy of the labourers in the tea plantation was maintained by the Planters in such a way that they never thought anything beyond the necessity of life. Their nature of work totally kept them isolated from outside influence and the modern facilities. Whether it may food, housing and recreation they were isolated in every respect. However, in the subsequent period, the management organized different sports and games and filmshows for the labourers. It was in the open field of the garden that the mobile cinemas took place and the labourers with great enthusiasm enjoyed the programme.\textsuperscript{48}

Sometimes, the estate arranged cultural programmes during the occasion of Durga Puja and Dol Yatra, but these programmes were not so much popular as the mobile film show.\textsuperscript{49} Circuses were also arranged with great enthusiasm by the management. Generally, it took place in the winter month.\textsuperscript{50} There was hardly any entertainment programme in which the women participated. They were not allowed to participate in the games and sports, as this was not acceptable by the elders. They generally enjoyed to see the outdoor games and festivals.

Among the sports and games held in the tea garden, football was the most common game in the tea garden labourers. Inter-garden football matches were arranged by the labourers themselves or sometimes by the Planters.\textsuperscript{51} Other than football, \textit{kabaddi} was the next outdoor game common in the garden. Among the indoor games, carom, \textit{das-pachis}, cards were mostly used in their nach-ghar and

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\item Singh, S N, \textit{Socio-Economic and Political Problems of Tea Garden Workers – A Study of Assam}, Mittal Publication, N Delhi, 2006, p.125
\end{enumerate}
other common places. However, after the independence, the concept of recreation among the labourers was totally changed.

One of the most important aspect of the tea plantation sector was the role of women. Mostly, the women were recruited in the tea garden for plucking of leaf and they enjoyed this job very much. They were not only engaged in the plantation work but also made contribution to the household works.

In the early period, only the male labourers were recruited, recruitment of women was not given preference, as the nature of work involved very much physical labour in the beginning. According to the sources, in 1861, only 10% women were recruited by the tea management in Assam including Cachar. The recruitment of women was steadily increased, particularly when the Sardari System of recruitment was adopted. By this system, large number of families including women and children were recruited to the tea garden. Thus, in the later years, as a result of the improvement of the means of communication, the migration of women to Cachar tea garden were increased in large scale. The following data will show the actual position of the women recruitment into the Assam state including Cachar.

### Number of Female Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>59,923</td>
<td>50,752</td>
<td>46,544</td>
<td>1,57,219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>2,04,492</td>
<td>2,05,603</td>
<td>2,52,376</td>
<td>6,62,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>3,23,731</td>
<td>3,05,850</td>
<td>4,80,850</td>
<td>11,10,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928-29</td>
<td>3,33,962</td>
<td>2,81,507</td>
<td>4,52,183</td>
<td>10,67,662</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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52 Ibid
55 Ibid, p.168
Their unwanted sufferings were started while they put their feet in the garden. The facilities for amusement and recreation were very limited for them. Like other plantation workers of NorthEastIndia, the women workers of Cachar were uneducated and they were very much satisfied with their job, though they got less salary and the promotional chances were very limited. In the eyes of the manager, the women were committed and dedicated than the men workers. They never complained or showed resentment for such discrimination.

Regarding their daily plantation jobs including household work, Purnendu Kumar writes, “From morning to late night they remain busy in garden. They got up at 4 O’clock in the morning, start cooking for their children, finish their early meals or breakfast and report for duty at 7 O’clock and start plucking leaves even in an inclement weather with their little infants stripped on their breasts. They work relentlessly irrespective of changes in the climate and unmindful of the effects it has on their bodies. They even remain standing for hours together while plucking the leaves during the monsoon when the weather alternates between brazen heat to heavy showers and the skin of their fingers pills off excessive contact water. Both mother and baby seek shelter under an umbrella which barely provides protection to them. Besides, the female workers are also engaged inside the main factory at various levels. While working inside the factory, they inhale tea dust and polluted air which affects their respiratory system. At five in the evening, they returned to the labour line being completely exhausted and fatigued. They hardly get one hour time for rest and they again, start other domestic works, like, fetching water from nearby wells and nala; collecting firewood and other food articles from local shops. They prepare food within their limited means and serve


58 Ibid, p.94
to their family members first and then take themselves whatever is left for them. Sometimes, they remain hungry even due to their limited resources.\textsuperscript{59} 

Since, the women workers belonged to lowest status in the functional and social hierarchy in the tea plantation, they were subjected to abuse and ill treatment at the hands of the managers.\textsuperscript{60} In minor offences, they could be whipped mercilessly and flogged. Sometimes, they were subjected to sexual harassment by the tea planters.\textsuperscript{61} The planters, as they were the supreme authority in the garden, could do anything as they wanted. There was nobody to challenge his power. A planter could take girls after girls from the labour line to keep him company at night, but there was none to dispute his action or authority.\textsuperscript{62} It is found that, most of the tea planters maintain ‘harem’ or ‘chokrikhana’ in their Bunglows, where a bunch of attractive young women were kept.\textsuperscript{63} This was a regular assault borne by the women workers in the hands of planters in the tea plantation. However, in the subsequent period, the harassment of the women and their work strategy was taken care of with the emergence of Indian national movement in India. Especially, M K Gandhi, in his magazine, ‘Young India’ had expressed it as a serious concern and warned such culprits to refrain from such acts.\textsuperscript{64}

**Wage Structure**

It is the general impression among the people of Cachar that the tea workers are ‘poor’, ‘illiterate’, ‘nasty’ and their economic status is below average compared to other industrial workers. The Arkattis and Sardars had recruited the poor labourers from the famine affected areas, such as, present Bengal, Bihar, Chota

\textsuperscript{59} Kumar, Purnendu, *Tea Plantation Workers of Cachar: A Socio-Political Study*, in journal of North-East-India Council for Social Science Research, 28\textsuperscript{th} year of publication, Vol. 28, No.2, Shillong, 2004, p.33.  
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid,p.23 
\textsuperscript{64} Singh, S N, *Socio-Economic and Political Problems of tea Garden Workers* Mittal Publication, N.Delhi, 2006 p.17.
Nagpur, Orissa, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh etc. to the Cachar tea gardens with assurance of fabulous wages and of getting land to cultivate and even to have own cattle. The labourers become motivated and in fact, they dreamt of becoming owners of land while working in the gardens permanently. Though the cultivable land was introduced in the early stage of the cultivation of tea, but even doing so, the position of the labourers was no better and low wages always remained a question mark.

In the early days, the rate of wages on Cachar tea plantation varied from garden to garden and was based mainly upon the nature of work and it was determined by both quality and quantity of the work. However, for the first time, systematic wage structure for the tea plantation labourers was maintained by the Act of 1865, which fixed the monthly wages at Rs. 5/- for a man, Rs.4/- for woman and Rs.3/- for a child. Further, the Act of 1872 revised the rates by providing for an increase of one rupee per month for both men and women. These rates were however, increased by the Act of 1901 to Rs.5.5/- for a man and Rs.4.5/- for a woman for the second and the third years and to Rs.6/- for a man and Rs.5/- for a woman for the fourth year of the contract. Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, criticised the wage rate of the Act of 1901 when he said that ‘the wages actually earned in the Cachar tea districts were too low as compared with general level of agricultural wages in Assam general and Cachar in particular.

However, in the subsequent years, that is in 1906, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee studied the economic condition of Cachar tea garden labourers. The report said that a family consisting of one working man, one working woman and one working child would have earned averagely Rs.14/- in September in 1905 and

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65 Ibid, p.44  
67 Ibid, p.186  
68 Ibid, p.186.  
69 Ibid, p.186  
under Rs12/- in March 1906, because March was the lowest earning month and September the highest.\textsuperscript{71}

In 1921, another Committee examined the economic condition of Cachar tea garden labourers and found that prices had risen considerably during the war and the increase of wages were not proportionate to the rise of price. Therefore, the Commissioner of the Surma Valley stated in 1922, ‘to live in comfort a man would require to earn Rs.10/-, a woman Rs.7/- or Rs.8/- and a child Rs.4/-. The actual earnings of a man at this time were Rs.6/3/4 in Cachar.\textsuperscript{72}

The following table depicted the earnings of Cachar tea labourers from 1905-1922.\textsuperscript{73}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rs</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Paise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1909</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1910</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
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<td>1912</td>
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<td>1913</td>
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<td>1914</td>
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<td>1915</td>
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<td>1916</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, p.309.
During the Second World War period, the Indian Tea Association recommended concession rate seeing the situation of the labourers and intervention of the Congress and the Communist minded people. With regard to Cachar (covering present Hailakandi and Cachar district), the following concessions were effected from January 1, 1942:  

i) Rice was sold at rate of 8 seers to 5 seers weekly for an adult and 2 seers for a child.

ii) Cloth allowances of Rs. 3/- for man and Rs. 2/4 for woman were to be paid before the Durga Puja in 1941.

In 1942, a scheme of cash allowances was made in addition to concession rice supply, these were -

i) 6 pies, 4 ½ pies and 3 pies on the daily hazira of men, women and children respectively,

ii) A monthly allowance at the above rate,

iii) Cloth allowance worth Rs. 5/- for man, Rs. 4/- for women and Rs. 2/- for children at each of the pujas.

In 1943, there was modification in the scale of concessions in food stuffs, these were -

i) Rice for adult male was 4 seers weekly at Rs. 5/- per maund.

ii) For adults women 3 seers weekly at Rs. 5/- per maund and

iii) For a child 2 seers weekly at Rs. 5/- per maund.

Other Commodities  

i) Dal – 2 seers per month at 3 annas per seer,

ii) Salt – ½ seer per month at one anna 6 pies per seer,

iii) Mustard Oil – ½ seer per month at 3 annas per seer and

iv) Gur – 1 seer per month at 3 annas a pies per seer.

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74 Ibid, p.314
75 Ibid, p.313.
No other major changes were made during 1945, and in 1946, there were variations from district to district with regard to issue of food stuffs.

Considering all angles, the fact cannot be denied that the condition of the tea garden labourers of Cachar was one of misery and exploitation until the independence. It was only after Indian independence condition became better off.

**Political Life**

The workers of the tea plantation in Cachar brought from the different parts of the country, were poor, innocent, illiterate and suppressed by the Planters. The geographical settings, ethnic diversity, restriction to go back to their ancestral places and many other socio-economic compulsions forced them to lead an unpleasant life. They could not freely exchange their grief to their fellow workers and even movement beyond the tea estates was restricted. They hardly went to weekly market place within the garden for purchasing essential items of their daily life. These market places become in due course the meeting points where some social activities could take place and religious priests could talk to them regarding local, regional and national issues and that too secretly.  

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

The condition of the workers can be assessed from the report of N C Bordoloi, who, besides being a Planter, was also a Lawyer and Politician. He reported in 1919 that, “A garden is like a small town by itself, with the barracks for labourers and the stately bungalows of the managers and their assistants. Nobody, not even the policemen can enter this kingdom without the manager’s permission. A manager may assault a labourer, insult him and take girl after girl from the lines as his mistress, yet there will be none to dispute his action or authority. It is only at sometime when the manager’s cruelty surpasses all bounds that the labourers set upon him and assault him. Had it not been for the fear of Britishers and the guns and pistols they possess

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and the fact that at their back and call all the constabulary and magistracy of the district would have occurred pretty frequently in these small dominions.” 77

Under the above circumstances, it was not possible for the workers to organize themselves and had no courage to raise their protest against the Planters, though they well understood the surrounding happenings of the national movement led by the Indian National Congress. It was known to them that any protest resulted the dismissal from service. Therefore, the workers out of fears of losing jobs remained silent and accept whatever it was. Such was the sorrowful life of the tea garden workers who had been deprived of their legitimate claims.

With the passage of time, however, the situation began to change. Their long sufferings got a spark with the emergence of Gandhi in the scene of Indian National Movement. The name of Mahatma Gandhi spread like wild fire and every worker came to know that Mahatma was born to liberate India. The word ‘Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jai’ echoed in every labour line of the tea estates and they were eager to have the glimpse of such a prophet. 78

Many social activists cum nationalist workers moved from garden to garden in Cachar and met secretly with the tea workers and drew the attention of the people of the country to the pitiable condition of the tea workers. 79 They encouraged the tea workers to unite together and raise voice against the injustice meted out to them by the European Planters. It was they, who opened their eyes and injected the spirit of self-reliance, unity and to fight against the European Planters for their legitimate rights.

The tea labourers received more enthusiasm to fight against the European tea Planters when the fifth conference of the Surma Valley Political Conference was held at Sylhet in September 1920 under the Presidentship of Abdul Karim and

79 Ibid.p.150
addressed by Bipin Chandra Pal and Sundri Mohan Das where it was resolved to encourage tea garden labourers to boycott the British dominated tea plantation. This resolution created ‘sensation’ among the tea workers and they soon became agitated to launch non-co-operation movement in tea garden of Cachar district. Further, the visit of Mahatma Gandhi (August 1921), Jwaharlal Nehru (December 1937) and Subhash Chandra Bose (May 1938) at Silchar gave fuel to the tea workers through their ‘fiery speeches’ to make them aware of their rights and incite them to take revenge against the white Planters.

Thus, from the first quarter of the 20th century the grievances of the labourers started bursting out in the form of spontaneous revolt. ‘Gheraos’ and strikes began in almost all the gardens of the Cachar district. The strikes were made on a charter of demands of which the demand for higher wages, healthiness of the garden, good management, protesting against the supply of low quality rice as ration were specially noteworthy. The strikes were basically spontaneous, unarmed but militant in character. Though the strikes were generally against the plantation authority, sometimes it was directed against the exploitation of the Maharajas and the ill behaviour of the garden Baboos.

One concrete example of the labour strike was that of Chargola Exodus of 1921 at Ratabari Tea Estate and the Arunabond Labour Strike of 1939. The Chargola Exodus of 1921 was the epoch making history of the tea plantation labour movement which effected the entire plantation of the present Barak Valley. A large number of workers participated in this strike. The workers there since back had agitated demanding increase in wages but in respect of the management there was no mood to budge and inch. As influenced by the Gandhi’s Non-Co-Operation Movement they get influenced and their agitation assumed greater shape. The laouerers of Chargola Valley decided to go back to their ancestral places and

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80 Ibid, p.152
83 Ibid.
Accordingly the labourers moved towards their home on 3rd May 1921. Though the labourers were ordered by the Planters to return to their gardens, but the labourers instead marched ahead shouting ‘Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jai’ and proceeded towards Chandpur Railway Station to proceed to their native places. Though the railway authority was requested by the Planters not to issue them rail ticket, the labourers did not entertain it rather marched on foot along the railway line enchanting nationalist slogan including the famous one ‘Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jai’.

Having failed to convince them, the local magistrate Khiran Chand Dey, Commissioner with S K Singha, S. D. O. gave order to the Gurkha Rifles to drive the coolies away from the station yard. The Gurkhas fell upon the innocent men, women and children and began to beat them most mercilessly and inhumanly. The ‘heart rending’ sound of cries and wailing arose in the air, which startled the people of the town. Next morning it was ascertained that about one hundred coolie were wounded and some children were missing. It is said that the water of Padma River was ‘reddened’ with the blood of the labourers. Thus, the economic grievances provided a weapon for political action.

Another ‘epoch making’ incident in the labour history of Barak Valley was the Arunabond Labour Strike of 1939. This was an another milestone in the labour movement in Cachar tea plantation. It began on 4th April and continued for 45 days upto 19th May 1939.

The main causes of this movement were heavy work load, low wages, underweight of the tea leaves plucked by the workers, ill treatment of the European Planters towards labourers and lack of freedom. In this movement, the tea labourers received a tremendous support from all political parties including

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87 Ibid.
89 Samayik Prasanga, Silchar, 30th October 2002.
neighbor tea estates for the cause they fought. In fact, Arunabond Labour strike felt a great affect to the labourers of the Cachar tea garden and it urged the labourers to come to a common plantform to fight against the exploitation.

These were several minor incidents which were the results of the continuous oppression that the labourers were subjected to. In the subsequent years their movement merged itself into the wide stream of Indian nationalism.

Festivals –

The largescale transportation of labour from the various parts of the country such as - West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh during the establishment of the tea industry in Cachar brought with them their cultural tradition and in course of time a unique and homogenous culture evolved that can be called the Tea Workers Culture. Hardly there was any month that passed by without a festival being celebrated in the tea garden, as the Hindus had 13 festive occasions in 12 months. Therefore, as season changed, so did the festivals, songs and dances. Through field study, it came to notice that some of their cultural festivals are their original and native ones while others are mainly imbibed through local influences. Though the labourers were facing untold suffering and hardships from the Planters, yet they maintained their festivals with great enthusiasm. The tea workers of Cachar celebrated variety of festivals which gave myths and legends associated with them, such as, Ghar Puja or House Worship, Gram Puja or Goan Puja, Karam Puja, Kathi Nach, Saharai or Saria Parab, Tushu Puja, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Ganesh Puja etc. Some of the common festivals of the Cachar tea gardens are mentioned below –

i) Ghar Puja or House Worship – This Puja is performed with the help of Bhagat (Priest) in every year for the well being and prosperity of the household and the family members. In this Puja, the house is thoroughly purified by way of being cleaned and washed with mud and cowdung paste. It is said that in this Puja

91 Bishu Bagti, Permanent Labourer, Kathal Tea Estate, an interview conducted on 10th September, 2009.
a hen is usually offered as sacrifice and it later on cooked and consumed by the family members.  

ii) Gram Puja or Goan Puja or Village Worship – ‘Gram Puja’ is solemnized every year in the month of June-July (Asharh) at a place called ‘Devi Sthan’ of the labour line. This is performed for the well being of the entire village so that no misfortune happens upon the inhabitants. They believe that the spirits of their ancestors live in the village or house to take care of their family members. In this occasion, the celebrants collected money and other necessary materials and invited the village priests to perform the ritual. The villagers concluded this occasion with great feasting of eating and dancing. It is said that black pigeons were sacrificed and consumed in this Puja.

iii) Karam Puja – This is a harvest festival when the new crop comes to the house in the month of December-January. It is the most important festival of the tea workers celebrated to increase the yield of their fields and in the hope of improving their material lot. Regarding the story of the ‘Karam Puja’, it is said that, once upon a time there lived two brothers called Karma and Dharma. Karma is the eldest and Dharma was the youngest. The eldest Karma dishonoured the karam tree, which his younger brother was worshipping. In consequence of which Karma’s financial condition deteriorated and he grew very poor. His crops failed and cattle kept dying until he worshipped the Karam tree. It was then that Karam Raja came to him and told him to perform Karam Puja.

The ritual was concentrated in the cutting of the three branches of Karam tree and their installation in the middle of the dancing ground called ‘Akhara’ designated as the Karam Raja. The Pahan – the village priest anointed the Karam Raja with sindur and tied with unbleached thread and offered milk. The girls then placed the karam daura – the karam baskets containing a little aura rice, some flat rice, a cucumber covering in a coloured cloth, an earthen lamp, flowers and young

92 Ibid.
93 Sanatan Tanti, an interview conducted on May 15, 2011 at Kathal Tea Estate of Cachar.
shoots of some growing crops. The girls were then made to sit around the Karam Raja and were told the story of the Karma by an elder of the village.

The following morning, the maidens distributed jawa that is maize saplings to their brothers and relatives. Later in the afternoon the Karam Raja was taken round the village amidst songs and dances. By evening the karam branches were thrown into a river.96 The songs sung during the occasion of Karam Puja are called Jhumur Geet. These songs described the enchanting descriptions of flowers and the beauty of nature, expressing of happiness or sorrow, the love story of Radha-Krishna etc.97 The songs goes like this -98

“Shishere Ki Phote Phul
Bina Barisane
Bachane Ki Mane Man
Bina Darishaae.
(English Version: Those in love desire for each other’s warmth,
But there is a barrier; someone’s assistance is necessary
To help the two see each other.)
Naina Sundar Dekhi Jorali Prit Re
Hai Mor Kesan Prit Tuti Gelo
Tuito Gelat Nato Chorai
Chot Gelai Prit Re.
(English Version: Seeing your beautiful eyes, I fell in love,
But our relation is severed;
You snapped the bond of love
Oh how deeply I am hurt)
Jhakhan Phul Kali Chilo
Takhan Bhamara Ailo Gelo
Are Brahmara Kon Phule Majilo
Purana Prit Chare Notune Majilo
(English Version: After offering everything to her beloved,

96 Kajal Chandra Kanu, Hospital worker, Derby Tea Estate, an interview conducted on 20th December 2009.
97 Ibid
98 Ibid
As betrayed, she realizes the crude fact”

iv) **Kathi Nach** – This was a common festival among the tea communities. This was not a religious festival but a social one which coincided with the colourful festival of holi symbolized the getting of a new life in nature. On this auspicious occasion the youth sang and danced with great enthusiasm in a circle accompanied by the rhythmic sound of the beating of wooden sticks. The lyrics were mostly love lyrics.\(^9\)

v) **Saharai or Garia Parab** – The tea workers of the Cachar observed this festival in the new moonday in Kartik to honour the cattle which are inseparable part of agriculture.\(^1\) In this occasion cattle were given extraordinary treatment. Their hoofs were washed with rice beer, their hornes oiled and anointed and heads adorned.\(^2\) The cattle were also fed on soaked pulse grains mixed with salt and paddy grains. In short, the cows were treated with great honour, light earthen lamps in the cowshed, cut grass to feed them and sing songs in praise of them. The songs associated with this Puja have been traditionally handed down orally from generation to generation and the songs are known as ‘Johali Geet’. The songs goes like this\(^3\) -

‘\( \text{Khuj khujte ali puch puchte} \)
\( \text{Kon dike ahirabe ghor ho,} \)
\( \text{Puch Puchte ali khuj khujte ho,} \)
\( \text{Ahirabe ghor loti dur ho,} \)
\( \text{Boithoke detoi bhala ruchu muchu pirho,} \)
\( \text{Ghaihi detoi gua pan} \text{ ho.’} \)

( English Version – Oh! the cow race! After asking many people about you we have come here. Your master has also offered us betel-pan.) Also,

‘\( \text{Aaj je hakai bhala bachareku parab ho,} \)
\( \text{Nahi ale bar aporadh go.’} \)

\(^9\) Field Study Ajoy Panika, Social Worker, Poloi Tea Estate, an interview conducted on 5\(^{th}\) April 2011.
\(^1\) Ibid
\(^2\) Ibid
\(^3\) Dutta, Anup Kumar, *Cha Garam – The Tea Story*, Paloma Publications, Assam (India), 1992, p.87
(English Version – We have come here today on the occasion of the parab. Not to have come would have been a crime.)

vi) **Tushu Puja** – Tushu Puja (parab) is the popular festival in the Cachar tea gardens. All throughout the Bengali month of Poush that is in and around December and January the tushu songs filled the air in the gardens of Cachar. Tushu Devi was a historical character who has been sacrificed herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and sanctified or make sacred into a Goddess. There is a stanza in honour of Tushu –

> ‘Cone Tushu, we shall wash your feet with our scented hair,
> Do come again, Tushu in the temple of our hearts
> When you come Tushu, our hearts are relieved from the burden of despair,
> Do come again, Tushu in the temple of our hearts.’

The practice of rituals among the tea workers regarding to Tushu Devi comes down from this –

> ‘Poush mashe Tusu anibo
> Chandan kahar tore mein
> Jadi Tusu doia kore
> Rakhbo sonar mahale.’

(English Version – In the month of Poush I shall bring Tusu to the house on a palanquin made of chandan wood. If she is pleased she will keep me in a golden palace.)

Tushu songs also carried lyrics of love and romance, expression of day to day happenings etc.

Besides the above festivals, of late the labourers of all sections, castes and religions started celebrating almost all the festivals in the Hindu calander. Mention may be made of Durga Puja, Dasahara, Kalipuja, Monsa Puja and Lakshmi Puja. There were no community of tea labourers who did not celebrate these festivals.

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103 Ajoy Bhattacharjee, Office Asstt. Poloi Tea Estate, an interview conducted on 12th February 2011
104 Babul Dhobi, an interview conducted on June21, 2011 at Poloi Tea Estate of Cachar.
Even the management of all gardens were given holidays on account of the festivals. Through field study, it has been known that, Rosekandy Tea Garden was the first tea garden where Durga Puja was celebrated by the tea workers and subsequently it spread over the entire T E’s of present Barak Valley.106

Thus, every festival was celebrated in the Cachar tea gardens with great enthusiasm in the midst of dance and music. Music by drums was associated with those dances which added pleasure and happiness.