CHAPTE III

TEA
The most important colonial innovation in Assam was the introduction of the tea industry which gave Assam a place of pride in the commercial map of the world. The discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam was of profound political and commercial significance to Britain. In fact it has been regarded as the single most important factor which had influenced the Company in its decision to annex the province. Perhaps the British would never have been interested in the jungles of Assam at all had not the circumstances forced them. If it was only an extension of their frontier they could have tried much earlier. Yet for years they had remained indifferent and had not made the slightest attempt to incorporate this region in their domains. Such an action was considered, at that time not only politically impracticable but also economically inexpedient. The obvious question, therefore, arises as to why the British suddenly changed their mind. The answer to this question lies not in India but in the Company's trading activities in China.

THE CHINA TRADE

By the middle of the eighteenth century the English had outstripped all the other foreign competitors in the Canton trade, the chief item of which was tea. After the English East India Company had established its factory at Canton in 1715, the bulk of the trade was under its control owing to its monopoly of the English trade. Other Englishmen were permitted to participate only under the

1 See Chapter I.

2 For details see H.M. Vinacke, A History of the Far East in Modern Times, pp 31-52.
licence of the Company, and then, only partially. The Company was represented at Canton by superintendents who were, to a large extent, the spokesmen for the entire body of foreign merchants. The Chinese tended to deal with them directly and to hold them responsible for the conduct of trade on the foreign side.

One of the peculiarities of this early trade was that it was largely one sided. The Chinese were not particularly interested in the European goods whereas the Europeans made long voyages, often at great risks, to secure Chinese goods, mainly tea. Hence, the Chinese came to believe that the foreigners were wholly dependent on China for their well being. Consequently there developed among them a feeling of superiority. The trade was permitted as a matter of privilege and not as a matter of right. Gradually, however, trade began to grow. In the beginning, the Chinese products were paid for in specie but soon an exchange of commodities began to build up. Nevertheless, for a long time exports from China far exceeded her imports, that is, until opium began to figure largely in the trade scene.

The demand for opium grew so much that by 1830 the balance of trade had become totally unfavourable to the Chinese Empire. The increase in the importation of opium, coupled with the rapidly increasing home production in the South-Central and Western provinces, which was obviously indicative of an increasing number of users, roused a furore in the Chinese Empire. Objections were raised on
moral grounds. The serious economic consequences\textsuperscript{3} of the opium trade caused widespread resentment. In spite of the fact that the opium trade had been declared illegal, a phenomenal illicit trade continued with the connivance of the local Chinese officials.\textsuperscript{4} This alarmed the Chinese Government so much that it threatened to put an embargo on the profitable tea trade if the opium traffic was not stopped. Meanwhile, the British merchants had been agitating in favour of ending the East India Company's monopoly at Canton because they wanted to participate in the trade competition as freely as the nationals of other countries, especially America. Subsequently, in 1833, on the renewal of its charter, the East India Company lost its monopoly of the tea trade with China. This was to have tremendously far reaching consequences because it became essential for the Company to find an alternative source of supply under its exclusive control.

ASSAM TEA

The discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam was, therefore, of tremendous significance. Its importance was further increased when enquiries conducted by Captain F. Jenkins, who in 1834 became Agent to the Governor General for the North East Frontier, and Charlton, his assistant, and the reports and specimens submitted by them

\begin{quote}
3 The cultivation of opium withdrew land from cereal growing and thus tended to interfere with the food supply in some sectors of the country. Secondly, as opium imports increased, the specie of the Empire was drawn to Canton and was exported in settlement of an adverse trade balance.

4 The average import of opium was as follows:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
1800 - 1811 & 4,016 Chests \\
1811 - 1821 & 4,494 Chests \\
1821 - 1828 & 9,708 Chests \\
1828 - 1835 & 18,712 Chests \\
\end{tabular}

\end{quote}
eventually convinced the botanists and the Government that
the Assam tea plant was identical with that of China. From the outset, therefore, tea affairs in Assam acquired a
considerable degree of importance and value and the Company probed ways and means of setting up tea plantations in Assam.

One of the first measures of the Tea Committee had been the deputation of its Secretary, Gordon, to China in June 1834 to procure seeds, plants and growers, because the general belief had been that the native plant had degenerated for want of cultivation. Accordingly, in January 1835 a consignment of about 80,000 seeds arrived from China. Of these 20,000 seedlings were sent ten months later to C.A. Bruce in Assam. However, due to defective packing most of it was destroyed. Those that survived were planted in a nursery together with some plants of Bruce's "seeds of indigenous stock". The fact that the latter survived better than the imported variety convinced Bruce of their superiority. In August 1837 William Griffiths reported:

From these shrubs the first tea ever made by the Chinese in British India was procured, and although the supply was small, yet I am not aware of its having proved inferior to any subsequently manufactured. The process was seen by no one but Mr. Bruce and appeared to have been kept a complete secret from everyone at Sadiya.

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6 E. Gait, A History of Assam, p 406.
8 C.A. Bruce was appointed "Superintendent of the Government Forests", and he at once set himself to discover all the tea tracts in the Lakhimpur district and to arrange for the purchase of the leaves which were plucked by the Singphos and other villagers.
Edward Gait mentions that in 1837 Bruce packed forty six boxes of tea, but owing to defective packing much of it was damaged and only eight boxes could be sent to England. Perhaps this was the consignment which Griffiths refers to in his report of August 1837.

The first Government planting of the China stock was made on very porous, sandy soil near the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Kundil rivers. The locality was found to be totally unsuitable, and the bushes which had survived had to be replanted on firmer soil at Jaipur. Here fresh difficulties were met with. The imported Chinese overseers, trained under far different conditions of soil and climate, carried out every operation in garden and in factory precisely in accordance with practices prevailing in China, the method often being unsuitable under the much altered conditions of Assam. The garden was, therefore, sold off to the Assam Company in 1840. It appears that the intention of the East India Company was to experiment only to prove that the tea plant would grow in Assam and that tea could be produced as a marketable commodity, and then to leave it to private enterprise to produce it on a commercial scale. The Government of India had repeatedly affirmed the principles that the "Government are eventually

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11 ibid.
12 F.P.P., 1839, 17th - 24th July, N. Wallich, Secretary, Tea Committee to J.P. Grant Revenue Department.
13 In deciding the name of the Company, the Committee (a provisional committee of the Assam Tea Association had been formed in London) were aware that lime, coal and oil were in the soil, and that gold was alleged to have been found in the rivers. With the eye to the possibility that they might want to develop anyone of these other commodities, the committee decided to adopt the general designation of "The Assam Company" rather than the "Assam Tea Company", although tea was the main object of the enterprise. This Company had been formed in 1839 with a capital of half a million sterling in 10,000 shares of 50 each, of which 8,000 were allotted in great Britain and 2,000 in India. Antrobus, Op.cit., p 37.
to withdraw from the further pursuance of the scheme, and as soon as it may appear expedient to entrust its future success to private speculators. The Assam Company was not only the premier tea company of India but was also the pioneer of the tea industry outside China.

WASTELAND GRANT RULES

The discovery that tea could successfully be cultivated in Assam opened up a virgin field for the British capitalists and innumerable opportunities for her unemployed. To facilitate the development of the tea industry under European capital, the Government made special rules of the grants to planters. The first special Grant Rules were those of March 1838 when wastelands were offered to applicants on a forty-five years' lease on condition that a quarter of the entire area must be in cultivation by the expiry of the fifth year, on the failure of which the whole grant was liable to redemption. One-fourth of the grant was to be held in perpetuity revenue-free. Of the remaining three-fourths, no revenue was to be assessed for the first five years if the land was under grass, ten years if under reeds and high grass, and twenty years if under forests. Local aspirants were not discriminated as such, but the clause which provided that no grant was to be made of an area less than 100 acres, and only to an applicant who was in possession of capital or stock worth Rs.3.00 per acre, excluded Indian competition in practice.

15 ibid.
16 ibid.
The rules were modified in 1854 under the "Old Assam Rules" which provided for a 99 years lease. No grant was to be made for less than 500 acres, afterwards reduced to 200 acres and even 100 acres in special cases "if native applicants could satisfy the collectors of their ability to bring ryots from outside Assam".\(^{17}\)

To these succeeded a new policy of disposing off land in fee simple at fixed rates ranging from Rs.2-8 to Rs.5 per acre with no clearing conditions attached.\(^{18}\) From 1862 the grants were placed on auction sale.\(^{19}\) The agitation against this system of auction was so effective that in 1864 the Government reverted to the earlier system of the principle of leases. Thirty years was fixed as the time of the lease without any special stipulations as to the area to be brought under cultivation within the time of the lease.\(^{20}\)

This provision (requiring auction of fee simple grants) was very distasteful to speculators, who complained that after they had spent time, trouble and money in searching for a suitable piece of land, they were liable to lose it altogether, or to have to pay more than its value for it at the auction sale.

These extremely favourable terms led to a scramble

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19 ibid.

20 ibid.
for land among planters. It was not always their intention to plant the whole area with tea. In fact, more often than not, they acquired these wastelands, which contained valuable materials like timber, with the intention of selling off portions of it with an unearned profit. However, the unplanted area could also be let out to tenants who would be able to work in the tea gardens in their free time. The planters were also motivated by the hope that by occupying extensive areas, they would be able to ward off prospective competitors. In 1872 the total area taken up by tea planters in the Brahmaputra Valley was officially reported to be 364,990 acres of which only 27,000 acres were under tea (approx 8%). The following table shows the proportion which the area taken up and the revenue demand derived from tea lands bears to the total revenue paying area of the Brahmaputra Valley:

(TABLE IS PLACED ON NEXT PAGE)

21 ibid.
22 ibid.
24 E.A. Gait, Land Revenue Manual, pp LXI - LXII
### PROPORTION OF TOTAL AREA TO REVENUE DERIVED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISTRICT</th>
<th>TOTAL SETTLED AREAS (IN ACRES)</th>
<th>ORDINARY LAND REVENUE DEMAND</th>
<th>AREA IN ACRES OF TEA LAND TAKEN FROM GOVT FEE SIMPLE REVENUE</th>
<th>TOTAL 8 COMMUTED PAYING GRANTS ESTATES</th>
<th>TOTAL LAND REVENUE DEMAND FOR 1895-96 ON TEA LAND</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE AREA REVENUE TAKEN UP FOR TEA LAND TO TOTAL LAND ON TEA LAND</th>
<th>TO TOTAL LAND REV. DEMAND SETTLED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. GOALPARA</td>
<td>1,586,674</td>
<td>104,979</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ASSAM PROPER</td>
<td>2,373,691</td>
<td>4,308,948</td>
<td>332,208</td>
<td>291,866</td>
<td>624,074</td>
<td>289,150</td>
<td>26.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. TOTAL BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY</td>
<td>3,959,365</td>
<td>4,413,927</td>
<td>332,208</td>
<td>292,418</td>
<td>624,626</td>
<td>289,655</td>
<td>15.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25. ibid., p LXV
It is clear from the above that the planters formed the largest single land owning class. It is also clear that they contributed the least to the revenue of the province. While the common peasant paid between Rs.3 and Rs.1-8 annually per acre towards land revenue, the planter held most of his land rent free and paid on an average, only about nine annas per acre for the remaining part.

One important consequence of this systematic land-grabbing policy was the displacement of many rural cultivators. Officially by 'waste land' was meant "land covered with jungle, or uncultivated, and of such character, or in such position that it is not likely to be taken up for cultivation of the ordinary native staples of the country within a reasonable time". In practice, however, many planters encroached upon the jhum rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. There were also instances when land, not properly settled by cultivators, were sold as waste land to the tea companies. This resulted in the former occupants either having to leave the place and settle in a new tract or to stay back as tenants of the new landlord. Another point worth noting here is that although the major part of the tea area was taken directly from the Government, there were also instances of land being taken up by planters on lease from the proprietors of permanently settled estates.

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26 ibid, p 75.
27 ibid, p 384.
EARLY PROBLEM OF LABOUR

The tea industry in Assam thus opened up new avenues for the investment of Britain's surplus capital. But capital and management are just two aspects of an industry. Plantations, being labour intensive, required a constant supply of labour. One of the characteristic features of all plantations is that they are initially set up in sparsely populated areas, and Assam was no exception. From the outset, therefore, the tea industry in Assam faced an acute shortage of labour.

As mentioned earlier, the soil of Assam was of exuberant quality and the population sparse. In 1835 the total population of the entire Brahmaputra Valley was estimated at only 799,519. There was, therefore, enough fertile land for all and much to spare if anyone ventured to clear the jungles. Hence, the great majority of the people were agriculturists of one kind or the other and combined agriculture with traditional industry. Rice, the common crop, was grown with little care and at small risk. While its cultivation yielded a large return it required no corresponding expenditure of capital. The common people grew nearly every article of domestic consumption in their own fields and lived in ease and comfort. "In this enlightened country" wrote G.M. Barker, a contemporary, "each man is his own master and the life of a ryot is inconceivably and supremely happy." He owed

30 Ibid.
31 See Chapter II for details.
32 G.M. Barker, A Tea Planters Life in Assam, p 77.
allegiance to no one save the Gossain, who was always a man of importance and wealth and whose power over the people was extraordinary. Apart from the common people and the Gossains, there were the members of the former royalty and the displaced aristocracy. Economically they were almost crippled, for the abolition of slavery in 1843 compelled those landowners, who had for so long depended on their slaves for the cultivation of their lands, to break up their estates.\(^{33}\) Incidentally, records do not suggest their (slaves) opting out either for employment in the tea gardens or wage-labour in the villages. The bulk of them appear to have emerged, in due course, under the prevailing conditions of land abundance and capital shortage, as poor peasants.\(^{34}\) Their social position too, was somewhat peculiar. The fact that they were formerly the ruling race earned them a considerable measure of respect, but the recency of their conversion to Hinduism necessitated a low place in the Brahmanical order.\(^{35}\)

The villages in the Brahmaputra valley offered all conditions that make for material prosperity. Yet there was no great accumulation of wealth, though it must be admitted that only a small minority was in debt. Opium,\(^{36}\)

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34 *Ibid*.
36 In 1860 the Government put a ban on the private cultivation of poppy, while at the same time increased the price of Government controlled opium. The proposed aim was humanitarian. Actually they were motivated by two main reasons.

1. It was hoped that by raising the price of opium the addicts would be compelled to work as wage labourers to earn the extra money required to pay for their living.

2. The 'bari' and 'Chapari' lands in which the crop was grown was assessed at a lower rate, thereby considerably lowering the revenue of the state. The introduction of "akbari" opium seriously upset the local economy, for opium was the only cash earning crop of the villagers. Moreover, the increase in price was no deterrent. Records prove that consumption, in fact, increased.
no doubt, was a heavy tax on most Assamese. Apart from compelling a man to pay heavily for his pleasure, opium deprived him of that keenness and bounce so essential for those who wish to advance on the path of material progress. The enervating climate and the security of their crops further contributed to their unenterprising character.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that when the tea gardens were opened up, few Assamese were willing to work as wage labourers and certainly not at the cost of their own cultivation. In 1840 Captain Phillips, Assistant Commissioner, Lakhimpur reported:37

It is a very rare thing indeed for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. Their taking such work at all is attributable to temporary necessity, as for instance, inability to pay their revenue, waiting to get married and not having the necessary means, being in debt to a 'Kyah', and wanting, if possible, to escape payment of his exorbitant interest, or as more commonly happens, dawning their freedom being in want of a yoke of bullock etc. etc.

In fact the Bodo-Kacharies, a plains tribe in the Brahmaputra Valley, were the only Assamese that were willing to work in the tea gardens. The Superintendent of the Assam Company wrote:38

The Kachari coolie is very much superior to the common Assamese as a labourer, has fewer prejudices of caste, eats animal food, drinks spirits and unless when perverted by the Assamese example and influence, abstains from the use of opium. These habits, while

they tend to preserve their physical superiority, also entail the necessity of increased industry for their provision.

In the initial stages, Chinese tea growers were imported from Singapore, Penang and Batavia. But the extremely high cost of recruitment and difficulties in managing Chinese labourers compelled the planters to look elsewhere for labour. In fact as soon as C.A. Bruce found that they were not vital to tea making or cultivation, he urged upon the authorities at Calcutta to allow him to get rid of them at any price. In their report of 1842, the Directors of the Assam Company prophesied:

The excellent quality of tea and its improvement since it has been made by the Assamese most satisfactorily and fully justifies the expectation that the labouring people of Assam will eventually furnish numerous skilled in the art for the purpose of manufacture on a very extended scale.

In some stages during the manufacture of tea, tea firing for instance, usually only Assamese men were employed as few among the imported labour could hardly stand even seven consecutive days at this work. However, for reasons given earlier, Assamese labour was not available in sufficient numbers and therefore, at a very early stage in the growth of the tea industry acute shortage of labour was experienced by the planters, who had to resort to the expensive task of importing labour from those areas of India where distress and scarcity were

42 The Tea Cyclopaedia, p 20.
acute, viz., Bihar, Orissa and Chota Nagpur. These areas were heavily populated and the landless peasantry soon fell victim to the temptations held out by the recruiting agents or 'arkatis' who painted rosy pictures of life in the tea gardens.

PERIOD OF SPECULATION

For the first two decades the tea industry in Assam was developed on steady lines. In 1852 the Assam Company paid its first dividend. Meanwhile, the Jorehaut and other companies had been formed and many private estates had been opened up. This flow of capital was accompanied by some of the consequences too often associated with the developments of a novel but alluring enterprise on a grand scale. The 'South Sea Bubble' and 'Rushes' to reported gold and diamond mines are examples where the spoils mostly go to a few. The actual success and exaggerated official reports engendered the most extraordinary belief in tea as a money spinner. The London Producer Market recalls how the four years between 1861-64 were a period of enormous speculation in Assam tea when company after company was formed to plant tea gardens. It was a saying current among planters in those days that "it was doubtful whether it would ever pay to make tea, but there was no doubt that it paid to make tea gardens." There was an eager gamble for shares with the usual results. The Assam and Jorehaut Companies, already in the field, could watch with

44 ibid.
45 ibid, p 97.
indifference the hurried formation of new companies, and the extension of old ones, usually under the supervision of men with little or no experience of tea cultivation. When speculation did start, it ran riot, as Colonel Money has testified to in his 'Treaties on Tea':

Often in those days was a small garden made of 30 or 40 acres and sold to a company as 150 or 200 acres. It was done over and over again. The prices paid, moreover, were quite out of proportion to even the supposed area .... New gardens were commenced on impossible sites and by men as managers who not only did not know a tea plant from a cabbage but who were equally ignorant of the commonest rules of agriculture. Boards highly paid with secretaries still more liberally remunerated were formed both at Calcutta and London to carry on the enterprise, and in short, money lavished in every conceivable way while management ran rampant in each department.

It appears that during these years gardens were often laid out as a speculative measure and with no intention of retaining them. Companies were floated as a gambling medium without serious intentions of opening out tea lands in Assam. The following table shows the growth of tea plantations in Assam between 1850 and 1871.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>NUMBER OF ESTATES</th>
<th>AREA UNDER CULTIVATION (ACRES)</th>
<th>PRODUCTION OF TEA (LBS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,876</td>
<td>216,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7,599</td>
<td>1,205,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>31,303</td>
<td>6,251,143</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is not surprising that in this atmosphere fraudulent transactions were common. By 1865 many proprietors discovered how foolishly they had bought and were dismayed by the realisation that they could never hope to make a profit. Panic spread swiftly and there was a wild rush to sell. Gardens that had cost lakhs were sold for as many hundreds. Many concerns collapsed completely and proprietors were now in as much of a hurry to get out of tea as they had been to get in a few years earlier.

Such ill-considered speculations led to a tremendous crisis in the tea industry. The lack of restraint on the part of the Government in granting land, the ignorance of the duties and responsibility of the hurriedly formed Boards of Directors, the insistence of many proprietors on quantity instead of quality and the scarcity of labour, all contributed towards the chaos. The financing banks were alarmed at the situation and liquidation of nearly all the companies followed.49 The land passed into the possession of the banks which had been financing them on security of Fee-simple title deeds.50 Some of the private owners, however, held on grimly through all the hardship with unshaken confidence in the future of Assam tea. It is on record that in some localities these men formed small communities, encamped where water was plentiful and by pulling their resources, lived on simple rations supplied by the natives who took garden livestock and other suitable items as security.51


50 It might be noted here that this depression coincided with the depression in Western India which resulted from the reckless floating of companies in the Cotton Industry.

The Jorehaut Tea Company was incorporated in 1859 with a capital of 60,000 and chose William Roberts, who had been for a time Managing Director of the Assam Company, as its first Chairman and moving spirit. Its capital was used in buying the Cinnemara, Oating, Kaliabar, and Numaligarh gardens from private parties.

When the storm subsided and Assam settled down to restore its shaken industry, a curious position was disclosed. Large areas of land had come under the possession of the various banks which had no direct use for them and were now anxious to sell them off. But more often than not they found it difficult to dispose off the land as Assam was still sparsely populated and the Government were giving tea grants on Fee simple tenure. In such cases the banks themselves were obliged to undertake the management of the tea estates which had been planted earlier.

The Government scheme of practically free waste land grants was not intended as a permanent measure, but it lasted long enough to place the industry once again on a firm footing. An organised system of labour recruitment greatly improved matters. Having overcome the initial instability, the tea industry continued to develop on a steady line.

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52 When the density of population per sq. mile in Bengal was 535, in Assam it was 110. Census of India 1911, Vol. I, Part I, P-84.
RECRUITMENT OF LABOUR

The gradual expansion of the industry in a labour short economy created a class of agents or middlemen who supplied labour to the gardens. The first mention of a paid recruiter is in the Board minutes of the Assam Company of 4th June 1839, when it was agreed to offer one Campbell of Midnapore the job of going to Chota Nagpur or Bhagalpur to collect families of labourers willing to migrate to Assam. He was to be paid Rs.2/- as commission for every able-bodied man landed at site, Rs.1/- for every woman and child and for himself Rs.150/- monthly towards his own maintenance and travelling. 53

The planters themselves often had no better connection with recruitment than was involved in paying for the labourers. This system obviously led to disastrous consequences for it soon involved competition among these contractors. Moreover, until the passing of the Inland Emigration Acts, viz., Act III (Bengal Code) 1863 and Act IV 1865, neither were the recruiters licensed nor the emigrants registered. There were also no standard rules regarding wages and conditions of labour. 54

The second method was to recruit directly. This was, of course, only possible if the garden had been established for a considerable period when there were men of certain standing (sirdars) whom the planter could trust to go away on paid leave to their own native place and return with

recruits. The Sirdars were paid a fixed bonus per head on all coolies brought. This was much less expensive than the first method but was practicable only in a few cases. Therefore, the main system of recruitment continued to be through contractors. The abuses of this system, however, were of such a grave nature that even the official reports could not hide them. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported:

Contractors collected coolies by the hundreds on false promises of high pay and light work and despatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey; the result was shocking mortality on the voyage up, while many of the immigrants were of cast or constitution which precluded all hope of their serving many months in the jungles of Assam.

A contemporary observer, G.M. Barker, wrote that "they are often wedged in, on a small dirty steamer so closely that all idea of a healthy atmosphere is out of the question, the thoughts of the moral effects are never considered." The doctor who accompanied each batch of labourers normally had an easy time on the journey. His only fear was the anticipated death of the labourers to which he strongly objected on grounds of his diminishing income. It is on record that some of them put on shore men in a morbid condition but fortified to such an extent with rum that they had been passed by the receiving officer as in good condition.

55 If recruited through an agent the expenditure per coolie averaged at about Rs.90/-.
Recruitment of labour was one problem but getting them to Assam was an additional problem. The supply of boats or efficient boatmen who knew the river was not always forthcoming while sufficient food for large numbers at halting points was also not always available. Moreover, there were instances when, owing to the outbreak of cholera or malaria in an epidemic form, there were heavy casualties and this seriously impeded further recruitment, for it led to rumours in the recruiting districts that those who emigrate to the tea areas are never heard of again. Furthermore, desertions were very common.

It is, therefore, evident that many of the newly recruited labourers were unfit for work. In an attempt to recruit local labour, the Government tried in 1859 to equalise the revenue of all the districts with that of Kamrup which was then the highest. In this way they hoped that the ryots, being unable to pay the revenue, would be compelled to give up their cultivation and take up work in the tea gardens as wage labourers. The Government, therefore, periodically raised the revenue on the land holding. By 1872-73 there was 100% increase in the total revenue demand of the Brahmaputra Valley. Yet in spite of this tremendous increase the industry was not at all successful in attracting local labour. Perhaps the main reason was that taking up land for cultivation, although at subsistence level, was probably still more lucrative, both from the social and economic point of view for the ryots.

60 ibid.
than taking up jobs in the plantations. Thus out of a total plantation labour force of 34,433 in Assam proper, 22,800 or two thirds were imported labour and only 11,633 or one third were local.\(^{62}\)

By 1905-06 the adult labour force on the plantations in Assam rose to 417,262.\(^{63}\) Of this only a few thousand were local men. The main recruitment areas were Bengal 64.9%, N.W. Provinces 14.0%, Central Provinces 10.8%, Madras 2.7%, Nepal 2.7%, Rewa 1.3%; others 2.5%. Half of the total number of recruits came from Burdwan, Rajshahi, Dacca, Chittagong, Patna, Bhagalpur, Orissa and Chota Nagpur.\(^{64}\)

By 1875 communication to and within Assam had improved considerably which led to great advantages particularly in the transport of labour. In a Board meeting of the Assam Company in 1886, A.B. Fisher, a Director, commented that as the travelling time from Calcutta to Assam had been reduced by more than half, the corresponding rate of mortality had also been greatly reduced and it was possible to land the labourers in good condition and fit for work.\(^{65}\)

Recruitment of labour was not the sole problem. Much difficulty also arose in persuading the labourers to renew their contracts. A sense of their importance and dearness of their services put them in an advantageous bargaining

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64 Census of India 1901 - Vol.IV, Part I, p 33.
position. On the other hand, there were also instances of labourers being so much in debt, to the local money-lender for instance, that they were forced to renew their contract although they may have disliked the work.

ENTICEMENT OF LABOUR

Another factor which aggravates the problem was the enticement of labour, or as was generally known, 'pimping'. In a young and labour-short economy unscrupulous employers often enticed labourers from their neighbours who had spent considerable sums importing them. Managers, therefore, paid bonuses for the renewal of agreement or for a fresh engagement of skilled labourers. Closely allied to the problem of enticement was the employment of ex-garden labourers. Besides the ordinary labour force living on an estate, many gardens obtained the services of ex-garden labourers, generally known to planters as "bastiwallas", residing in the villages adjoining the tea gardens. In some places they were numerous and of immense help to the employers. Consequently it happened that when there was competition for obtaining their services, inducement had to be given in the form of higher wages or lower tasks than those normally prevailing in the garden employed. When this occurred, labourers living in neighbouring estates to those attracting "bastiwallas", seized the opportunity of earning more or working less by signing on as casual labour. Thus labourers housed and living in one garden, which had probably imported them at considerable cost, were actually working in another garden. There was no obvious
remedy for this situation except to ensure that when a manager employed labours he must make sure that they were actually unemployed labour and not workers belonging to another garden. 66

**ABSENTEEISM**

Another aspect of the labour problem which figured prominently was the extent of absenteeism. It is important to bear in mind here that work in the tea estate formed only a part, though the main part, of the occupation of a garden labourer. His subsidiary work took a lot of his time. In 1931 the Labour Commission reported: 67

The most important (of his subsidiary occupations) is private cultivation, but household duties in agricultural surroundings, such as purchase of weekly supplies from the market, the collection of firewood, the grazing of cattle, the threshing of corn etc. make a considerable demand on the worker's time and particularly on that of women. Absenteeism is, therefore, to some extent inevitable.

In fact in the early days of the industry much reluctance was displayed by the planter in employing a settled labour force owing to the feeling that the time spent on the labourer's own cultivation could be beneficially used in the garden during the busiest season of the year. 68 But as recruitment became easier and labour more plentiful, the advantages of the system became obvious. During the slack season when the planter could not offer adequate work, the labourer could devote his time

66 *ibid.*, p 383.


68 *ibid.*
completely to private cultivation. This not only made life for the worker more attractive but was also a convenient way of keeping the labourer at hand for the busy season.

WAGE STRUCTURE

In the official reports of the Indian Tea Industry and in most official reports, it has always been claimed that tea garden labourers were paid much more than they could earn in their native place. They stressed that conditions of employment in the tea plantations were essentially different from those which prevailed in other industries and that these factors, particular to the industry, viz., the family income and not individual income, subsidised rations, bonus, medical facilities, absenteeism etc., should be taken into consideration while commenting on the income of the workers. They also maintained that, inspite of the various fluctuations faced by the industry (depression, falling prices etc.) the wages had been consistently kept at the minimum level. Moreover for the hardworking labourer the system of ticca wages could always be availed of. From the outset, the argument that tea garden labourers were paid much more than other wage labourers fails to explain the phenomenon of labour scarcity which continued in varying degrees throughout the period of our study. In the recruiting districts labour was certainly not scarce. Hence the only explanation can be that considering the nature of work, wages were hardly attractive. Even at the official level the minimum wages were fixed at Rs.5/- for a man, Rs.4/- for a woman and

69 Apart from the daily task known as the "Hazri" there was extra time work usually at a higher rate of payment, known as 'ticca'. In theory the labourer was at liberty to undertake or decline a 'ticca' offered to him, but in practice, in most labour short gardens, considerable pressure was exerted on him to undertake it. On the other hand since the daily task was fixed at the planter's discretion, very often it was so heavy that for an average labourer, doing 'ticca' work was almost impossible.
Rs.3/- for a child under twelve. \(^70\) The intention was to bind the employer to pay the minimum wages irrespective of the quantity of work done unless a magistrate sanctioned short-payment on account of absence, wilful negligence or indolence. In practice, however, this was a forgotten law. Thus in 1864 while a free labourer could earn a minimum of Rs.7/- per month if employed by the Public Works Department, the going rate in the Assam Company, the biggest tea company in Assam, was only Rs.4/- or Rs.5/- \(^71\).

It was not the case of the tea gardens being unable to pay more. In fact as the following statistics will show the case was just the reverse. The phenomenal expansion of acreage under tea led to a corresponding increase in production. The total export of tea from India (and Assam sent the bulk of it) to England increased as shown below: \(^72\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>EXPORT OF INDIAN TEA (IN LBS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>4,584,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>12,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>43,836,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>96,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>150,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>188,000,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increased production led to a reduction in the cost of production. In 1900 the out-turn of tea per acre of the


\[^71\text{Antrobus, Op.cit., p 389.}\]

\[^72\text{Tabulated from records of Department of Commerce and Industry, Commerce and Trade - A, March 1905, Nos. 6 - 10.}\]
Assam Company rose from 4 maunds to 7½ maunds. Low production costs obviously led to high rates of profits. The figures of the Assam Company statistics showing the percentage of dividends to the shareholders are a pointer to the fact.

It is true that a portion of the profit was reinvested for further expansion of the industry, but it must be remembered, as Amalendu Guha has written, "only a small part of the total investment in tea appears to have been supplied by Britain's home saving. The major part represents the undistributed surplus and ploughed back dividends of the older companies which were already in the field."

Thus from the above it can be seen that the labour problem which haunted the planters was, to a great extent, called for. Had they been prepared to sacrifice a portion of their profit in the form of higher wages for labourers, they might have been able to attract even local labour to a considerable extent. It is on record that the labourers of the Assam Company struck work in 1848 to realise three months' arrears of wages. Again in 1859, the Company's Kachari labour went on strike for demanding a wage increase. Many labourers had then left the Company's employment, though they remained in the province, because

74 ibid, pp 407 - 411.
77 ibid, p 389.
the local people always had the land to fall back upon. It was perhaps in the interest of the Companies to appoint immigrant labour, recruited from distant and poorer areas, who could not leave at will even if they were dissatisfied with the working conditions.

The plantation industry financed and managed by Europeans and worked with immigrant labour, thus had little link with the local economy.