CHAPTER THREE

THE TEA INDUSTRY, RECRUITMENT OF LABOUR AND EMERGENCE OF THE EX-TEA GARDEN LABOUR

THE TEA INDUSTRY

Assam was under the Ahom kings prior to its occupation by the British in the year 1626. Successive Burmese invasions during the last part of the Ahom rule had ruined the entire economy of the kingdom and reduced its population to a large extent. The East India Company, the then Government of occupied India found possibilities of growing tea in Assam.

Detailed historical account of the tea industry in India and that of Assam is available from the study by Griffiths (1967). Besides this, there are many other historical studies which describe the growth of the tea industry in Assam. Among these studies mention may be made of Das (1931), Das (1941), Gaik (1963), Borpujari (1963), Goswami (1963), Allen (1905), Allen (1906), RoyBurman (1963) and Chaudhuri (1936).

A brief outline of the history of the tea industry and the history of the recruitment of labour
for the tea gardens in Assam is sought to be provided.

Some important dates indicating important events in
the early period of the history are provided in brief.

1815 : Colonel Latters noticed tea drinking habits
of Assamese tribes.

1819 : David Scott, agent of Governor General, began
taking interest in growing tea in Assam. Wild
tea plants were collected and sent to Calcutta
for identification.

1823 : Major Robert Bruce, formerly businessman, later
agent of Governor General made contact with
Singphoo Chief for tea plants.

1825 : C.A. Bruce, brother of Robert Bruce, collected
tea plants and sent them to David Scott.

1826 : The East India Company occupied Assam.

1831 : Plants sent by one Lt. Charlton from Sadiya
(Dibrugarh district) were identified as Tea Plants
by Calcutta experts.

1834 : The first Tea Committee was formed. The Secretary
of the Committee was sent to China for tea seeds
and tea experts. The Committee also sent a
Scientific deputation to Assam to study the
condition for the cultivation of tea.

1835 : The Scientific expedition reported that extensive
areas are covered by wild tea plants in the
jungles of Upper Assam (now Dibrugarh and
Sibsagar districts). The possibilities of growing
tea in Assam was confirmed.

1836 : C.A. Bruce was appointed Superintendent of Tea
Forests in Assam.

1837 : First Tea Garden was started at Chabua (in
Dibrugarh district) with Chinese tea seeds.
A small quantity of tea was produced at Sadiya
from leaves of wild tea plants. A sample was sent
to the Government of India.

1838 : 4,220 lbs. of tea was produced.

1840 : 11,160 lbs. of tea was produced.
It is evident that the tea industry made its modest beginning in 1837. The industry could not make tangible progress up to 1850. But in the later period it made rapid progress in respect of area and production. This will be evident from Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
The Progress of the Tea Industry in Assam, 1850-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Tea Gardens</th>
<th>Area under Tea (in thousand acres)</th>
<th>Production of Tea (in million lbs.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>388</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>231.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>804</td>
<td>337.0</td>
<td>337.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>350.0</td>
<td>350.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>420.0</td>
<td>420.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>433.0</td>
<td>433.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>386.0</td>
<td>386.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>445.0</td>
<td>445.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Changes in the geographical area of Assam ignored.

Sources: Griffiths (1967), Goswami (1963) and Tea Board (1970-71).
The Assam Company was incorporated with a share capital of £500,000 in the year 1639. This company took over the tea gardens opened by the East India Company. The company went into serious financial troubles in the initial years but recovered from its losses in 1850. This success brought confidence to the industry and several new companies began opening plantations in Assam. In the next ten years tea cultivation spread to Darrang, Howgong and Cachar districts. All was not smooth sailing for the tea industry in Assam because it faced serious crises at different times. The present study is not directly concerned with all these crises except for the fact that at times a few of these crises threatened to throw out large number of labourers from employment.¹

Among the conditions which favoured the growth of the tea industry in Assam the availability of suitable land was the foremost. At that time, Assam was almost an abandoned country.² There were enough

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¹ Even at present also the tea industry is not without difficulties. Sick and mismanaged tea gardens have been causing serious concern.

² Mann (1934) reported that immense tracts of waste land covered with forests and high grasses existed in Assam. It may be noted here that there were two grades of land - high and low. The high land was not suitable for Sali paddy (wet paddy) cultivation as it did not retain water. But such land was suitable for tea plants. Thus, tea cultivation needed land which was unsuitable for the local people to cultivate paddy. Further, local demand for land was necessarily at a very low level.
land for establishment of large tea gardens. This is precisely the reason for the existence of larger size tea gardens in Assam.

Harler (1964 : 33) pointed out that the Brahmaputra valley is perhaps the best tea growing area of the world. The soil, climate and the topography were suitable for tea cultivation.

The British Government also encouraged tea cultivation in the Province. In fact, it was the Company Government (the East India Company) which started tea cultivation in Assam and handed over the gardens to the Private Company. In order to earn more land revenue the Government showed its eagerness to settle land to the planters on easy terms by enacting special land settlement rules. 3

In spite of these advantages the early planters had to face serious difficulties. The climate was favourable for tea cultivation but it was unsuitable for the European planters. The high temperature, extreme humid climate, floods, absence of safe drinking water etc. were serious difficulties. Apart from these, diseases like Malaria, Cholera, Kala-azar, Smallpox,

3 Discussions on the special land settlement rules is available in Goswami (1963 : 285-288).
Dysentery and Typhoid were widespread. There were no medical facilities. Extreme humid climate, diseases and lack of medical facilities greatly hampered the pioneers.  

Absence of internal and external communications had also affected the expansion of the tea industry in the early years. The river route was the only means of communication to outside Assam. Country boats were the only means of transport in use. The internal communication of the Province was also primitive. Roads whatever existed during the Ahom rule went into disrepair. Under such conditions it was difficult to organise and run an industry. But, these difficulties were overcome by the colonial planters by hardwork and enterprise. The pioneers of the tea industry rendered commendable service in this direction.  

4 Allen (1905 : 173) reported that it was the most unhospitable country for the Englishmen and consequently many of the planters died. Many others left Assam.  

5 Mann (1934) stated that the scientific expedition sent to Assam by the Tea Committee started from Calcutta on 20th August, 1835 and reached Sadiya on January, 1836, taking about 4 months. It is also interesting to note that Dr. Wallich, the botanist of the party 'saw the country so desolate that he got frightened and wanted to leave without seeing all the country'.  

6 The pioneers also did not know much about the cultivation and manufacture of tea.
SHORTAGE OF LABOUR

The foremost difficulty faced by the early planters was the absence of local labour for the tea gardens. The tea industry, at the initial period, was a highly labour intensive industry. Forests had to be cleared, roads and houses had to be built and planted areas had to be kept free from quickly growing weeds. The plucking of tea leaves needed large number of labourers.

A special feature of the requirement of labour for the tea plantations may be noted. The plantations required a large resident labour force consisting of men, women and children. In fact, the tea gardens required labour families.  

The early planters made frantic efforts to recruit local labourers to work in the gardens but their attempts met with failures. When the industry began to grow the shortage of labour became a serious problem.

One need not go far to know the causes of the shortage of local labour for the tea plantations. The population of Assam was very small. It was about 6.0 lakhs around 1886.  

Borpujari reported that the

7 Royal Commission on Labour (1931 : 356).
8 De (1969 : 12) quoted this population from R.B. Premerton's 'Report on Eastern Frontier of British India'.

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population in Assam was nearly 12.0 lakhs in 1853 and the density of population in Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts were 9 and 30 per sq.mile respectively. Goswami (1963: 22) observed that even if the majority of the adult population of the tea districts were recruited as labourers for the tea gardens the supply of labour would not have been sufficient.

The socio-economic formation of the population of Assam was such that a class seeking wage employment was absent. People of Assam enjoyed a free and independent life in cultivation and one can hardly expect such people to be resident labour in the plantations. That would have meant leaving their homes and becoming hardworking wage labourers in servitude. At any rate they would not have let their womenfolk to work in the tea gardens under English planters. The mood of the people was well

9 Borpujarı (1963) - Table in Appendix E.

10 Mc-Bride (1959 : 148) rightly defined plantations as a form of landed estate usually established in the colonial and the semi-colonial countries with a large labour class kept in servitude. The conditions in tea gardens in Assam, at the initial period were near slave plantations. This would be evident from the discussions in this Chapter.
reflected in the lines quoted by Borpujari (1963: 257) from Bengal Secret and Political Consultations of 1831 which read:

"Blessed with an extremely fertile soil with simple habits, ryots in Assam had limited wants, they were generally satisfied with humblest of food, plainest of clothes and smallest of habitations."

Further, the industry grew at such a rapid pace that it was impossible to obtain labour from local sources. It was, therefore, necessary for the planters to import labourers from outside the Province of Assam. The history of recruitment of labour for the tea plantations in Assam in an organised manner thus dates back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

RECRUITMENT OF LABOUR

Migration is a process by which the supply of labour is usually adjusted to demand, specially when it is a question of internal migration. But, there must be potential migrants. Patel (1965) reported that in the mid-nineteenth century a vast landless agricultural labour section had emerged in the densely populated provinces of India. They constituted the potential migrants. But, there were many obstacles for a free flow of migrants from these labour surplus areas. Lack of knowledge of the positive, negative and the neutral factors in Assam acted as the barriers.\(^\text{11}\) Assam was

almost an unknown country and "Migration to this province was as good as international migration for the potential migrants. Since free flow of migrants was not expected and the need for labour was great, the colonial planters adopted a semi-forced method of recruitment of labour.\textsuperscript{12}

The British planters were aware of the fact that indentured labourers were recruited from the labour surplus areas of India and were sent to the plantations in Malaya, West-Indies and other colonies. Thus, they looked for imported labour from the labour surplus areas to keep the tea industry growing as fast as possible. Their greatest concern was labour supply for the tea industry.

The Assam Company recruited the first batch of labourers from Chota Nagpur division in Bihar in 1841. But, diseases enroute had completely wiped out the first batch of imported labour. This disaster did not put a stop to such attempts and individual tea gardens imported labour sporadically upto 1859. It was

\textsuperscript{12} Similar history of labour recruitment for the plantations in Africa during mid-nineteenth century was reported by Berg (1965 : 394). Labour for the plantations in Africa had to be imported from considerable distance and a system of forced recruitment was reported. The situation in Africa was a bit different because potential migrants were present there. In India the potential migrants were present but there were obstacles for free flow. In case of plantations in South-India labour was available from adjoining areas.
only after the advice of the Bengal Government
(Asam was administered by the Bengal Government)
the planters adopted a somewhat uniform recruitment
procedure.

A Tea Planters' Association was formed to
look after the recruitment and forwarding of
labourers to Assam. The system thus adopted was known
as the 'Free Contractors' System. Under this system
contractors were employed to recruit labourers from
outside Assam. These contractors in their own turn
employed recruiting agents. These agents came to be
known as Arkattias or Arkatiyas. They were paid on
the basis of number of labourers recruited and placed
at the disposal of the contractors for despatch to
Assam.

Labour recruitment became very lucrative
business and naturally many unscrupulous persons
entered into the business. Arkatiyas indulged in
spreading false stories of good life in Assam tea
gardens, promised cultivable land and good wages.
Enticement of labour was unchecked. This resulted
in widespread fear among the labourers and the
Arkatiyas soon earned a bad name.13 The abuses of

13 The arkatiyas are still remembered by the tea
garden and the ex-tea garden labour population.
A folk song telling about enticement is prevalent
among them.
the free contractors' system of recruitment were so grave that it met with protests from various quarters. Patel (1955 : 27) quoted

"The horrors of Slave Trade pale before the horrors of Coolie trade of Assam and Cachar in the years of 1861-62 ".

There were enough grounds for such a remark. The mortality of labour in transit from the recruiting districts to the tea districts was appalling. It is not known how many of the recruits reached the tea gardens in Assam. Arrangements were inefficient. Housing facilities, medical facilities and food supply in the gardens were also utterly inadequate. As a result, the recruits suffered from cruelty and hardship. The alien Government was passive onlooker for a number of years. The labour as soon as they reached the gardens realised the situation and wished to leave. The journey from their homes to the tea gardens was long and risky. They were assisted to come. The journey way back was not easy.

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14 From W.Nassau Lee's 'Land and Labour in India', London, 1867.

15 Griffiths (1967 : 270) reported that some 84,915 labourers landed in Assam between 1863 and 1866 of which over 30,000 died by January 1866. Labourers died even after reaching the tea gardens.
The planters spent much money on the recruited labour and therefore they could not afford to lose a single labour who reached the tea gardens alive. For the interest of the planters it was necessary to put the labourers firmly under bindings. But, there were no specific legislation under which labourers could be recruited and forced to work in the gardens. The recruitment of indentured labourers for the plantations in the British colonies was made from India under the Indian Emigration Act of 1837. This Act was not applicable in case of recruitment of labourers for plantations within India. But the recruitment under the free contractors' system was virtually the indenture system. The recruited labourers were bound by contracts under Section 490 and 492 of the Indian Penal Code (known as Penal contracts) and also under Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859. The recruits were put under contract to work in the tea gardens in Assam for a term not less than 5 years. The contract was known to the labourers as Girmitya and those who came under such contracts were Girmityas.

16 The Indian Emigration Act, 1837 was passed after the abolition of Slavery in 1834.

17 Sections 490 & 492 now stands deleted. The Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 was passed at the instance of the Calcutta Trade Association to prevent wilful breach of contract or desertion of service by workmen. A lot of controversy as to the applicability of this Act was reported by Das (1931 : 37-42)
The planters were not happy about these contracts because these penal sections did not give much legal remedies in case the labourers decided to leave the gardens. Even then, these penal sections and the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 remained very popular among the planters for a very long time.

The Bengal Government appointed a Committee in 1861 to enquire into the emigration of labour to Assam and Cachar. The Committee felt the necessity of control over emigration of labourers to the plantations in Assam and suggested passing of an Act. Thus, the first legislation for the control of emigration was formulated and the Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863 was passed.

This Act legalised the indenture system of labour recruitment which was actually in practice in the guise of the free contractors' system. The system of recruitment did not change much in its form. The Act of 1863 provided that (i) the recruiters (i.e. the contractors and the Arkatiyas) be licensed

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18 There were several other Committees of Enquiry appointed by the Government from time to time for similar purpose.

19 This Act of 1863 became necessary for the recruitment of labourers for the Assam Tea Gardens and was the earliest plantation labour legislation in India.
and registered (ii) recruits be produced before a magistrate of his own district and the terms of contract be explained before the Superintendent of Emigration (iii) the terms of contract be restricted to 5 years (iv) the recruits be medically examined so as to ascertain the fitness to serve in the tea gardens of Assam and (v) sanitation on way to the tea gardens to be maintained to reduce mortality in transit. The system after the enforcement of the Act came to be known as the Licensed Contractors' System.

It was obvious that the Act of 1863 did not improve upon the conditions that prevailed during the free contractors' system. The Government had to amend the Act in 1865. The necessity of the amendment was stated in the Act of 1865. Griffiths (1967: 270) quoted from the object of the Act:

"In consequence of the unfortunate state of relations existing between employers and labourers in the eastern districts........ interference appears to be necessary in the interest of the employer as of the labourer. For the planter declares that he imports labourers into the Province at a very great expense and that as soon as they arrive they refuse to work or leave service; that the punishment for desertion is slight and carries with it the release from all engagements and that therefore the labourers willingly incur the liability to punishment in the hope of being set free from the contract............etc."
It was clearly mentioned that the penal sections and the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 did not give much legal protection against desertion. The new Act of 1865, therefore (i) empowered the tea garden managers to arrest absconding labourers without warrant and (ii) made indolence and desertion punishable by law. In a way of concession to labour the Act reduced the period of contract from 5 years to 3 years and provided a clause that the contracts would be voidable in case of unhealthy tea gardens. It also provided for fixed monthly rates of wages. This amendment in fact made the condition of labour worst. It put more powers in the hands of the tea garden managers to keep the recruited labour under control.

The Act of 1863 and its subsequent amendment in 1865 did not remove any of the abuses in the recruitment system. This was revealed by another Commission of Enquiry in 1865. The Commission reported that recruits were still induced to emigrate by misrepresentation, mortality in transit were high and unfit persons were sent in large numbers. It also came to light that individual planters sent
out their garden Sardars to recruit labourers from outside Assam. Such recruitment was not provided in the Act but the Commission observed that in such cases many abuses of the contractors' system were absent. The Act of 1865 was therefore amended in 1870 to legalise recruitment by garden Sardars. The Government also found it necessary to pass a new Act known as the Tea District Emigration Act of 1873 which repealed earlier Acts. This new Act permitted free recruitment outside the provision of the Act in cases where the term of contract did not exceed one year. The Workmen's Breach of contract Act of 1859 was allowed to be used in case of recruitment of time-expired labourers.

It may be noted here that passing of the Act of 1863 produced the first batch of legally recognised time-expired labourers in 1866-69. Advances were given to the time-expired labour to bind them under the Act of 1859. Large number of such time-expired labour had settled in the villages outside the gardens as ex-tea garden labourers. The number of ex-tea garden labourers swelled at the emergence of successive batches

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20 The Garden Sardars were headmen among labourers and usually trusted men of the management. The Sardars also played vital part in allotment of work to the labourers.
of the time-expired labourers. As regards the new Act of 1873 Griffiths (1867: 277) remarked that the planters made no use of the new provisions because the penal sections were not allowed to be used.

A new Commission of Enquiry examined the working of the Labour District Emigration Act of 1873 and reported in 1881. The report favoured free recruitment by the employers to accelerate importation of labour. It is apparent that the recruitment of labour was done through licensed contractors, the licensed recruiters or the Arkatiyas and the Garden Sardars. The Government passed the Inland Emigration Act (No.1) of 1882.

This new Act of 1882 provided for recognition of local agents in the recruiting districts and execution of contracts in the tea districts. The Act intended that the labourers would freely move to the tea gardens in Assam, see for themselves the working conditions and enter into contracts thereafter. But the main flaw of implementation of the Act was that it declared the district of Goalpara as the labour

21 The Arkatiyas operated in the tea districts also to collect time-expired labour and entice labour from one garden to the other. These Arkatiyas also helped desertion of labour from the gardens. Griffiths (1967: 288-293) discussed the aspect of enticement of labour elaborately. The enticement was reported to have continued upto 1932.
district upto where labour was expected to move freely. In fact, Goalpara was far away from actual districts where labourers were likely to be employed. All contractors sent recruited labour to Dhubri in Goalpara district and contracts were made there. The Act thus gave rise to what was known as the Dhubri System of recruitment. The contractors and the Arkatiyas continued to operate in their usual manner.

The Inland Emigration Act of 1882 was amended and the title of the Act was changed to Assam Labour Emigration Act of 1893. This new Act made provision for cancellation of contracts in case of wrongful recruitment and repatriation of such recruits with their families. The local Government was given powers to supervise such matters. These changes in the legislation did not remove the defects in the system of recruitment and the interest of labourers was always subordinated to the interest of the planters. This system continued upto 1901. By that time another Commission of Enquiry was appointed in 1885. This Commission strongly criticised the system of recruitment and pointed out the abuses. Subsequently, the Government passed the Assam Labour Emigration Act of 1901.

Assam Labour Emigration Act of 1901 specified that (1) labour contracts were to be made in writing
in prescribed forms specifying terms of labour,
(ii) the period of contract restricted to 4 years,
(iii) provisions of cancelling wrongful contracts
was made and (iv) placed licensed contractors and
sub-contractors in specified recruiting districts.
Further, it created a special class of recruiters
from among Garden Sardars. This was the old wine
in a new bottle and did not remove many ills of
the system. But, by that time situations in the
gardens and the state of communications in the
Province had considerably improved and mortality in
transit were also reduced.

Assam Labour Enquiry Committee was
appointed in 1906 which recommended few changes in
the legislation. The Act of 1901 was amended in
1908 by which the system of enforcing penal contracts
was abolished and power of garden managers to arrest
absconding labourers was withdrawn. The Assam Labour
Emigration Act of 1901 was again amended in 1915
which abolished the indentured system of labour
recruitment for the Assam gardens. This established
the Sardari System of recruitment. The garden Sardars
became the only recruiting agents and all other
contractors and Arkatiyas were dispensed with. This
was the first step towards removing many of the evils
of the penal contracts. But the Garden Sardari system did not accelerate the supply of labour.

Griffiths (1967: 281) reported that an Enquiry Committee in 1920-21 found that in many gardens the amendments had been ignored and local contracts for specified number of years were still being affected. It was also reported that substantial advances were given to labourers to bind them effectively for long period to the gardens. The Committee further examined the rationale of retaining the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 and voted for its complete repeal. A Bill was passed in 1924 which repealed the Act of 1859 and abolished the remaining traces of the indenture system. The Bill was given effect to in 1926 and it brought important changes in the system of recruitment. From that time tea garden labourers were not required to enter into any legal contract for employment. By then, a sizable number of labourers and labour families were imported to Assam. Many persons born to these immigrants had also entered the labour force. But, the gardens were still in need of imported labour for new gardens were coming into existence and old labourers were going out to settle in areas outside the tea gardens. A section known as the ex-tea garden labourers had
by then emerged. The Royal Commission on Labour (1931) had indicated that there were little chances of the time-expired labour returning home without the assistance of the employer. Therefore, only a very few of the labourers went back to their original places.

Amongst the various suggestions and recommendations the Royal Commission on Labour recommended 'freer movement of labour', 'greater security for them' and 'better administration of law'. The Commission's Report resulted in passing of the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act of 1932 which provided for the first time statutory rights to all immigrant labour to be repatriated from Assam, with their families, at the expenses of the employer. The term (although there were no contracted terms) after which they were entitled to be repatriated was fixed at 3 years under usual conditions. Official figures of the number repatriated from Assam are available from 1934. 22

22 Vaghaiwalla (1954: 69) reported figures for the number of labourers repatriated from 1934 to 1950 from Controller of Emigrant Labour, Assam. There is a doubt that all officially repatriated labour had actually left Assam. The investigator of the present study met a few ex-tea garden labour who reported that their fathers were given repatriation money but they did not leave Assam. A respondent's father took the repatriation money but did not actually return. He built a small house on land belonging to some other local men and became tenant cultivator.
As a result of the Act of 1938 the Tea District Labour Association was formed for the purpose of recruitment of labour. The Association recruited labour from six recruiting Provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, C.P., U.P. and Madras. A new agency with Controller of Emigration as the head was appointed by the Government to supervise recruitment of labour. Local authorities were also empowered to supervise the recruitment, forwarding and employment of labourers in the tea gardens. Thus, considerable improvements were affected in the vital process of recruitment after a chaos which continued for more than 80 years.

Due to these improvements the tea garden labourers began showing signs of settlement in the permanent labour force of the gardens and the process of going out to settle in land as ex-tea garden labourers had also slowed down. But, the industry continued to import labourers upto 1960. The Industrial Committee on Plantations in August 1960 decided that recruitment from outside should be discontinued and stringent penalties should be imposed for illicit recruitment. The Tea District Labour Association was liquidated in 1960. The Government of Assam was interested in this matter because the tea gardens in Assam showed signs of possessing labour in excess of their requirements (Griffiths : 1967 : 293-294). The position of labour
supply in the tea gardens in Assam had reversed from shortage to surplus and growing unemployment in tea gardens, at present, is a problem related to continued large scale recruitment of labourers from outside.\textsuperscript{23} If a favourable condition of work in the tea gardens in Assam and the system of recruitment of labour had been improved at an earlier date the section who went out of the tea gardens to become ex-tea garden labour would have settled in permanent labour force in the gardens. In that case, surplus labourers would have been evident at a much earlier date, resulting importation of labour unnecessary for such a long period.

Thus, the history of the recruitment of labourers from outside Assam is a long and eventful one. Many of the abuses of the recruitment system had left deep imprints in the minds of the older generations of tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population. The past of the ex-tea garden labour is still alive in the later generations also.

**SOURCES OF LABOUR**

Labour for the tea gardens in Assam was recruited from various parts of India which were located

\textsuperscript{23} This aspect of growing unemployment in the tea gardens of Assam was discussed in Chapter II.
at considerable distances from the tea districts. The areas from where these recruits were available were those where famines were frequent due to successive droughts. Even today, some of the areas are really backward. Further, as a matter of policy, the planters were in the lookout of recruits who could stand the adverse climate of Assam and were capable of undertaking hardwork. The Arkatiyas found it easy to entice the poverty-stricken and ignorant sections of the people.

De (1969 : 69) reported that experienced planters suggested recruitment of aboriginal tribes because such tribals were hardy and the rate of mortality was lower among them. In the very early period C.A. Bruce pleaded for importing superior races as labourers. Therefore, the recruitment of labourers was mostly confined to hill areas and the tribal or the aboriginal sections. RoyBurman (1963 : 8) mentioned that tribal communities like the Santals, Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Gonds, Khonds, Kisans and Nasrias.

24 Two recent studies relating to certain districts from where labourers were recruited may be referred to. Chakraborty & Roy (1972) studied 7 villages of Midnapore and 9 villages of Purulia districts. Sengupta (1973) studied the Santal Rural Economy in Santal Paraganas in Bihar.

were the important tribals who were recruited. Among others, Savaras, Godovas, Projas, Pankhas and others were also recruited. Some semi-tribal communities like Lohara, Chasia, Turia, and Bauria were among the recruits. The recruited labourers might also include some higher castes groups. But, the composition of the recruits were different in different period because the sources were different.

Table 3.2 gives the percentages of labourers from different areas from 1877 to 1881. Table 3.3 gives the distribution of adult labourers by sources in 1928-29. Although, Bengal was the adjacent Province to Assam, it did not supply much labour to Assam gardens. Some districts like Purulia, Midnapore and Bankura i.e. the western districts of Bengal had contributed some labourers to the tea gardens. But the eastern Bengal contributed only settlers on agricultural land. For this reason the tea garden labourers had to be imported from long distances. The tables reveal that Bihar contributed the largest number of labourers. After the formation of the Tea

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26 Detailed accounts about the character of the tribals and semi-tribals can be had from various anthropological studies. Reference may be made to RoyBurman (1968), Majumdar (1961) and others. Pakyntein (1964) also provided the reprints from old Census reports regarding castes and tribes in Assam. Harlalka (1975) also studied this aspect from old anthropological studies.
Table 3.2
Percentage Distribution of Tea Plantation Labourers with reference to Area of Origin (1877 - 1881)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruited From</th>
<th>Percentage of Total Labour Force in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1877-78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chota Nagpur</td>
<td>48.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santal Paragana</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bengal proper</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>24.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orissa</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.W. Province</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.3
Distribution of Assam Tea Garden Adult Labourers by Places of Origin (1928-29)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Origin</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Province, Bengal &amp; Bihar</td>
<td>220,474</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chota Nagpur &amp; Santal Paragana</td>
<td>191,838</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Province</td>
<td>78,558</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>61,882</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam*</td>
<td>57,498</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7,935</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 9.0 per cent from Assam include children born to imported labourers and also partly local labourers in Cachar and Sylhet.

Source: Das (1931:27).
District Labour Association in 1939 recruitment was confined to the provinces of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Central Province, United Province and Madras. The districts of Ranchi, Hasaribagh, Santal Paraganas, Dumka and Gaya of Bihar; Mayurbhanj, Ganjam, Sambalpur, Saibassa and Puri of Orissa; and Raipur, Rampurhat and Jabalpur of Central Province contributed a large number of labourers. The tables also reveal that Chotanagpur and Santal Paraganas contributed a major part of the imported labour. It is interesting to note that most of the districts like Santal Paraganas, Ranchi, Hasaribagh, Gaya, Purulia, Bankura, Saibassa, Ganjam, Mayurbhanj and Puri of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa are contiguous. A sketch map is provided to indicate the sources of labourers for the Assam tea gardens.

NUMBER OF LABOURERS IMPORTED

No authentic information is available as to the number of tea garden labourers imported into Assam from outside. During the early period of recruitment individual tea gardens recruited labour

27 Sharma (1976) made a recent study on the Jharkhand movement in Bihar. The Chotanagpur area comprised of several districts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The Jharkhand movement originated in Bihar and more particularly in the tribal areas of Chotanagpur.
without any official control. It was also difficult to know how many of the recruited labour actually reached the tea gardens and survived thereafter. The mortality in transit was very high. During the period of licensed contractors there were also recruitment by individual gardens through their garden Sardars. The recruitment by garden Sardars was at first not within the provision of the Act in force. These recruitment must have escaped the official records. In the later period there were also some unassisted labour coming to the tea gardens for employment. All these led to the difficulty of making any estimate of total labourers imported into the Province. It is also difficult to know anything about importation of labourers from Census reports due to the fact that other immigrants came to the Province. Therefore, an estimate of labourers imported into Assam during the course of entire history of recruitment is very difficult.

However, there are information as to the number of labourers imported only for specific years from 1859 to 1909 from secondary sources. It might be possible to get a rough idea as to the total size

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22 The primary sources of information are scattered in old government records and papers etc. It might be possible to obtain data from these records provided a special investigation is made separately for the purpose.
of the import of labourers to the Province of Assam (including the district of Sylhet which went to Pakistan in 1947).

The number of labourers imported at specific years as available from secondary sources (sources indicated) are provided in Table 3.4. The table indicates that information from 1911 to 1950 is

Table 3.4

Statement Showing Import of Labourers
(at specific years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number Imported</th>
<th>Sources of information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>2,049</td>
<td>Harlalka (1975:97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960-61</td>
<td>3,081</td>
<td>Harlalka (1975:97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2,098</td>
<td>Harlalka (1975:103)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>9,341</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>14,411</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>25,811</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>31,897</td>
<td>Das (1931:66)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>95,931</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908-09</td>
<td>2,22,753</td>
<td>ibid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-20</td>
<td>7,69,000</td>
<td>Goswami (1963:23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-30</td>
<td>1,69,000</td>
<td>Goswami (1963:24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-50</td>
<td>7,00,000</td>
<td>Vaghaivalla (1954:69)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continuous and total labourers imported during this period was 16.38 lakhs. The difficulty arises in case of the period from 1859 to 1910 for which information in regards to 11 years are only available. But, it is also evident from the table that the import of labour had risen from a nominal number of about 2,000 in 1859 to more than 1.10 lakhs in 1909. The flow of labourers continued for all these 52 years at increasing annual rate. The average annual rate of import of labour estimated on the basis of the scanty data might not give an accurate estimate but it would give an idea as to the size of labour imported upto 1910 at least approximately. At an average annual rate of import of 30,000 labourers during 1859 to 1910 i.e. for 52 years, total import is likely to be to the extent of 15.60 lakhs. Adding import during 1911 to 1950 total import to Assam (including Sylhet) was nearly 32.40 lakhs. This is the gross import of labourers to Assam which did not account for unassisted return to their original places and officially repatriated.

29 It may be noted that total import included men, women and children.
Considering the fact that about 17 per cent of the labourers were in the tea gardens in Sylhet in 1931, it may roughly be said that 5.50 lakhs labourers were imported for the tea gardens there. Therefore, import to Assam gardens was 26.90 lakhs.
The net import to Assam gardens would be nearly 24.0 lakhs excluding the officially repatriated upto 1950.

POPULATION OF TEA LABOUR CLASS

The population of tea labour class means the tea garden labourers and their dependents living in the tea gardens together with the ex-tea garden labour population, living in the villages. Total size of this population is not known. This aspect was discussed earlier in Chapter II in connection with the number of tea garden labour population in Assam. It was roughly estimated that not less than 14.00 lakhs people were in the tea gardens belonging to the tea labour class in 1971. It is not possible to know precisely the size of the ex-tea garden labour population residing in the villages. Therefore, the size of the total population living in Assam belonging to the stock of originally imported labourers is not known.

30 The percentage estimated from percentage of tea garden labourers in Sylhet in 1931 (Goswami 1963:232). It may be noted that in Sylhet some local labourers were available.
Harlalka (1975) indicated that labour leaders roughly estimate the tea labour class as 30.0 lakhs. Borgohain (1970) claimed it as nearly 30.0 lakhs. Tanti (1973) said that there are 22.0 lakhs ex-tea garden labourers spread over the State and 5.38 lakhs labourers working in the tea gardens as labourers. Apparently, 5.38 lakhs labourers might be the actual labour force in the gardens including outside labourers. The ex-tea garden labourers as per the statement might include the surplus labourers in the tea gardens. But, according to this statement the total population belonging to the tea labour class was 27.38 lakhs.

An attempt is being made to estimate the population of tea labour class in Assam on a rough basis. The estimate is provided in Table 3.5. Das (1931: 20) reported that in 1900 A.D. the population in tea gardens of Assam, including men, women and children was 6.68 lakhs. It might not include the ex-tea garden labourers settled in the villages up to that time. But, for the absence of information this was taken as the base of the estimate. The import during 1901 - 10

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## Table 3.5

Estimate of total population belonging to Tea Labour Class in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(in lakhs)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Total 6.62</td>
<td>including men, women and children as per Das (1931:20).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-10</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>number imported.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Total 10.45</td>
<td>natural increase @ 5.0 per cent for the decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-20</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>imported (Goswami: 1963:22).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Total 18.66</td>
<td>natural increase @ 5.0 per cent for the decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-30</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>imported (Goswami: 1963:23).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Total 21.28</td>
<td>natural increase @ 5.0 per cent for the decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-50</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>imported (Vaghaiwalla: 1954:69).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>natural increase @ 10.0 per cent for two decades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>decrease being repatriated (Vaghaiwalla: 1954:69).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>lost to Sylhet in 1947.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Total 22.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951-60</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>natural increase @ 10.0 per cent for the decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Total 24.20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961-70</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>natural increase @ 20.0 per cent for the decade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Total 29.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was taken to be 3.50 lakhs on the basis of imports at specific years provided earlier in Table 3.4. Sources of information for the imports during the later decades are indicated in Table 3.4.

The rate of growth of the tea labour class is taken as 5.0 per cent for the decades upto 1950 considering the fact that high mortality among the tea garden labourers was reported. The rate of growth was taken to be 10.0 per cent during 1951 - 60 and 20.0 per cent in 1961 - 70. These rates were much lower than the growth rate of population in Assam for the respective decades (20% and 35% respectively). Thus the estimate is a very conservative one. However, the estimate did not take into account unassisted inflow and outflow of labourers from Assam. Further, import during 1951 - 60 was not considered. It reveals that total population belonging to the labour class (both tea garden labour and ex-tea garden labour) in Assam was nearly 29.00 lakhs in 1971. Excluding 14.00 lakhs in tea gardens (as estimated earlier in Chapter II) there was about 15.00 lakhs of ex-tea garden labour population in Assam in 1971.

CONDITION OF LABOURERS IN TEA GARDENS

Royal Commission on Labour (1931) examined the question of the condition of labourers in the
tea gardens in Assam. It had come to certain important conclusions. It found that (i) migration to Assam tea gardens was basically different from migration of labour from villages to urban and industrial factories. Because migration to plantations involved no radical change in the mode of living of the migrants. They migrated mostly with their families, being encouraged to take their families and the plantations being in rural areas the labour found the atmosphere congenial. The Commission also pointed out that many labourers were allotted small plots of land by the management to cultivate their own crops so that they are not only wage earning labourers in an organised industry but also, in a small way, agriculturists on their own. (ii) Life in the tea gardens resembled to ordinary village conditions. (iii) The migrants had improved their condition by coming to the tea gardens in Assam. Apparently, the Commission examined the condition in about 1928-29. The history of the previous period was revealed by various Commissions of enquiry appointed by the Government from time to time. Some of the findings of these Commissions were examined earlier. The Royal Commission also suggested improvements on the condition of labour.
Things that were said in connection with the character of migration and the rural character of life in the tea gardens in Assam were basically true. But the Royal Commission on Labour failed to notice of the situation from the point of view of labour. Furthermore, the 80 years of history of deplorable condition of labour in the tea estates of Assam would remain buried if the Commission's report is taken as the base. Shortly before the visit of Royal Commission a British trade union delegation also visited the tea estates and spoke very harshly. Das (1931 : 127) quoted the delegation:

"Our views is that despite all that has been written, the tea gardens of Assam are virtually Slave plantations and in Assam tea, the sweat, hunger and despair of a million Indians enter year after year."

Dutta (1949) characterised the tea garden labourers as slave labourers. Guha (1975) gave an account of the conditions of tea garden labourers in Assam. It is also evident from the previous discussions that the interest of labour remained unprotected till 1901 and some provisions for labour were first introduced in that year in the Act. More benefits for labour were provided in the Act of 1932 at the recommendations of the Royal Commission. But the

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32 C.F. Report on Labour Conditions in India by Percell, A.A. and Hallsworth, J.
provisions of this Act were not properly implemented. The colonial planters exploited the labourers as much as possible. Life of labourers in the plantations was difficult from the beginning. Labourers were ill paid and treatment to them often bordered tyranny. Griffiths (1967: 376) pointed out:

"They depended wholly on the manager for the simplest amenities and even for the necessities of life and at the same time the penal contract put them effectively under his control. He was, moreover, clad in the authority of the ruling race during the heyday of British power - the unquestioned king of a garden population geographically isolated from more advanced elements of society."

He further added:

"Fortunately, tea garden managers in the last few decades of the last century were drawn from a better class of society .............."

Evidently, persons in the managerial staff who were not from better class of society in England did not leave the powers unabused. The planters even complained of interference in their private interest when their own Government wanted to check certain undesirable practices. The conditions were favourable for a planters because the 'coolies' (the term used to mean the labourers but now substituted) were utterly ignorant to make organised protest against maltreatments, low wages and lack of attention.
Planters in Assam had their own way of defending against adverse comments from various quarters. They resented even the mild comments of Sir Henry Cotton, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, when he said that 'the wages actually earned in the tea districts were too low as compared with general level of agricultural wages in Assam' (1901). The planters (The Assam Branch of the India Tea Association) expressed feelings of resentment and tried to justify their point in the name of a crisis in the industry and saying Sir Cotton's remarks were based on over sympathy to labour. Such crisis always came up when labour welfare matters were put to the industry.

The condition of labour in the tea gardens in Assam remained deplorable for a pretty long time since the beginning up to middle of the present century. Conditions improved considerably but not upto expectations after India attained independence in 1947. This aspect was revealed by several enquiry Committees instituted by the Government. The present study is concerned about the condition of labour in the period up to 1950 because within that period tea garden labourers came out to settle in land. The flow of tea garden labourers to the villages were greater in the period up to 1930 because condition up to that period was very much deplorable.

33 Griffiths (1967: 145).
EMERGENCE OF THE EX-TEA GARDEN LABOUR

The causes which contributed to the emergence of the ex-tea garden labour population in Assam are proposed to be discussed in brief. The causes may be broadly divided into two. The first being the system of recruitment and the legislations for the control of importation of labour to Assam and second was the condition of labourers in the tea gardens. These two aspects were discussed in details earlier.

The system of recruitment adopted by the planters offered opportunities to the recruited tea garden labourers to seek other avenues for employment if they so desire, after expiry of the term of contract. The Act of 1863 provided that the labourers could be legally bound under contracts for a period of 5 years. Thus those who were recruited in 1863 were time-expired labourers in 1868. The legally recognised time-expired labourers began appearing annually after 1868. Subsequent amendments of the Act of 1863 reduced the period of contracts, at first to 4 years and then to 3 years. This helped increased flow of time-expired labourers at shorter intervals. The Acts passed for the control of emigration (called emigration from the point of view of the Bengal Government) actually established the
indenture system of recruitment. This system was abolished partially in 1915 and finally in 1925. Upto that time legally time-expired labourers continued to emerge among the tea garden labourers. After 1932, the repatriation of labourers became a statutory obligation of the employers. Even then, a term of 3 years was fixed for repatriation of the imported labour.

When labourers became free after serving a term as tea garden labourers some of them did not like to remain as bonded labour again. Thus, the time-expired labourers contributed to the growth of the ex-tea garden labour population in Assam. The section who did not like to be reemployed took settlement by occupying Government khas land or unused tea garden land in the vicinity of the tea estates, so that, they could at times earn by employing themselves as casual labourers in the tea gardens and at the same time lead independent life of their own by cultivating land which was abundant at that time.

34 There were also recruitment of labourers from the time-expired section. Griffiths (1967:274) reported that about 15 thousand of them were recruited in 1873.

35 De (1969:188) reported that the process of time-expired labourers settling in land outside the tea gardens began earlier than 1879.
The tea garden managers also favoured settlement of time-expired labourers in the vicinity of the gardens. As a matter of fact some planters took it as a matter of policy. Because, apart from a regular labour force kept as resident labour all the year round the planters needed extra labour much more than their normal requirements during the peak plucking season. If they maintain a regular labour force at that peak level of requirement their financial obligations became greater. So long labour reside under their control in the gardens they were under certain legal obligations such as supply of rice at concession rates, housing facilities and others. Thus, they favoured settlement of the time-expired labourers near the tea gardens, so that, they could have a 'reserve' supply of labourers for meeting extra requirements during peak plucking season. In fact, some tea garden managers assisted labourers in reclaiming Government waste land near the gardens and even provided some materials to construct houses. Some managers allotted unused garden land which was in their possession much in excess of their own requirements. (But mention may be made of the fact that either the Government or the planters provided no capital for their settlement). Thus, the planters
in Assam helped in the emergence of the ex-tea garden labour population.  

The system of recruitment of labour by contractors and Arkatiyas was partly responsible for settlement of time-expired labourers in land. The Arkatiyas promised land at the time of recruitment but the recruits found the situation quite different in Assam gardens. The contracts bound them to be wage-labourers. The land for their own cultivation was abundant near the gardens and they took the earliest opportunity to settle in land. Some even deserted prior to the expiry of the contracted term to settle in land. There were many among the tea garden labourers who might have come to Assam with the hope of getting cultivable land.

As the waste land did not yield land revenue, the Government also encouraged settlement of people in waste land. This benefitted both the Government and the planters besides contributing to the agricultural production of the Province by extension of area under crops.

36 Similar opinion was held by the Plantation Inquiry Commission (1956: 113).

37 Griffiths (1967: 304) reported that in 1921 about 2.62 lakhs acres of land belonging to the tea gardens were allotted to labour. This initiated the garden labour into cultivation of crops under Assam condition. Those who did not get tea garden land, sought land outside the gardens even when they were serving a term of contract.
Apart from the time-expired section of the tea garden labourers there were many others who joined the ex-tea garden labourers in the villages under different circumstances. The first of them were the deserters (i.e. those who left gardens before the expiry of the terms). Das (1931 : 52) reported that there were large scale desertion among the recruited labourers in Assam. Elaborating causes of desertion he stated:

"The very feeling of work under compulsion, as subjected by the terms of contract, although entered into more or less willingly created an impulse for desertion. This was aggravated by not often finding themselves at home in a distant country, or by discovering that their position was quite different from what they were often led to imagine."

Thus, desertion could also be attributed to (1) the contract system of recruitment, (2) enticement of labourers by Arkatiyas and (3) bad working condition in the tea gardens.

The deplorable working condition in the tea gardens continued for a long period and the wages of labourers were very low. It was stated to be lower than agricultural wages. The tea gardens in Assam were free from large scale labour movements upto 1901, but number of disputes between planters and labourers continued to increase afterwards. Guha(1975) discussed the movement of tea garden
labourers in the Assam plantations and opined that sporadic movements started early. Such frictions also led to desertion of labourers from the tea gardens. Das (1931: 93-99) reported that in 1921 about 8,000 labourers left work consequent of a dispute between the labour and the management. Retrenchment and victimisation on account of friction might have occurred in the pre-independence period because the planters resisted the formation of trade unions among garden labourers. Besides this type of desertion there were other instances of labour refusing to work and coming out of gardens during epidemics. Sometimes labour refused to be vaccinated and came out in groups.

Some tea garden labourers settled in land after retirement due to old age. But such retired labourers were in fact few, because after retirements the labourers usually became dependents of their sons and daughters and continued to live with them in the gardens.

The process of tea garden labour settling in land began as early as 1888 and continued unabated upto about 1930. The Royal Commission on Labour 1931 emphasised the need of settling ex-tea garden labourers in land and said:
There had been a steady movement of labour from the tea gardens to the adjoining bastin or villages where labourers have been able to acquire government land for cultivation. The movement had been assisted by the Government of Assam which is anxious to promote colonisation of the sparsely populated province. Over 60,000 ex-tea garden labourers are settled in government land.

The number of time-expired labour settling in land was supposed to be reduced after the passing of the Act of 1932 embodying statutory obligations of the employers to repatriate imported labour after 3 years of importation. But, it might be also possible that labourers received the repatriation expenses from the gardens and found this to be ready money to start new life in the villages.

Further, there was acute shortage of labour in Assam, not only in the tea gardens but also for other works. Griffiths (1967: 103) reported that the Public Works Department also entered the labour market in competition with planters. During the period of growth of the tea industry demand for labour had also came from Railways and Mines. It is natural that the time-expired labourers (and also deserters) found avenues for employment as casual labourers both in the P.W.D. and in the agricultural sector as agricultural labourers and share-croppers.
The World War of 1939-45 brought many of the tea garden labourers in contact with the world outside because the Indian Tea Association directly participated in the war efforts by sending large number of labourers to the Burma front. During the war many of the tea gardens in Upper Assam were converted into military camps. This helped many tea garden labourers, particularly the younger sections to come to the urban areas. Some other displaced by the war went to the villages.

The process of settlement in villages by the ex-tea garden labourers, in the post-independent period had comparatively slowed down because land became scarce in the rural areas and conditions in the tea gardens had improved considerably due to statutory welfare measures under the popular Government.

Thus, the history behind the ex-tea garden labour population is long and singular in character. Tea is an organised industry. Although it has rural character it resembles any other industrial organisation. The usual process in the development of the industrial society is the flow of population from rural areas to industrial or urban areas. The process which the history witnessed in Assam is the reversal of the usual order.