CHAPTER-2
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DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEA INDUSTRY AND THE EMERGENCE OF AN INDUSTRIAL WORKING CLASS IN ASSAM: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.

The establishment of the tea industry in an economically and commercially backward state like in Assam, was itself a product of endeavours and entrepreneurial skills displayed by the representatives of the British Colonial power. After the cease of the East India Company’s trade link with China, particularly in respect of tea trade the officials of the East India Company seriously began to think of an alternative. Infact, the Company enjoyed a major trade benefit in its tea trade with China.\(^1\) But the anti-monopolist drive as started in the 1820’s in Britain, the British Parliament compelled the British traders to cease the monopoly right (e.g. tea trade) as enjoyed by the Company in the year of 1833. Even that decision was taken as early as 1825.

The consumption of tea became very popular in Britain since the early part of the nineteenth century and during the Industrial Revolution ‘the British consumed three times as much tea as the East of Europe put together’ and, ‘by the middle of the century about 0.61b of tea was legally imported per head of the population plus a considerable amount smuggled in and already there was evidence that the drink was not uncommon in the countryside even among labourers (or more precisely their wives and daughters)’.\(^2\) The cessation of the tea trade with China brought a grave situation to the tea drinking British population.

\(^1\) Even, prior to the establishment of the tea plantations in Assam, tea became the principal profitable trade for the East India Company and ‘continued to be so for the company until 1833. In 1813-14, the company sold some 29.5 million pounds of tea and by 1833 this figure had risen to 3.3 million. These sales brought in over 24 million per annum to the company’s treasury and, incidentally, provided the state with about 7.6 of total public revenue through excise and other duties’. Philip Lawson: The East India Company: A History, (London & New York- 1993), Pp. 156-157

There was another reason which compelled the Company to cease the tea-trade connection with China in spite of the indispensable need of the tea and its growing popularity in Britain. The reason was the threats given by the ‘Chinese’ to terminate treaty port system and also soon after the news of the discovery of tea in Assam, the British public opinion urged that: ‘if but a portion of the Capital, which is now jeopardized in China, be carried to the British provinces in Assam. The transfer will give an impulse to agriculture in those provinces, which will develop (sic) many of its other resources, and at the same time, do more to teach the Chinese sounder notions of political economy than even the cannon of a British man-of-war’.

The higher authority of the East India Company though was at the very beginning averse to the idea of the discovery and establishment of tea estates in the foothills of the Himalayan region like the North East India. But by the early 1830s, they were eagerly waiting for the prospects of the viability of this new discovery and in order to balance their finances, the tea committee enthusiastically reported in 1834: ‘If we should succeed…. Bengal would be possessed of an additional staple for export nearly, equally in value to that of the aggregate mass if indigenous articles now shipped to England’.

It was Robert Bruce, who succeeded in discovering tea, growing wild in Upper Assam (Sadiya region). Bruce even conversed with Beesa Gaum, the Singpho Chief in whose territory, they indigenously produced tea and though it was not popular with the common Assamese folk. Robert Bruce’s discovery in 1823 did not get quick approval from the scientists of the Calcutta Botanical Garden. It was only after the formation of the Tea Committee and its espousal of opening the tea gardens, made it worth item of production.

After the discovery of tea, the British Officials again faced the problems of deploying superior ‘type of labourers to make the tea cultivation possible’. They thought that a civilised jat of worker like the Chinese with their

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4 Parliamentary Papers, 1839, paper 63, Extract India. Revenue Consultations, 12 May, 1834, Tea committee to Revenue Department, 15 Mar, 1834, Minute by Secretary at meeting of 13 Feb 1834; Quoted in *Ibid*, f. n. - 21.
already acquired skills in the tea cultivation would greatly help in the foundation of the industry solidly and they seriously gave their concern in importing Chinese workers as far as from Malay and Singapore. The political agent of Assam also greatly welcomed the initiatives taken by the company officials. In the very beginning of the tea plantation in Assam, the planters preferred only Chinese variety of tea and only since 1882 it was thought to be prudent to use the indigenous variety of tea.

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The first experimental tea was planted near 'the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Kundil rivers (Sadiya)' at the government initiative, but due to the 'poor and porous soil', it was not suitable for the tea cultivation and that was the reason why it was shifted to Jaipur (Lakhimpur). By the year of 1830, fifteen gardens were opened at the direct initiative of the government in the Lakhimpur district and in 1830; the first 12 chests of tea from Assam were received in England. But later the government thought it unwise to continue its business-endeavours any longer and so, it decided to hand over the remaining tea gardens to the private enterprise, the Assam Tea Company which was formed in 1839. In 1851, the crop of this company was estimated at 280,000 pounds. Mr. A. J. Moffat Mills the Judge of the Sadar Dewani Court (Calcutta) during his visit to Assam highly praised the company's achievement.

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5 The early tea planters had to face a crude situation both in labour procuring and labour control because what they wanted a subservient class of labourers with an inclination to serve in the harsh conditions. As the indigenous people they were not accustomed to such discipline in a newly established commercial production thus were obviously dubbed as "lazy". The first attempt of importing Chinese labours being frustrated and out of Company's purse about Rs.29,365 was expended but still the efforts did not fructify. For the early attempts in labour supply mechanism, See- H.A. Antrobus: A History of the Assam Company (Edinburgh-1957), Pp. 374-390

6 Jenkins particularly became more enthusiastic in the tea cultivation and hope that it came into its fruition. But earlier also, he supported in bringing 'civilized' Chinese workers to work in Assam in Tea Plantation. The Chinese labourers demanded higher wages. In 1840, the Company (Assam Tea Company) and acquired 18 tea makers, 4 carpenters and 18 apprentices to work in Assam and they were paid respectively at the rate of Rs.45 a month, the apprentices Rs.20 and the Chinese labourers charged around Rs.16 month and whereas the indigenous laourer took only Rs.3.8 to Rs.4 a month. That is why, Bruce, urged the Calcutta Board to allow him to get rid of them in any price. 

Ibid, Pp. 382-383

7 Gait writes: 'It was not till years lather, when large tracts had been given up to the cultivation of China tea, that the Assam planters became convinced of the great local superiority of the indigenous variety, in respect both of quality and outturn and found that for most soils the best plant of all is a hybrid in which the indigenous element largely preponderates'. Edward Gait: A History of Assam (Guwahati-1997), p. 335

8 B.C. Allen, E. Gait, H.F. Howard, C.G.H Allen: Gazatters of Bengal and North East India (Delhi-2001), p. 70
thus: ‘I visited the tea plantation and was much gratified to find that the clearance of the lands was steadily advancing and the company are commencing to reap the fruits of their enterprise’. Though, initially the company did not get success but by 1859, it had been able to bring under its cultivation around 4,000 acres with an outturn of over 760,000 pounds of tea. In 1855, the first tea garden was also established in Cachar and, by 1875, in that district, ‘the total area taken up for tea cultivation under all tenures was returned at 208, 488 acres of which 82,759 acres or 39.6% were fit for cultivation’.

The real foundation of the tea industry was laid between 1856 and 1859. The Assam Tea Company controlled around some 60% of the total acreage under tea and it was the largest producer of tea among the Assam Valley tea gardens even right up to the 1920s. A second company (the Jorehaut Tea Company) was established on June 29, 1859 with a share capital of £ 60,000-3000 of £ 20 each. The Company purchased four tea gardens at first and it paid a dividend of 5% in its initial years. The total production of tea cultivated in 1875 was 28½ million pound and in 1901 it was estimated at 237 million pounds.

Interestingly, despite the tea-boom in the 1850s, the Chinese tea almost dominated the global market (almost 96%) and only the remaining amount was supplied from India (4%). In 1886, Great Britain imported around 59% of tea for consumption. Between the period of 1814-50, tea was not among the major export items of India, but only a negligible quantity was exported. Only indigo, raw silk, opium and cotton dominated around 56-64% of total value of exports. Tea began to dominate the market only after 1880s. It was also true that tea as an export item continued to rise after 1859 though in a small amount of export value: ‘The export increased forty fold in nineteen years, from £ 60,000 in 1858-59 to over 2½ million in 1876-77. The rise was continuous and uninterrupted every year within this period.

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ended in a larger export than the preceding year'.\textsuperscript{15} The total export value of tea with its quantity (m.lbs) has been given below.\textsuperscript{16}

**Table: 2.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quantity (million lbs)</th>
<th>Value (Rs million)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850-1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870-1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880-1</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1</td>
<td>110.2</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1</td>
<td>192.2</td>
<td>96.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-11</td>
<td>255.0</td>
<td>124.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-1</td>
<td>285.1</td>
<td>121.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930-1</td>
<td>356.2</td>
<td>260.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-1</td>
<td>349.5</td>
<td>278.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: K.N. Chaudhuri in CEHI, Abstract of Table 10.11

From the following table we can find the idea that ‘by the last decades of the century exports had increased to over 150 million lbs on an average and accounted for 6 to 10% in value terms’.\textsuperscript{17}

Though the tea as the popular drinking item had been in use even during the Industrial Revolution in England as it has been explained by Hobsbawm but the consumption of the Assam produced tea did not earn big support from the British citizens in the formative period of the industry: ‘The consumption of tea in Great Britain and Ireland rose from barely 100 million of three and a half pounds per head of the population in 1866 to 225 million pounds or six pounds per head of the

\textsuperscript{15} R.C. Dutt: *The Economic History of India* (Delhi-1995), p. 263

\textsuperscript{16} K.N. Chaudhuri: *Foreign trade and Balance of Payments (1757-1947)* in Dharma Kumar (ed.): *CEHI Vol-II* (Delhi-1994), p. 844

\textsuperscript{17} (Statistical Abstract for British India) cited in Ibid, p. 855
population in 1903.\textsuperscript{18} Although, Gait negatively pictured the consumption of tea in his own country (England), but from the rapid rise of the export ratio of tea, it did not indicate that the future of the tea would be bleak:

The popularity did not come down and the phenomenal growth in the consumption of Indian tea in Europe and North America is explained by a very high income elasticity of demand and the continuous rise in the standards of living of the masses in these countries.\textsuperscript{19}

The total acreage under tea increased also from 93,802 in 1881 to 204,683 acres in 1901-02.\textsuperscript{20} The total area brought under tea cultivation has been shown in the table covering the period since 1882-1896.

\textbf{Table: 2.2}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Year} & \textbf{Area under tea cultivation} \\
\hline
1882 & 178,851 \\
1883 & 189,453 \\
1884 & 189,852 \\
1885 & 197,510 \\
1886 & 203,993 \\
1887 & 211,079 \\
1887 & 216,676 \\
1891 & 241,823 \\
1892 & 247,192 \\
1893 & 254,126 \\
1894 & 268,796 \\
1895 & 276,014 \\
1896 & 291,901 \\
1897 & 310,550 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Total acreage of tea cultivation:}
\end{table}

Source: Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for the year 1897.

\textsuperscript{19} Chaudhuri: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 855
\textsuperscript{20} A. Guha: \textit{Medieval and Early colonial Assam} (Calcutta-1991), p. 189
New wasteland settlements were provided to attract the new British tea capitalists. As early as 1838, Francis Jenkins, then the Political Agent for the north east frontier of Bengal, devised a rule that 'waste land from 100 to 10,000 acres might be taken by on a fortyfive years lease', with a rent free period of from five to twenty years and rent was charged Rs. 1-2 an acre. Those rules were revised in 1854, 1861, 1874 and 1876 respectively in order to lessen the burden of paying rent to the Government by the tea planters. In 1932, it was decided that the planters would have to pay Rs. 1-2-0 per acre\(^{21}\) which was quite nominal considering the high revenue extracted from the poor peasants.

It was not that the tea plantations passed its early years without any crisis.\(^{22}\) The first crisis came to the tea plantation sector in 1866 and later by 1867 and 1868. B.C. Allen provides the reasons for that collapse:

During the tea boom large sums were paid for labour and for seed, land which was little better than jungles was sold for preposterous prices and the tea companies which formed under the unfavourable conditions soon collapsed.\(^{23}\)

Gait also writes about the collapse in the tea industry:

The tea mania extended even to Government officers and three Deputy Commissioners, four assistant Commissioners and several police officers threw up their appointments to engage in tea planning, clearances were made wholesale often with the sole object of selling them to companies at a large profit; land was taken up irrespective of its suitability for the object in view of the supply of labour available and was planted out with a wholly insufficient number of tea bushes. The result was a general collapse; many of the new companies unable to meet

\(^{22}\) There is a good summary of the episode of the 'tea mania' and collapse in the 1860s in P. Griffiths: *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London-1967), Pp. 96-108
\(^{23}\) Mr. A.C. Campbell in a note written in 1873 said 'Young who had been engaged in England were turned adrift when the collapse came “in a most inhospitable country without a penny or a friend”; some died, others had literally to beg their way out of Assam, most had to regret impaired constitutionally and all the loss of some of the best years of their life.'; Quoted by- B.C. Allen: *Assam District Gazettes- Vol. III* Sibsagar (Allahabad-1906).
their liabilities were wound up and those which were still carried on suffered a serious depreciation of their shares....24

The enormous increase in 1870s had been the result of keen interests taken both by the Government and the entrepreneurs to develop the industry irrespective of the hurdles of labour supply and the high mortality rate among the recruited labourers. Another characteristic of the tea plantation industry of Assam was that unlike the jute industry of Bengal, where most of the mills were registered in India but in respect of tea, situation was quite different. According to a report of the Indian Tea Association: ‘Of the total nominal capital invested in the joint stock companies producing tea in India in 1914, which amounted to Rs.302.3 million, only about Rs.43.7 million were accounted for by companied registered in India and the rest by sterling companies.’25 The sterling companies played a pivotal role since 1830s in the development and management of the tea industry. Even the Assam Tea Company was formed with an initial capital of £ 500,000 and for investment it was dependent upon London investors:

Though London capital, in sterling pounds, constituted the infrastructural base for these new companies, actual cash flow for new plantations was raised in Calcutta and currency circulated in the region. The bulk of the capital was raised in India from earnings owned and managed by the English in Calcutta, though, in the final analysis, all fiscal policies were accountable to London.26

Generally, the financial board based in London controlled all the matters relating to investment and dividends: ‘Most of the large managing agency houses involved in the tea plantation in India were firms which had made money in other fields and then entered into the tea business as one of their many ventures.’27

25 The figures are quoted in G.D. Hope, Chief Scientific Officer, Indian Tea Association, “The Tea Industry of Bengal and Assam in Playne and Wright”. Bengal and Assam, Bihar and Orissa; Cited in A.K. Bagchi: Private Investment in India 1900-39 (Cambridge-1972), f. n.-18, p. 161
26 Piya Chatterjee: A Time for Tea (Delhi-2001), p. 87
27 Bagchi: Op. cit., p. 162 For an excellent analysis of the industrial phenomenon as developed in the Eastern India, See Bagchi’s classic study: Private Investment in India (Particularly Pp. 170-181)
But the planters were not always cooperative to the directions given by the managing agency houses and they complained usually about the control-imposed upon them by the Calcutta agents. For instance, during the strike wave of 1920-22, it was particularly evident that where as some tea garden managers decided to raise the wages of the striking workers due to the price-like of the basic commodities, but the agents based at Calcutta vetoed their proposals and the strikes occurred as according to the evidence given by some managers before the Enquiry Committee of 1922. It was very interesting that even up to 1947, with just thirteen leading agency houses they (the expatriate business community) controlled over 75% of tea production in the region.28

The rising profits and the prospect of opening more tea gardens compelled the colonial state as well as the tea planters to think of a steady source of labour supply. The intention of the planters to recruit the local labourers for their tea states did not materialise due to the demand of higher wages by the natives. The growing interest in tea-plantations created another great problem of recruiting labourers for the tea estates. In the colonial-capitalist discourse labour was simply defined as a commodity which could be tamed and subjected to discipline and authority of the tea planters. According to the colonial officials, the indigenous population of Assam did not give much attention to the newly developed industry and that’s why perhaps Mills said during his visit to the Sibasagar district:

The difficulty they (tea planters) have to contend with is the want of labour, arising not only from the scantiness of the population but the natural indolence of the Assam. The Company give employment to 3,000 men and of these only one third are inhabitants of the District.29

The problem of the labour shortage created a great danger before the tea planters and for instance, during the first years of the Jorehaut Tea Company’s operation, the dearth of labour supply seemed to have brought untimely closure to many of its

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29 Mills also wrote in his Report: ‘The remainder are Cacharees from Darrang and Bengalees. The importation of labourers from Bengal is very expensive and I am informed it costs the company Rs. 15 per head to land them at Nazeera.’
gardens: ‘The Company’s first year’s operations in 1860 resulted in a total of 155 coolies being sent up, though these efforts are described as not having resulted so satisfactorily as could have been desired. In 1861, results were no better, only 140 having been sent forward’ and besides the unpopularity of Assam in the recruiting districts, it was also observed about the inadequate transport system of Assam which created great difficulties in labour supply.30 The communication network of Assam was backward and it was so undeveloped that ‘the original Commission of Enquiry set up by Lord William Bentinck in 1834 to ascertain the possibilities of growing tea in Assam took, on their voyage in 1835, about four and a half months to reach Sadiya from Calcutta. The whole journey was made by country boat up the Brahmaputra’.31

But initially, the planters were not enthusiastic in extension of railway facilities to Assam.32 The importance of the railways became acutely felt only after 1880s and by 1885 the only railways in Assam were the Dibru-Sadiya Railway (metre gauge), constructed by the Assam and Trading Company in 1882. The Jorhat Provincial Railway (two feet gauge) was opened in 1883. The railway communication became more improved after ‘the opening of the Assam Bengal Railway in 1895 which connected Assam with outside world and as such the impact of railways in Assam is primarily the outcome of the establishment of this railway.’33 With the establishment of the railways, the colonial penetration became more intense after 1890s.34

30 ‘Great efforts were made to enlist the aid of Government to control emigration of labour, for at that time not only were the steamer facilities to Assam inadequate for the transport of labour but there was the competition from the Maurititus for Indian labour. Conditions of emigration to Island were far superior to those for Assam and Mr. George Williamson, whilst he enlisted the support of planters in Assam for representatives to be made to Government, recognised that it was up to the Industry in the first place to improve its own conditions of transport.’

31 Ibid., p. 66

32 Tinged with indifference was apprehension that the construction phase of railways would rob them of their hard acquired work force, who might be tempted to leave the rigorous and oppressive garden environment for the freedom and better pay afforded by railway contractors.
Arup Dutta: Indian Railways- The Final Frontier (Guwahati-2002), p. 40

33 S. B. Medhi: Transport System and Economic Development in Assam (Guwahati-1978), p. 56

34 Priyam Goswami has discussed the overall impact of the colonialism upon the economy of Assam during the 19th Century in her book: Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialisation and Colonial Penetration (Guwahati/Delhi-1999). For the study of the early industrial ventures and the development of the transport system, see also, H.K. Barpujari’s Assam in the Days of the Company (Shillong-1996), and the selected volumes edited by H.K. Barpujari: The Comprehensive History of Assam (Vol.-IV & V), (Guwahati-1993 and 1992)
To attract the native labourers, the colonial authority even tried to increase the land revenue rate in Assam to deviate the indigenous populations’ attention into the plantations. But the attempt hardly did able to achieve its aim despite the fact that ‘a hundred percent increase in the total revenue demand in Assam proper between 1867-68 and 1872-73 and an income in the opium price from Rs.14 percent in 1860 to Rs.20 in 1862 and to Rs.23 by 1873.’

At first, though Kachari labourers were hired for doing service in the tea gardens but Kacharis proved too indocile and above all, the shortage of recruiting indigenous labour compelled the authority to think of an alternative source. The first experience, the tea plantation authority got was that the docility of the labouring class must be the essential ingredient for doing labour in an agro-capitalist industry like the tea plantations. The colonial authority gave serious consideration to the import of labourers from the surplus populated areas like the Chotanagpur and later also from other areas such as North-Western provinces, Central Provinces and as far as from the Madras Presidency. The prospect of the recruitment of the ‘aboriginal’ tribes solved the tedious problem of labour shortage. The anthropological studies particularly helped in recruiting the aboriginal tribes like the Santals from the Chotanagpur plateau. The selection of the ‘Chotanagpur Plateau’ as the ‘labour catchment area’ and later also the import of vast bulk of labourers from that area facilitated the planters to employ those labourers in a very meager sum of salaries in the tea plantations of Assam.

36 To be jungli from the forest or primitive was to be a pure aboriginal and to be an aborigine was to be the best class of labour.
37 In an earlier anthropological study of the 1880s, H.B. Rowney discussed the habitation of the tribes in the forests and he wrote scathingly about the need for subjugation of the tribes: ‘Every inaccessible jungle, hill-tract, and fen-land of the country is occupied by them; and they are to be seen there even now almost as isolated by manners, language, and prejudices of race from the population by whom they are surrounded as they were in the past. … We see many parts of the country marked on the maps as “unexplored” or “thinly inhabited” for the best of all reasons that they were malaria-guarded. … The main division of the Dasya race as now seen are: the Gonds, the Bhelis, the Kolis, the Mairs and Meenas, the Khonds, the Koles, and the Sonthals’
38 Chotanagpur Plateau- (Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal), in this region already large scale dispossession of land took place after the permanent settlement came into effect especially in the Bengal districts and the communal rights enjoyed over their land by the peasants of that area curtailed due to the Zamindari extortions. Chatterjee: *Op. cit.*, p. 72
Even immediately after the discovery of tea in Assam, the Government sent recruiting parties to obtain the 'Dhangars' from Chotanagpur. The local authorities too encouraged the Munda and Oraons to emigrate but the attempt did not materialise. In the process of the recruitment of the poor labourers like the Santals from the Chotanagpur region, their forced 'transportation' to Assam and thereby losing of their 'body' sold as 'commodities' to the capitalists and their supposed misconception of 'time', which was manipulated under the coercion of the capitalists, created a disjuncture between the labourers interests and the interests of the capitalists.

There were some special reasons which provided great help to the exertion of the labour recruitment from those areas and among those reasons the landlessness and famine like situation were particularly responsible.

Famines in the recruiting districts and the overflow of the labour recruitment:

Famines and the scarcity of food forced the landless agriculturists people to migrate to the plantations. Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous famines occurred in India, and millions of people died in these famines. Throughout the colonial period in India, in the tea plantation industry, the best years of recruitment of labourers had been the famine years and scarcities in the recruiting districts.

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40 Prathama Banerjee writes about the Santals and their losing of ‘body’: ‘In the course of their enforced transportation as indentured labour, Santals experienced their own selves as commodities. They were explicitly sold for their bodies, they were constantly in the grip of disease and death, they were forcibly and unwillingly circulated with cargo, they almost always fail to return home—all this making their bodily functions and movements seem out of their own control’. Prathama Banerjee: Politics of Time: ‘Primitives’ and History Writing in a Colonial Society (Delhi-2006), p. 96
41 Jean Dreze narrates thus: ‘Famine followed massive crop failure resulting from drought. The immediate effect of these crop failures was not only to reduce food availability in the affected region, but also and more importantly to disrupt the rural economy. In particular, landless agricultural labourers found little employment as field activity was brought to a standstill while general impoverishment simultaneously enlarged the supply of casual labour. Food prices increased as the less vulnerable groups strived to maintain reasonable food consumption levels (possibly by selling assets), while trade was often slow to move food to the affected area from other regions.’ Jean Dreze: Famine Prevention in India, in J.Dreze, A. Sen, A. Hussain (ed): The Political Economy of Hunger (Delhi 1999), p. 72 (emphasis original)
districts. In an impressive study regarding the famines in the Chotanagpur region and the recruitment of labour afterwards, Prabhu Mohapatra has explained that 'large-scale-migration' from Chotanagpur can be attributed to the 'conjunction of crisis' in agriculture the region experienced between 1880 and 1920.\textsuperscript{42} In the following table major famines basically concerned with the aspect of the labour recruitment for the tea estates has been given.\textsuperscript{43}

Table: 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Area affected</th>
<th>Mortality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1865-66</td>
<td>Orissa and adjacent areas</td>
<td>1,300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bihar and Bengal</td>
<td>135,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868-69</td>
<td>North west province</td>
<td>600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869-70</td>
<td>Central Provinces</td>
<td>250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877-78</td>
<td>North west Provinces (U.P.)</td>
<td>1,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888-89</td>
<td>Ganjam</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tributary States of Orissa</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Bihar</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896-97</td>
<td>North-west Provinces</td>
<td>(total 4,500,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Central Provinces</td>
<td>Also taking into account Deccan, (Bombay and Madras), Punjab, Burma, Central Provinces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>650,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>Central Provinces</td>
<td>188,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905-06</td>
<td>Bundelkhand (NWP)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907-08</td>
<td>U.P. (old NWP)</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{43} Table totally has been arranged to show only the effects of the famines in the recruiting districts and we have selected only such districts and excluded other major famine affected areas such, Punjab, Bombay etc. Table cited in Irfan Habib: Indian Economy 1858-1914 (Delhi- 2006), p. 83
The famines which occurred in those areas particularly affected the poor peasants. For instance, in the Central Provinces, famines which occurred in 1896-97 and 1899-1900 greatly benefited the tea industry of Assam. In the Bilaspur district, the total population decreased by 151,186 out of the population which was in 1891 numbering, 1,164,158 but in 1901 it was 1,012,972. Again, in that district, the rice crop failed partially during the period of 1902-03 which led to the scarcity. In the Raipur district, population dropped from 1,584,427 (1891 census) to 1,440,556 (1901 census), so the population decreased by 143,871. In the same district (Raipur) wages were also low; just it was 1¼ to 2 annas in the interior places of the district. In the Balaghat district (C.P.), also, population dropped by 56,869 during the decade 1891-1901. So, in the latter half of the nineties, there was extensive emigration to Assam. Jubbulpore also met the same fate during the famine years where population dropped by 67,561. In the following table, it has been shown the number of population, who got employment in the tea-districts of Assam (1901).44

Table: 2.4

Central Provinces’ districts population and employment in the tea districts of Assam:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Native District</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Bilaspur</td>
<td>21,137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raipur</td>
<td>7,719</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balaghat</td>
<td>8,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bhandara</td>
<td>1,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jubbulpore</td>
<td>13,703</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC-Report 1906

The British recruiting agencies as well as the colonial government officials became more conscious when they saw the improvement that took place in the recruiting districts due to the extension of the railways and the establishment of coal-mines or some lime factories. In an official abstract about labour conditions in the recruiting

44 Arranged from the Appendix B of the ALEC Report 1906, Pp. 152-53
districts, it was observed for example, in the case of the Bhandara district of the Central Provinces:

Work people are in great demand for manganese mines, irrigation works and the Gondia-Chanda railways and the cotton industry in Nagpur and the districts to the east take up all the available labour there is. Wages are good and are rising yearly. Emigration to Assam may be regarded as a thing of the past so far as this district is concerned.45

The difficulty of procuring labour for the tea gardens of Assam became acute after the employment and emigration of the landless agriculturists to the newly developed industries like the jute or coal mines. The growth of the jute industry in Bengal (Table 2:5) and substantial availability of work at the docks attracted the labourers as far as from the Central Provinces. The substantial improvement made in the coal mines (Table 2:6) also affected in the labour migration to the tea gardens.46

Table: 2.5

Total number of looms and the average daily workers (Jute industry), 1895-1904

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of looms</th>
<th>Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>10,169</td>
<td>78,114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>15,169</td>
<td>110,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>15,948</td>
<td>113,493</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>17,018</td>
<td>117,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>18,228</td>
<td>122,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>19,816</td>
<td>131,886</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: "Reports on Labour in Bengal"- Mr. Foley, cited in ALEC- Report 1906

45 Ibid., p. 153
46 Ibid., p. 18
Table: 2.6

Total output of Coal, 1894-1905.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Out of coal in tons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>2,716,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>4,978,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>5,487,585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>6,259,236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>6,361,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>7,063,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>7,234,103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC- Report 1906

The new kind of developmentalist mood as grew up in labour recruitment districts was also conceded by the Indian Tea Association which was recognised by the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1930). Generally, the wages, the emigrant labourers got at those centres were rather high. For instance, the labourers from Bilaspur who had been employed by the Bengal-Nagpur Railway worked on monthly wages of Rs.7 for a man and Rs.5 for a woman. Though, the colonial-capitalist lobby depicted a forlorn hope for further recruitment of labourers for the work in the tea gardens but the real emigration rate did not decline abnormally as late as 1921. In 1921, around 3% of the population of Chotanagpur found

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47 About the effects of the industrial changes in the recruiting districts, in the Royal Commission on Labour it was also noticed: “The only changes of importance are the falling off of emigration from the districts of Singbhum, Hazaribagh and Manbhum, and the Western districts of Bengal. In the case of Singbhum, the cause is not doubt the growth of Tata’s Steel and Iron works, and the allies companies; in the other districts the factor had been demand of the coalfields and the opportunities for casual labour afforded in the Eastern districts of Bengal in connection with jute and paddy cultivation. Extensive railway construction works have also absorbed large number of labourers in areas where previously they used to emigrate to tea. Important among their works are in the central Coalfield Railway through Hazaribagh and Palamau- Raipur- Vizianagram Railway, the Vizagapatam Harbour Scheme and similar projects.”

Royal Commission on Labour in India, (Assam part), Vol- VI (London-1930), p. 64

engagement in tea estates out of the total population of 5,650,028. The basic reason as claimed by the Royal Commission regarding the workers engagement in the tea plantations was that ‘... the Bihar and Orissia industries cannot provide the same facilities to needy agriculturists as does tea.’ In support of that claim the Commission reproduced the view of the Financial Department, Government of Bihar and Orissa and where it was stated frankly that ‘the services rendered by the tea industry to the Bihar and Orissia provinces generally did not go unrecognised,’ as the following extract “.... emigration serves to mitigate the rigours of food grain.”

Although, a rigorous labour procurement was followed intensively by the tea capitalists but the colonial state as well as the capitalists did not pay any serious concern to the mortality in the transit of the labourers to Assam.

**High mortality rate in transit:**

Due to the lack of protections of the labourers from the probable diseases and the ruthless prosecution of the agreement terms, instead of maintaining of the basic hygienic conditions in transit of the labourers, the mortality rate assumed a high rate. For instance, between the periods of 1863-66, about 84,915 labourers arrived in the tea districts of Assam, and out of these considerably over 30,000 died by 1866 and between 1865-66, the number of labourers died was 9,147. ‘The deaths on a total labour force of about 40,000 were estimated to have exceeded 11,000 in a

---

49 In the ITA Report as submitted to the Royal Commission, it was stated: ‘Pressure on the soil must have been considerably relieved, for in 1920-21 we find only, 5,537 souls proceeding to tea estates, the figure dropping in season 1923-24 to 3,679. Since then there has been steady increase the figure for 1928-29 being 46,868. The total figures for the duodecennium are 313,539 or an annual average of 261,000 approximately, or about 45 of the total population.’ Op. cit., Royal Commission, p. 63

twelve months.'51 Between the four years 1864-67, the annual mortality in the largest
depot ranged from 36 to 115% of the average daily strength.'52

The special causes of the high-mortality rate among the labourers as
given by the colonial authority were:

(a) the arrival of so many immigrants weakened by famine or scarcity and
liable to exceptional sickness and mortality anywhere and more than ordinarily
difficult to acclimatize in Assam, and
(b) their arrival at an exceptionally unhealthy period unfavourable to
acclimatization.53

About 249,883 immigrants came in the famine period (1845-97) and majority arrived
in a condition already weakened by distress and insufficiency of food.

At the same time, the impact of the kala-azar upon the populations ‘of
Assam both indigenous and immigrants was disastrous.’ The principal tea districts,
Sylhet, Cachar, Sibsagar and to a smaller extent, Lakhimpur suffered more or less
severely from it.54 A table has been provided below to show the death-rate among the
garden labourers between the periods of 1876-1905.55

52 B.C. Allen: Assam District Gazetters- Vol. VII Sibsagar
54 Ibid
55 Ibid., Appendix- VII, p. 236
### Table: 2.7

Tea garden population and the mortality figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average labour force</th>
<th>Number of new immigrants</th>
<th>Percentage of new immigrants to labour force</th>
<th>Percentage of new immigrants of year and of previous year to the labour force</th>
<th>Total numbers of registered deaths on tea garden</th>
<th>Total tea garden death-rate per 1,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1876</td>
<td>124,323</td>
<td>34,283</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>6,253</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>146,513</td>
<td>31,897</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>7,465</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>172,569</td>
<td>43,061</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>43.4</td>
<td>11,421</td>
<td>66.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879</td>
<td>184,935</td>
<td>24,712</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>9,450</td>
<td>50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>188,497</td>
<td>15,913</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>6,657</td>
<td>35.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>194,182</td>
<td>17,116</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>6,167</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>200,099</td>
<td>22,559</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>7,590</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>229,867</td>
<td>32,138</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>9,335</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>267,855</td>
<td>45,511</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>11,583</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>289,574</td>
<td>29,398</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>10,711</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>301,349</td>
<td>30,894</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>12,059</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>320,408</td>
<td>36,463</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>11,633</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>347,371</td>
<td>46,293</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>13,857</td>
<td>39.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>386,532</td>
<td>55,658</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>16,212</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>406,089</td>
<td>36,080</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>13,949</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>429,148</td>
<td>49,908</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>15,832</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>457,717</td>
<td>56,050</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>19,250</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>479,743</td>
<td>50,675</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>15,982</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>494,336</td>
<td>46,530</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>15,805</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>526,833</td>
<td>72,837</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>17,702</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>571,412</td>
<td>81,115</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>18,272</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>630,107</td>
<td>95,931</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>26,120</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>642,283</td>
<td>49,169</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>20,017</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>640,165</td>
<td>31,908</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>17,610</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>664,897</td>
<td>62,733</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>19,603</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>653,614</td>
<td>26,222</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>16,904</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>653,045</td>
<td>26,684</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>16,376</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903-04</td>
<td>654,021</td>
<td>22,162</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>15,752</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-05</td>
<td>657,700</td>
<td>24,209</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>15,145</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC- Report 1906

From the table (2.7), it would become apparent that the mortality rate was highest between the four years from 1876-80 and the highest death occurred in 1878 (66.1%). Normally, death rate was between 30-40% almost in all the years covering the period. But the death rate decreased from 1899 and, later, it reached at the lowest 23.0 in 1904-05. In an excellent report, prepared by Surgeon- Major R. Neil Campbell, it was mentioned that lack of medical inspection and scarcity of providing basic facilities to the emigrant labourers caused the maximum number of
deaths among the labourers. Dr. Campbell described the horrible experience during his inspection in the Surma valley thus:

I left Goalundo ... in the *Pathan en route* for Silchar. There were 197 coolies on board, and, as there was only one galley, the morning meal took over eight hours to cook. The emigrants did not seem satisfied with the quantity, and all young and old, clamoured for more out of a small quantity which remained. Some of the children, I might truthfully say most of them, were little better than skeletons. I had to order milk to be distributed to some of the children, they were in such a debilitated condition. The morning meal was not given till 12-15 P.M. I ordered the medical officer to let me see the evening meal and to inform me when ready. I visited the cook-room at 6.30 P.M. and again at 7.15 P.M. and the meal was not then ready. I was having my dinner and heard a commotion, so finished quickly, thinking it was the coolies preparing for their meal and went out at 8.20, i.e., about ten minutes after the commotion, to find the meal had been given, which was impossible in so short a time. On enquiry, I was informed that the meal had been given and not to all, or nearly all, and that the commotion was the Coolies crying.56

Again Dr. Campbell in his scintillating description said:

There was no shelter for those who landed except a covered passage between two godowns, which had no sides, and was only a few feet wide. There was a dense fog the next morning, and it was very cold, so, considering the quality of the clothing, the exposure must have been trying. ....There were eight cases of cholera between Manumukh and Fenchuganj with two deaths. There was no hospital and no means of isolation. A small piece of canvas was put up round the sick and dead, who were lying among the healthy on the lower deck, and an attempt made to isolate, but this was impossible, owing to the crowded state of the steamer. ....There was no place for cooking. There was no hospital. There was only one latrine, containing one seat, so that it would take hours for the Coolies to relieve themselves unless the steamer happened to be anchored alongside the

56 Report on the Arrangements for Transit of Immigrants to Assam 1897, Shillong
bank. There was no water-supply, except that the Coolies could get from the river and this was filthy. There was insufficient protection round the decks, and I was informed that on one steamer, a child had tumbled overboard and been drowned.\textsuperscript{57}

The labourers became so depressed out of the harsh situation that they had to face that they did not feel the urge and sympathy to look after their own relatives those who were suffering from diseases. Dr. Campbell frankly said seeing a case of cholera: 'It was extraordinary to see the callous way the sick were abandoned, even by their nearest relatives, and those who died on board were thrown in the rivers between Fenchuganj and Karimganj.'\textsuperscript{58} The situation had been remained unchanged even after their arrival in the exact destinations and the Committee of 1906 observed that 'it is only too probable that the disillusionment following upon the immigrants arrival on the garden, aggravated by the feeling that he is bound to remain there, should, in many cases, have had a prejudicial effect on his health and the circumstances cannot be left out of account in considering the mortality of the past.'\textsuperscript{59}

The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 analysed the above remark of the previous Committee thus:

These remarks might well have been written with reference to the free immigrant who, on arrival on a tea garden in Assam, up to a recent date, and even now in certain districts, is being placed under the long-term contracts expressed in terms of days, in consideration of trivial advances and in direct contravention of the law. ....It is significant that the highest adult death-rate recorded in the Resolution on Immigrant Labour for 1920-21 is reported from the Tezpur district where full advantage is taken of the provisions of Act XIII especially in the case of new immigrants. The birth-rate is also the lowest with the exception of Nowgong, another district in which the penal contract system is worked with considerable vigour and where allowances to pregnant women do not err on the side of liberality.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Taking excerpts from the Committee of 1906. Quoted in Assam Labour Enquiry Committee report (henceforth ALEC) 1921-22 Ch. VI, p. 93
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
So, taking as a whole, the workers conditions deteriorated more due to the harsh penal contracts imposed upon them with the implication of the Act XIII. The harsh working conditions made the workers conditions miserable. In the following table (2:8) a statistics has been provided to bring into focus the birth and death rates respectively both in the tea gardens and in the provincial level (the percentage per mile from 1912-20).

Table: 2.8

Birth and death rate (1912-1920)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tea Garden</th>
<th></th>
<th>Provincial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birth rate</td>
<td>Death rate</td>
<td>Birth rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>27.22</td>
<td>23.64</td>
<td>32.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>26.66</td>
<td>25.47</td>
<td>33.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>24.54</td>
<td>21.93</td>
<td>32.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>26.27</td>
<td>26.47</td>
<td>30.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>25.15</td>
<td>30.96</td>
<td>30.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>31.10</td>
<td>30.41</td>
<td>31.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>35.41</td>
<td>55.23</td>
<td>34.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>31.58</td>
<td>83.82</td>
<td>30.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>25.89</td>
<td>31.54</td>
<td>31.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC Report-1921-22

From the table it can be gauged that the death rate was the highest in 1919 in the tea garden (83.82%) and whereas in the provincial level it was 50.9%. The reason of the abnormal death rate during the period of 1918-19 was cholera and influenza:

The high mortality however was primarily due to the importation of hordes of famine stricken and diseased coolies who were sent up to the Assam tea gardens in the expectation that the artificial war-time prosperity of the industry justified large extensions of tea cultivation on old estates and the opening of new gardens.

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61 Ibid., p. 94
As might have been anticipated disease broke out among these new recruits on the way up and on the tea-gardens to which they were consigned.62

But, most of the managers and the medical officers of Assam opined before the Committee (1921-22) that the ‘Coolies’ were generally averse to the idea of going to the Westernised hospitals. In the Surma valley for instance, it was stated by the planters that ‘the coolie; if he enters hospital at all, only does so in the last resort, after he has tried to treat himself after his own fashion in the lines.’63 But, the actual reason behind the unwillingness of the workers to take any medical help was as given by the Committee of 1921-22 thus:

The fact that the best medical attention on the gardens could often do little to save life in such circumstances conduced to a feeling of despair and even to a belief among the more ignorant and superstitious that the garden was haunted by some evil spirit. It is not therefore, a matter for surprise that some of these unfortunate immigrants lost faith in European medicines and methods of treatment and that when ill-health began to prey on body and mind and the earning capacity was diminished, they became discontented with the conditions of tea-garden life.64

The mortal fear of the disease affected coolies towards the western medicines and their own refusal not to enter into the civilised western hospitals could be cited as one of their forms of their resistance against the exploiters and they wanted only to treat them through their indigenous medicines. The civilised mission of the western medical practitioners failed in the context of the tea-gardens labourers.65

62 Ibid.
63 The planters tried to hide their own negligence towards their labourers by blaming Gandhi when the Committee of 1921-22 visited the various tea gardens of Assam. The reason of the Coolies refusal to take any medical help from the hospitals had been explained as part of the influence of Gandhi’s propaganda to induce people nothing to do with hospitals and western medicines. Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 95
65 To give an echo to the brilliant analysis as given by Ranajit Guha in this context: ‘Science- the science of war and the science of exploration- had won for Europe its first overseas empires in the mercantile era. Now in the nineteenth century it was for science again to establish a second-order empire by subjugating the bodies of the colonized to the disciplines of medicine and hygiene.’ He also has significantly pointed out about the resistance of the rural poors of India during the colonial period when they refused to take the medical benefits offered by the colonialists: ‘The small voices of the sick in rural India speak of a degree of resistance to that imperial design. They demonstrate how difficult it still was for medicine to rely on that objectification of the body so essential for its success in diagnosis and healing.’
the control of the body through healing the workers' diseases was the real motive of the colonial state and the plantation authority, then the western medicine failed to put its grip over the body of the labourers. Though, it seemed to be the cultural resistance as put against the authority by the poor labourers but the negligence showed by the plantation authority and the colonial state towards providing the basic facilities for maintaining a good health for the labourers, made the spirit of the labourers feeble.

The feeble minded workers sometimes failed to offer their services to the progress of the capitalist productive relation. But, the tea-planter tried to ascribe to some of the labourers working in their respective estates as lazy due to their feebleness. The Committee of 1921-22 refuted that view about the laziness and on the contrary they attributed the laziness of the labourers to the anaemia disease which was called also as the ‘lazy disease’: ‘It is significant that the name ‘lazy disease’ is applied to ankylostomiasis in Porto Rico and the Southern States of America, as stated by Captain Christophers, I.M.S. in the Dooars Report of 1910.’66 The disease was primarily ‘the result of malaria or dysentery or hookworm infections’. It was generally also held by the medical officers and managers that ‘the prevalence of anaemia or hookworm disease in a garden very considerably diminishes the efficiency of the labour force.’ The ‘kala-azar’ occurred even during the visit of the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 and it witnessed seven such cases in the Golaghat Sub-division of the Sibsagar district. In one tea garden of that sub-division (Dooria T.E.), 270 labourers died between the periods of 1916-1921: ‘Hundreds of infected houses were burned down, new lines erected and hospitals with a special staff established’.67

The condition of the women labourers became more appalling though they immensely involved in plucking the tea leaves. The workers recruitment to the tea gardens was always preferred with their families and ‘the economic benefit family migration to capitalists is demonstrated par excellence not in indentured migration for sugar plantations but in tribal recruitment for tea estates where female labour was specifically required.’68 For recruiting the women labourers with children, the recruiting parties adopted various fraudulent measures, even kidnapping to meet the

67 Ibid., Pp. 97-98
68 Marina Carter: Servants, Sirdars Settlers (Delhi-1995), p. 3
growing demands of labour. The Enquiry committee of 1921-22 gave its sincere attention to the health condition of the women labourers and appealed: 'Where it is so difficult to obtain labour from the recruiting districts, it is, apart from humanitarian motives, a matter of enlightened self-interest to be generous in the treatment of women during and after confinement.' Though some tea gardens maintained basic medical facilities for the pregnant women but at the average level, some gardens refused to offer any benefits during pregnancy period and even after delivery. They (tea planters) explained that the gardens 'were hard hit during the depression' in the post First World War period and they categorically stated 'that, after all, a tea-garden is not a philanthropic institution.' The Committee noted in disgust: 'Economy on these lines is the worst kind of parsimony.'

The condition of the time expired labourers became worse. The Native Press since 1890s, vehemently criticised the negligence of the tea-planters as showed towards those time expired labourers. Particularly, the newspapers like, 'Sanjibani' and 'Hitabadi' played a great part in informing the conscious bodies about the plight of those labourers. The Government of India took notice of the criticism of the two newspapers and in a letter written to the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, by the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam wrote:

I am directed to forward a copy of a letter and its enclosure, from the Govt. of India (dated the 22nd Dec. 1896) together with extracts from the Sanjibani and Hitabadi, regarding the treatment of sick and destitute labourers who have been employed on the railway and tea gardens in Assam and to request that you will be good enough to enquiry in to the matter carefully.... The correspondence discloses a serious state of affairs which it is incumbent on the authorities to take step to remedy.

69 For an excellent analysis of the issue of the recruitment of women labourers to the tea garden of Assam, See- Samita Sen: Questions of Consent: Woman's Recruitment for Assam Tea Gardens. 1859-1900 in Studies in History, July-Dec. 2002 Vol. XVIII No.2
71 Ibid.
72 In the two newspapers (Sanjibani and Hitabadi) it was reported that 'It is a notorious fact that weak and infirm, diseased and old coolies, most of whom are scarcely able to support themselves on their legs, are often turned out by their employers to shift for themselves, either to find a lamentable grave on the road side, sometimes for one of a morsel of food and sometimes out of the effect of disease aggravated by exposure and neglect, or eke out an extremely measurable existence by begging from door to door.' Proceeding of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Department under the control of the Revenue and Agriculture Department of the Government of India. July 1897, Shillong, p. 17, p. 19
The government report also cited the complaint of the two newspapers:

Coolies who are turned out of the gardens as invalids or as useless for some reason or other, become a real part to the surrounding villages, in as much as they spread all sorts of infectious diseases among the villagers and live on their charity, sometimes even by stealing. Says that, as their lot is a very hard one. "Government being a Government for poor and the helpless, it should see to their well-being." 73

It was also true that the material condition of the labour force much depended upon the attitude of the tea plantation authority. The government also recognised the fact and stated thus:

The condition of the labourer on the plantations is very dependent on many circumstances. The healthiness of the garden the distance from the nearest bazaar, the wages he can earn, the character of his master, the amount of care and consideration he receives, all deeply affect the coolie's happiness and comfort. In every cases, everything has been unfavourable. The gardens have been very unhealthy and the greater numbers of the labourers have suffered more or less from sickness, the nearest bazaar has been many miles distant and their small wants have been but poorly supplied from the garden store. The estate has often consisted of a small and almost inaccessible clearance in the heart of a dense jungle. Depressed and weakened by sickness, the coolies have been able to earn but little, and that little perhaps long withheld. When too ill to work there has often been no one to nurse them with that care which they required, no medical attendant. Who could be dependent on to see that they were properly treated and that they received sufficient nourishment. The manager may have been young and altogether inexperienced, or what is worse, he may have been a hard master. 74

The picture which was depicted by the report had not been transformed till the end of the colonial rule despite numerous protests led by the labourers, out of frustration and anger.

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73 Ibid, p. 12
74 Report of the Commissioner Appointed to Enquire into the state and prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet-1868 Calcutta, p. 45
It was not only in respect of the health where there was a total negligence showed by the planters but also, the labourers were brought under the surveillance of the agents (arkattis), those who played the ultimate role of recruiting the labourers by adopting all fraudulent means to satisfy their own masters.

Arkattis- ‘the scum of the earth’:

The biggest slur on the colonial tea plantation industry was their recruitment process and the use of middlemen (Arkattis) to recruit labourers for the tea gardens of Assam. The Enquiry Committee of 1906 noted that ‘intense feeling against emigration to which is manifest almost everywhere in the recruiting districts.’ The tea planters generally divided the recruited labourers into three classes of labourers and the arkattis became the chief helper in recruiting the labourers. Among the Bengal districts, mainly, the Chotanagpur labourers Ranchi, Manbhum, Hazaribagh, Singbhum, Palamau, Santal Parganas occupied the chief importance from the viewpoint of labour-supply and their capacity to work in the tea gardens. In the Surma Valley tea gardens, generally, labourers imported from the United Provinces were used greatly. The garden managers stated before the Committee (1906) that ‘this class of labourers (U.P.) does best in the more open parts of the district, but suffers in health on some estates, more especially those close under the hills.’

Among the nationalities of labourers, the Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas had the highest number of labourers who were employed in the tea gardens of Assam (total labourers from those areas 2,96,503 between the years 1885-1905). The total labour recruitment in the same period was 6,90,076.

75 The Committee also observed: The arkattis posed themselves as the scum of the earth, a heartless scoundrel who would boast that he could by ill treatment make anyone “willing in a few minutes to emigrate to Assam and who was feared as much a man eating tiger.” Op.cit. ALEC 1906, p. 22,
76 E.N. Baker, the Deputy Commissioner in Chotanagpur divided the labourers, according to their capacity into three classes: “First class- Bhumij, Sonthal, Uraon, Dhangor, Munda, Kora, Kol, Paharia (i.e. Chotanagpur hill people). Second class includes all other castes including the Bengal coolies. A third class comprises of the khettris from Bihar and generally castes from Bihar and North-West provinces.” E.N. Baker’s letter to Chief Commissioner of Chotanagpur. In Report of the Commissioner on the Labour District Emigration Act, 1880 p.253; Cited in Ghose: Op.cit, f.n.-45, p. 32
78 Ibid, p. 12
The Enquiry Committees (1906 and 1922) found that the fraudulent recruitment in most of the labour districts gave a bad name to the tea plantation industry in Assam. The positive and favourable accounts about the Province had only been given by Christian missionaries. For instance, Rev. Mr. Heberlet, a Baptist missionary, who himself brought some labourers for the tea gardens of Assam and who after seeing much criticism of the labour recruitment process in the vernacular Press of Sylhet, especially in the vernacular newspapers like the *Paridarshak*, commented:

Those exaggerated reports, I believe do a great deal of harm by deterring many necessitous people who might better their hard lot by emigrating to the tea districts and they have operated injuriously, I know, in frightening many of the neediest of the people under any change to such an extent that they prefer their present miserable condition to the awful lot of garden coolies as depicted in these reports.\(^{79}\)

The unpopularity of the services in the tea plantations of Assam also brought down the numbers of labourers recruited for the tea plantations. The causes which contributed to the fall in the recruitment for the tea gardens, according to the Committee of 1906, were the distance and isolation of the province and the ignorance prevailing in many of the recruiting districts regarding it and secondly, 'the reputed unhealthiness of Assam' and the high mortality of the past amongst tea-garden immigrants.\(^{80}\) J.B. Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam had offered a quite different view and he stated in a 'Note' (confidential):

The Coolies dislike of Assam has been attributed to the bad climate of the Province. But its climate is certainly not inferior to that of the Duars; and in some localities the garden labour forces are extraordinarily healthy. Its remoteness has cited against it. But Sylhet and Cachar really as accessible as the Duars, and there is moreover, evidence to show that in the early days of the tea industry coolies

\(^{79}\) *Report on Labour Immigration- 1887*, p. 6  
\(^{80}\) *Op. cit, ALEC-Report 1906- Ch. III*, p. 15,
voluntarily migrated to Assam and could be obtained (though no doubt in comparatively small numbers) at a mere fraction of the present outlay.\textsuperscript{81}

The Chief Commissioner, also noted, the real cause of the decline in the recruitment of the labourers thus:

Narrow limitation of personal liberty to which the Coolie is subject in this province is not only the result of the unpopularity of Assam. I am persuaded that it is also the most potent cause of this unpopularity. To use the coolies own expression, Assam is a land of "\textit{Phatak}" (imprisonment).\textsuperscript{82}

Fraudulent practices were widely used in the recruitment of the labourers and even a recruited labourer changed many hands before he entered into Assam. The Superintendent of Hazaribagh\textsuperscript{83} wrote in his statement before the Committee of 1906:

The number of natives of that district who had gone to Assam from Raniganj alone was 715. Out of 730 persons entered in the registers of four of the depots since September last, it was found that 488 or nearly 70\%, had been got or professed to have been got from the adjoining close districts or from the Chotanagpur or Orissa Native States.\textsuperscript{84}

The contractors said that no ‘coolie’ could be got without enticement and forcible kidnapping. It was observed:

As regards forcible kidnapping, the charges have commonly proceeded from employers of labour in Bengal or their recruiters who have alleged that coolies

\textsuperscript{81} Confidential Note written on 28th April, 1904. Enquiry into the causes of friction between the planters and their coolies on the tea garden of Assam- 1904. Revenue- A- Nos. 77, 117 ASA
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid
\textsuperscript{83} Hazaribagh- The total population of this district in 1901 was 1,77,961 and out of this the natives of the district who were doing labour in the Assam was 68,772. The Chief attraction of the recruiters fell upon the Bhuiyas, Ghatwals, Dosadhs and Santals.' The Committee of 1906 found that one obstacle of emigration is the Kamia system by which the debtor is bound in serfdom to his creditor.' The Committee stressed: ‘It will be probably be necessary to resort pretty freely to the payment of the best of emigrants and thus overcome the difficulties presented by the Kamiaship system.’ \textit{Op.cit.}, ALEC Report-1906- Appendix- B, p. 149
proceeding to an estate in Bengal have been forcibly seized by the servants of a professional contractor, confined in a depot for Assam emigrants and perhaps, ultimately carried off to Assam.\textsuperscript{85}

It was very interesting, in this context, that the women labourers, generally, deserted by their husbands or victims of domestic squabbles, opted for going to anywhere, as stated by the colonial officials and also by the recruiters:

Such women are often ready almost to go anywhere with anybody and to do anything and they seem not infrequently to fall victims to the professional \textit{arkatti} or recruiter. It may be safely said however that at least such of them as are of superior caste would not willingly go to labour on a tea-garden. They have accordingly to be deceived by some false representation and they are probably told that a home will be provided for them either as a domestic servants or in a less honourable capacity or perhaps person who enlists one of them tells her that he will marry her or to keep her as his mistress.\textsuperscript{86}

The deception cases came to light, when the deceived women labourers were confined in the ship and made their journey for an inglorious future.

The enticement of women from Chotanagpur and other regions continued unabatedly upto the dawn of 1901\textsuperscript{87}, and in majority of those cases relating to the enticement of the labourers, 'most of the women were used to recruit the young girls. Those victims were cajoled, bribed and in some drugged to force them to leave their own country.'\textsuperscript{88}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{85} Op.cit, \textit{Labour Immigration Report- 1887} \\
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid \\
\textsuperscript{87} Later by the Act of 1901 it was determined that the registering officer has to be satisfied that the intending emigrant has not been induced to consent to go to Assam by any coercion, under influence of misrepresentation or mistake. In the case of a woman recruited by a contractor, particular enquiry is prescribed by clauses (3) and (4) of section 34 of the Act as to the consent of her husband or careful guardian and if she is alleged to be a widow or an married woman, the evidence of at least one witness is required to, show that her husband indeed or that she has no lawful guardian, as the old may be. \textit{Op.cit. ALEC-} 1906, p. 25 \\
\textsuperscript{88} Samita Sen: \textit{Op.cit.}
\end{flushright}
Through the enticement and extraordinary fraudulence practised under the full guidance and cognizance of the tea capitalists and the colonial state, the women workers were subjected to the worst kind of servitude. Even, when they reached at there work place, they had to face the jealous eyes of their employers (both the managers and the subordinate staff of the tea estates).

The deplorable situation did not end after their integration with the labour system but insensitive attitudes were shown by the planters in respect of the wages of the labourers.

Wage slavery and tea-garden labourers: the contract system and the wages

The tea planters always preferred the labourers recruited from the areas such as the Chotanagpur plateau. The prices offered normally to the ‘aboriginal’ type of labourers for the tea plantations of Assam were high; the aboriginal coolies cost between Rs.130-150 during the 1890s and the planters paid Rs.110-130 for the second class ‘handy’ coolies. The extreme importance given by the planters to the selection of ‘aboriginal’ or Chotanagpur belt workers as the best type of coolies helped on the other hand, the labour contractors to deceive the garden managers:

The contractors are up to all manner of tricks to pass off inferior coolies as first class labourers; they make them dress their hair on one side and stain their skins so as to look like aboriginal. It is no use trying to find out a man’s caste here he is so well tutored. It is only when he gets to the garden that the deception comes out.

In spite of the harsh treatments during their (the recruited labourers) transit to the tea garden of Assam, the wages offered to the labourers were insufficient to live in a comfortable living standard. As early as 1859, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal urged the tea planters to raise the wages to attract labourers from other parts in India.

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89 Ghosh: Op. cit., p. 34
90 Quoted in ALEC- Report 1906, p. 24
He was of opinion that 'attracting labour to Assam was merely a question of offering sufficient wages and that it was a great mistake to suppose that what were good wages in Bengal must be sufficient wages in Assam.' He was of opinion that 'attracting labour to Assam was merely a question of offering sufficient wages and that it was a great mistake to suppose that what were good wages in Bengal must be sufficient wages in Assam.'91 In 1860, a local labourer was paid at the rate of Rs.4 or Rs.5 a month. It was considered that as the day's task was light and as every emigrant could hold rent-free land from the planter 'as much as he chose to cultivate during his term of service, a wage of Rs.5 was sufficient to offer to imported labourers.'92 The Committee of 1906 also opined that 'on the whole, the wages paid to labourers are sufficient to keep them in comfort and even to enable them with the practice of a little thrift to save money.' But the Chief Commissioner of Assam in a report of 1896 pointed out the discrimination in the wage-structure and his view was given also due consideration in the Labour Immigration Report of 1897:

During the forty years that have elapsed since coolies were first imported from Bengal, wages have practically remained stationary, though the price of all commodities in Assam during that time has largely increased and that the question of raising the rate of wages was one of which the consideration could not be much longer delayed.... It must not, however be forgotten that a considerable number of immigrants, at any rate on their first arrival in the country are physically unfitted to do a hard day’s work and Mr. Cotton is inclined to think that the low scale of wages is indirectly indispensable for some portion of the mortality among Act coolies. The pay offered is not sufficient to attract the best class of labour and the actual amount earned by sick and weakly coolies does not in all cases admit of their providing themselves with sufficient wholesome food to enable them to regain their health.... With the high prices at present prevailing, Rs.3 a month is probably the smallest amount on which a coolie can live and keep in good health....93

The British colonial officials and the tea planters always preferred in giving land for cultivation to the labourers in lieu of sufficient wages. The tea planters judged the situation when they gave low wages to the labourers because of the availability of enough land for rice cultivation and they said that those gardens where rice cultivation

91 Ibid, Appendix- A, p. 135
92 Ibid.
93 Report on Labour Immigration into Assam 1897, p. 24
was in full swing carried also the definition of the good gardens. The planters judged the characteristic of a good garden thus:

A low rate of pay and a low average wage are often the signs of a popular garden, particularly if there is much rice land in the vicinity for they denote the grant of liberal leave, and this the ordinary labourer values more than high pay.⁹⁴

The ITA later, also, conceded that ‘the Coolies highest ambition in life is to become the proprietor and cultivator of his own little plot of land.’⁹⁵ Generally, a nominal rent was charged for the lands held by the labourers but ‘it also became apparent that lands is of little use to the coolie unless he gets sufficient leave to cultivate it and to reap the crops.’⁹⁶ Newly emigrant ‘Coolies’ in their gardens did not get that facility and a coolie did not receive pay when he was engaged in his cultivation. The labourers who were giving up their services in the tea estates, were given the facility of cultivating some land and the ex-tea garden labourers held 262,022 acres directly from government by 1921.⁹⁷

The perception of the British officials that by granting some plot of land, the labourers discontentment could be tamed, was rather an illusion and the hope for giving to the labourers a reasonable standard of living could not be also measured with facts. The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 interestingly, gave their opinion of the term ‘reasonable comfort’ thus:

The expression “health and reasonable” is elastic enough to admit of various interpretations. The Committee think that they are placing a fair construction on the term if they take it to mean a decent living wage, that is, not a mere subsistence allowance, but a wage that could suffice to keep a coolie in health and reasonable comfort with the possibility of saving a little. *The Committee believe that the term “reasonable comfort” connotes the possibility of saving a little.*⁹⁸

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⁹⁵ ITA Report-1921, p. 79
⁹⁷ Ibid.
⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 40 (emphasis added)
The granting of land for rice cultivation to the labourers never gave them the perfect standard of comfort which could have augmented the criteria of the comfortable living standard as defined by the Committee as mentioned above. Although, the tea plantation authority tried to preserve the peasant characteristic of the tea plantation labourers, but they did not supply additional scientific implements for cultivation and it was rather archaic and the labourers livelihood remained unchanged throughout the colonial period in spite of the fact that the hike of basic commodities created unlimited discomfiture for the poor workers.

**Price-hike and the indifferent feature of the wage-structure:**

The year 1905 marked as one of the significant year from the economic point of view to the labourers worked in the tea plantations and the Government of India, too, in a resolution (1914 Oct.) expressed the opinion:

With the year 1905 Indian prices entered upon a new phase. Prices rose rapidly to unprecedented heights and so far (1914) there is nothing to suggest the probability of a reversion to the levels of former years. The explanation of this remarkable phenomenon cannot be found in changes of an internal nature; and examination of the statistics of prices in other countries indicates clearly that the increase in prices has been broadly synchronous with a general upward movement in price levels throughout the world and that its origin must accordingly be sought in causes more or less common to whole civilised world.99

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99 It may be interesting to give from the Report (PP 167-70) a comparative statement showing nominal and real wages of rural agricultural labourers and tea garden labourers. The index number a relative to an index number of 100 for the period from 1890 to 1894:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nominal Wages</th>
<th>Real Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1895 1900 1905 1910 1912</td>
<td>1895 1899 1900 1904 1905 1909 1910 1912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture Labourers</td>
<td>105 125 147 170 189</td>
<td>103 120 123 134 130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Garden</td>
<td>106 103 106 117 120</td>
<td>101 96 90 98 95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Government of India after reviewing K.L. Datta’s report arrived at the conclusion that:

It has been shown that the prolonged rise in Indian prices dates from the year 1905, and that its ultimate origin must be sought in causes which have been operative throughout the civilised world.\(^{100}\)

In his report Datta selecting the period “1890-1904” as the basic or standard period for the purpose of estimating the fluctuations in price levels observed that:

Whereas in rural areas in India wages of agricultural labourers and villages artisans have risen enormously as measured by their purchasing power. About 1912 they were about 38 percent above the level of the standard period. The rise in the wages of industrial labour had not been so large. Nominal wages had increased in every case, but the rise was not in all cases as great as the rise in prices.\(^{101}\)

Datta remarked about the wages of the tea-garden laourers that ‘the coolie in tea-gardens appear to be in the worst position as their real wages have fallen 5% below from in the basic period.’\(^{102}\)

One of the major features of the wage structure that was prevalent during the whole colonial period in the tea plantations was that it hardly gave the labourers to save a little money. But the colonial officials as well as the tea planters believed prior to 1920’s that:

When an emigrant settles down in Assam his object is not as a rule to save money, but rather to lead a pleasant life, and this is more particularly true of the aboriginal coolie. He works enough to provide himself with food and clothing and a few luxuries and if he was any surplus cash he spends in good deal of it in drinking.\(^{103}\)

\(^{100}\) Ibid., p. 40
\(^{101}\) Ibid.
\(^{102}\) Ibid.
\(^{103}\) Op. cit. ALEC –Report 1906, p.73
It was also observed that, generally, the North-Western Province labourers were more conscious in saving a little sum of rupees out of the wages given to them but it gravely affected their health in due course. It was observed that the Santals spent much of their wages in drinking. The classification of the labourers on their habits of spending their nominal wages either on drinking or saving a paltry sum was not the thriftiness or the extravagant nature of the labour, rather on the other hand, it indicated that in the midst of overall wage crunch, the labourers never did become a contented class and its discontentment always manifested itself in outburst in the form of violent protests. In the following table, the monthly wages earned by the labourers before the Chargola exodus has been given below:  

Table: 2.9  
Monthly wages in the Chargola Valley tea gardens (1905-1921):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Of total number on books</th>
<th>Of average daily working strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Rs. 4-10-6</td>
<td>Rs. 3-5-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>Rs. 4-11-0</td>
<td>Rs. 3-6-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Rs. 7-2-7</td>
<td>Rs. 5-6-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>Rs. 8-7-2</td>
<td>Rs. 6-7-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Rs. 9-9-3</td>
<td>Rs. 7-2-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Rs. 10-7</td>
<td>Rs. 8-7-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>Rs. 11-11</td>
<td>Rs. 9-9-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Rs. 12-1</td>
<td>Rs. 10-7</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Rs. 13-1</td>
<td>Rs. 11-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Rs. 14-2</td>
<td>Rs. 12-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Rs. 15-11</td>
<td>Rs. 13-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Rs. 16-1</td>
<td>Rs. 14-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Rs. 17-1</td>
<td>Rs. 15-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Rs. 18-1</td>
<td>Rs. 16-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Rs. 19-1</td>
<td>Rs. 17-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Rs. 20-1</td>
<td>Rs. 18-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Rs. 21-1</td>
<td>Rs. 19-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC- Report 1921-22

From the table, it would clear that significantly between the periods of 1914-1921, there was no apparent increase of the wages. Even in some years, say, between 1918-19 when large number of recruitment occurred due to famine like situation in the recruiting districts, the labourers did not see any large increase of their wages and in fact, the wages lowered down to Rs.4-14-4 for men, Rs.3-13-3 for women and Rs.2-9-8 for children and which was the lowest in comparison with the previous year.

Besides their low wages, the workers also did not enjoy the freedom of leaving their working places at their own will and the implication of the Penal Acts almost pushed the workers to the new kind of servitude.

**Penal contract Acts and the sealing of the workers fate:**

The penal contract which forced the labourers to stay and work in the gardens for an indefinite period was one of the worst kind of examples displayed by the planters of their indomitable will to keep the recruited workers and to fraternise the labour-power of the poor workers for the better cause of the capitalist production and its forces. The labour legislations like the Act XIII or Act VI, were promulgated in order to push the workers into the worst kind of capitalistic exploitations. The Acts were ostensibly passed to safeguard the rights of the planters over the labourers, for instance, 'the Act VI gave the employer a strong hold over the coolies.'\(^{105}\) The abrogation of the Penal Contracts Acts was never considered prior to the dawn of the twentieth century and Henry Cotton's advice of abolishing the penal contract system was vehemently opposed by the tea capitalists.

When the Act III of 1863, in accordance with the suggestion of the Committee which was formed in 1861, it was provided that 'no one should engage any native inhabitant of India within the territories subject to the Government of Bengal to proceed for the purpose of labouring for hire in Assam, Cachar or Sylhet without a license.'\(^{106}\) There was no such provision for the protection of the labourers.

\(^{106}\) Ibid, Appendix-A, p. 136
and 'the flogging of coolies for doing short work was common and absconders when recovered were also flogged, Hill men were rewarded for arresting absconders and the amount of the reward deducted from the absconders.'\textsuperscript{107} The Government of Bengal passed, later, the Act VI of 1865 with the objects and reasons in support of the Act:

In consequence of the unfortunate state of the relations between employees and labourers in the eastern districts it is new proposed, as in the case of colonial Emigration to continue the interference of Government so long as the contract is current. Such interference appear to be necessary in the interests of the employer as of the labourer.\textsuperscript{108}

Similarly also, before the promulgation of that Act, the Act XIII of 1859 was passed when the ultimate pressure was given from the capitalist body:

At the instance of the Master Wardens and Members of the Calcutta Trades Association, who memorialised Government setting forth the losses they sustained owing to the willful breaches of contract or desertion of service by workmen and servants and asking that summary punishment and summary remedies should be provided by application to a Magistrate.\textsuperscript{109}

Though the Act XIII of 1859 at first worked only within the jurisdictions of the Presidency towns but later it was extended to other jurisdictions as well. In Assam, 'the act was extended to the labour districts (except Sylhet to which it was extended later) in the sixties and was intended to meet the case of imported and locally engaged labourers against of breaches of contract, by whom it was considered that the civil law did not give employers sufficient protection.'\textsuperscript{110} The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir W. Ward in his note submitted to the government of India 'considered the Act to be totally indefensible in principle,' and he also said that its repeal would seriously affect the tea industry and that the planters would strongly object to its withdrawal. Later, the Government of India accepted the views offered by the Chief Commissioners of Assam like Mr. Ward and Mr. Quinton and expressed the

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 103
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
opinion: ‘However objectionable in principle, there is no doubt that in its practical operation this Act has been harmless and even beneficial.’

The Enquiry Committee of 1906 though indirectly said that ‘if labour is to be attracted to Assam, contracts and agreements must be shunned’ but the Committee failed to offer any concrete solution to the evaluation of the harsh Acts. The colonial government officials took an indifferent attitude regarding the bad effects of the contract system in order to safeguard the planters’ interests and for the protection of the capitalist production relation. The Committee of 1906 also categorically remarked that ‘on the whole Act XIII works fairly in practice, not with standing that there is some uncertainty in its administration. Its very defects constitute perhaps its chief merit; it leaves a wide discretion to the magistrate to see that agreements under it are interpreted with fairness to both the Parties concerned.’

The harsh treatments meted out to the recruited labourers sometimes made them insane. The insane labourers were tried to cure, then through the establishment of the asylum and the asylum acted as the civilised method of putting ‘therapeutic intervention’ to the poor labourers fates:

The asylum no longer punished the madman’s guilt, it is true; but it did more, it organized that guilt; it organized it for the madman as a consciousness of himself,

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111 Ibid., p. 104
112 When the educated Indians, particularly the Bengali gentlemen were leading a fierce critique against the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, the officials on the other hand thought that the Act had brought four drastic changes and which ultimately helped in the growth of the production of tea: ‘It promoted free emigration; gave preference to recruitment by garden agents over recruitment by contractors; raised the maximum for which contracts could be made from three to five years and legalised such contracts within the province itself. Under these fostering influences the production of tea rose from thirty-one million pounds in 1879-80 to fifty-one million in 1883-84 an increase of 60 percent in four years.’
Sir Charles Alfred Elliott: Labouring Days (Calcutta-1892), p. 73
113 Ibid., p. 107 (emphasis added)
114 Surendranath Benarji in his report sent to the Government of India mentioned one case of a woman who became insane because of the mental torture.
Tea garden Labour in Assam- from the Secretary (Indian Association) to the Secretary, Government of India, Calcutta, 12th April 1888 in J.C. Bagal: History of the Indian Association 1876-1951 (Calcutta: 1953), Appendix, Pp. XXXVI-VII
and as a nonreciprocal relation to the keeper; it organized it for the man of reason as an awareness of the other, a therapeutic intervention in this madman’s existence.\textsuperscript{115}

The labour depots were kept as temporary prisons and the recruited labourers were brought to the depots and when they refused to sign in the agreement for contract, then they were kept in the depots as ‘prisoners’. Besides, the canning of the disobedient workers, the lockup system was widely prevalent in some of the tea estates.\textsuperscript{116}

It was true that the illegal arrests of the ‘Coolies’ put the labourers in a servile condition, bearing the imitation of a medieval form of serfdom (though clearly modified under the capitalist farming system). It was also noticed later that ‘the illegal arrest of absconders continues, ....Minors are placed under contract and in some instances as must be inevitable as long as the practice is so common are arrested and sent to jail.’\textsuperscript{117} Particularly women and children were the worst victims of the Act XIII. The implication of the Act was severe in almost all of the tea districts. The criminal litigation made by the planters against the violation of the terms of the Act was numerous. For instance, in the Nowgong district, there were 101 cases in the Criminal Courts against the coolies, and in 15 cases, the maximum sentence of 3 months rigorous imprisonment was awarded:

In one case a women labourer of Kellyden Tea Estate (Nowgong district) was sentenced to three months hard labour because she refused to return to complete the balance of 805 days.\textsuperscript{118}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[115] Rabinow (ed.): Pp. 145-146 \textit{The Foucault Reader (London, 1991)}
\item[118] The arrested woman, who ran away from the contract, was in agreement on 16th June 1918 for 939 days on an advance of Rs.12 with a monthly wage of Rs.4. She worked 134 days and absconded on 1st Sept. 1919.
\end{footnotes}
The Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong district noticed the fact that ‘minors are concerned in possibly about 5 percent of the case. The act appears to be administered with considerable rigour in this district.’ In the Darrang district, particularly in the Darrang Sadr subdivision, from the 1st July 1920 to the 30th May 1921 there were 446 cases and from the 1st July 1921 to the 28th March 1922, 205 cases’ and it was observed:

Having regard to the tea-garden population, the number of cases instituted in Tezpur (Darrang Sadr Subdivision) indicates that the assistance of the courts is invoked to a far greater extent than in other tea districts. *It is notorious that garden discipline in this district has always been fairly strict. Many of the case records since 1st July 1920 show that managers insist on their pound of flesh.*

The terms of the contract were executed fully and the labourers did not get any chance of complain. The ‘absconders’ were generally, convicted with a rigorous punishment. Even the planters did not spare a month from the agreement days. For instance, in the Mijikijan T.E., (Darrang district) when a woman applied for a discharge certificate, then ‘the manager filed a complaint against the absconding and she was arrested court. On 24th July 1919, she had been given agreement for 313 days with a Rs.10 advance. She left the garden on 26th July 1920, having a balance of 27 days to work. The Deputy Commissioner ordered her to return to the garden and as she refused to do so, sentenced her to 6weeks’ hard labour’.

In the table (2.10), a list of cases, involving the planters who brought those cases against the labourers have been given.
Table 2.10

Tea planters cases against their workers (1900-1921):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of cases against Coolies</th>
<th>Decided in favour of complainant</th>
<th>Number of persons imprisoned</th>
<th>Applications by Coolies for discharge certificates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>38 Includes 36 fined</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902-03</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903-04</td>
<td>568</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904-05</td>
<td>599</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905-06</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-07</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907-08</td>
<td>1,158</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908-09</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909-10</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910-11</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-12</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912-13</td>
<td>983</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913-14</td>
<td>1,193</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914-15</td>
<td>1,228</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915-16</td>
<td>780</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916-17</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918-19</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919-20</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-21</td>
<td>1,604</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ALEC- Report 1921-22

During the period (1900-1921), about 16514 total cases were brought against the coolies and among those cases, 6036 were decided in favour of the complainant. The total number of persons imprisoned was 1949.
The Act XIII which was in prevalence since 1859 was indeed the handiwork of the plantation authority to subjugate the workers forcefully, to the mechanism of the capitalist production relation, and the labourers were constrained to abjure their freedom in favour of the development of the plantations. Even in the early 1900s, J.B. Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam recognised:

The coolies are virtually treated as prisoners from the date of engagement, being closely confined in depots, clothed in a special dress, fed on cooked food and finally transferred to garden agents at so much per head.\textsuperscript{122}

The authority which gave the managers to arrest without warrant, and the section 195 of Act VI of 1901 indeed was 'a peculiar feature of the first special labour legislation that was undertaken for Assam', and it had become clear that by the Act, 'the liberty of every indentured labourer was placed in the hands of his manager.' Also, the labourers were very 'ignorant of the precise bearing of the law.' It was later proved that 'by arrangement made with ferrymen any persons who may be suspected to be runaways have been liable to detention at public ferries'. Even sometimes, the Chief Commissioner (J. B. Fuller) stated in his 'Note' that 'tickets are refused by the steamer booking-clerks to men who are suspected by them of having left tea gardens without permission.' In order to induce the 'coolies' to renew their contracts, 'every kind of expedient good or bad is practised.'\textsuperscript{123}

After many thoughtful considerations given to the Act of XIII, it was decided by the Committee of 1921-22 that '...the majority of the Committee are unable to agree to the suggestion that the Act should be given a further trial or that further amendments should be considered.'\textsuperscript{124} But the proposed consideration for the repeal of the Act was vehemently opposed by the planters and it was urged:

The tea industry which imports labour at considerable cost should have some guarantee against labourers deserting or being enticed away by other gardens and

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 4
next that the coolie is more content with an agreement because it affords the opportunity of an annual bonus for any special item of expenditure.\textsuperscript{125}

Even earlier to that decision, the Committee of 1906 considered it judicious to declare the right of private arrest of the labourers by the planters as an offence but the both the planters and the Commissioner and district officers of the Assam valley 'strenuously opposed' it. In 1922, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley informed the Government of Assam that 'the Act is worked in a human and lenient manner.'\textsuperscript{126} But, finally, it was considered 'the Act as an anachronism that there should be any penal contract at all.'

The repeal of the Act XIII did not initiate even a radical departure from the earlier labour system which was in existence since 1859. The emphasis was always upon the recruitment of a better class of workers and there was no such inner motive behind that decision of repeal to put stop on any further recruitment of the labourers. At the same time, the workers resistance to the planters' grinding superintendence even in the every sphere of life, marked a significant development since the second half of the 19th century. The resistance became more apparent after 1880s. This kind of development also pointed out the fact that the workers form of resistance took its own independent line in their protests against the tea capitalists. There was no such influence of the bourgeois culture of organising the protests by giving prior notice to the owners or defendants of the industrial concerns and on the other hand the rapid rise of the protests helped in the growth of a class which was preeminently different because its structure and solidarity of its actions was quite fragile, although sometimes the newly developed class gave a severe jolt to the capitalists. The class grew in the process of their struggle against the planters' atrocities.

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 89
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 90
Workers-resistance and the emergence of the class:

The gradual rise of clashes (since 1880s) between the planters and the labourers attracted attention of the Government of Assam and it was admitted:

The figures showed that though cases of collisions between employers and labourers were not numerous, they had shown a steady increase and that condition in Assam was less satisfactory than those which obtained in the neighbouring tea districts of Bengal.\(^{127}\)

The Government of India asked in a letter concerning the gradual deterioration of relationship between the managers and the labourers. The Chief Commissioner of Assam, conceded in his letter sent to the Government of India:

There has been an increase of serious collisions between employers and employed on the gardens in Assam since the year 1899, that the relation between these parties are less satisfactory than they are in the Dooars in Bengal and in Madras and Ceylon that the chief causes of the differences for the worse are, firstly, the importation of labourers recruited under chapter III of Act VI of 1901, that is to say, by contractors, sub-contractors and recruiters; secondly, the lack of suitable organisation in respect of tea garden labour forces; and thirdly, and chiefly the authority to arrest labourers without warrant which managers possess under sections 195 and 196 of the Act.\(^{128}\)

Regarding the basic causes of the collisions, although, the Chief-Commissioner tried to analyse it with an impartial attitude but the Commissioner of the Assam Valley districts had offered totally different views from the Chief Commissioner’s ‘Note’.

\(^{127}\) Ibid., p. 89
P.G. Melitus, then the Commissioner of the Assam Valley wrote in the very first of his ‘Note’:

The object of this note is to show as far as possible that collisions between employers and labourers are in reality a comparatively small item in the plus and minus account of the Assam Valley labour system. In so large and complicated a system, there must necessarily be much that is bad and much that is good.129

The views offered by Melitus in defense of the tea-planters was criticised by F.J. Monahan, who was the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam and in a letter sent to the Secretary (Department of Revenue and Agriculture) he wrote:

Mr. Melitus, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, is disposed to think that the increase in the number of cases between planters and coolies, to which the Deputy commissioner of Lakhimpur adverts, is no more than is proportionate to the increase in the strength of the labour force, and he observes that the unsatisfactory features that are noted by the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang are practically confined to a particular group of gardens. Mr. Melitus’ conclusion …does not appear to be supported by the facts which have been collected.130

Monahan gave a list indicating number of the cases, which demanded the intervention of the Criminal courts in order to preserve order on tea gardens during the last 14 years.

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129 Note on the Assam Valley Labour System, by P. G. Melitus, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts. Ibid.
130 The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur Major H.W.H. Cole, submitted a report in response to the memorandum sent by the commissioner of the Assam valley district on 23rd December 1903, generally reached at the conclusion on the points set forth in the memorandum: (i) There appears to have been a tendency in the past ten years for cases of rioting and unlawful assembly to increase on the other land, there is a falling off in cases of assault by planters and coolie. (ii) Yes, judged by the information available, but as stated above, this is very scanty in early years. (iii) The attitude of the coolie towards his employer has deteriorated from the latter’s point of view…” (Dibrugarh- 5th March 1904).
Quoted in Ibid.
Table: 2:11

Number of cases in the tea gardens (1890-1903):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Number of persons convicted</th>
<th>Average annual number per 10,000 adult male coolies of labour force.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Of cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-94 (five years)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-1899</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1903</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Cited in the letter of F.J. Monahan to the Secretary, Department of Revenue and Agriculture.

The severity of penalty imposed upon the labourers convicted of assault, unlawful or riotings was another cause, that led to the frequent occurrence of collisions between managers and their coolies as noted by Monahan in his letter and he gave importance to the view offered by Fuller in that context. Supporting the viewpoint of his illustrious predecessor, Sir Henry Cotton, regarding the harsh punishments given to the convicts, Fuller stated:

"Sentences are commonly inflicted in these cases that are exceedingly severe if judged from the standpoint of ordinary criminal procedure.... So long as the law bars discontented coolies from the remedy of leaving their gardens, ill-feeling is liable to break out suddenly into open disorder."

Another cause of the growth of open ruptures before 1921 was the labourers’ loss of faith in the planters controlled judiciary and the impression grew up among themselves that ‘the planting and the official communities are in close sympathy with one another.’ The enlightened development of consciousness about the prejudices in the judiciary system with imperfect machinery of justice, which worked amiably at the concurrence of the plantation authority, was a new sign of the workers’ growing level of consciousness, which eventually did led to the growth of their

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131 Ibid., Monahan’s letter
protests against that abominable defect. The Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur district, gave a good hint of that progressive emulation of the tea plantation labourers to reach at their destination, which meant the denial of any faith on the colonial-capitalist justice and order:

Now a days, the coolie is more enlightened. He has a fair knowledge of the labour laws gained by experience and is usually well capable of looking after his interests. In recent years, moreover, the publicity and importance attaching to cases between employers and employed, the frequent discussions in the press-European and Native- have not been without their result on the mind and attitude of the coolie.\textsuperscript{132}

Both the Chief Commissioner and the Commissioner of the Assam Valley, considered the opinion formed around the issue of the loss of faith by the labourers on the judiciary and admitted that, 'in the special circumstances of this province it is inexpedient that an officer of Government should gain the reputation of sympathizing actively with the coolie.'

The Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur district stated in his report:

The danger lies in the Coolie being an unthinking individual, easily led, specially in his cups, and ready to resort to violence on insufficient provocation. When we consider the isolated position of the gardens the, the character of the labour force, and the small chance of gaining assistance, once authority is lost, it is a matter for thankfulness that the riots of recent years have not been attended with serious loss of life.\textsuperscript{133}

When the planters showed indecent manners towards the women labourers, the male labourers became offended. The women labourers had to face incalculable maltreatments of the planters and very frequently, in numerous occasions, the planters behaved with beastly manner. Flogging of women happened

\textsuperscript{132} Report from the D.C. of Lakhimpur District in response to the Memorandum of Commissioner of the Assam valley. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
for violating the work-discipline in the gardens. In one incident, occurred in 1888, it was reported by the Deputy Commissioner of the Lakhimpur district:

A large body of coolies left the garden and came to the station complaining of ill-treatment. They stated that both men and women had been flogged; in the case of women that they had been tied to a post in the porch of the manager’s house, their clothes lifted up to their waists, and that they had been beaten on the bare buttocks with a stirrup leather by the orders of the Assistant Manager, Mr. Anding. The District Superintendent of Police went out and enquired, and found that two women, Panoo and Khumti, had been assaulted in the way described. I myself also went out and on further enquiring ascertained that a woman named Sukni had also been beaten some three or four times. The women Panoo and Khumti had been flogged for desertion and Sukni for short work.134

In 1893, four cases of ‘unlawful assembly’ and twelve cases of ‘rioting’ occurred. In the same year, in one of the cases occurred in the Jokai T.E. (Dibrugarh Sub-division) the Assistant Manager of the garden, J.F. Barnes, ‘caused two women to be caned for creating a disturbance in the lines.’ Later, the Assistant Manager was convicted with a fine of Rs.50. The Magistrate who pronounced that verdict stated clearly:

Although in this particular case there were no circumstances of special aggravation or indecency, the Offg. Chief Commissioner considers and he wishes all Magistrates distinctly to recognize the principle, that any employer who flogs a coolie woman or causes her to be flogged should be sentenced to a substantial term of imprisonment.135

But when the labourers became enraged at the violation of their honour by the planters and resorted to violent protests; the labourers got heavy punishment for their riotious behaviours against the authority. In one such instance of the violation of the honour of women, ‘the Manager was seriously assaulted with sticks by six coolies, instigated by a girl who alleged that the manager had outraged or wanted to outrage her. The Manager was so badly beaten that his condition was for sometime critical.’

134 Ibid.
135 Ibid
The coolie women faced such ill treatment frequently in their work-field, when they refused to listen to the ‘indecent overtures’ of the managers. In 1892, in the Sibsagar district, a woman labourer of the Maduri tea estate, was assaulted and subjected to ill-treatment by the manager when she refused to listen to his indecent gestures.\(^{136}\)

The labourers, those who ran away, were treated more harshly. In one such case, ‘an absconded coolie woman on being brought back to the garden after recapture was by the order of the manager flogged in the most barbarous manner by three of the garden employees in presence of all the labourers on the estate.’ The victim, women labourer was from the Phulbari tea estate (Darrang district). Severe canning by the managers, led sometimes to the death of the labourers. In the Sibsagar district, ‘a ‘Coolie’ of the Rajmai tea estate, for stealing firewood from the lines was severely struck by the Superintendent of the garden and he received some blows on the head. The coolie immediately fell down and died on the spot.’ But interestingly the Jury of the Session Court ‘unanimously returned a verdict of acquittal which was accepted by the Sessions Judge.’ For the simple crimes, like stealing, such severe beatings were quite common. In the Lakhimpur district, in one case, a boy had been severely beaten by the manager for stealing and that the boy had died a few days after from the effects of the beating. The manager was ‘sentenced to pay a fine of Rs.5’ when the Civil Surgeon in his medical report stated that the whipping had nothing to do with the death of the boy.’\(^{137}\)

The workers restiveness, seeing the outrageous treatments against them, helped to mobilise though within their gardens through the phenomenology of an ingrained culture of revolt against their opponent. Usually, the protests of the labourers took the form of violent protests and through violence they wanted to pacify the spirit of violence of their opponent.\(^{138}\) The workers especially made their violent

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\(^{136}\) All the information about those incidents has been cited from the Revenue- A (Ibid) concerning the frictions between the labourers and the planters.

\(^{137}\) List of Serious Cases of Assault on Tea Garden year 1899. Ibid.

\(^{138}\) In an excellent article, Jonathan Spencer writes: ‘...Violence has long been taken to be a sign of the primitive, the savage, or the uncivilized, or alternatively of the deviant, the individual, and the unsocialized....’ He also explains: ‘Theoretically, violence lurks behind many important anthropological conceptions of the human and the social. Violence represents ‘natural’ drives which society must tame and repressed if it is to survive....’

Jonathan Spencer: *Collective Violence* in Veena Das (ed): *Handbook of Indian Sociology* (Delhi-2004), Pp. 472-473. But in the context of the working class violence, the situation is quit different and it seems that the workers violence erupts when they fail to absorb fully with the violence of the capitalist system.
attacks against the managers. For instance, in the Darrang district when ‘the manager found fault with some bad hoeing, reprimanded the two daffadars in charge and struck one of them lightly with a cane, whereupon about 30 Cachari coolies threatened to assault the Manager with their hoes. No assault was actually committed,’ but the six accused sentenced to three months rigorous imprisonment.

The idiom of protests of the labourers, was the important in this context, where a conundrum appeared that the planters could not be able to run the administration of their respective estates without facing some obstructions from the labourers. The disciplining of the labourers in order to make them accustom to the capitalist production created on the other hand, dissatisfaction among the labourers. The workers became conscious about the dignity of the women labourers and when such incidents of the violation of the modesty of the women labourers occurred, they tried to make a combination among themselves and took drastic but violent action against the culprits.

The labourers of the Silghat tea estate (Nowgong district) severely hurt the Manager of the garden when he went on an inspection and at the trial 40 labourers who hurt replied that ‘the manager had assaulted a coolie woman for disobedience of orders and that this led to their attack upon him.’ There were numerous examples of work-place collisions between the planters and the labourers. Riotings took place also, when the management of the gardens increased the rate of pruning. In the Kharjan tea estate, according to the district report as submitted by the Deputy Commissioner:

Eight coolies of the Kharjan Tea Estate were convicted of rioting and two were sentenced to 9 months’ and five to 6 months’ and one to one day’s rigorous imprisonment and the remaining accused were fined Rs.10 each. The conviction was confirmed by the Judge of the Assam Valley Districts. The task rate of

139 Foucault explains about the power of discipline which is used by the capitalists: ‘The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills or at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. ....(Thus) discipline produced subjected and practiced bodies “docile” bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience).’
pruning was increased to 30 nals from 25 and this enraged the coolies, who refused to do more than 25 nals. The Manager, Mr. Powell, summoned the coolies to his bungalow and asked one man, Gulali, if he had finished his task. At this man replied in the affirmation, but as the muharrir contradicted him Mr. Powell gave Gulali a slap in the face. The coolies present there attacked Mr. Powell with their sticks and struck him on the head. He ran to his hangalow, pursued by the coolies, who confined him, his assistant and the muharrirs for nearly two hours, when they succeeded in making their escape. Mr. Powell was somewhat severely beaten....

Their immediate assaults upon the managers for the gardens staff showed their latent dissatisfactions and a desire of revolt to take revenge for their depleted working conditions. The causes seemed to be too simple to characterise it as the leading causes of an organised class struggle fought between the two antagonists (capital and labour). The significance of all those protests, was the accumulated grievances of the labourers, those had been suffering most under the rule of a highly developed capitalist system and the workers had developed consciousness to protect their own respects and existence, even in the midst of the mighty capitalist giants and the workers continued their protests living in a ‘closed dominion’; called as the tea estate.

The actual causes of the conflict between the two groups as stated by the Commissioner of the Assam valley districts, P.G Melitus had been:

(1) There had been a change in the class of coolies:
Formerly the proportion of “Junglis” to plains people was smaller. From soon after the passing of the Act of 1882 there have been large additions of junglies (many of them of inferior classes) to the labour force....

(2) There has been a change in the position of Managers:
Private concerns are giving place to companies and private owners are disappearing. Control is being removed from managers on the spot to absentee

140 From the List of Serious Cases of Assault 1899, Ibid.
Agents and Directors. The cost of production... is being reduced, with less liberal
treatment to Managers, staff and coolies. Coolies have suffered least, partly from
policy and partly owing to Government supervision, but Managers and staff have
been seriously affected.

(3) There has been a change in the Government officers:
There is less Knowledge and less experience than before; and we have younger
officers less able to influence planters which their responsibilities have increased
owing to larger labour force and other changes.\footnote{141}

The change of ‘dusters’ by the garden authority had been held responsible for the
collisions, supporting the view offered in the Labour Immigration Report for 1902-03,
by the high officials like Melitus. In that Report it was written: ‘The coolies are aware
that the conditions of their employment are regulated by rules not by the bargainings
of the market; the rules are unfavourable to them in some respects but favourable to
them in others and they resent any attempt to extract more labour than the rules
warrant.’\footnote{142} The Commissioner of the Assam Valley districts, P.G. Melitus, tried to
make two points in clear terms regarding the above question, the first was:

The coolies know little of the rules but round the rules certain local practices or
dusters, varying from garden to garden and on particular points even conflicting
with the rules, have grown up with the details of which they are intimately
acquainted, and it is the departure from dusters in a direction unfavourable to
them which they really resent.

And secondly:

The dusters are not altogether regulated by the rules; they cannot in the aggregate
be less advantageous to the coolies than the rules require, but they can be more
advantageous.\footnote{143}

\footnote{141} Note written by P.G. Melitus (16th May, 1904), Ibid.
\footnote{142} Ibid.
\footnote{143} Ibid.
But how far the change of *dusturs* affected the labourers and how far those changes were responsible for the unrest among the labourers can’t be ascertained fully. Even both the Chief Commissioner of Assam and the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, did not put any attention to those views offered by P.G. Melitus. Nitin Varma, in one of his articles, has supported the views of Melitus, writing from the stand point of putting a cultural tinge to the labourers struggles.\(^{144}\) It was true that the change of ‘*dusturs*’ provoked the coolies to take violent measures against the changes generally which occurred in the unhealthy and unpopular gardens. The change of ‘*dusturs*’ infuriated the labourers, who had already been in a state of mental agonies and economic depression.

The tea planters thought also that it would be necessary to maintain the caste hierarchy among the labourers those who were brought from the different parts of India. They stressed that the northern Indian labourers were particularly conscious of preserving their caste identities. The plantation authority was particularly careful in respect of the United Provinces labourers to the tea gardens of Assam ‘on account of caste scruples’ and to make the labour importation free from the ‘caste scruples’ the recruiting agencies with solid support got from the plantation authority maintained it ‘to be essential that the emigrants should be allowed to travel with Sardars recruiting them as third class passengers and not sent through depots or rest-houses and that in Assam they should have their basties and not be mixed up with aborigines or out-castes from other places.’\(^{145}\) It was one of the most glaring examples of ‘caste-prejudices’ as maintained under the colonial-capitalist relation and where the pre-capitalist relations were maintained in order to exploit the accumulated labour-power of the imported labourers.

The isolated outburst of workers anger against the domination of the tea capitalists however failed to impress upon the representatives of the bourgeois political organisation, namely the INC which dominated the nationalist politics since the 1880s.

\(^{144}\) Varma seems to have pre-occupied with the cultural approach of the protests of the labourers by neglecting the overall aspect of the economic issues in the tea plantation workers protests.


Diabolical role of the intelligentsia in the emergence of the workers consciousness:

The sufferings of the tea plantations labourers attracted the attention of the early nationalist politicians and they were much in disagreement with the colonial administration regarding the poor working conditions in the tea gardens of Assam. The philanthropists like Dwarakanath Ganguly, the Assistant Secretary of the Indian Association of Calcutta, visited Assam and who, ‘went to the Brahmaputra valley and brought back horrifying reports, which were serialized in Sanjivani (Calcutta) under the pen name of “Son of Legni”.'146 In the early Congress sessions, the nationalist leaders took a very keen interest in the conditions of the tea-plantation laborers. When the Congress session, was held at Calcutta in 1886, the Assamese delegates also joined there and since that Congress session the Assamese delegates participated in the annual Congress sessions, although, their participation did not bring any radical pressure upon the colonial administration about the labour system of Assam. Both the Congress and the philanthropists did not make any concrete analysis to root out the grievances of the labourers. The earlier attempts, made by the members of the Indian Association, failed to bring up any resolution concerning the labour problems in Assam, due to the indifferent attitude of the moderate Congress leaders.

But, the nationalist press played a leading role in the agitation against the Inland Emigration Act of 1882, particularly; papers like the Bengalee and the Sanjivani under the editorships of Surendranath Banerji and Krishna Kumar Mitra respectively took a keen interest in the labour system of Assam.147

The trials made by the Indian Association to condemn the Act-XIII, especially in the 1887 (Madras session), where their resolution was turned down when they urged ‘the Congress leadership to condemn the legalized in humanities of the Assam Coolly Act.’ The reason of the nationalist leadership’s refusal to take up the labour issue of Assam was that the issue was a provincial issue and so it could not be considered as the national issue.148

146 A. Guha: Planter Raj to Swaraj (Delhi-1988), p. 65
147 Bipan Chandra: The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India (Delhi-1991), p. 386
148 Ibid., p. 365
The Congress leaders began to take a more serious interest in the labour problems of Assam since 1896, when Jogenchandra Ghosh, moved a resolution and B.C. Pal also supported that resolution. Ghosh said forwarding the resolution: ‘I have seen poor men and women jump overboard into the deep waters of the Brahmaputra to escape a lot which is worse than death.’\textsuperscript{149} In the Karachi session (1913), it was resolved by the Congress that ‘owing to scarcity of labour in India and the grave results from the system of indentured labour, which reduces the labourers during the period of their indenture, practically to the position of slaves, this Congress strongly urges the total prohibition of recruitment of labour under indenture, either for work in India or elsewhere.’\textsuperscript{150} Later, the thirtieth session of INC, (Bombay), held in 1915 also ‘reaffirmed its resolution passed at the last session against the system of indentured labour and urges its abolition as early as possible, the system being a form of slavery, which, socially and politically debases the labourers and is seriously detrimental to the economic and moral interests of the country.’\textsuperscript{151}

The labour issue of Assam rocked the horizon of the moderate politics of the early Congress, when the Assam Labour and Emigration Bill was proposed in the Legislative Council on 13 Oct. 1899, and despite the condemnation of the Bill by the enlightened Indians, it was, in fact, enacted on 1901 (8 March). Among the European members, only Henry Cotton, then the Chief Commissioner of Assam did not give his vote in favour of the Bill.\textsuperscript{152} The vociferous criticism of the national press fully fell upon the representatives of the plantation industry and the Bengalee wrote (1901, 10 March): ‘The primary object of British is to benefit the European capitalist and merchant, even if necessary at the sacrifice of justice and humanity.’\textsuperscript{153} R.C. Dutt, also reiterated the views offered by the nationalist press and he wrote:

A dark stain is cast on this industry (tea) by what is known as the “slave-law” of India. Ignorant men and women once induced to sign a contract, are forced to work in the gardens of Assam during the term indicated in the contract. They are

\textsuperscript{149} Report INC for 1896 p. 165; Quoted in \textit{Ibid.}, p. 362
\textsuperscript{150} A.M. & S.G. Zaidi (eds): \textit{The Encyclopedia of the Indian National Congress Vol. VI} (Delhi-1979), p. 84
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 703
\textsuperscript{152} Guha: \textit{Op. cit.}, Planter Raj, p. 42
\textsuperscript{153} B. Chandra: \textit{Op. cit.}, p. 374
arrested, punished and restored to their masters if they attempt to run away; and they are tied to their work under penal law such as govern no other form of labour in India. Hateful cases of fraud, coercion and kidnapping, for securing these labourers, have been revealed in the Criminal Courts of Bengal and occasional acts of outrage on the men and women thus recruited have stained the tea gardens in Assam.\(^{154}\)

The critique of the labour system of Assam and its wider connection with the government led to the development of some ‘loud thinking’ among the nationalist leadership about the integral relation that developed between the emergent capitalists and the colonial government. In a brilliant speech given by B.C. Pal, one of the most prolific orators of the early stage of the INC and who, also, was one of the leaders of the extremists, analysed the issue of relation between the capitalists (basically foreign capitalists) and the British colonial government:

This question, Mr. Chairman, is an old question- the world wide question of the conflict of labour and capital. The forces of the capital already strong in the strength of the almighty dollar and combining themselves not only to keep out coolies out of their due reward but also shield even those who are condemned by law courts and punished by High Courts. And when that is done, should not the force of labour also combine? You represent the force of labour. Prince of peasants, Mr. Chairman, we all of us stand in the position of labourers in this country, and they all stand, in the position of capitalists.\(^{155}\)

The efforts made by the nascent middle-class towards the labour affairs in Assam were quite minimal, throughout, the colonial period unlike Bengal. The development of formation of the bourgeoisie in Assam was also very sluggish. The emergence of the middle class in Assam was a late nineteenth century phenomenon

\(^{154}\) Dutt continued his remarks regarding the dreadful labour system of Assam: ‘Responsible and high administrators have desired a repeal of the penal laws, and have recommended that the tea gardens should obtain workers from the teeming labour markets of India under the ordinary laws of demand and supply. But the influence of capitalists is strong; and no Indian Secretary of State or Indian Viceroy has yet ventured to repeal these penal laws, and to abolish the system of semi-slavery which still exists in India.’

and majority of the representatives had maintained a close liaison with the former feudal structure. The deconstruction of the feudal elements by the colonial intervention did not bring any radical changes to the socio-economic formation of the colonial Assam. The middle class had still carried the insignia of the rich peasant characteristics but without revolutionising the existing social relations. The lack of support from the colonial state and the prejudicial policies of the colonial state ultimately brought destruction to the spirit of innovations and so the stagnation prevailed.

The lack of modern education did not create a unfavourable environment for discussing the relevant issues of the province among the people:

Relatively to Bengal, the base of the renaissance was rather narrow, no doubt. Even as late as 1872 in Assam proper, there were only three local newspapers—none of them a daily; two published from Sibsagar and one from Guwahati. There were only six English schools which sent up candidates for the Entrance Examination of the Calcutta University.\(^{156}\)

But inspite of the absence of higher educational institutions in Assam, the Assamese youths those who went to Calcutta for higher learning tried to study the socio-political state of Assam. But they were too absorbed in the illusion of progress and they thought that it would come only through the civilised form of government (British government). This mentality brought a disjuncture between their commitment to the interest of their own province and their idealistic negligence towards the fragments of the society like the tea plantation labourers.

For instance, the leading periodicals of that time like the *Mau*,\(^{157}\) which was edited by Harinarayan Bora (controlled and edited practically by his brother Balinarayan Bora), took a quite opposite position in respect of the workers interests in

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\(^{157}\) *Mau* was published from Calcutta (Bhowazar) and it had a life span of only one year and among the periodicals published in Assamese right upto 1886, it was tenth in number. S. N. Sarma in re-editing the collected volume of the periodical has rightly observed that the views of the Mau and its editor were not totally different from the nineteenth century Indian middle class where an abominable attitude was pursed towards the peasants and the workers. *Mau* (1886-1887) —edited by Haranaryan Bora, reedited by Dr. S. N. Sarma (Guwahati-1980), p. 8
Assam. During the critique of the Inland Emigration Act, Dwarakanath Ganguli made strenuous efforts to bring into focus the ‘coolies’ question through the press in Bengal but, then, Bolinarayan Bora, in the ‘Mau’ vehemently opposed the views of such enlightened Begalis. Some leading figures of Assam criticised the attitude taken by Bora.

The criticism of the labour affairs of Assam was continued under the liberal discourse of the nineteenth century. The overall paradigm and approach of the nationalist leadership was never to put an end the bourgeois culture of progress, which had been predominantly viewed as the best framework for rapid development in the socio-economic setup of the Country. What they aspired for, throughout their struggle against the colonial rule, was only to follow the footsteps of the bourgeois democratic foundation of the English society with sufficient industrialisation, with a clear imitation of the bourgeois English economy.

The critique of colonialism started under the aegis of the early nationalists did not always follow concrete evaluation of the bad effects of the colonial rule in India. Their ultimate aim and reason of the choice of a similar capitalist order like the English capitalist development was deeply influenced by the ‘bourgeois liberalism’ and ‘this choice was to great extent influenced by the discourse of ideological system created by colonial rule and the western ideas filtering through its ideological apparatus.’ Although the early nationalists or the intellectuals of the nineteenth century India showed a remarkable grasp in scrutinising the role of colonialism but it was also true ‘despite the rhetoric in favour of the poor, the general critique of inequality and poverty was endowed within a bourgeois perspective, for it was more concerned with ways to reinforce the system which generated inequality, rather than transforming it. However, the misery of the common man was rhetorically described and graphically detailed; remedy was sought in either enlightenment or

159 Lakshminath Bezbarua the foremost literary figure of Assam sternly criticised Bolinarayan Bora for the latter’s disdainful attitude towards the coolies and with other leading persons like Kalikanta Barkakati and Mathura Mohan Barua (editor of the “Advocate of Assam”), Bezbarua made a strong criticism of Bora’s views in the Mau.
L. N. Bezbarua: Mor Jivan Soworon (Dibrugarh-1998), p. 78
160 K. N. Panikkar: Culture, Ideology, Hegemony (Delhi-1998), p. 94
The criticism of the early nationalists had a deep impact upon the political struggle of the 1900s (1905-1947). The followers of the broad Marxist tradition still have a great fascination regarding the contribution of the early nationalists' critique of colonialism.

Colonialism created a caricatured form of capitalist development in India, which was in broader aspects, thoroughly used for the development of their own motherland (England). The neutrality observed by the critics of the colonial economic policy, in respect of the labourers, those who worked in the Indians owned industrial ventures was significant, because, in contrast, their opposition to the foreign owned industries led to a heavy criticism of the workers fate in those industries. Bipan Chandra has eloquently analysed that dilemma:

The pro-labour sympathies of Indian national leadership were aroused in the case of plantation labour primarily because of the foreign character of the capitalist enterprise involved and that they did not extend to the labourers working in the Indian-owned enterprises was dramatically demonstrated when exactly two weeks after the passing of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act on 8 March 1901, the Indian Mines Bill came up for discussion and enactment in legislative council. ...The entire Indian press and all the Indian members of the Council opposed the very moderate provision of the Bill designed for the protection of women and children working in the mines.

The deep ambivalence of the Congress leaders and their tragicomic part in the case of the factory workers vis-à-vis the plantation workers was one of the most glaring examples of moderate bourgeois politics.

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161 Ibid., p. 98

162 Aditya Mukherjee says: 'The early Indian nationalists, consisting some of the best minds of that era, over nearly half a century of intense intellectual activity, questioned each one of the colonial claims.... Their success was that the essential elements of their thought became the common sense wisdom of the time and provided the basic structure of the economic understanding of colonialism not only to the Indian national movement but to the planners and academics after independence.' Aditya Mukherjee: The Return of the Colonial in Indian Economic History: the Last Phase of Colonialism in India, in Social Scientist Vol-36, nos. 3-4, March-April 2008.

The novelty of their intensive critique of the plantation body did not lead the bereaved and estranged workers, those who had been already in confrontation with the planters. The moderate political game remained essentially within the boundary of class harmony and there was not any signal of obstructing in the growth of pure-capitalist economy, which was but in reality an illusion under the colonial rule. Sumit Sarkar rightly points out:

Politics remained for the bulk of the Moderates very much a part time affair— the Congress was not a political party, but an annual three-day show, plus one or two secretaries, and the local associations which were quite numerous on paper were no more than tiny coteries, usually of lawyers, which met occasionally to ‘elect’ among themselves the Congress delegates for the year or to pass resolutions on some immediate grievances and otherwise enjoyed long spells of complacent hibernation.¹⁶⁴

The nineteenth century augured a new phase in the nations struggle for freedom on the one hand, and, it was determined on the other hand, that there would be no class war between the antagonistic forces and the physical world of a classic, bourgeois political-economy would be imitated for the ready disposal of the same inertia for bourgeois development in the Country and in that formation of the society, there would be no place for the latent aspirations of the dispossessed elements of the society or the active protests of the labourers.

The emergence of the working class in Assam happened without the intervention of the bourgeois Congress leadership and the plantation workers continued their protests inspite of the heavy restrictions put upon their activities by the tea capitalists. The beginning of the Non Cooperation movement brought a new hope, when, the labourers heard about the Gandhi’s declaration of bringing Swaraj within a year.

¹⁶⁴ Sumit Sarkar: Modern India (Delhi- 2002), p. 91.