CHAPTER V
WAGES
Under the former Government the system of paying wages in cash was not prevalent in Assam. The Pykes, who were employed by the Ahom Kings for the execution of various works were exempted from paying any capitation tax so long as they remained under service. Such capitation tax was fixed at Rs. 9/- per annum on the eve of the British annexation of Assam, and as such, wages under the Ahom Government did not exceed annas twelve per month. Neither did they receive provision nor any other allowance. However, the farm servants and agricultural labourers, employed by the rich, were better protected. Usually, they were paid in grains. For their domestic services, the Assamese of rank maintained also slaves in their families. The latter received adequate provisions from their masters and were, generally, treated as members of the family. Further, the people of the indigent circumstances often mortgaged themselves for a loan; and during the interim period of its repayment such bondsmen worked as labourers and received food and clothings from the mortgagee. The dependants of such a mortgagor were also provided with a portion of grain for their support. Generally,

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, Para 249.
commodities of a rupee worth per month were considered sufficient remuneration on the eve of the British annexation of Assam.

With the introduction of Company's rule in Assam there arose the problem of payment of wages to the labourers. The porters and bearers engaged by the Company's military officers were mostly pressed labourers. Although, the officers had statutory obligations to pay reasonable remuneration to such pressed labourers, hardly they paid any amount. Cases were not rare when no payment was made at all. The payment of remuneration depended on the whims of the officers who pressed them for work. At the beginning there was no uniform rate of payment as the nature of works varied and the services required were only temporary in nature. A lump sum was occasionally paid in a few cases. Not only many remained unpaid but no compensation was at all given to them for the losses they had to sustain during the period of absence from their own paddy-fields. When a little payment was made that too was not paid directly to them. Payments were usually, made either

7. Vide article 8 of the Bengal Troops Transport and Travellers Assistance Regulation, 1806.
8. A.S.Vol. No. 4 of 1823-34, No. 6, Fort William to Commissioner of Runpur, 6 July, 1827.
TABLE NO. I
PRICE CURRENT OF PRODUCE IN ASSAM IN 1835.
(The maximum price is shown)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Price Rs. a. P.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rice</td>
<td>Per maund 0-12-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mustered seed.</td>
<td>= 0-8-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mustered oil</td>
<td>= 5-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Khussari Daal</td>
<td>= 1-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mugh</td>
<td>= 2-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Kalai</td>
<td>= 1-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opium</td>
<td>= 200-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Treacle</td>
<td>= 6-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Tobacco</td>
<td>= 3-8-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Betel-nut</td>
<td>= 10-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Black paper</td>
<td>= 20-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Pigs</td>
<td>Each 2-0-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Geese</td>
<td>= 0-4-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Ducks</td>
<td>= 0-2-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Fowls</td>
<td>= 0-1-0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Vide table No. XIV (P. 60)
Report on the Judicial and Revenue Administration of Assam, 1835.
through the Caobura or Mauzadar. Not unoften the Mauzadars misappropriated the whole amount of money paid to them by the government for payment of the labourers. Gradually the system of paying an uniform wages in cash was introduced when ryots were engaged for a long period.

WAGES ON THE INCREASE.

Before 1829, the average wage per month never exceeded Rs. 2/- per month. Within four to five years wages was doubled. In Cachar, monthly wages for men varied between Rs. 2/- to Rs. 3/-, but wages for women and children were between Re. 1/- to Rs. 1/8/- per mensem. Inspite of the increase in wages sufficient number of labourers could not be induced to Under Assam. Lieutenant Matthie, Magistrate and Collector of Darrang, writing in February 1835 states that Rs. 2/- or even Rs. 3/- per month were hardly sufficient to attract local people for hire. By 1835, the wages increased almost three to four times. This increase in wages had little connection with the price-index of the period. The table No. I, compiled on the basis of the District Officers' reports, will indicate that the cost of principal food, generally consumed by the labourers, was not so high that might be a consequent cause of such a rise in wages. This was due to acute scarcity of local labour. No

11. B.R.O.C.(Tea), March 1834, Sl. No. 15.
Assamese inhabitant could be employed in any undertaking unless high wages were offered.

During the period between 1835 to 1840 there was an abnormal increase in the rate of wages for the skilled artisans. The services of Chinese tea experts were then imperatively demanded in the tea projects. The Chinese had to be induced to emigrate into Assam with very high wages to start the tea nursery at Sadiya. It appears from report of the Government of Bengal that wages for skilled Chinese labourers in 1840 varied between ₹22/- to ₹71/- per mensem. Despite such high wages adequate number of Chinese could not be induced to emigrate into Assam. Naturally, the local Assamese had to be trained up with a view to employing them in place of the Chinese. But for the same unit of work, the Assamese counterpart was given a maximum wage of ₹10/- per month, although their craftsmanship proved to be in no way inferior to that of the Chinese. An amount of ₹10/- was not a

* In fact, the beginning of 1840 saw the constant fluctuations and wide disparity in the rate of wages. It so happened, when the District Officers submitted estimates to their higher authorities for approval, during the interim period of final sanction, the rate of wages raised to a considerable extent and the original estimate had to be revised (vide A.S.Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 2173, 8 February, 1840).

** In connection with the transfer of half of the tea nursery to the Assam Company in 1840.

13. A.S.Vol. No. 6(a) of 1842 (Misc), No.72, Hamilton Vetch to Jenkins, 23 April, 1842.

14. Ibid., No. 103 of 1842, chart showing the pay scales of different workmen.
sufficient inducement to an Assamese; inevitably dependence on the Chinese artisans could not be avoided altogether. Obviously, large sums were expended for the skilled labourers.

On the other hand, the Assam Company for their urgently needed unskilled day labourers paid wages even unto Rs.4/- per month to get their works quickly done. That compelled the authorities of the Public Works Department in Assam to pay higher wages. Major Garstln, thus, observed in October 1840 "this high wages for internal competition would continue until the supply and demand became better regulated". During 1840-43, in the face of such a competition the other government officers in Assam had also to request their higher authorities to enhance the wages.

FLUCTUATIONS AND CONSEQUENT REGULATION.

To pay such high wages to the labourers, Assam Company had to incur expenditure of a considerable amount. That inevitably resulted in, along with other causes, a serious financial crisis after 1844 which necessitated curtailment in the budget of the Company during the subsequent period. They had to close, as has already been pointed out, many of their gardens. As a result of such a financial setback on the part of the biggest competitor in the recruitment of labour, the

15. A.S.Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 1797, Garstln to Bude, 24 October, 1840.

16. A.S.Vol. No. 6(b) of 1842(Misc), No. 49, Commandant 23rd regiment to Jenkins, 29 April, 1842.
offer of competitive wages was stopped for some time. This greatly facilitated the authorities of the Public Works Department to employ large number of labourers giving a flat rate of Rs.4/- per month. On the other hand, during the period of depression in tea the Assam Company paid their labourers a very low wages i.e. One rupee and ten annas per mensem, which the *Friend of India* termed to be a "Famine Wage". It is difficult to understand as to how it was possible for the Company to keep labourers under the employ with such a low rate of wage, when a flat rate of Rs.4/- was available in the Public Works Department. It appears from the Company's history that extreme coercive measures had to be resorted to keep them under Company's employ. In that manner Company was saved from paying a heavy amount to their labourers by its new management under Stephen Mornay and George Williamson (Jr) during 1849-1858. That also enabled them gradually to declare


* But the company's appointed historian H.A.Antrobus in his recent work 'A History of the Assam Company' has stated that wage was reduced from Rs.3/8/- to Rs.3/- (See P.86 Para 5). This view seems to be erroneous in the light of Friend of India's editorial which was a contemporary observation.

** It has been stated even by the Company's appointed historian H.A.Antrobus that Stephen Mornay's "methods were ruthless....He went to the extreme of sacking labour if work for them was temporarily not available....He even dared to stop labour cultivating their own rice-land,... his methods were almost brutal....labourers' wages were two and three months in arrears, which caused much discontent and insubordination amounting to strikes" (Antrobus, H.A., A History of the Assam Company, P.86-87).
a dividend of 2½% which was later raised even up to 9% to their shareholders.

During 1858-59, although, the labourers outside the plantation were flatly paid at the rate of Rs. 4/- per month. This was soon found inadequate to induce requisite number of labourers. In April 1860, when the difficulties of procuring labour at Rs. 4/- was brought to the notice of the Lieutenant-Governor, the latter authorised the Commissioner of Assam to increase the wages in the government works from Rs. 4/- to Rs. 5/- a head per mensem. This had alarmed some planters in Assam. In a resolution, the planters of Lakhimpur expressed their great displeasure on the Government action and pointed out that such an enhanced rate should not be offered to all the labourers. In fact, when the highest of wage reached Rs. 5/-, the plantation labourers received in several gardens only half of that amount. An attempt was made in the Act III of 1863 to regulate the payment of wages by legislation. It provided that the labourers should get at least the wages stipulated in the original contract, executed at the time of recruitment, and in addition to that it was also provided that no deduction from the wage could be made on account of the cost of importation. But to check some of the planters' tendency to pay

21. Vide article XLI of Act III (B.C) of 1863.
'Famine Wage' to their labourers, no measure ensuring a minimum rate of wages for them was provided in the act.

**TOWARDS INTRODUCTION OF MINIMUM WAGES**

The rate of wages in the plantations, however, increased in the later period. This was due to reasons other than implementation of the government measures. There was an increasing competition amongst the planters during the first four or five years of sixties to open several new gardens and the land, which was little better than jungle, was sold for preposterous prices in London. For such hasty action the labourers were urgently needed for which higher wages were offered. The average earnings in 1865 varied between Rs.6/- to Rs.6/8/- per month. There were a few instances when by piece work or on "Tikka" basis they earned an amount between Rs. 8/- to Rs. 10/- per head per mensem.

On the other hand, there were some labourers who could not even earn half of that amount. Their condition became all the more precarious with the rise in the price of food-stuff by 1864-65. On an average, only 12 seers of rice were available a rupee. Obviously, life in the plantation became harder for those who were weak and unable to earn even average wages.

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In view of this fact, a minimum wage/protection to commensurate with the cost of living became essential to save such plantation labourers. Further, a regulation of the working conditions was also considered necessary to save the newly imported labourers from overwork in the gardens. When incorporation of some additional measures also became inevitable to protect the labourers in the other fields, an attempt was made to remove the shortcoming of the previous act relating to the wages. The following measures were, thus, incorporated in the Act VI of 1865.

(1) Minimum wages for a male or a female over 12 years of age should be 2.5/- and 2.4/- respectively. Below the years of that age they were to get 2.3/- per mensem.

(2) Neither were to serve for more than 3 years nor to work on any Sunday nor for more than six hours consecutively on each of the other six days in any week nor for more than nine hours a day.

By providing these measures it was expected that the labourers would not only be financially well-protected but they would also be protected from overwork.

DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING PROVISIONS AND SUBSEQUENT WITHDRAWAL.

Hardly a year elapsed after the enforcement of the said act, the effect of the reckless expenditure of the first four years of sixties became apparent and soon it was followed by a depression in the tea market. Several old gardens were


26. Vide article No. IV of Act VI (B.C) of 1865.
closed and those existed even during period of depression, scarcely afforded to pay their labourers. Either they were set free or they were kept in long standing arrears. Neither was it possible for the tea companies to pay minimum wages nor to implement the other working conditions of the act. Besides, it was the year of general scarcity of food-stuff in the province. A large number of the labourers, as has already been stated, died in the gardens. Death rate mounted to 300 per 1000 labourers in 1866. The financial position of the Tea Companies however, improved by the close of 1867. It was expected that gradually there would be an increase in the rate of wages at least on humanitarian grounds. But the planters neither paid them regularly nor paid them the statutory minimum rate of wages. Meredith, who was the Protector of Labourers in Upper Assam, writes in 1867 that even the sick labourers received neither food nor pay. Whatever they took in the way of food from the garden store was put down as so much cash advanced to them. And on their recovery it was again deducted from their pay. For obvious reasons, a thorough enquiry into the matter became necessary. Although, such an enquiry was ordered for by the Secretary of State for India in 1866, of which mention has been made previously, it was not instituted earlier than the close of 1867 for the opposition

of the vested interests. The findings of the Commission were a reflection of the state of affairs in the tea gardens of Assam. It stated that in the garden, which they visited, the pay of twelve men during the month of September averaged less than Rs. 3/- each, and out of this rice had to be bought at rupees two a maund. By sixteen women, in another garden, the highest wage earned in one particular month was Rs. 1/13/9 and one had earned as little as annas 11-9. In most of the gardens the labourers earned very much below the minimum wages. To protect the low wage earners, among other things, the Commission suggested that:

1. The price at which rice was to be supplied to the labourers was not to exceed rupees two and annas eight a maund and

2. Cancellation of contract for arrears of pay.

The recommendations made by Commission were not satisfactory even in the light of their own findings and, naturally, they were far below the actual requirement of the situation. However, the following provisions were made in the Act II of 1870.

1. Every labour contract was to be reduced to writing and must specify the monthly amount of wages in money, the period of services, the name of the district in which service was to be performed and the price at which rice was to be supplied to the labour.

2. Employers were provided with the power to fix daily tasks of labourers. But if in the consideration of visiting

30. Ante, P.130
32. B.G.P.File No. 303 of 1863-73, No.5999, Eden to Secy, Govt. of Bengal, 28 December, 1868.
33. The Calcutta Gazette, 23 March, 1870, p.587.
Inspector of labour the above schedule of daily task appear to be unreasonable, he might submit the schedule to a Committee to revise.

(3) Recovery of wages from the employer with compensation if wages were in arrears for two months and for arrears of wages exceeding four months, contract was to be cancelled. And in addition to that the working conditions of the previous act as usual were enjoined.

It is apparent from the above measures that neither the labourers were guarded with minimum wages nor in its absence any system of full rationing was introduced although such a measure was suggested by the Commissioner of Assam. Moreover, the law empowered the employers to exact the maximum labour. It is needless to mention that such measures would be hardly sufficient to afford adequate financial protection to the plantation labourers.

MISERIES OF THE LOW WAGE EARNERS.

After 1870, financially the tea industry came to a better position. Inspite of that, no improvement was made in the scale of general wages even in the subsequent period. Despite enforcement of the act, a good number of labourers died in some of the gardens for various reasons. The rate of mortality was so great that the Government had no other alternative, but to order for special enquiries. The reports of those Committees once again revealed a sad picture of the garden life. One such Committee was formed in 1871 under Major Graham to investigate

34. The Hindoo Patriot, Editorial, 4 December, 1871.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
the affairs of Adabari and Baligara Tea Estates in Darrang. On careful examination of the garden registers, Major Graham stated that on an average the earnings of an adult male labourer did not exceed 2/3/- per mensem and that rice had been sold to them from 9 to 12 pies per seer and as a result of which the labourers bitterly complained of their lot.

In fact, life of the labourers in the gardens became miserable especially after 1872 due to gradual rise in the price of food-stuff. Cost of living increased not only in the plantations but also in the district headquarters. Several representations were made to the Commissioner during 1872-73 even by the District Officers for the increase in their salaries. Evidently, the days were hard and particularly for the plantation labourers. But neither the Inspector of Labourers nor the Commissioner of Assam advocated the cause of labourers, although the emoluments of the Government servants were increased. Under such conditions the labourers were neither paid a reasonable wage nor supplied with rations at a cheaper rate according to contract. As the supply of rice in the province mainly depended from outside the province any delay in such importation resulted in starvation. Particularly Upper Assam which was a difficult area, therefore,

37. Ibid.
depended on food from Bengal and that left them entirely at the mercy of their employers. Of course, there were gardens, where payment of wages was regular and reasonable and supply of rice was also adequate, cheap and good in quality; but the number of such gardens was negligible. Under these circumstances, the condition of sick labourers became extremely miserable. That inevitably resulted in mortality. Evidently, the situation demanded further measures of control.

REINTRODUCTION OF MINIMUM WAGES

In spite of these, the vested interests felt that no financial burden should be imposed upon the employers. Nevertheless, through initiative of Sir George Campbell a bill was introduced early in 1873 to protect the interest of labourers in the plantation. The Select Committee on the bill, however, made an adverse remark for which it was ultimately not possible to incorporate any measure to protect interest of the labourers. The Committee was not in favour of any legislative interference in the matters relating to the enhancement of wages, and as such avoided suggesting any measure. Consequently, no additional measure was incorporated in the Act VII of 1873.

In 1874, Colonel Keatinge, the first Chief Commissioner

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41. Ibid.

42. B.G.P.No. 303 of 1869-1873, Report of the Select Committee, 17 April, 1873.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Cost of rice per maund</th>
<th>Wages per day</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rs. As. Ps.</td>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>Un-skilled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Sylhet</td>
<td>1.14. 3</td>
<td>0. 8. 0</td>
<td>0. 4. 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Cachar</td>
<td>2.15. 0</td>
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<td>3. Goalpara</td>
<td>3. 7. 0</td>
<td>0. 4. 0</td>
<td>0. 3. 3</td>
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<td>4. Kamrup</td>
<td>4. 0. 0</td>
<td>0. 8. 0</td>
<td>0. 4. 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Darrang</td>
<td>4. 0. 0</td>
<td>0. 8. 0</td>
<td>0. 4. 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Nowgong</td>
<td>3. 2. 0</td>
<td>0. 8. 0</td>
<td>0. 3. 0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Sibsagar</td>
<td>2.15. 4</td>
<td>0.12. 0</td>
<td>0. 4. 0</td>
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<td>8. Lakhimpur</td>
<td>4. 0. 0</td>
<td>0.12. 0</td>
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<td>9. Garo Hills</td>
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<td>10. Khasi Hills</td>
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<td>0. 6. 0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Naga Hills</td>
<td>6. 9. 0</td>
<td>. . .</td>
<td>0. 8. 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Wages shown were current outside the plantation.
of Assam, again raised the question of increasing the scale of labour wages. In June of the same year when Keatinge visited Cachar, the planters presented him an address of welcome. In his reply the Chief Commissioner pointed out "were your industry in a depressed condition, even a slight rise in wages might produce disastrous consequence. But fortunately, there is no fear that your industry will be ill affected by a rise in wages". Keatinge reasonably pointed out to them that tea enterprise was no longer in an uncertain speculation. It was a thriving branch of Indian Commerce and planters had made large profits, and as such they were expected to share at least a reasonable portion of their profits with those, whose exertions yielded the handsome return. In spite of such an appeal, wages remained unaltered even in the subsequent period.

The condition of the labourers, as such, became all the more miserable when the cost of living in the province further shot up during 1874-75. The table No. II will indicate the cost of rice prevalent in different districts of Assam along with the current rate of wages paid to the labourers outside the plantation. The working classes in the plantations had to live under such circumstances that the slightest rise in prices compelled many of them to give up part of their food. Their source of income being limited, frequently they resorted to offences and various kinds. Desertion from the plantations,

43. The Hindoo Patriot, Editorial, 6 July, 1874, P. 317.
as has already been stated, was great. Many deserted in the hope of getting bonuses from the other planters for re-engagements. Such a state of things was, undoubtedly, deplorable, and a searching enquiry into the matter was demanded both by leading public and the political associations.

The Labour Enquiry Commission, which was eventually appointed in 1880, could not elicit further information other than those already reported by the District Officers. A bill was introduced in 1881 to amend the last Labour Law. In the original bill, the period of contract for service was raised from three to five years. For the first three years of service a minimum wage of Rs. 5/- per month was incorporated and for the last two years of service the rate was fixed at Rs. 6/- per month. No provision was made for the supply of rice. In December 1881, The British Indian Association in Calcutta lodged a strong protest against these provisions. They argued that when the wages were fixed by law, it was essential that provision should be made against the rise and fall of the chief staple of life. Without it, the life of the labourers would be insupportable. Further, in January 1882, the same Association made a strong representation to his Excellency the Viceroy and Governor-

44. B.C.P.E., November 1878, Extract from the proceedings of Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 August, 1878.


46. Ibid.
General of India. It was pointed out that in Bengal labourer could earn more than five or six rupees a month and daily wages amounted to no less than four annas a day. That Assam being a remote place, labour was scarce; therefore wages ought to be much higher than in Bengal. This protest eventually resulted in some amendment in the original bill and the following measures were incorporated in the Act I of 1882:

1. Labour contract was to specify monthly rate of wages in money and also stipulate the price at which rice was to be supplied. Payment of wages should be Rs. 5/- and Rs. 4/- for men and women respectively during the first three years of service and Rs. 6/- and Rs. 5/- for the last two years of contract respectively.

2. The minimum payment for each daily task should be the quotient resulting from dividing the monthly wages of the labourer concerned by the number of working days in the current month. The number of working days in any month should be ascertained by dividing the number of Sundays from the whole number of days in the month.

3. The employer should on six days in each week provide for each labourer sufficient work to enable him to earn at least his minimum daily wages. Failing such due provision of work, the labourer, if he could show that he was able and willing to labour for the same, would be entitled to claim his minimum daily wages.

4. If, in the opinion of the Inspector of Labour, any labourer found unable to perform the work scheduled by employer and failed to earn due to weakness, the sum of one anna and a half per day, should receive in lieu of such actual earnings subsistence allowance at the rate of one anna per day or diet on a scale approved by such inspector. Such subsistence allowance should be recoverable as if it was an arrear of wages.

5. If any labourer was compelled to absent himself from work on account of sickness, he should receive from his employ-

47. The Bengalee, News Item, 14 January, 1882, P. 16-17.
48. Vide article Nos. 9, 115 and 119 of the Act I of 1882.
er for each day of such absence subsistence allowance of one anna and a half or if in hospital, sick diet on a scale approved by the inspector.

(6) If such absence exceeds the total number of thirty days in any one year and the employer, as soon as such number exceeded should give the labourer a notice in writing to that effect. Each day of absence in excess of such number should be added to the term of the labour contract, unless the labourer refunded to the employer the sum of one anna and a half per each day so in excess.

In addition to the above measures, the other working conditions of the previous acts were also incorporated. It may be recalled that the rate of wages fixed at 3.5/- per month was the minimum rate stipulated in the Act VI of 1865. After seventeen years, when the cost of living was almost doubled, the same rate was adopted as the statutory minimum rate of wages. Even the payment of that minimum wage was also subjected to some conditions which required the labourer to show that he was really willing to earn his minimum wage. When there was a general tendency among the employers to pay as less as could be possible, it would be next to impossible to convince the former that the labourer could not earn his full minimum wage for not providing him sufficient work.

FAILURE OF THE PROTECTIVE MEASURES.

It deserves a mention here that not only the labourers received low wages, inspite of regulative measures since 1865, they were also not protected from overwork in the plantations.

One common notion amongst the garden labourers was that they were employed for a certain type of work. Neither had they any idea as to how many hours they were to work for nor the courage to enquire into the matter from their European Managers. The specification of the daily task, to be executed by each labourer employed in an estate, was a matter which was left entirely at the discretion of the employer. He was at liberty to exact as much work from his labourers as he deemed fit. The only protection was that if the Inspector, who did not normally visit a garden more than once a year, considered such daily task or part thereof unreasonable he might direct its reduction. But such a reduction was rarely effected. Further, the law provided that labourers were neither to work for more than six hours a day nor for more than six days in a week. But that was also not a sufficient safeguard against overwork. Scarcely such a matter received consideration in the hands of the Protectors of Labourers. Inevitably, the employers exacted more than maximum labour permitted under the provisions of the Act. Dwarkanath Ganguli, Assistant Secretary, Indian Association, who visited the plantations of Assam under the disguise of a "Coolie" rightly pointed out in 1886:

"Since the depression of tea market, planters are endeavouring by every possible means to reduce expenditure and many of them to collect whatever they can scrape together by taxing to the utmost the working power of the coolies. The daily task has lately been raised by 50 percent, all round, and in some gardens it has nearly been doubled."

50. The Bengalee, 25 September, 1886.
Under the existing standard of daily task, which the planters introduced in contravention of the prevalent labour law, the earnings of the labourers varied disproportionately. Had there been an uniformity in the schedule of daily task, a great disparity in the wages earned, possibly, would not have resulted. While a few labourers could earn a reasonable wage; because of the light nature of work under a tikka basis, the large majority failed to earn even their minimum wage.

It is rather difficult to show the average wages earned by the plantation labourers in Assam. The reports of the District Officers were confusing and contradictory. The highest wages earned was shown in some of the reports to be as high as ₹.27/- per month during the period of 1882 to 1886. Such a high rate was hardly possible in the actual earning of a garden labour. There is reason to believe that a tendency was prevalent amongst some of the planters to show very high rate of wages in their reports with a view to impress government that they paid their labourers more than reasonable wages. It might also happen that the entire family gathered their leaves in a single basket or several baskets of leaves were weighted in the name of a single member of the household which resulted in such an abnormal high wages per head. Naturally, highest earnings had never reached to ₹.27/- per month. As a matter of fact, the actual earning

52. Ibid.
of an individual labourer was miserably poor. In 1884,
Sub-Divisional Officer of Karimganj in his inspection report
stated:

"The average wages show an extremely low rate of wages.
there are not a few gardens at which I found the rate of
wages...less than Rs.3/- with rice at Rs.3/- a maund or close
to that figure. It can hardly be said that this is a fair rate
of wages. Bengalis in the adjoining villages earn without
difficulty Rs.7/- per month. The coolie, who works in unhealthy
climate, should at least be able to earn more than half the amount
wages are so low it is impossible that coolies can save.
They must, therefore, turn out to work whether sick or well, with
the consequence that they very speedily die."

Referring to such low wage earners, D.C. Cachar remarked;

"Take first coolies.....who entitled to get rice at
Rs.3/- per maund. His family consisted of 5 persons, a man his
wife and three children, of whom one is wage earning child.
The combined average earnings of such a family are Rs.9/10/6.
Expenditure on rice, allowing 10 chattaks per child in a 30
days month, could be Rs.5/2/6, leaving Rs.4/8/0 for the purpose
of oil, dal, salt and other sundries."

The Deputy Commissioner endeavoured here to show that
with such a joint income a family could somehow bear its expen-
ses. A greater section of plantation labourers never earned their
minimum wages stipulated in the Act I of 1882.

There were, however, some subsidiary sources of income
open to the plantation labourers for which a large number of them
somehow survived from utter ruin. Among the collateral sources
of livelihood mention may be made of the cultivation of paddy
and other crops, the rearing of livestock and poultry, the
hiring out of cattle and sometimes of carts and petty trading

of the kind such as selling milk and vegetables. These were permitted, rather encouraged, by some of the employers during the period when full-time services of the labourers were not required in the gardens.

Inspite of these subsidiary sources of income, the total earnings of tea garden labourers were extremely inadequate. Husband and wife, labouring together all the year round did not succeed to save even a small amount that could help the wife to stay some months at home after her confinement and look after her infant child. Obviously, for this reason, a woman labour in the plantation never liked to be a mother and preferred to procure abortion by bribing the midwives. Neither financial assistance was provided during and after her maternity nor any arrangement made to protect her baby. Consequently, the child was a burden to a woman labour. That is why the birth rate was found to be too low and death rate too high in the plantations.

UTTER NEGLECT AND INDIFFERENCE OF THE LEGISLATORS.

The problem of wages in the plantations was receiving the attention of the Chief Commissioner of Assam ever since his assumption of office in 1874. After the promulgation of the Act I of 1882, he instructed his District Officers to keep a constant vigilance and whenever the average wage drawn by the labourers in the preceding month found to be less than Rs. 4/- or of woman

55. Ibid, 1886, para 36, also the Bengalee, 28 November, 1885, P. 546.
less than Rs. 3/- an enquiry was to be made into the matter for taking suitable action against the planter. Further, when reviewing the yearly Immigration Reports, which were usually forwarded by the Chief Commissioner both to Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal and Governor-General of India every year, the Government of India made a resolution in 1885 concerning unsatisfactory nature of wages in the gardens. The Chief Commissioner of Assam on the basis of the above resolution issued a circular, in December 1886, to all the District Officers of the tea districts directing them to obtain accurate information in communication with the planters. In compliance with that circular the District Officers of Assam submitted their reports. The reports of the honest officers confirmed that the rate of wages prevalent in Assam in between 1882-1886 was the same rate prevalent even before thirty or forty years back. But the Labour Commission, which was appointed in 1895 to explore the feasibilities of better supply of labour to the Coal, Jute and Tea Industries in the eastern region, did not discuss the problems of wages in the tea plantations of Assam. While on the other hand, the Commission annexed a table in their report showing the weekly wages, which was very high, in the Jute

56. Ibid, 1883, Para 15.
58. Ibid.
Hills of Bengal. Possibly, the Commission did not like to give a scope to make a comparison between wages paid to the labourers in Jute Industry of Bengal and Tea Industry of Assam.

It was mainly due to the repeated representations made by Chief Commissioners like Keatinge and Cotton that the question of increasing minimum wages, Rs.5/- for man and Rs.4/- for woman per month, ultimately received consideration in the legislature. With the help of several statistics, the Chief Commissioners endeavoured to impress upon the Government that even the minimum rate was not, on an average, earned throughout the province. Cotton emphasised the need for increasing minimum rate of wages at least to Rs.6/- and Rs. 5/- for man and woman respectively per month. The bill which embodied the above suggestion remained under consideration for more than two years and subsequently became Act VI of 1901 with some amendment. The following measures were incorporated therein.

(1) The term of contract was made for four years. Payment of minimum rate of wages made conditional on completion of the daily task scheduled by the employer. The rates of wages were fixed.

(a) for the first year Rs.5/- in case of man.
(b) for the first year Rs.4/- in case of woman.
(c) for the second and third years Rs.5/8/- for man.
(d) for the second and third years Rs.4/8/- for woman.
(e) for the fourth year Rs. 6/- for man.
(f) for the fourth year Rs. 5/- for woman.

59. Assam Immigration Report, 1899, para 43.
(2) Payment of minimum wages during the first six months of arrival was to be made even if half of the work done under schedule.

(3) Payment of all labourers was to be made on or before the 15th day of each month by the employers.

The provisions relating to working conditions, leave on medical ground, subsistence allowance for the unfit etc. remained unaltered. The last two provisions were really well intentioned. It may be recalled that the minimum rate of wages stipulated in 1901 was the minimum already fixed in the year 1865.