CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM IN ITS BEGINNING
The problem of labour in Assam, in fact, had its early beginning since the days of first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). As the means of communication in the province at that time did not overcome the stage of using either boat, elephant or palhee, the movement of troops depended mainly on human bearers. The officials, both civil and military, of the North-East Frontier found it extremely difficult to procure porters and bearers which were indispensably necessary to carry arms, ammunition, and provisions for the defence of the frontier. Instances were not rare when the Company's regiments had to wait anxiously for the menials; and for want of which they had even to retreat to the base camp. In 1824, Brigadier Richards had to retreat to Gauhati with his troops from Nowgong for want of provisions which could not properly be supplied with for acute scarcity of local labour. The difficulties of undertaking military operations in Assam during the war days of twenties were the common causes of complaint of the Company's officers. In the absence of volunteers to serve as porters the military officers


2. Ibid, P.4; also A.S.Vol. No.5 of 1840, No.2134, Garstin to Bude, 6 February, 1840. Also Banerjee, A.C., The Eastern Frontier of British India, Chap.IX, P.249.
were compelled to resort to forcible seizure at the moment of dire necessity. It is stated that not only the crews but that even their boats were forcibly seized in the Brahma-putra for military requirements. In 1825, the Company's officers, being unable to procure requisite number of labourers, even forcibly seized a large number of beggars in the district of Sylhet and engaged them as porters to accompany the British army in their march to Assam through the Khasi and Jayntia hills. As a matter of fact, the difficulties of procuring requisite number of labourers in the Military Department were experienced, more or less, everywhere in the Company's territories during the early years of the 19th century. To meet such emergencies, a regulation for facilitating the movements of troops through the Company's territories was passed in the Bengal Council early in 1806 which legalised seizure of inhabitants for military purpose. The Company's officers in Assam, therefore, had some authority in seizing local people for the regimental need. Furthermore, the said Bengal regulation was again supplemented in the year 1825 which enacted that the Zemindars of the respective area should supply workmen for the Military Department

4. Ibid, Foot Note, P. 76.
* Regulation XI of 1806.
on demand. Refusal to comply with such demands was subject-
ed to a fine of rupees even unto one thousand.

However, during the early few years of the British administration in Assam forcible seizure of local inhabitants was few and far between. Consequently, discontent was also not widespread. But with the expansion of the Company's territories in Assam, various political problems arose one after another which demanded prompt military action in the interest of security of the newly acquired province. The rebellions of the Khamptis, Singphos and Khasis endangered the peace and tranquillity of the areas under British occupation. Company's regiments, therefore, had to be kept in constant readiness to meet emergencies. The regiments had to be marched through the impassable jungles and marshy tracts. Naturally, demand for large number of porters and bearers was constantly felt to accompany the regiments at a moment's notice. Excepting the above necessity, the labourers were required at all times for accompanying sepoys escorting remittances, prisoners, reliefs, sick sepoys and for many other purposes. During rainy seasons demand for extra hands was

6. Ibid. Foot Note, P. 119.
7. Barpujarl, H.K., Assam. In the Days of the Company, \textsuperscript{2}.33
8. A.S.Vol. No. 49(a) of 1859, No. 100, Junior Asstt. Agent, Governor-General to Agent, Governor-General, (Undated.)
9. Ibid.
also felt for clearing jungles and making drainages in the
cantonment and other military bases. As these cantonments
were mostly located in places isolated from human habitation
not a candle nor even a single item of food could be consumed
there by the soldiers until those were brought by the labour-
ers. In view of these difficulties in Assam an editor of a
reputed newspaper remarked in the later period that even
life in a light house in the Red Sea at that time was suppo-
sed to be far better. The want of good communication in the
province was naturally keenly felt. But no action was taken
by the Government of Bengal to improve the communication in
Assam earlier than 1838-39. Further, travelling itself in
the province was a difficult task. Like other parts of India
no cheaper transport was available in Assam. The porters
were the only means of transport and it was also at times
extremely difficult to procure even at the cost of high remu-
geration. Writing early in 1840, when difficulties of trans-
port were brought to the notice of the Military Board by
Captain Mainwaring, Commander of Second Sibundy Corps, the
Government of Bengal accorded sanction of purchasing elephants
for the regimental needs which would lessen dependence on
human bearers. In the subsequent period some of the District

11. A.S.Vol. No. 6(a) of 1842(Misc), No.352, Executive
Officer to Matthie, 7 January, 1881.
12. A.S.Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. Nil, Princep to Jenkins,
5 February, 1840.
Officers suggested maintenance of adequate number of elephants in the district headquarters by the government with provisions for the Civil officers to hire these animals on requirement. But the Government of Bengal, although they were fully aware of the problem of transport in Assam, rejected the proposal in consideration of possible financial loss that might arise out of elephant mortality. Moreover, for such an occasional use, investment of a large outlay to buy and maintain elephants was also considered wholly unjustified. As an alternative, on certain occasions, the village headmen and chowdhuries, the Revenue Officers of the parganas, were directed by the police to supply villagers as could conveniently be collected on arrival of any regiment in their area. It was, however, pointed out as to refrain from supplying any inhabitant of rank and position not accustomed to carry load. But that system was also found unworkable, for it resulted in much discontent among the inhabitants as it became a licence to the village headmen and Zemindars to satisfy any old personal grudge upon any person by putting him constantly to face Government requisitions. The circumstances in Assam compelled the military officers to resort to forcible seizure very frequently. In 1842, the Commandant of the 23rd Regiment stationed at Bishnath while reporting the great demand for labour throughout the province remarked that although the natives of the province were found willing in
certain cases to enter services, but on receiving the first advance of money they usually never turned up for duty and there lay the utter helplessness of the Military Department. Under such circumstances it was not possible to facilitate movements of army without resorting to forcible seizure. Instances were not rare where not only women but even the little girls were forced to carry provisions for the regiment when males could not be procured. At the moment of dire necessity Assamese agriculturists were also forcibly seized and dragged from their paddy-fields to follow the Company's soldiers. This undoubtedly caused considerable loss to agriculture of the state. For these reasons the inhabitants had a great dislike for military work, and none voluntarily offered service when regimental officers were greatly in need of the same. The Military Department, in fact, had already earned a bad name since the first Anglo-Burmese war for maltreating and harassing the local men who worked under regiments. Even after fifteen years of the British administration in Assam many inhabitants were forcibly seized to work as burden bearers and dragged from place to place as they had practically no scope to avoid regimental requisitions.

This created panic and great discontent among the local people of various districts specially for the forcible

13. A.S.Vol. 6(a) 1842(misc), No. 49, Commandant, 23rd Regiment to Jenkins, 29 April, 1842.
seizure without consideration of age, sex, and caste. Many, therefore, deserted from the villages to avoid military troubles. In 1859, inhabitants of Cachar even expressed their willingness to pay double revenue in case they were exempted from furnishing labour for the regimental purpose. A rough estimate was, accordingly, made in the same year by the officers relating to the probable income of the government for assessing double revenue and expected to be in a position to meet expenditure for maintaining a labour establishment. As the measure was not approved of by the Government of Bengal it was not possible to take any action in this direction. However, on principle the Government of India had already agreed in 1858 that "something should be done to free the ryots from this slavery they now suffer". That it was the 'most hateful task that can be imposed' and was the 'causes of constant complaint amongst the people.' The Government of India also realised that people had a great disliking for the government work and referring to the law of impressment it further stated:

16. Ibid.
17. A.S.Vol. No. 45(a) of 1859 (Undated).
18. A.S.Vol. No. 44(a) of 1858-59, No.458, 28 January, 1858; also Bengal Hurkaru, Editorial, 25 April, 1865.
"If the power of the act be resorted to (so) frequently, on trifling ground, and before a fair trial has been made of other means, it is highly probable that its results will be detrimental to the progress of the work and the objects of its enactment....even if the power of the act are invariably brought to action greater care...should be taken."

But in practice the necessity of labour, so frequently created in Assam that no sooner had the labourers finished one job than they were again pressed into another. This virtually could not be avoided at all throughout the whole of the 19th century, although attempts were made from time to time to minimise resorting to forcible seizure even in the cases of real necessity.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE P.W.D. AND CONSEQUENT NEED FOR LABOUR.

Public Works Department was another branch under the Military Board that had also to face the scarcity of labour in the province since thirties of the 19th century. As the Military Department was in dire need of good communication in the province for strategic reasons, it had decided to set up a nucleus of P.W.D. in Assam with headquarters at Dacca. On 5 June, 1836, Mr. Martin was appointed as the local supervisor of public works in Assam. In the following year, when the vulnerability of the North-East Frontier, as a whole, was revealed due to Khamti uprising in Sadiya, the Governor-General in Council had to take decisive measures. Major Garstin, the


Superintending Engineer, Lower Provinces, was deputed in 1839 to investigate and to report measures for the defence of the province and specially for the improvement of the communications leading to the strategic outposts. A comprehensive report suggesting repair and reconstruction of roads in Assam was submitted to the Government for approval. The report also included construction of a number of masonry forts, blockhouses and public buildings. Furthermore, political and economic necessities also demanded an extensive public works in the province. Since the construction of masonry buildings under the Ahoms was an exclusive right of the royal family, some of the District Officers suggested that to exert political right in the province, the authorities of the East India Company must construct masonry buildings. It was pointed out:

"The question of erecting certain Pucca works is not of mere pound, shilling and pence, but one involving question of policy of far reaching greater importance."

It was also felt that the depopulated province would be peopled in case incentive to the trade and industry was given; and for this construction of roads and bridges became all the more necessary. In August 1840, the measures

22. Ibid.
23. A.O. Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 2134, Gerstin to Bude, 6 February, 1840.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
suggested by Major Garstln received the approval of the Government of India. Lieutenant Splita was appointed an Executive Engineer to execute the works speedily in Upper Assam. Inevitably, the problem of procuring local labourers came before the authorities of Public Works Department as well.

Instances of voluntary labour for the construction of roads and other public works under the British in Assam were also not rare. In 1836, Lieutenant Matthie succeeded through the co-operation of the villagers of Darrang in constructing about hundred miles of roads. In 1838, Lieutenant Rutherford also succeeded in procuring volunteer labourers for some public works in the same district. But when the supreme Government decided in 1840 to undertake an ambitious project on the suggestion of Garstln, it became a difficult problem as to how to procure a vast labour force which alone made it possible on the part of the Ahom Government to spread a net work of roads throughout the province. A good number of labourers became indispensably necessary even at the very beginning for the commencement of survey operations.

26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
In most of the cases, the tract proposed to be surveyed, was an almost unhabitated and unknown wilderness consisting of dense forest infested with man hunting animals. Operation of the theodolite method of survey and chain was difficult in those places. Moreover, the people, inhabiting the regions, were in many cases hostile to any outsiders and instead of helping Government in carrying out survey works they became the cause of great apprehension and danger. Naturally, the survey party, mostly consisting of foreign people, required to employ labourers from the district headquarters. A constant demand for labour, therefore, was always present in the headquarters of the district. Strong arm guards had to be posted as a precaution to protect the survey camps from tribal raids and also to accompany the surveyors in the field. Provision for the whole party had also to be procured from a great distance. Consequently, the task of surveying the province became a formidable job for Major Garstin. Being utterly helpless in his efforts to procure local labourers he had only one alternative before him, and that was to employ convicts, as usual, from the Jails. But soon a difficulty arose even in employing the criminals in large numbers outside the Jail area because of their chances of absconding. In


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.
view of such a difficulty J. Matthie, Deputy Commissioner of Gauhati, suggested, early in August 1839, that instead of spoiling time and energy for the supervision of prisoners a permanent establishment of Kachari labourers, who were occasionally found willing to work as labour, might be maintained in the district headquarters to carry out works. In fact, such permanent labour establishments were actually maintained in some of the district headquarters with approval of the Governor-General of India from time to time. Improvement works in many stations, therefore, could be carried out for some time with these labourers. But shortly the P.W.D. authorities had to face a major difficulty in employing such Kachari and other able-bodied persons. Writing in July 1842, Splota brought to the notice of Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam (1834-1861) that with the opening of Assam (Tea) Company in 1839, it became extremely difficult on the part of the Public Works Department to secure services of requisite number of labourers for any certain period in Upper Assam. And maintenance of such Kachari labour establishments became extremely difficult. Splota in the face of great inconvenience and also being utterly helpless, requested

33. A.S.Vol. 4 of 1839, No. 219, Matthie to Magistrate Kamrup, 3 August, 1839.


35. A.S.Vol. No. 6(b) of 1842 (Misc), No. 70, Splota to Jenkins, 6 July, 1842.
the Commissioner of the province to arrange to send some Kachari labourers by exerting his personal influence.

Although a good number of Assamese also could be employed by the P.W.D. authorities in carrying out the works, they were gradually found unsuitable for hard work. In 1847, to dig a tank at Gauhati some Assamese labourers were engaged. But the output of their work was not satisfactory. Captain Smyth, Superintending Engineer, Lower provinces, writing in 1847 to the Secretary, Military Board, states that "Assamese would seem to be unable or unwilling to perform work of children and I shall upon him (Mr. Martin) to state whether he can suggest any means, by which a better description of labour may be procured". But practically Martin, who by 1847 had become Executive Engineer of Lower Provinces, could offer no suggestion for the solution of the problem. Moreover, in 1847 while repairing roads from Gauhati to Golaghat and from Roha to Deboka, Martin himself gathered a very sad experience due to employment of Assamese labour. He reported:

"I regret to say the people of Kamrup are very unwilling to work for hire. I have, however, succeeded in getting a gang of about thirty men but I fear I shall not be

36. A.S.File No. 26 of 1848, No. 2177, Superintending Engineer to Secretary Military Board, (Undated)

37. Ibid.

able to get sufficient labourers to put the road in repair...the people of the Kamrup district are so well-off they are very unwilling to work for hire."

Further, employment of labourers in P.W.D. required to be made comparatively for a longer period. But the ryots preferred engagements for a few days. They worked only to meet any pressing necessity for money and a small sum was considered by them sufficient. As a result of which some of the non-Assamese people had a monopoly in dictating their terms of wages. But these classes preferred working for individuals because the works of P.W.D. were strenuous. Naturally, neither Assamese nor non-Assamese labourers could advantageously be used in the road making works.

However, as originally suggested by Captain Smyth in his letter of 29 December, 1847, for the introduction of a better class of labourers in the Lower Assam, Martin made an enquiry for the purpose. It was stated in his letter of 16 January, 1848, that to import labourers from Rangour (in Bengal) would cost nearly ten rupees per man before they reached Gauhati and that it would be necessary to enter into agreement with them for at least a term of four seasons of service on permanent wages. As it was not possible for the Public Works Department to employ them for such a long period no improvement of situation could be made. Martin also made an enquiry as to whether labourers could be induced to come

in the Brahmaputra Valley from Sylhet. "But from all I can learn" writes Martin "...from the...gramins that...they are nothing better than the Assamese."

Thus, Martin neither could do well with the Assamese labourers nor could procure adequate number of Kachari labourers nor even he could find out any source wherefrom labourers could be induced to come in Assam and, therefore, he again suggested employment of convicts, who were sentenced to hard labour, in the road making works. Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, also shared in this view and in one of his letters to the Government of Bengal he reported:

"I would again press upon the notice of the Government, the only means that occurred to me practicable on the part of the Government with a view to lessen the demand of labour for the public works and for municipal purposes, viz keeping of our jails full to the extent of accommodation in the each of the prison...and permitting their being employed in the execution of public works generally and on the repair of roads, bridges, drains....at the head stations of the several divisions...."

It appears from a later record that the Government of Bengal approved the practice of employing convicts in large numbers in the execution of public works in the province. Instructions were given to the District Officers in this respect. That instruction soon turned to be a great boon as

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid. Also A.S.Vol. No.26 of 1848, No. 314, Martin to Smyth, 15 November, 1847.
the convicts were used for a pretty long time in embanking rivers, draining the swampy areas, cutting down trees etc. In view of the satisfactory working of the prisoner service, the *Friend of India* writing in its editorial on 12 December, 1861, even suggested rehabilitation of the convicts of other provinces in Assam with subsequent large-scale employment of them in the execution of urgently needed public works in the State. The probable results, which the editor expected out of such efforts, were to turn the criminals into honestmen, to people the depopulated zones and lastly to create an avenue to remove the political prisoners, who did havoc during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, to the hills of Assam. However, such a rehabilitation had never been made and as a matter of fact the use of prisoner service in Assam was gradually confined only at a time when labour was very scarce and more difficult to procure.

On the other hand, more difficulties were experienced in the Public Works Department of Assam to procure skilled labourers in the province. This was reported on several occasions to the Commissioner of Assam by his District Officers. Services of the skilled workmen such as Brick makers, Carpenters, Blacksmiths, Overseers were very scarce. Amongst the skilled labourers again services of the Carpenters were one of the most essentials in the Public Works Department. Garstin, Naturally, had also to face

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43. A.S.Vol. No. 44(b) of 1859-63, No.4758 (Printed Circular) C.B.Young to Commissioner of Assam, 24 November, 1860.
serious difficulties in the proper execution of public works due to scarcity of such labourers. Writing a letter to the Secretary, Military Board, during October 1840 he stated: "what the urgency of the case demands in Assam, where workmen of these descriptions, if at all procurable, are not only indolent and ignorant but very scarce." In Dibrugarh one experiment was made with the local labourers to make bricks for P.W.D. Captain Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, undertook the project. But "out of the number burnt there many of its turned out so bad that they are nothing but powder perfectly useless." Although in the best days of Ahoms, the art of brick making was adopted from the imported Bengali architects and although in the later times the local people achieved mastery over it, this trade seems to have been forgotten by the later generation. Major Garstln, thus, concludes "good bricks can not be made in Assam." Further, in the works of supervision also, experienced workman was not easily procurable. Garstln states: "It is quite out of......power to procure any person up here to officiate as an overseer." Writing after twenty years of Martin the

44. A.S.Vol. No. 6(a) of 1842 (Misc), No. 352, Garstln to Bude, 7 January, 1842.
45. A.S.Vol. No. 4 of 1840, No. Nil, Garstln to Bude, 20 October, 1940
46. A.S.Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 1797, Garstln to Bude, 24 October, 1840.
47. Ibid.
Revenue Commissioner of Assam states "there is not an individual in the province capable of conducting such duties". From this it is evident what a difficulty Garstin had to face in 1840. In consequence, higher wages had to be given to meet emergencies and the Government was also obliged to pay much higher wages for skilled labourers until the supply and demand became better regulated. At this stage the authorities thought of importing certain classes of skilled labourers from Bengal. But even behind the proposal of importing foreign labourers there was the ultimate aim of the Government to stimulate re-emergence of an industrial class in Assam. Obviously, the Government of Bengal expected:

"that the native people must be taught, and when taught they will work as cheap or cheaper than others. The Bengalees would, moreover, be the means of instructing the Assamese, on their respective crafts, (and a time will arise when Government will be able to recruit) cheap and qualified workman, native of the country"

In fact, such efforts seem to have proved a great success in the long run and gradually it became easier to employ qualified local skilled workmen in the province. Although there was a great demand for skilled labourers, there created no major problem with regard to employment of skilled workmen in the works of P.W.D. in the subsequent period.


49. Ibid.

EARLY ATTEMPTS TO PROCURE LABOUR
FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL TEA PLANTATIONS.

The problem of labour, in fact, became all the more
acute in the province when Lord William Bentink, the Gover-
nor-General of India (1825-35), decided in February 1834 to
introduce experimental tea cultivation in Upper Assam. As
the tea cultivation at that time was new in kind in India,
there was no indigenous artisan who could give necessary
instructions in the tea cultivation to the Government. Demand
for Chinese workmen, therefore, came before the Tea Committee.
Accordingly, G.J. Gordon, Secretary of the Tea Committee, was
deputed to China Proper to collect Chinese tea plant to natu-
ralise in India. One of the important duties of Gordon was
to induce Chinese tea makers to come to India and for want
of which there could be practically no beginning of the tea
projects in Assam.

To start the tea nursery in Assam the Tea Committee
was in immediate need for local workmen for clearing jungles
and constructing thatch and bamboo buildings for the estab-
ishment. Attempts were made in the state of Cachar and
also in the kingdom of Manipur to procure labour for the
experimental tea plantation in Upper Assam. Although, there

51. A.S. Vol. No. 5 of 1840, No. 1797, 24 October, 1840.
52. B.R.O.C.(Tea), 1 February, 1834, Sl. No. 4.
was some chance of getting workmen specially from Manipur, none could be induced to migrate to Upper Assam. The Tea Committee, therefore, had to face the same problems with regard to the supply of labour which the Military Board was experiencing since the annexation of Assam by the British.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Charlton, the Officer in-charge of Sadiya, and Captain Jenkins after investigation found that the Chinese tea plant, which the Tea Committee was endeavouring to naturalise in Assam, was already growing in the wilderness near about Sadiya (in Upper Assam). It was decided that the wild grown tea of Assam was the tea of commerce and with this discovery much of the time and energy that would have been spent on the experiment of naturalising Chinese plant in the climate of Assam could be saved. This sudden

* It may be mentioned that the people of Manipur had the tradition of giving compulsory labour to their king like the Assamese Pyke system which they called "Laloo system". But very few Manipuri men could be induced to work on hire. More particularly, during May to November unless very high remuneration was offered none found willing to earn wages. Further, they had also little necessity for money. Barter system played an important role in their economy. Although bell-metal coin was in circulation on the eve of the British relation with Manipur, the Agricultural labour used to be hired for a complete season. The custom was to pay his remuneration in grain. Manipuri women as labour could hardly be procured because 'they are all nearly without an exception market women and cloth weavers' and no inducement could tempt them to leave their traditional professions.

(B.R.O.C(Tea), 2 April, 1834, S.No.18.)

54.B.R.O.C(Tea), 23 February, 1835, SI.No. 38.

55.Ibid, 23 March, 1835.
discovery also greatly brightened the prospect of tea cultivation in Assam. The Committee was, thus, confronted with a great problem of procuring good number of skilled Chinese artisans. The Committee, thus, almost in a hurried manner appointed some of the Macao Tea merchants to arrange skilled Chinese workmen. But hardly a year elapsed, the Government of India decided to undertake an extensive tea cultivation which would even remunerate the past Government outlays. C.A. Bruce, who was appointed the Superintendent of experimental gardens, urgently needed skilled Chinese workmen to carry out the Government's instruction. At this juncture, Gordon, also arrived in Calcutta with a batch of Chinese workmen. They were immediately despatched to Upper Assam by country boats. The demand for ordinary worker was equally great. Bruce consulted the Barsenapatl, the ruler of the Muttock country, where tea plantations were set up, and the latter agreed to supply him some labourers to work in the experimental plantation. Ahom king Purandar Singha of Upper Assam is already said to have assured Bruce that he would exert his personal influence in inducing some Kachari labourers who had their settlements near Gabroo Hills, south of the Sibsagar district.

56. B.R.O.C.(Tea), Jenkins to Grant, 14 December, 1835, Sl. No. 170.
58. Ibid. Also B.R.O.C.(Tea), 26 November, 1836, Sl. No. 83
Captain Jenkins was all along alive to the question of procuring labourers for the tea gardens. He endeavoured to get settled a few colonies of Kacharis, Rabhas, Garos of low lands and Nepalese as might conveniently be induced to migrate into Sadiya. These people, according to the Commissioner of Assam, were remarkable for their hardiness, strength and fearlessness. They were also expected to be very docile and tractable. He believed that without a great outlay of money the scheme could be given a fair trial provided some inducements were given to them. Waste land was proposed to be allotted to all such immigrants for a term of ten years free of rent and that an amount between Rs. 12/- to Rs. 20/- would be paid per head as an advance money recoverable in each month at the rate of one fourth of their pay. The plan failed since the people, whom Jenkins proposed to migrate, were unwilling to leave their hearths and homes.

Therefore, the Government of India had to think of other sources wherefrom labour could advantageously be procured for the purpose. Captain Jenkins was already convinced that there could be no solution to the problem unless effective measures were taken to import labourers from outside the province. Early in 1837, he suggested to import Bhansgas from Chotonagpur into Assam. The Tea Committee accordingly,

60. B.R.O.C.(Tea), 30 March, 1837, Sl. No.141.
suggested to depute a few trustworthy persons to Chotonagour at the proper season with a view to giving publicity and to explain matters to the Dhangas and to obtain information regarding their willingness to immigrate. But no suitable Dhanga Sirdar, having adequate knowledge of Assam, was available to explain matters to their own men. When the Committee was endeavouring to procure such a Dhanga Sirdar, Bruce in his letter of 29 March, 1837, informed that with the help of the Barsenapati of the Muttock country, he had already procured a good number of Muttock labourers. Bruce further assured with much confidence that there were also possibilities of getting more such labour if necessary. The question of introducing Dhangas into Assam was, therefore, deferred for some time. Moreover, the Tea Committee was also not inclined to incur additional expenditure in a politically unstable country like Upper Assam by importing Dhangas. Inspite of various difficulties, as mentioned above, experimental tea cultivation proved a success by the close of 1837. Twelve boxes of black tea manufactured in Sadiya were despatched to England. The quality of this tea proved to be of high standard and it was expected that shortly Assam tea would be able to compete with that of China. In the meantime the extent of tracts bearing

61. B.R.O.C.(Tea), 21 April, 1837, Sl. No. 145.


indigenous tea also increased beyond Government expectation. Naturally, the Tea Committee was then in urgent need of more Chinese artisans. Expert Chinese workmen could easily be imported from Singapore without incurring much expenditure, but on account of strained political relation with the Government of Burma (Ava), the Government of India could not arrange to import the Chinese artisans from Singapore. The latter had no other alternative but to send men to China Proper to procure skilled Chinese workmen. Three months' advance pay at the rate of $15 per workman were offered to them as family money. Free passage was also provided along with an efficient escort. Passage money for each workman amounted to $50 and in addition to that a fee at the rate of $5 per workman had also to be paid to the Mandarins (as the Chinese local tax).

In the interest of the "matters relating to the agricultural or commercial resources of (the) empire, (with) promising result of incalculable benefit to the country", the Government incurred such a high cost for the importation and maintenance of Chinese labour. With a view to getting a constant flow of

64. Ibid, Editorial, 31 May, 1838. P.278.


66. A.S.Vol. No. 6(a) of 1842 (Extract from a letter of Dr. Wallich, No.3, 8 January, 1842).

Chinese workmen at a moderately less cost, Lieutenant Charlton suggested the construction of a road from Upper Assam to the frontier Chinese province of Yunan where surplus population might be induced to emigrate.

FORMATION OF THE ASSAM COMPANY.

The initial successes in the experimental tea plantation in Upper Assam stirred up the speculative world and possibilities arose for the investment of foreign capital in the manufacture of Assam tea. The Government of India also made special rules for the grant of waste land in 1838 which had encouraged the private speculators into Assam. In February 1838, Bengal Tea Association, consisting of a body of European and Indian capitalists, was established in Calcutta. A similar association was also constituted in England. The Bengal Association wanted to take over the Government Tea plantation and to undertake extensive cultivation and manufacture on a commercial basis. They represented to Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India (1836–42), who gave a favourable response in this respect. This led to the formation of the Assam Company in 1839 in conjunction with the two associations that were constituted in England and in Bengal.

68. The Friend of India, Editorial, 8 August, 1839.


70. Ibid.
JOINT EFFORTS IN PROCURING LABOUR PARTIALLY SUCCESS.

The Assam Company in anticipation of getting Government experimental projects in due course endeavoured to make necessary arrangements to procure labourers from all possible sources. The Company's primary object was to get adequate supply of skilled Chinese artisans to start new gardens. Accordingly, in June 1839, the Company wrote to Shaw, White Whithead & Company and E. Boustead of Singapore, Maclaine, Waston & Company, Batavia to Barthelchav at Penang and also to several other places to supply Chinese tea makers. In November 1840, they contacted R. Hunter, an influential planter of Siam to induce local Chinese to emigrate to Assam.

Although a sufficient number of Chinese artisans could be procured from different sources, various difficulties were experienced both by the Government as well as by the Assam Company from time to time. Without interpreter nothing could be communicated to them and as such need for a Chinese interpreter was keenly felt ever since the arrival of Chinese in Assam. With great difficulty such an interpreter could subsequently be procured by the Tea Committee and appointed in Assam. The Chinese were also found unable to
stand the hostile climate of Assam. Further, some of them also proved themselves as imposters. Chinese who were sent from Canton to be attached to the Government establishment as paper makers knew little or nothing of their pretended calling. Captain Vetch, Political Agent, Upper Assam, while writing about them in 1842 stated to Captain Jenkins that:

"first they (Chinese) requested vats to be made and when ready, they said the bamboo from which paper was made, required many months steeping, when the bamboos at last were steeped the allotted time, fresh difficulties arose and as the articles required could not be obtained on the spot further delay occurred, at last every want being supplied, their skill was put to the proof, and as you witnessed, failed and one of the men has since committed suicide, while the other have, after getting some instruction from an inhabitant of Assam ........produced some specimen made after his recipe but vastly inferior. I, therefore, request that they may be discharged as imposters."

A large number of Chinese labourers had to be discharged soon after not because of their personal faults nor of their unsatisfactory works but mainly as a measure of economy. A considerable number of such discharged labourers led the life of vagabonds committing robberies and creating disturbances in Calcutta. Writing about them the Bengal Hurkaru in its editorial on 21 December, 1849, states:

74. A.S.Vol. No. 6(a) of 1842(Misc). No.72, Hamilton to Jenkins, 25 April, 1842.

* It appears that of the Chinese imported by the Tea Committee between 1838-40 a large number died due to climatic effect.

75. A.S.Vo. No. 6(a) of 1842, No. 5, Vetch to Jenkins 17 January, 1842.
"(They) are continuously committing depredations and the known sanguinary character of these people has spread an alarm throughout some streets. The only excuse which they made by these China men is that they have no employment, and of course, obliged to rob".

The third batch of the Chinese (about 247) which the Assam Company imported in February 1840 also proved as imposters, quarrelsome and many fled away on their way into Assam. A serious affray had also occurred at Pabna. On the whole they proved wholly intractable.

Naturally, therefore, importation of Chinese in large number was gradually discouraged both in the private and public sectors. As such, Charlton's scheme for drawing the surplus population of Yunan was also abandoned. The Commissioner of Assam stated:

"Even if an easy and safe road from Yunan was established, in the present circumstances of Assam and under the present condition of labour and capital in the province the idea of Chinese immigrants coming to settle or to work for hire cannot be reasonably entertained".

Personally Bruce was also not in favour of importing large number of Chinese, and in 1840 he also gave a timely warning to the Assam Company when it began to import large number of Chinese into the province. In justification of his statement he pointed out that the natives of the province should be given an opportunity to adopt mastery over certain

77. Ibid, P. 382.
trades, and Bengalee workmen should be taught to avoid complete dependence on the Chinese workmen.

As a matter of fact, attempts had already been made to get adequate supply of skilled local labourers in the province by sending the Assamese boys to Calcutta to learn technical know-how of the tea industry. But unwillingness of the Assamese youths to proceed to Calcutta for training created the difficulty in imparting necessary training to the local people. The few that received instructions in Assam from the Chinese, however, proved themselves fully qualified as tea makers. Referring to the high-mark of their efficiency, it was expected in the yearly Tea Report of 1842 that:

"the labouring population of Assam would eventually furnish numerous and skilled in the art of labourers for the purpose of manufacture on a very extended scale"

Further, in consideration of great financial loss to maintain Chinese artisans, Captain Jenkins offered a plan in 1842 on the recommendation of Watkinson, Superintendent of Tea Culture, to entertain a number of Mohammedan boys, native of Chittagong, who were expected to stand the climate of Assam, as apprentices for Government tea plantation in Upper Assam.

81. Ibid.
82. A.S.Vol. No.6(a) of 1842(Misc.), No.158, Secretary, Revenue Department to Commissioner, Chittagong, 25 April, 1842, also No. 87, Willich to Halliday, 4 May, 1842.
Their services were to be utilised as a tea maker on completion of their training under the Chinese. But the Commissioner of Chittagong, inspite of proper publicity, could not procure a sufficient number of either "Mugs or Mussalmans" with a 'little learning' for the purpose. This failure might be explained by the fact that in 1840, the Assam Company imported "a good many labourers from Chittagong, many of whom absconded on their way up, and others, who tried the business and climate, returned from Assam with a tale of terror and certain death" and this was sufficient to discourage them.

Inspite of partial success of the Government's scheme of replacing Chinese artisans by Indian workmen giving them necessary training, it greatly facilitated in creating qualified Assamese tea makers in the long run. In 1843, Parker, Superintendent of Assam Company, refused to accept any more Chinese workmen in his establishment. In justification of his refusal, he pointed out high-mark of Assamese craftsmanship in the art of tea making and availability of the growing number of local Assamese artisans.

On the other hand, supply of unskilled labourers in the tea plantations became a costly affair. It may be recalled, in anticipation of getting requisite number of local

83. A.S.Vol.No.6(a) of 1842(Misc), No. 110, Collector of Chittagong to Revenue Commissioner, Chittagong, June 1842.
Muttock and Assamese labourers for the tea estates, the scheme of introducing Dhangas had to be abandoned. Although some local labourers could be procured, a practical difficulty arose in getting their services. They worked only when they were not cultivating or harvesting their own paddy-fields. None could be employed for two seasons consecutively. Consequently, it became very difficult to teach new people the art of tea plucking. This necessitated the introduction of a class of labourers whose services could be utilised throughout all the seasons of the year. 'If tea should be cultivated with vigour' writes Friend of India in its editorial of 31 May, 1839, "the present inhabitants (of Assam) would be insufficient to carry forward the enterprise." "we must", it was added "look to the source from whence the coolies are drawn, whom we are now sending in for a distant slavery." Obviously, the paper hinted to the colonial emigration into the British, French and Danish colonies. The editor had further drawn the attention that "instead of allowing them to be transported like slaves........let them be invited to resort to the valley of the Burhampoora and set diligently to the cultivation of tea". This suggestion once again brought before the Government the scheme of introducing the Dhanga labourers into Assam which was previously abandoned. If the Dhangas, hardy and expected to stand the climate of

Assam, immigrated into Assam they would find the province akin to their own country (hilly) and also could visit their home occasionally at regular intervals. Earlier in his letter of 17 September, 1838, Captain Jenkins already suggested in the official level that at least two hundred Dhanges, exclusive of their families, should be imported for the purpose. It was then decided that Dhanges should march across to Maymensingh and Rangpur and from there to Goalpara under the supervision of a proper escort who should get a salary of Rs. 100/- or Rs. 150/- per month besides a bonus per man he could bring them safely to the ultimate destination. Although, with the help of the authorities at Chotanagpur it was endeavoured to induce Dhanges to immigrate in Assam, the Government effort was an unsuccessful one and no definite progress could be made in this direction either.

It was left with the newly formed Assam Company to take initiative in this regard. In June 1839, the Company first appointed Campbell, an European resident of Midnapore, to recruit Dhanges on behalf of the Company, and by the end of 1839 it had eight European recruiters at several places. At first the latter recruited four hundred Dhanges, next to that about one hundred and fifty six. But many of them deserted

86. B.R.O.C.(Tea), 17 September, 1838.
even before they reached Assam. The Company made several attempts to import Dhangas with the help and co-operation of the local indigo planters of Bihar, and to some extent they were successful in inducing a few batches of Dhangas at a considerable expense. In certain cases, the whole gang deserted before it reached the plantation of the Company. In 1840, when the said Company succeeded through its agent in persuading a gang of six hundred and fifty two Dhangas to proceed to Assam, half of them died on the way while cholera broke out and the rest, being frightened, had fled away. As a matter of fact, various factors contributed to the ultimate failure of the scheme of introducing Dhangas labourers in Assam of which lack of proper transport and its high cost, less inducement in wages and lastly fabricated stories regarding Assam deserve special mention.

Inspite of inadequate supply of labour the operations of Assam Company during 1840-42 were promising, and in 1843 they gave a dividend of 3% to each shareholder. In the meantime, the Government also introduced new rules on the grant of waste land in Upper Assam which had resulted in further extension of Company's business. But in 1844, the Company had to face a great financial set-back and amongst

88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid. Also A.S.Vol. No.6(a) of 1842 (Misc), No.7, Revenue Deptt. London to Governor of Presidency, (Undated).
all other causes high cost of importation of Chinese and Dhanges was the most important. As a result, the Company could not afford to engage costly labour and many of them including many others, who were procured at a heavy cost had to be discharged. Several factories of the Company had to be closed. Naturally, there was a rapid fall in the value of the Company's shares. But towards the close of 1846 with reshuffling of the Company's administrative setup, the Company was saved from its mismanagement and financial crisis. This gradually turned the earlier deficit into a surplus. The Company's position was considerably improved in 1852 which is evident from the fact that it could give a dividend of 2\% after years of mismanagement and years more without any dividend. Since 1853 the Company again started importation of labourers from outside the province. But difficulties of getting constant supply arose again during the year of Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The Indian contractors said to have refused to supply labourers to the European planters and the "coolies" also refused to serve in the plantation 'as' to


92. Ibid.


quote the editorial of the *Friend of India* on 15 July, 1858, "the Europeans were sure to be cut up." The Directors of the Assam Company in their report for the year ending 30th April, 1858, recorded great difficulties of procuring labour, which crippled all their operations. They stated that they might double all their outturn of tea but for the absence of labour. They also stated in their report that they were frequently sending men to employ Kacharis and even occasionally Assamese, but all in vain. Being utterly helpless many of the planters and even some district officers thought that it was the duty of the Government to stimulate industrial spirit in the Assamese. And this would be possible by enhancing the land revenue. In that case the poor Assamese inhabitants would be compelled to search for employment to earn the additional income. This point of view did not commend itself to Jenkins, who in his letter of 24 October, 1859, while admitting that there was great reluctance on the part of the Assamese, declined to provide the planters with cheap and abundant local labour of the province.

**Failure to Induce Tribals to Become Wage Earners.**

It deserves mention in this connection that some


96. *Bengal Government Selections No.XXXVII*, papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam, 1861, Paras 1-2.

of the District Officers in Assam in their search for local labour occasionally endeavoured to induce tribals to become wage earners. Attempts were made to procure such labourers through the respective tribal chiefs. In fact, the earlier tea minutes of the Government also recorded that attractive presentations (such as guns) were given to the tribal Chiefs with a view to persuading them to arrange supply of their own men for the Government purpose. In his treaty with Scott in November, 1826, Tirrut Singh, the Khasi Chief, undertook to supply labour for the construction of a road linking Sylhet with Gauhati. Mention has already been made earlier about Muttock labourers, whom Bruce wanted to employ in the experimental gardens with the help of their chief namely the Baranapati. But the Muttocks, though sturdy and robust, had very little necessity to earn wages for a living, for their food was cheap and had opium enough to smoke. They occasionally came forward to work as labour in the tea gardens. This class even contracted with a planter in 1842 and gave him information of tea tracts in the interior of the hills with a view to their getting employment in future. It appears

98. B.R.O.C.(Tea), 21 November, 1837, Sl. No. 177.


100. A.S.Vol. 6(a) of 1842 (Misc), An application, Bouynge to Brodic, 21 September, 1842.
from a letter of Junior Assistant Commissioner, North Cachar, addressed to the Commissioner of the province that in 1859 Kukis were induced to work as labourers; and the latter had also inclination to accept any Government work. But Kukis were extremely lazy and sullen set' and, naturally, they also failed to provide even a partial solution of the problem in any particular area.

Efforts seem to have also been made to settle a colony of Naga labourers in the district of Nowgong. At Bokal in the Nowgong district, the authorities succeeded in starting a Naga colony wherefrom some of the Nagas were accustomed to work as day labourers in the plains. As the need for money was, more or less, limited amongst them, probably for this reason they felt little or no necessity to earn wages at the cost of sweated labour under the scorching sun of plains. Moreover, as Captain A.K. Comber, writes:

"I do not think that in the present barbarism any other hill tribes......could be induced to labour. They are too fond of hunting and too much taken up with the international warfare and dispute."

It was indeed a Herculean task to supply unskilled


103. Bengal Govt. Selections No. XXXVII, Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam, 1861, No. 13, Comber to Jenkins, 20 October, 1859.
labourers in the plantations of Assam. Towards the close of 1860-61, with the rapid extension of tea cultivation in both the valleys of the Brahmaputra and Surma the demand for labour was always on the increase. The planters did not have even half of the labourers they needed and, therefore, there was a pressing demand for labour everywhere. Thus, when all the efforts failed to procure adequate supply of local labour, the authorities began to import labourer from other parts of India, where it was readily available.

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* There were sixty eight factories in Assam unto the end of year 1859 with a total area under actual cultivation was only 7599 acres yielding 1205,689 lbs of tea. In 1860-61 there were one hundred and ten factories along with 74,240 acres under tea garden of which no less than 20,945 acres were under actual cultivation with an output of 1,700,000 lbs - an increase of about hundred and fifty percent within two years. In Cachar, there were fifty three plantations with an area of about 100,000 acres of which 5,957 were in actual cultivation with output of 128,112 lbs by the end of 1861-62. There were only two hundred and fifty tea plantations in India including Assam at the same period and the rapid progress in Assam will be revealed from the above statistics

104. Friend of India, Editorial, 28 November, 1861.