CHAPTER III
TRANSPORTATION
In the early thirties of the nineteenth century, extreme were the difficulties in despatching labourers from Calcutta to Sadiya in Upper Assam where experimental tea cultivation was carried on by the Government. All communication had to be maintained through the river Brahmaputra. The use of the steam in the navigation was not yet introduced, and as such country boats were the only means of transport by which any despatch could be made to and from the province. Boats were also not always available nor efficient boatmen who knew the river could be procured. During the rains, the tremendous velocity of the currents and the accumulation of the trunks of trees and boulders on the banks rendered navigation by ordinary country boats practically impossible. Under such circumstances, it was an arduous task in the thirties to arrange safe transport even of a few batches of Chinese artisans from Calcutta to Sadiya. As usual, these labourers had to be sent by country boats and a voyage up the stream upto Sadiya took about four and a half months to reach. Obviously, this difficulty was multiplied when tea cultivation was extended in the province, and more labourers

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid, P.358.
4. Barpujari, H.K., Assam: In the days of the Company, P.351
were required for the purpose. The Assam Company (1839), for their extensive cultivation had to convey a large number of labourers from Calcutta, and the problem of transport became a headache to the authorities of the Company. Although, they were compelled to despatch their labourers in small batches by country boats, they endeavoured to explore the possibilities of introducing a better means of communication in the Brahmaputra to facilitate quicker transport.

EXPERIMENTAL STEAMER COMMUNICATION.

In 1842, an attempt was made by the Assam Company to introduce a steam boat of their own for the purpose of conveying labour. Even in its experimental stage, the steam boat was found unsuitable to ply against the strong current of the Brahmaputra and as such no improvement could be made in this direction at that time. In 1847, for purpose of accelerating the transport of troops and their supplies, the military authorities persuaded the Government of India to introduce a steamer service on the Brahmaputra. At first, these steamers ran at very uncertain intervals and did not proceed beyond Gauhati. The Assam Company, after much negotiation, succeeded in arranging a few trips to convey their labourers from

6. Ibid.
Calcutta. But, as the steamers did not proceed beyond Gauhati, the despatch of labour up streams by country boats appeared neither practicable nor economical. To remove these difficulties, in a memorial on 6 June, 1863, to Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General of India (1848-56), the Directors of the Company requested that the existing service be extended and this eventu­ally resulted in extension of trips upto Dibrugarh. But the accommodation was soon found to be inadequate specially on the upward journey for carrying the large number of urgently needed labourers to work in the tea estates. About this time, Mr. Mills, in his report (1853) on Assam, also laid a great emphasis on the introduction of regular steamer communication with Assam. Partly from the administrative reason and partly for industrial needs, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal was also impressed with the idea of extending a regular steam communication as far as Dibrugarh, and he ultimately persuaded the Governor-General in Council to move authorities in England to increase the number of boats to such an extent as would permit to keep some stand-by for permanently using them for navigation in the Brahmaputra. As a temporary measure, the Governor-General directed the Government of Bengal, in January 1856, to withdraw three pairs of boats from the Ganges during March to September and to place them on the Brahmaputra.

10. Ibid, P.255.
11. Ibid.
despatching a steamer and flat every twenty days and during the remainder of the year to despatch the boats whenever they could be spared for the purpose. Accordingly, the Meghna, the Jumna and the Themes began to ply on Calcutta - Dibrugarh route. Inspite of these measures, the Government of Bengal failed to maintain a regular service during the period of Sepoy Mutiny (1857-58), when the whole services were suspended to meet the emergency.

I. G. S. N. SERVICE, ITS INTRODUCTION.

Apart from the irregularity of the service, there were other practical difficulties in the steamers in carrying the labourers to the province under the existing arrangement. The vessels were provided with insufficient cooking accommodations in the deck. This resulted in undue delay in the preparation of labourer’s meals as each individual or family was supplied uncooked rations. In certain cases, many of them were even compelled to take uncooked food being unable to cook. Further, no private arrangements for relieving the calls of nature were provided with the steamers. The labourers for relief required another person to hold on by the hands to finish the business in the ship’s side in the most public manner. To the females, obviously, it was a positive terror. Some of the women even said to have dropped over board on each trip.

12. Ibid, P. 255.

Further, because of the wet deck, the sick could not even take rest when it was absolutely necessary. When such a matter was brought to the notice of Captain Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam, by George Williamson (Junior), Superintendent of the Jorehaut Tea Company, towards the close of 1860, the former, in his letter of 20 November, expressed his inability to suggest anything for remedying the evils on the ground that Marine authorities of Bengal were the proper persons to take action in the matter. Jenkins did not feel the necessity of exerting his influence in this regard, even though the interest of his division was involved. Nevertheless, these difficulties were removed to a great extent by the year 1860-61, when the Indian General Steam Navigation Company came forward and introduced regular steamer communication with Assam.

TRANSPORT IN THE SURMA VALLEY.

The same problem had arisen in the meantime in Cachar with the extension of tea cultivation in that division. In the absence of any steamer communication with that district there was no alternative but to resort to country boats for conveyance of labour from Calcutta. Usually, the labourers were despatched in such boats in small batches of twenty five under the supervision of an Indian compounder, generally known as Native Doctor, and a Chaprassi, engaged by the recruiting

contractors, on whom alone the Tea Companies relied for the safe conduct of the labour to their destination. It was the custom to provide provision, clothing and medicine along with the other necessary arrangements from recruiting district till the latter reached ultimate destination at the expense of the recruiters. Instances were not rare when the whole of the provision became exhausted before the boat reached only the half of their journey. Various difficulties were experienced gradually in despatching labourers by country boats from Calcutta to Cachar.

Inspite of steamer communication difficulties were experienced even in the Brahmaputra valley. Although labourers were provided with cooking accommodation in the vessels under the new arrangements, for want of proper supervision, strong and most healthy labourers generally monopolised the whole of the cooking space allotted. Neither sanitary nor adequate medical facilities were provided for the steamers. These were essential, because before shipment of labourers in Calcutta, they were dragged from the recruiting districts without any suitable arrangement for their food enroute and

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid, Vide statement of Captain Hodge, Commander of her Majesty's Steamer 'Bentinck'.
19.
subsequent treatment while sick. Even after their arrival in Calcutta, they were kept for several days in the filthy depots of the private recruiters. Labourers were provided without adequate shelter nor proper food nor any medicine when sick. Under such circumstances outbreak of cholera was very frequent. Naturally, therefore, when the labourers were shipped after staying in such filthy transit camps and when they received no medical care during their voyage to Assam, cholera of a very fatal nature occurred among them almost daily in the steamer.

TRANSPORT REGULATIONS.

Early in June 1861, Henry Hopkinson, the new Commissioner of Assam (1861-74), reported the matter to the Government of Bengal which he termed "a sad and melancholy affair of transportation." He endeavoured to convince the Government of Bengal of the necessity of immediate interference in the matter. Later, in August, while reporting the usual calamitous results, he brought home to the authorities in Calcutta that if preventive measures were not taken without delay, frightful loss of human life would continue. Inspite of such

19. Ibid, Vide Statement of Mr. Staunton, Secretary Assam Tea Company, 6 August, 1861.


21. B.C.P.File No. 375 of 1861, No. 170, Vetch to Hopkinson, 1 June, 1861.

22. Ibid, No. 367, Hopkinson to Govt. of Bengal, 13 June, 1861.

23. Ibid, No. 484, 5 August, 1861.
a forceful remark, in the absence of any law regulating the river passenger boats and also for want of any regulation to control private depots, it was difficult for the Government of Bengal to take any action to remove the evils in the transport of labour. As a temporary measure, the Government of Bengal made an arrangement with the commanders of the steamers who promised to provide better shelter and better opportunity for cooking in the steamers during voyage. They also assured that proper sanitary measures and adequate supervision would also be provided.

To enquire into the problem the Government of Bengal appointed a Three Man Commission in July 1861 under the Chairmanship of Captain J.G. Reddie. During their investigation, the Commission noticed, among other things, that Calcutta depots were but a square of ground with little stress of human habitation resembling 'half dried bed of a small tank' and a 'spot more repulsive to sight and smell'. The uses of such transit camps were thought to be a potent cause of cholera at depot and voyage. According to the Commission, the steamer route through Sundarbund could not be a ground for heavy mortality during voyage; for the steamer was to pass through

24. Ibid, No. 67(a), Thompson to Commissioner of Assam, 17 January, 1861.
25. Ibid.
27. A.S.Vol.No. 44(b) 1859-63 (P.W.D.), Chairman, Labour Commission to Govt. of Bengal, (Undated).
Sundarbund during the first day of its journey and any mortality, according to the Commission, might be the effect of 'pernicious management' in Calcutta depots and not due to the climatic effect of Sundarbund. However, the Commission admitted that mortality in the passage, not wholly attributable to defective supervision of the private depots but also might be due to climatic effect of Bengal and Assam, which specially the hill men of Chotanagpur, whom the planters of Assam preferred most, could not stand. The Commission also observed that native subordinates, under whose care the labourers proceeded, did not fail to take advantage of the large opportunity afforded to them for defrauding their employers and labourers. The agreement, on which the contractor was paid for all who died on the voyage, was a premium on mortality - like an ordinary commercial transactions; to quote the Commission's own language "all the party considered their duty and responsibility discharged when the living were landed and cost of dead adjusted."

Lastly the Commission felt that overcrowding in the ship could not be avoided in the absence of any rule for the allotment of number of passengers to the vessels. To remove these evils, the Commission recommended (a) trustworthy supervision and care during the passage (b) control over private depots


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.
conclusion of the boat and vessels as to their soundness, accommodation etc. by a competent person and (d) construction of suitable landing depots at the places of disembarkation in Assam.

Concurring with the views of the Commission, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal embodied the aforesaid measures in the Act III of 1863. Under the provision of this Act:

1. The recruiters or contractors were required to accompany the labourers from the recruiting districts to the contractor's depots. (Further, as has already been mentioned in the last chapter, the private depots were also brought under regulation by the provisions of the above Act).

2. Steamers or boats were required to be licensed to carry labourers and made liable to be punished either in case of carrying labourers without license or for accommodating more labourers than specified in the license.

3. The Magistrates were empowered to inspect or detain steamers if necessary and could detain labourers on voyage if found violent sickness existed among them.

4. It was also laid down that if proper means be not arranged for the conveyance of labourers to the place of final destination, Magistrate was required to make arrangement and incur necessary expenses recoverable from the party with whom the labourers contracted.

These provisions were expected to remove many of the previous evils and promote a better means of transport. But these measures were not only inadequate but also defective in their practical approach. As one of the major difficulties in promoting a safe transport was the frequent outbreak of Cholera, no measure whatsoever, was adopted in respect of

31. A.S. Vol. No. 44(b) of 1859-63 (P.W.D.), No. 3023, Eden to Commissioner of Assam, 26 November, 1862.
proper sanitation of the vessels, nor any emphasis was laid in providing a competent medical Officer along with a hospital arrangement. Further, no provision was made for supplying proper food during passage.

EVALS OF REGULATED TRANSPORT.

After the enforcement of the measures, mentioned above, some of the previous inconveniences were, no doubt, removed and the transport of labour became safer to some extent. But within a short time, much of the previous difficulties had to be faced again. Affairs of the private depots needed more effective supervision; it was found that some Amlahs of the depots managed the shipment of labourers already suffering from some previous disease. At the depots again, the labourers were supplied with unwholesome diet, which resulted in frequent stomach trouble and also occasional outbreak of Cholera. Inspite of the legislative provision for inspection of labour by the Magistrates at the different ports of the district, difficulties were experienced from time to time for the uncertainty of the arrival of steamers. Government

32. In four years from 1864 to 1867 the annual mortality in the largest depots ranged from 36% to 115% on the average rate being calculated on a daily average of no less than 458 souls (Assam District Gazetteer, Vol. VII, Chapter IV, P. 139)

33. When such inconveniences were brought to the notice of the Steamer Company by the Commissioner of Assam the former instead of assuring punctual arrival in the near future gave a threat of withdrawing services from Assam. (A.S.Vol.No.26 of 1863-64, No. 5, Hopkinson to Govt. of Bengal, 24 March, 1864.)
officials had to await anxiously the arrival of vessels, which never reached at the scheduled hour in majority of the cases. A control over the movements of the steamers, therefore, became necessary. Notwithstanding the provision that was made for the construction of suitable landing depots for the reception of labourers at the ultimate destination, proper arrangements were not made for the purpose. As a result those who were unable to proceed on foot to the tea gardens due to exhaustion of strenuous voyage failed to reach and died on the way. No arrangement was made for supply of proper food to the labourers during passage; they were left completely at the mercy of the contractor's men, who invariably supplied irregular, inadequate and unwholesome food. Dr. Thrope, Civil Surgeon of Gauhati, in course of his inspection of a batch of such immigrants, found that the labourers were supplied with only "Chopra and Goor" as food during transit. Similarly, for want of legislative provision clothing that was supplied to the labourers was of worst possible description. Under such circumstances, the immigrants were liable to be the victims of frequent sickness and, obviously, their condition was pitiable. The medical man, in-charge of the immigrants, felt himself absolutely helpless. Having no other alternative, in some cases,

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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid. No. 9, 20 December, 1863.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
a temporary hospital was formed over the deck covering a portion and being partitioned off with canvas. Neither diet nor requisite medicine could be provided for the patients. Further, it was impossible to accommodate all the patients in such temporary hospitals. "I found" writes Campbell, Personal Assistant to the Commissioner of Assam, who happened to be a passenger of such an immigrant vessel, "..........human beings huddled closed to each other and actually perishing from want of care". Consequently about forty percent of the total dispatch between 1864-1867 died enroute per annum. In seven months from August 1865 to February 1866, no fewer than five cases were brought before the Government of Bengal in which serious mortality took place and in one case it went upto the extent of sixty seven percent. Dead bodies of such immigrants, for want of any provision for respectable and decent burial, were thrown off into the river in a most frightful and humiliating manner. Naturally, therefore, incorporation of more humane provisions in the statute became necessary for the safe and convenient transport of immigrants.

The defects of the earlier measures, as mentioned above,

38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
42. A.S. Vol.No.26 of 1863-64, No.9, Wagu en to Government of Bengal 20 December, 1867.
were brought to the notice of the Government of Bengal by the Commissioner of Assam from time to time since the close of 1863. In spite of that the Government of Bengal remained indifferent and did not take proper and timely action in the matter. When the reports of such disastrous despatches of labour reached England in 1866, Lord Cranborne, the Secretary of State for India, could not but severely comment on the action of the Government of Bengal. He directed the Government of India in the same year to institute an enquiry of the actual state of affairs and called for a report. But the enquiry was also delayed and because of the interference of the interested parties. The British Indian Association of Calcutta, when they came to know of the order of the Secretary of State and subsequent delay of the Government of India for instituting the enquiry, reminded the Governor-General of India several times of the order of the Secretary of the State. The Association did not remain silent and renewed their appeal.

43. B.G.P.E., February 1867, No. 19, Also the Hindoo Patriot, Editorial, 11 May, 1868, P.149.

* The British Indian Association was founded by George Thompson, who had a deep love for India and Indian people, in the year 1843. He came to India at the invitation of Prince Dwarika Nath Tagore (1794-1846). Thompson was against colonial imperialism and Tagore thought such a person would be suitable for India for guiding National aspirations of the Indians. In Calcutta, he came in contact with the Indian youths and started the said Association with the help of disciples of Derozio namely Krishna Mohan Banerjee, Ramgopal Ghose, Tarachand Chakravarty. This Association, since then, became the only mouthpiece of Indian people before the rise of Indian Association in 1876.

44. Ibid.
to Sir John Lawrence, the Governor-General of India. The
indifference of the Governor-General, inspite of the ceaseless
devours of the Association, aroused public indignation
which compelled the former ultimately to direct Government of
Bengal by the close of 1867 to appoint the Labour Commission.

The Commission, in course of their investigation,
noticed that the rate of mortality during passage was extremely
high and such mortality was mainly due to contraction of the
germs of disease in the filthy private depots in Calcutta, the
subsequent effect of which was seen during passage. As a
remedy, the Commission recommended (a) construction of one
central depot outside Calcutta under the direct management
of the Government of Bengal in place of several private depots
in Calcutta (b) a regulation, restricting the conveying of
labourers to not more than five hundred in steamers and fifty
in boats (c) in the absence of suitable arrangement for the
reception of labourers, they were to be carried to the immediate
next station, where such arrangements were made. In their
recommendations, the Commission neither gave any emphasis on
the proper sanitation of the steamers nor any importance to
the arrangement of feeding and treatment of labour on the
vessel while sick. Obviously, the recommendations were not
upto the requirement of the situation that prevailed.

45. B.G.P.E., February 1867, No. 22. Also B.G.P.File No. 303
of 1869-73, No. 5999, 28 December, 1868.
William Gray, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (1867-71), clearly expressed his inability to accept the first suggestion on the financial ground. With regard to the second suggestion, he pointed out that its implementation would raise the cost of labour and as such the planting community would be greatly annoyed. Thus, the first two suggestions were rejected by the Government of Bengal. When the above decision of the Lieutenant-Governor was communicated to Sir John Lawrence, the Governor-General of India, he gave his approval in April 1869. Although for pecuniary reasons the Lieutenant-Governor did not support the first two important suggestions of the Commission, he incorporated some additional provisions in the Bill subsequently with a view to providing more amenities to the immigrant labourers during voyage. This bill became Act II of 1870. The measures that were embodied in the Act were as follows:

1. Provisions were made for good and adequate supply of food, clothing and medical attendance during transit.
2. It empowered the family of a labourer detained for sickness to remain with him.
3. Provisions were laid for receiving the labourers after disembarkation and also to supply food, lodging, medicine including hospitable attendance.
4. Local Magistrates were empowered to exercise their discretion according to the need of the situation on inspection.

46. Ibid.
47. The Calcutta Gazette, 23 March, 1870. P-587.
OLD EVILS UNDER A NEW FORM.

After the enforcement of the new measures, some general improvement could be noticed in respect of providing labourers with better food during voyage and there seemed to have been no general complaint against it. Moreover, much care was also taken to supply good blankets to protect them from cold in most of the cases. Further, reception of the immigrants was also reported to have been made satisfactorily.

Insipite of that some cases were reported to the Government by the District Officers which indicated that the previous malpractices were continued in a different manner. Their easy detection as such became extremely difficult for the visiting Magistrates either at depots or during passage. In several cases, it was found, every effort was made by the Amirah of the private depots to conceal Cholera cases from the visiting magistrates. Again, during passage, some of the steamer commanders were also found to be in the habit of concealing such cases intentionally for avoiding detention of steamers for inspection. In certain cases, the European commanders of the vessels gave open threat of dismissal to their subordinate Indian doctors (compounders), accompanying the immigrants.


during voyage, when the latter (doctors) actually reported cholera cases to the visiting Magistrates of the transit station. The steamer Commanders did not at all co-operate with the Magistrates in reducing the number of Cholera cases. They were found in the habit of bringing cheaper perishable goods from Calcutta in each trip. These they sold in Assam at a much higher rate. And as such, they derived a good profit out of such a business. Naturally, they also avoided detention of steamers for the early delivery of such perishable goods, even though detention was considered extremely necessary in the interest of human safety. Further, the Commanders, violating the rules prescribed for their guidance, also carried unauthorised passengers in the steamers along with the immigrant labourers and as such earned a good amount for their own purse. For the above reasons, the space allotted for the labourers sometimes became extremely narrow and they 'looked actually packed in the steamers'. During rains, such congestion created a miserable situation specially in the steamers, the roof of which were leaky. Moreover, during heavy showers, it became extremely difficult for the labourers due to violent wind to

50. Ibid, No. 48, Assistant Surgeon Gauhati to D.C.Kamrup, 18 March, 1872.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid, No. 35, 27 February, 1872.
keep their body and soul together in such steamers. These resulted in frequent sickness among them during voyage. But in the absence of proper hospital arrangement on the board, serious inconveniences and difficulties were experienced by the medical man in-charge of the steamer in respect of providing proper treatment to the labourers while sick. For want of such provision even the Cholera cases could not be segregated. Apart from these difficulties, adequate care and proper treatment of such patients could not also be made for the inefficiency of the native medical attendants. As the Steamer Company did not like to afford a qualified Indian or European Doctor in the steamers for the purpose, there had been no alternative but to rely on the unqualified native medical attendants. In certain cases, it was found that they neglected even the minor duties of any man in the medical profession. Evidently, better medical facilities could not be provided under the existing arrangement. Inspite of that whatever medical facilities were provided for in the steamer, the labourers, in certain cases even deprived themselves of those privileges of their own accord. In good number of cases, it became difficult on the part of the medical man in-charge to carry on


his duty where the labourers refused to take any medicine due to serious caste prejudice. Naturally, caste prejudices interfered with the use of many articles, which medical man considered most useful for the recovery. Occasions were also there when in the same steamer while one set, who were served with such medicines, did not suffer, the other set, who refused to take medicine due to caste prejudice, suffered severely. Notwithstanding the measures of control, these factors contributed to a serious outbreak of cholera by the close of 1871 and continued throughout the entire year of 1872.

DEMAND FOR REMEDIAL MEASURES.

The emigration proceedings of the Government of Bengal for the period were full of communications of such fatal cases. Writing in April 1872, Alexander Mackenzie, Junior Secretary, Government of Bengal, admitted the deplorable condition of the labourers during passage and felt the immediate necessity of incorporating further remedial measures to put a stop to such outbreaks of cholera. Sir George Campbell, who had since became the new Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (1871-74), took


59. B.G.P.File No. of 1872, A few Telegrams received during the year 1872.

60. Ibid, No. 1406, Mackenzie to Superintendent Labour Transport, 6 April, 1872.
a serious view on the subject. There are volumes of corres-
pondences in the emigration proceedings for the year 1872 which
clearly show that a firm and sympathetic stand Campbell took
at that time. Action was taken to alert all concerned to do
the needful to reduce mortality. But malpractices were so
deep-rooted, as has already been mentioned, it became extremely
difficult for the Government Officials even to detect cholera
cases at any stage not to speak of giving an early check to it. In these circumstances, the Government Officials suggested,
in course of their reports, remedies for the difficulties they
practically experienced with a view to lessening mortality and
to promote a speedy and convenient transport. Writing in March
1872, the Superintendent of Labour Transport in Calcutta
suggested to the Government of Bengal to introduce way-bills
during passage in which the masters of the steamers as well as
the doctors in-charge of the boats were to take entry of the
needful particulars from the Civil Officers of the districts
through which the steamer would pass. The way-bills, as
proposed, were introduced after, 15 April, 1872, by the Govern-
ment of Bengal and omission to attend to this duty was made a
disqualification in having a grant of license to carry labour-
ers for a future voyage. This restricted the malactivities
of the Commanders of the steamers and any mischief in passage
was supposed to be detected by its introduction. Obviously,

61. Ibid, No. 1560, 15 April, 1872.
62. Ibid.
the way-bills turned to be bitter pills to the Commanders. Secretary of the I.C.S.W. Company said to have openly told J.C.Grant, Superintendent of Labour Transport, after the introduction of way-bills that it would cause serious detention to the vessels and would be a consequent loss to the Company. The apprehension of the Secretary, it appears from the later records, was not altogether baseless. But there was no alternative but to adopt such a measure in the face of recurring malpractices by the Commanders which the Company failed to put a stop to.

Further, early in February 1872, Dr. Curran, Civil Surgeon of Gauhati, suggested as a measure for sanitation that all the labourers should be taken out on the beach and made to wash both themselves and their cloths periodically to avoid the filthy condition of the great number of labourers' cloths. As a remedy for the unhygienic condition of the deck, he further suggested that the flat was to be thoroughly fumigated by burning sulphur as long as the labourers remained on the shore. After the decks were dried, Mr. Dougall's Powder was to be freely sprinkled over them. It appears from a letter of the Government of Bengal of 20 May, 1872, that the suggestions were accepted with some modification, that only steamers

63. B.G.P.File No. 190 of 1872, No. 259 T, 22 May, 1872.
64. B.G.P.File No. 190 of 1874, No. 112Y, 9 February, 1874.
and flats twice effected were to be fumigated and disinfected.

With the introduction of such measures, succession of mortality was checked to a greater extent by the close of 1872. Inevitably, to introduce such measures the Steamer Company had to incur a considerable expenditure and a strong opinion was formed in the context that no such expensive measures were to be introduced further and no more change in the labour law in this respect was essential. Sir George Campbell, however, did not share such views. He desired that some change in the labour law should be made to incorporate a few additional measures as well as to cover the shortcoming of the Act II of 1870. He proved his genuine sympathy for the poor by introducing a bill in the Bengal Council early in 1873 to give effect to his desire.

In the original bill a penalty was imposed, as per desire of Campbell, for any delay of vessels to facilitate proper inspection during transit. But the Select Committee, in its preliminary report of April, quite reasonably amended the relevant section by prescribing that such penalty should not be imposed if delay was occasioned by any casualty in navigation. Further, in the original bill it was provided


67. Ante, P. 82-83.


69. Ibid.
that masters of any licensed vessel should report arrival of his steamer without fail to the Magistrate of the district, through which the vessel would pass, and to wait until the Civil Officer arrived on the spot. This provision being indefinite, the Select Committee substituted in that place that after proper report to the Magistrate the vessel should wait for not less than six hours of day light. Moreover, the Magistrates were empowered in the original bill to detain a steamer for unlimited hours if there was any case of cholera. The Select Committee amended that such delay should not be more than five days. Thus, the bill, above mentioned, became subsequently the Act VII of 1873 and the following important measures were incorporated therein.

1. The masters of the steamers were not allowed to embark immigrants on vessels carrying more than twenty immigrants without a pass. They were further required to report arrival of immigrants at every intermediate stations, where there was a Magistrate, to whom they were bound to give all information required.

2. Magistrates were given enough power to inspect vessels at any time and might detain vessels for inspection at least for five days and could even detain sick immigrants. They were further empowered to direct local medical officers to examine immigrants medically.

3. The vessels carrying two hundred immigrants must carry a qualified medical officer.

4. If immigrants were to disembark at a place other than a civil station, medical inspection was to be made at the civil station last preceding.

5. At the place of disembarkation also, if suitable arrangements were not made to receive the labourers, immigrants were to be carried on to the next station, where it was done.

OVERLAND ROUTE.

The new measures, under the Act VII of 1873, came into force from January 1874. The most significant innovation of the above labour law in respect of recruitment, as has been stated in the last chapter, was the introduction of "free recruitment and emigration". Amongst the free immigrants, there was a considerable number of famine-stricken people of Bihar. They could not afford the steamer fare from Goalundo to Dhubri and proceeded on foot from Sarun (in Bihar) across North Bengal to Dhubri and then crossing the Brahmaputra they made their way to the gardens of the Brahmaputra valley. They had with them their families including minors and infants. It was a long strenuous journey and they had neither money to buy food nor strength to proceed on foot. Even those who had some means could not buy for the high prices of food grains.

These difficulties compelled many of them to return back to their homes. Under this situation, S.C.Bayley, the Commissioner of Patna, with the help of Steavans, Executive Engineer, Bhagalpur, made some temporary arrangements to supply rice at the cost price from the various food depots established at each easier stage to facilitate such immigration into Assam.

* Please see map indicating labour route.

71. B.G.P.File No. 322 of 1873-74, No.7F, Commissioner of Patna to Govt. of Bengal, 21 November, 1873.

72. Ibid; Vide Resolution of the Statistical Department, 25 November, 1873.
through the overland route. Inspite of this measure, the immigration of famine-stricken people stopped after sometime partly due to inadequacy of the Government help and partly due to unwillingness of the planters to employ such famine-stricken labourers in their gardens for fear of subsequent mortality.

Early in November 1873, before the Act VII of 1873 came into force, Bayley, the Commissioner of Patna, brought to the notice of Campbell, the difficulties of using the overland route. The latter had before him the example of the solution of the great Irish famine of sixties when two million of her people were emigrated to America which proved a remarkable success. He thought to follow the example of Ireland in respect of Bihar famine. By encouraging such immigration he not only wanted to people the tea districts of Assam but at the same time he found in it a solution to the famine. Further, the recent use of overland route by the famine-stricken people, with partial success, also convinced him of the immense possibilities of safe despatch of labour by the overland route if adequate facilities were provided for the purpose. The Government of Bengal gave direct encouragement both to the employers and labourers after the

73. B.G.P. File No. 322 of 1873-74, No. 7F, 21 November, 1873.
75. B.G.P. File No. 322 of 1873-74, No. 7F, 21 November, 1873.
promulgation of Act VII of 1873 to use the overland route.

Necessary arrangements were made with the help of the local officers of various districts to provide assistance as best possible at their command. Thus, the overland route, which was abandoned for sometime, again began to be used gradually. In the interest of the marchers, Dhubri was made a controlling station, in March 1875, and the Government Officers were stationed there for the execution of labour contracts and also for providing necessary assistance to the labourers. Dhubri was also made a steamer station and this facilitated transport to those, who wanted to proceed to Upper Assam by steamers instead of travelling by overland route. Since then, a part of labour traffic was diverted from the recruiting districts by the overland route upto Dhubri, and beyond Dhubri they proceeded either by steamer or on foot crossing the Brahma-putra by ferry.

In the meantime, when the railway communication from Bengal towards Assam was extended upto Rungpur by the year 1877, the question of substituting railway journey for the tedious and dangerous steamer passage between Goalundo and Dhubri was put forward in April to the Government of Bengal by

77. B.G.P.E., November 1878 (Extract of the proceedings of Chief Commissioner of Assam, 27 August, 1878).
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
Col. Keating, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1874-78). Keating termed his suggestion "a decided opinion" and suggested that to avoid the risk of steamer transport, labour traffic should be directed via rail route up to Rungpur, and from Rungpur labourers were to proceed, as usual, on foot to reach Dhubri. For the convenience of the marchers he also proposed construction of Sarais or rest houses at each easy stage and supply of small waterproof bags to keep the labourers' beddings dry from rain.

On receipt of the proposal, the Government of Bengal referred the matter to the mercantile firms, who were agents in Calcutta for tea gardens in Assam, for their opinion. Many of them discouraged such a proposal of total diversion of labour immigration via Rungpur. They pointed out several cases of deaths from cholera even during the journey on foot to Dhubri and stated that mortality would be much greater in the Rungpur-Dhubri route when all the labour traffic would be diverted through railway. They requested Government of Bengal to keep both Goalundo and Dhubri as the places of embarkation. The mercantile firms stated further that journey by overland route would occupy a longer time and would also increase the cost of labour.

The Government of Bengal decided to keep both the


routes in case the Steamer Company was agreeable to reduce their fare, and Keatinge was directed to take up the matter with the Company. Keatinge found that the latter was adamant and unwilling to reduce the fare, although they assured that if all the traffic was diverted via Rungpur they might consider the question of reduction of fares. Keatinge was firm in his decision as the interest of his province was involved, and he assured Government of Bengal that if the use of railway and the marching by the overland route both be encouraged, the Steamer Company would be compelled to reduce their fare in the long run. At the same time, it became also difficult for Campbell to take an unilateral decision in the matter ignoring the mercantile community. He preferred to adopting a middle course in the matter, and from 1 November, 1877, he directed to divert part of the labour traffic via Rungpur by the railway and part of the traffic, as usual, by the steamer whichever became convenient to the labourers. For facilitating marching by the overland route between Rungpur and Dhubri special arrangements were made for care and inspection of labourers on transit. Sarais were constructed, wells dug out, rules were framed prescribing arrangements to be made by Sirdars in-charge of the marching party in respect of food, clothing, medicine etc.

82. A.S.File No. 2036 of 1879, No. 29-42, Proceedings for Emigration August 1877.

83. Ibid.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES INTRODUCED.

These measures greatly facilitated despatch of labourers into Assam. From March 1876, with the commencement of immigration at Dhubri via Rungpur route, marching through the overland route became popular. In 1877, about thirty six percent of the total immigrants took this Rungpur route, in 1878, this rose to forty percent, and in 1879 fifty eight percent. The popularity of overland route adversely affected the fortunes of Steamer Company. In 1879, they were disposed to review the question of reducing fare. Two years before when the matter was taken up by Keatinge the Company was adamant in their stand and expressed that if they were allowed to carry more labourers only then they would make some concessions. Keatinge was firm in his stand and he persuaded Sir Asley Eden, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (1877-79), not to accede to such an unjust demand and the latter also held the same view. But in 1879, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal changed his views and openly advocated for giving some concession to the Company. It is, in the above context, not unreasonable to guess that by that time mercantile and planting community, who had a vital interest in the shipping business, won over the Lieutenant-Governor to their side. It is surprising to note, that Eden advocated for such a concession on the ground


86. A.S. Proceedings File No. 203 G of 1879.
that steamers were well-built and had magnificent upper decks, lofty and high, and capable to protect from rain. During February 1879, the case was referred to Sir S.C. Bayley, who succeeded Keatinge, as the Chief Commissioner of Assam (1878-81), for a review. The latter had to accede to the request of the Lieutenant-Governor in his letter on 28 April, 1879. Accordingly the Steamer Company agreed to reduce fare in 1879 and also assured to provide a regular and speedier steamer service. Further, they were required after, 3 March, 1881, to feed the immigrants while on board instead of by the contractors. A rule for a standard diet was also prescribed for the purpose. With removal of earlier inconveniences steamer service became popular amongst the immigrants, and almost all the immigrants coming up to Dhubri instead of proceeding on foot to gardens, as they previously used to do, availed themselves of the steamer service.

Encouraged by these measures planters laid greater

87. Ibid. No. Nil. 18 June, 1879.

88. Ibid. No. 1407, Ridsdale to Governor of Bengal, 28 April, 1879, Assam Immigration Report, 1879, Para 5.

* It was decided that the steamers were to run from Tezpur to Dhubri by five days, Dhubri to Dibrugarh by Nine days. Fares from Dhubri to Gauhati were reduced from Rs. 12/- to Rs. 5/- up to Dhansirimukh from Rs. 15/- to Rs. 10/-.

89. Ibid.

90. B.C.P.E., December 1878, Nos. 18-22.


92. Ibid.
emphasis on the improvement of railway communication with the province rather than on introduction of any more preventive measures by legislative interference to regulate the existing system of transport. Labour Enquiry Commission, 1880 to which a reference has been made in the previous chapter, also laid much stress on communication as a remedy to proper immigration. They pointed out that if line under construction linking Bettiah, a great labour supply station, with Peepraghat on the eastern limit of Durbhanga be continued through Purneah and North Dinajpur to Parbatipur on the Northern Bengal State Railway, the whole of the North Bihar and the trans-Gangetic portion of the North-West provinces would be in direct railway communication with Assam. Moreover, a line from Chargola to Parbatipur would place districts of south Bihar, Munghyr and Bhagalpur in an equally favourable position. Further, on 3 September, 1881, an influential deputation, representing the Chamber of Commerce, the British Indian Association, the Traders Association, and other institutions, interested in the tea districts of Assam, urged upon the Lieutenant-Governor, the necessity of establishing railway communication with Assam. They put forward a plan for a line starting from Narayanganj and running through Dacca and Mymensing to Gauhati by means of steam ferry.

94. Ibid.
However, when a change in the Act VII of 1873 became essential for improving the condition of plantation labour in the other fields, all the measures previously adopted by executive orders to facilitate transport of labour had been incorporated in the Act I of 1882, along with some additional provisions. The new act embodied the following provisions:

(1) Masters of steamers were compelled to make provisions for food, clothing and medical facilities and local Government was empowered to make by-laws for the purpose.

(2) Medical Officers of vessels were required to be licensed by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal.

(3) Embarkation agent was empowered to order departure of vessels if delay occurred.

(4) Magistrates were empowered to remove any excess number of native passengers and detain till another opportunity occurred for forwarding them. All expenditure incurred to feed them and to provide shelter was to be recovered from the Master or owner of the ship.

(5) Masters of steamers were directed to take way-bills without fail to follow its instructions rigidly.

With the incorporation of the above measures, the transport of labour by the steamer was expected to be more convenient and safe in near future.

STEAMER IN THE SURMA VALLEY AND EXTENSION OF RAILWAYS.

In the Surma Valley, as has already been discussed, the means of transport was limited to the use of country boats since the beginning of despatch of labour to that division. It was impossible on the part of the Government to excercise

any control over the boats employed for the purpose, as it had to traverse the low lands of Sylhet. The journey was exceptionally long, tiresome and boring. The immigrants were exposed to very unhealthy conditions of life. The supply of food was inadequate and medical facilities were only nominal. The general supervision during the boat journey was entirely left with the peons. Under such conditions, the immigrants were frequently liable to fall sick and many of them died enroute. Cases of extreme inhuman treatment were also not rare. Narrating one of such cases, writing his Immigration Report for 1884, S.D.O., Habiganj stated:

Cholera broke out in a boat carrying up coolies, one was attacked and became very ill from the disease. In order to be rid of an encumbrance, and thinking that the poor man was sure to die, the chaprasi in-charge turned him out to a sand bed to take his chance of dying of cholera or surviving. Ultimately the man arrived at his garden to tell the tale.

The difficulty in introducing steamer service in the Surma Valley arose mainly from shallowness of water and existence of invisible big boulders in the beds of the river Kushiara and Barak. The planters of Cachar, occasionally suggested to the Government of Bengal for blasting out the boulders with the help of explosive materials. But this appeared impracticable to the engineers. However, when in 1885, of the labourers despatched by country boats to Cachar, no less than 51.9 persons died during boat journey, the

Government could no longer ignore such an important issue. On examination of the Immigration Report of Assam for the year 1885, the Government of India decided not to allow such a state of affairs in the Surma Valley to be continued for an unlimited period. In their resolution on the said report they decided to introduce on an experimental basis small feeder steamers for the transport of immigrants. Thus, since the beginning of the year 1887, daily steamer service was introduced in that division.

Notwithstanding the introduction of steamer service, all the tea planters of Surma Valley did not send their labourers by it. One main objection to the use of steamer was the expense. Fare from Goalundo to Silchar by steamer was Rs. 8/14/- whereas it was only Rs.2/- by country boats. Another objection to the use of steamers was the transhipment at Fenchuganj either to perform journey by country boats or to proceed on foot by the overland route, which became inevitable during dry season owing to want of sufficient water in the river Kushiara. Despatch of labour by steamer was further discouraged when the evils of steamer transport, which were previously found in the Brahmaputra Valley, began to occur in the Surma Valley. An excessive mortality resulted in during 1893 to 1895.

102. Assam Immigration Reports, 1893-95, vide mortality tables.
Towards the close of 1898, railway communication was extended in the Surma Valley connecting Chittagong, Badarpour and Silchar. The Government of Bengal took much initiative in the matter and constructed shelter houses in some of the railway stations, where labourers were to alight for journey to distant gardens. Arrangements were also made for the supply of cooked meals at suitable intervals on the railway journey. Thus, from 1898, labourers could be sent to the Surma Valley either by steamers or by railways and the use of country boats was abandoned altogether.

DAILY STEAMER SERVICE IN UPPER ASSAM.

Notwithstanding the extension of railways unto Rungpur in 1877, some new problems arose in connection with the despatch of labourers to the Brahmaputra Valley. The Government of Bengal expected that all the labourers would proceed by train from the recruiting district via Sitarampura, Raniganj and Calcutta to Jatrapur. From Jatrapur they were expected to advance by steamer to Dhubri. This was the shortest possible route to reach the Brahmaputra valley. But in fact, some of the poor "free emigrants", being unable to pay train fare, proceeded some distance on foot. When exhausted, they availed themselves of the train for some time and after some relief they again advanced on foot. From Kaunia,

105. The Englishman, Letters to the editor column, 23 March, 1878.
instead of proceeding towards Jatrapur to avail the steamer, they preferred going on foot towards Dhubri to save money. As the Government did not anticipate that the labourers might also proceed in this way, they did not keep any arrangement for giving assistance to those using overland route. As such, this resulted in unusual mortality for want of proper care. Early in 1878, addressing a letter to the editor Englishman, a kind-hearted European lady, who happened to be a traveller by the same route, narrated:

The sight of the poor creatures, men, women and children of all ages......lying dead, dying and deserted on the sides of the roads......the little boys scarcely dead, being torn by dogs, vultures. The poor creatures struggle on as long as their weary limbs....let them....until at least, unable to move another step, they sit down, deserted by chaprassas, duffadars, fellow labourers, without medicine or food.....till.....death wafts them away.

When the evils of using overland route and consequent calamities were repeatedly flashed in the columns of newspapers and also mentioned in the official reports, no professional recruiter and sirdar for fear of punishments dared to send their recruits as free emigrants and the route was abandoned. Even the use of overland route from Dhubri to the gardens of Assam was also gradually abandoned. During 1882 and 1883 only a very small number marched towards gardens. In 1884, only 19 labourers did so and since 1885 none marched.

106. Ibid.
107. The Englishman, Letters to the editor column, 23 March, 1878.
beyond Dhubri and all proceeded by steamer.

This naturally increased steamer traffic from Dhubri which became the halting station for a large number of immigrants. The number of steamers, which were in the service between Dhubri and Upper Assam, were found to be inadequate to carry all the immigrants regularly and very often a good number of them had to be detained at Dhubri for an uncertain period. Further, with already inadequate steamer service, there were frequent casualties of navigation resulting in non-arrival of steamers at scheduled times. Consequently, it became extremely difficult for the Government Officers at Dhubri to arrange accommodation, food and other facilities during the stay of such immigrants and also to their subsequent despatches to the gardens of Assam by steamer. Inevitably, Cholera broke out frequently at Dhubri and many of them had died. To arrange speedier despatch and also to avoid overcrowding at Dhubri and thereby removing mortality, the Government of Bengal introduced daily steamer service from Dhubri, in 1884, and as many as 13 mail steamers were put in service from Dhubri to Dibrugarh which performed journeys in five days. With this, congestion at Dhubri was reduced and death rate decreased. In 1884 alone, mortality was reduced to 0.49 percent and in 1885 it was further decreased to 0.22 percent.

109. Ibid.
Notwithstanding the measures of control, as embodied in the Act I of 1882, and introduction of daily steamer service in the Brahmaputtra valley, the mortality in the passage from Dhubri to Dibrugarh could not be checked in the long run mainly due to overcrowding. Although, provisions were made for removing excess number of passengers from the vessel, in no case such removal appeared to have been effected. During 1887 and 1888, Cholera broke out in an epidemic form and a heavy mortality resulted. This compelled the Chief Commissioner of Assam to make a personal enquiry at Dhubri during his cold weather tour of 1888. On examination of the situation, the Chief Commissioner submitted a report to the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal on the various aspects of transport and laid emphasis on the introduction of further measures of sanitation and proper control over the shelters provided to the labourers at Dhubri and beyond Dhubri during passage. This eventually led to the promulgation of special sanitary act by the Government of Bengal known as The Inland Emigrants Health Act of 1889. This empowered local Governments to make rules for the welfare, sanitation and inspection of both depots and steamers. Local Governments were further empowered to regulate movements of steamers, frame rules regarding supply of food, water, clothing and disposal of dead bodies during passage. Thus,

112. Ibid, January 1890. No. 1, Para 1.

113. Ibid, Para 3.
with the implementation of these measures, the situation improved. Adequate inspection and due precaution were provided for by the Chief Commissioner of Assam in both the valleys. Naturally, death rate was gradually reduced up to 1893.

Meanwhile, two further new railway routes were connected with the main line viz (1) Khana Junction via Sahibgunj and Kathihar to Jatrapur and (2) Lakhisarai via Sahibgunj and Kathihar to Jatrapur. The labourers travelling by these routes did not pass through the central stations in Bengal, where labour contract could be entered into. A large number, therefore, came straightway to Dhubri by rail and after making contract there, they proceeded by steamer to the tea gardens. Inevitably, labour traffic at Dhubri once again increased and it became the halting station for a large number of immigrants. As usual, for this congestion at Dhubri and overcrowding during passage, mortality during 1896-97 rose at an alarming rate. This created a problem once again.

The Principal Medical Officer and Sanitary Commissioner of Assam reviewed the whole position and came to the conclusion that introduction of anti-choleraic injection would lessen the outbreaks of cholera. Meanwhile, for frequent outbreak of cholera, the Director-General of the Indian Medical

114. Assam Immigration Report 1896, Para II.
Service was compelled to visit Assam in 1896 for an on-the-spot study of the situation and was convinced of the lack of proper supervision of the immigrants, both at Dhubri and beyond, which inevitably resulted in cholera in the past years and also expressed that introduction of anti-choleraic inoculation would be a costly experiment and disapproved such an idea altogether. For this difference of opinion, the Chief Commissioner of Assam directed Surgeon Major Neil Campbell of Indian Medical Service by the close of the same year to consider the whole question thoroughly and to submit a report on it. About the same time, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal also deputed Captain Vaughan of Indian Medical Service to institute a similar enquiry with special reference to the despatch of immigrants by railway through Bengal.

In February 1897, Major Neil submitted his forty paged report. The report clearly showed that cholera was prevalent among the immigrants long before they reached the steamers. That immigrants into Assam were often infected in a terrible degree by the germs of cholera enroute and that the welfare of the labourers was as much dependent on the introduction of improved sanitary arrangements of the denots

117. Ibid.
118. B.G.P.E., October, 1897. No. 43-45, F.No. also B.F.P.E., June 1897, Nos. 12-17.
120. Ibid, 1898, Para 23.
of recruitment and along the line of rail in the Central Provinces and Bengal as it was on the introduction of reforms on the river steamer and at the embarkation depots in Assam. Among other things, he suggested specially that overcrowding in railway should be avoided and sufficient railway carriages at Naihati and Bilaspur should be provided to prevent undue detention in the rest houses and depots. Further, for effective supervision he suggested appointment of Military Hospital Assistants or an Officer of Indian Medical Service during the recruiting season.

On the other hand, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal on the basis of the recommendations of Captain Vaughan, issued some new rules (under the Act I of 1882 and Act I (B.C.) of 1889, Indian Emigrants Health Act.) in 1898. By this, the labour traffic was restricted to two routes; the one via Naihati and Goalundo for the majority of immigrants, and the other via Katihar and Jatapur for immigrants proceeding from the districts of Bihar and the North-West Province north of the Ganges, while a block system of telegraphic advices, based on recommendation made by Captain Vaughan, had been adopted with a view to preventing congestion of traffic. Infected batches of labourers were directed to be segregated with a view to preventing infusion of cholera from the railway carriages on board the steamers. In the rules issued by the Government

121. Ibid.
of Bengal, mentioned above, for the treatment of immigrants on the steamer journey, the surgeon - Major Neil Campbell's proposals had for the most part been adopted. Provisions were also made for treatment of immigrants travelling by railway to Assam. By the close of the year 1898, a Military Assistant Surgeon had been appointed the Travelling Inspector of Immigrants with headquarters at Dhubri.

Thus, after the enforcement of the several remedial measures the mortality was greatly reduced at every stage. Surprisingly enough, by the close of 1899, a serious outbreak of cholera once again broke out which indicated that even under the most careful and favourable conditions, the transit of immigrants to Assam was always exposed to danger and was not due to any particular cause. It was due to the combination of causes and only a careful supervision and close watch, as the Director-General of Indian Medical Service expressed could keep a constant check and diminish the rate of cholera cases.

In the meantime, Gauhati - Tinsukia line upto Lumdung was completed. Construction upto Lakwa was finished in 1901, and the whole project upto Tinsukia was done in 1903. Gauhati was made a disembarkation station of steamer,

for the despatch of labour to Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur by train. With these improvements, transport of labour into the province became, by and large safer and quicker. In view of the improvement and in anticipation of its future promise, incorporation of no further measure in respect of transport of labour was considered necessary when Act VI of 1901 was passed.