The idea of introducing British enterprise and capital in agriculture drew the attention of the Board of Revenue and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. Some development took place first in the Brahmaputra Valley proper and then in the Barak Valley. Tea Committee was formed in 1834; experimental tea gardens were established in 1836 and the cultivation started in 1837. A wasteland rule was made in 1838 and revised in 1854.¹ The Assam Company received all government experimental tea gardens in 1840. The latter rule of Assam was introduced in Cachar on 12 January 1856 for the tea grant of waste land. The waste lands

settlement policy tempted the planters to grab more lands. To facilitate the land grabbing, the system of fee simple grants was introduced in 1861. The planters paid nominal revenue in comparison to the peasants whose rate varied from Rs. 2-8 to Rs. 5 per acre. The planters usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the jhum rights of the tribal shifting cultivation.²

Under the above rule thirty eight applications for waste lands had been registered. As the Assam Company led the way of tea in the Brahmaputra Valley, the same was done by the Cachar Company in Cachar. But G Williamson of the Assam Company also utilised his experience in the cultivation in Cachar.

The progress of the industry became a regular feature since 1869. Some statistics for this growth is available. In that year total area under cultivation was 24,151 acres and outturn was 4,234,794 lbs. 171 grants were made in 1870 and area under cultivation as 484,760 acres. In 1884 the area under the cultivation was 48,721,000 lbs. Cachar topped the list in tea production in 1885. The establishment of tea gardens in Cachar began to increase in subsequent years. There were 199 gardens in 1895, 159 in 1915 and 117 in 1928. The colonial growth with foreign capital and skill was thus remarkable.³

But what was the condition of the toiling men out whose toil capital was accumulated by leaps and bounds? How did they react to

² Ibid.
³ Ranjit Kumar De, op cit, p xxx
the horrifying disease affecting them since late 1850s? The immigrants with a hope of better life, believed the words of the arkattis or coolie contractors and sardars and to try their luck in new land joined in great numbers for tea districts. But after their arrival, they found that their life in the plantation was very hard from the very beginning. This is being analysed on different fronts such as freedom of movement, accommodation, education and wages.

**Freedom of Movement**

The labourers were of multi-tribe, multi-caste and multi-lingual background. This complexity helped the planters to keep the labourers well under their control. After arriving at the respective tea gardens the labourers were accommodated in segregated 'coolie' lines and kept under strict surveillance, day and night. The chaukidar followed everywhere even when one was out for nature's call. Even at night when women were asleep and improperly dressed the chaukidar intruded their privacy. The day of the labourers began with the ringing of gong and ended at sunset with another gong ring. The coolies were subjected to the most arduous kind of work under heat, rain and cold. There was a nirukh system in which the assigned task had to be finished in a day in addition to the monthly rates system. A new labourer was put under probation for six months even as he was

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* Nirukh system was a overtime work system.
4 P Saunders, British India Tea Company Ltd., Cachar to Bengal Governor, 9 October, 1865, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, Emigration Department, January 1866, No. 66. NAND
depressed physically and psychologically after the long and tedious rail and river journey. After this period, most of the labourers adjusted to the new life and those who did not and were not used to field work were often punished. Some were forfeited of their pay and rations. Due to the shortage of food in the early days of emigration, many labourers perished for the planters and even the governments looked to their sufferings with indifference. Due to their hunger and enfeebled condition, they could not even bring the waste land under tea cultivation.

In 1859, when the Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act was passed, it extended to all the tea districts. Equipped with the act, the planters resorted to the system of forced labour. Beating, flogging became common in the gardens. The treatment meted out to the labourers on the tea plantations was appalling. So long as the labourers were well looked after, they adjusted to the hardships of the garden life but sometimes under hard masters, the treatment of the labourers was beyond any toleration. Several labourers tried to escape. The runaway labourers were imprisoned for a month under the section 492 of the penal codes, but they could not be arrested and flogged. By the Act of 1865, the employer was empowered to arrest the escapee. The planters of Cachar requested the Government to empower them at par their counterparts in Mauritius.  

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7 J C Jha, *op. cit.*, p. 147
given more power, the management took every measure to prevent any escape of the labourers. At every outlet in the coolie lines watchmen were posted and the labourers prevented from going out freely at night. Any person producing an escaping labourer was given a reward of Rs 5. When the escapee was caught he was tied to a pole and flogged mercilessly and sometimes even causing death. The reward of Rs 5 was deducted from the wage of the runaway labourer.\(^8\) The atrocities inflicted upon the runaway coolies reminded Fuller, the Lieutenant Governor of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The runaways were generally not made over to the police as laws required.\(^9\)

The labourers’ life in the estate was governed by the laws interpreted by the managers and proprietors. The ‘watch dogs’ the protector of labour and the magistrate instead of implementing the laws, they themselves were a part of the system and showed a partisan attitude.\(^10\) According to a Report on Labour Emigration (1884) an immigrant woman preferred abortion to child-bearing for if she gave birth to a child, the child had to be taken along while out at work, leave it in the nearest drains exposed to extreme heat or cold, half starved, or even fall and die or leave it behind at home without anybody to are for it.\(^11\) The absence ranging to seven days or refusal

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^10\) J C Jha, *op. cit.*, p 159
\(^11\) Ibid.
to work was liable for imprisonment. Any attempt to escape or desert invited arrest and punishment. Collecting facts from the gardens of Cachar and Sylhet in 1864, *The Hindu Patriot* wrote:

> It is a melancholy condition that in developing the resources of the country the European must need oppress the natives and wade through their blood to reach the goal of his ambition.

The Sanitary Commissioner of Assam reported in 1884 that the condition of the immigrants often changed from bad to worse as days passed by. They found themselves exiled into bondage. So speaking on the resolution of the First Session of the Bengal Provincial Conference, Bipin Chandra Pal recollected:

> The deep impression which the sight of a cast out coolie from a tea garden had upon him

and referred to the sight of the plight of the coolies in the tea gardens in Assam and demanded an independent commission to enquire into their condition "with a view to early legislation for the redress of such grievances as may be proved by the Inquiry Commission." According to the proceedings of the First Session of the Bengal Provincial Conference, 1888, the poor coolies led veritably the life of beasts of burden. They were treated like beasts, both by the European managers and by Babus and their underlings. The number of these miserable men in Assam calculated at the census in the year 1881 was 1,89,160. The four years later the number increased to 2,76,863 and eleven months later the number had risen to 2,901,608.

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13 Amalendu Dey, op cit, p 67
14 Amit Kumar Nag, "Condition of Tea Garden Labourers", op cit, p. 53.
15 Ibid.
Lord Hardinge disliked the system of recruitment and the treatment the labourers were given. He wrote in June 1915 that the labourers were like 'dumb, driven cattle, too panic stricken to speak out' but the planters had money, class interest, cleverness and education. So, the labourers had no chance of winning. In 1926 the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act was repeated. But the evil tainted planters took advantage of the illiteracy and ignorance of the workers; the planters continued to deprive the labourers from freedom of movement. Restriction was imposed on the labourers to move from one garden to another or return from plantation industry to their homes. Margaret Reid quoted the Assam Labour Inquiry Committee as

"the committee, record their strong disapproval of the practice of placing coolie, particularly new immigrants under illegal long term agreements under illegal assert of absconders and of the practice of taking contracts from minors they are unable to say how far the private arrest prevailed, but that it is exercised they have no doubt they behave that the freedom of the coolie is considerably restricted under the present system."

The condition of the labourers in the tea gardens seems to have no change for better. The suppression, oppression and restriction were the features for the control of the labourers.

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16 J C Jha, *op. cit.*, p. 162
ACCOMMODATION

After arrival, the labourers were accommodated in barracks situated on the edge of the plantations where thick vegetation existed. Such places were normally the hotbed of malaria, kalazar, cholera, dysenteries, leprosy and many other diseases. They were most unhygienic places with thick population, but without provision for drinking water, latrine and urinal. The houses were made of mud-thatch which were temporary in nature. In every labour line there existed country wine shops cheaply consumed by the labourers. The management in its interest to enhance its profit neglected the interest of the workers and practically did little to better the condition of the workers. The management desired the 'status quo' to continue.  

Most of the new immigrants found the local climate and the people utterly strange. They often landed in gardens where no arrangements had been made and also no medical aid was available. Not being used to the nature of work, the change of climate and the new mode of life and diet many suffered from different sickness referred above and quite good number of labourers perished. In a particular garden the mortality was so great that the manager deserted the garden, left the dead bodies indisposed and the dying ones uncared for. The miseries imposed upon the labourers was not because they were

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18 Late Biswanath Upadhya, an interview conducted on 27 June 2000, at Cachar Sramik Union Office, Silchar
19 J C Jha, op. cit., p 154
illiterate and ignorant but because they were unable to stop work as they were bound by the penal contract.

EDUCATION

Education in the tea gardens was a late beginning in Barak Valley. A formal committee for the purpose was formed only in 1906 with the name Longai and Jhuri Valley District Committee. The resolution that was passed at the meeting held on 10th October, 1906 was like,

The Committee were of opinion that the only education denied by the coolie labourers is to be able to read and write ‘nagri’ to enable them to communicate with each other, and keep a check on their users. The introduction of Bengali would serve no useful purpose.\(^{20}\)

The Committee was of the opinion that ‘Bengali’ would be adopted in schools dependent on government however, the government would not interfere with the teaching of ‘nagri’ on a garden where the population was composed of north west provinces coolies.\(^{21}\) A year later the government extended help with grants for books, appliance and with some help toward the construction of a school house, or the pay of the teacher where such was required. The report was said to have underestimated the amount of teaching done on most gardens in the Surma Valley in private classes by clerks, sirdars and educated coolies. There were several such teachers, teaching as a rule, their


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 2.
own vernacular; those classes were small and not very regular; but taken together may reach a very considerable number of children.

Further suggestions were made for the improvement of education in tea estates. The committee suggested for these types of schools,

a) ordinary government lower primary whole day schools,

b) subsidized private evening schools,

c) purely private unsubsidised evening schools.

Occasional informal visits were recommended but the unnecessary interference was not favoured as it would lessen the interest of the managers to the well-being of the schools. The schools in Surma Valley functioned unsatisfactorily in the years that followed. There were instances of bad conduct of garden school boys and thin attendance. For this sorry state of education in the gardens there was without doubt latent objective of the planters. The planters were generally speaking in favour of giving the garden labourers only such teaching as would be useful to them as labourers. There was no employment in Assam open to 'educated' garden coolies. The planters apprehended that the labourer's education would ultimately bring awareness with regard to their nature of work and cause problems to the management on many fronts. Thus, from the management end there was hidden objective as not to

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22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 2
encourage education among the children of the labourers. In this connection, Hem Barua quoted the Investigation Committee of the All India Women's Conference. July, 1946,

The mental development of tea plantation labour is pathetic in the extreme and compares unfavourably not only with that of the jute workers but even with that of the mine labourers whose development in this respect is well known. "The committee did not find satisfactory arrangements for schooling in a single garden they visited either in the Surma or in the Assam Valley. In some gardens a semblance of school does exist. The government also contributes towards the pay of the school teachers wherever the garden authorities required their help".25

The educational scenario in the gardens of Barak Valley cut a sorry figure.

SOCIAL PROBLEM

Socially, the tea garden labourers were looked down upon. Since they came from different background, it was difficult for them to adjust themselves with the local population. The local population took little interest in mixing with the labourers before the Gandhian movement started. The tea communities were given lesser importance in the social activities. In fact, it was rare that the tea communities were invited by the local population for any social function. They used to be called 'coolies' by the people. For the management and for the local population their social standing was inferior. Utter neglect and isolation remained for sometime in the garden circle. But from 1880s

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25 J B Ganguly, 'Plight of Tea Garden Workers' op cit, p 91.
Congressmen began to visit the gardens for organisational purpose and closed societies began to be opened soon where the socialists too established their contact. In the last decade of the 19th century, Bipin Chandra Pal, the well known nationalist leader and a Brahmo, raised a storm of protest against the exploitation of the coolies by the sahibs. Both Bipin Chandra Pal and Dwarkinath Ganguly took up the cause of the downtrodden tea labourers of the Barak Valley. They published the deplorable condition of them and demanded better wages and lesser working hours through the book *The New Economic Power of India*, and the Bengali journal *Samhati*. The Indian National Congress also took up the cause of the tea labourers of the Barak Valley in their annual conference in 1896.26

**WAGES**

In Chapter 2 some aspects of wage items are discussed in the way of comparison with other valleys. This will be pin-pointed here in connection with a discussion on the Barak Valley.

On the economic front, the standard of living was very low. The minimum wage remained unaltered during years 1865-1903. Arkattis and Sardars had recruited the poor labourers with assurances of fabulous wages and of getting land to cultivate and even to own cattle. The labourers, in fact, dreamt of becoming owners of land themselves while working in the gardens permanently. In the Surma

Valley (now Barak Valley) the practice of settling the labourers on the gardens rice land was introduced in the early stage of the cultivation of tea. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported that the Surma Valley (Barak Valley) planters had been for years past settling their coolies on the garden rice land.27 Even doing so, the position of the labourers was no better. Low wages were mentioned in the Tea Commissioner’s Report of 1868. In 1883, the subdivisional officer of Karimganj, Sylhet district (now a district of Assam) reported, the rate of wages of Act Labourers was less than rupees three per month during the last season. Bengalis in the adjoining villages earned without difficulty rupees seven per month.28

In the 1850s, the minimum monthly wage was Rs. 2/8 per month, by 1860 the rate had risen to Rs. 4 or Rs. 5. The price of rice in 1860 was Rs. 2 per maund and in 1865 and 1866, when prices were extremely high, the normal price for the rice was Rs. 1 per maund. The Act VI of 1865 established a minimum monthly wage of Rs. 5 for a man, Rs. 4 for a woman and Rs. 3 for a child under twelve years of age. In 1868 the Tea Commissioner’s Report pointed that in many gardens labourers were insufficiently nourished. In 1865-66 the pay of the labourers was in arrear for two months in several tea gardens. On the Loharbund Garden owned by the South Cachar Tea

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28 Amit Kumar Nath, op. cit., p. 53
Company Ltd, the labourers had not been paid for about five months.²⁹

Act I of 1882 made it obligatory on managers to supply immigrant labourers with food grains at reasonable rate whenever it was not available in the market at such rate. Rs. 3 per maund was fixed as price at which rice should be supplied to the tea labourers. This fixation continued up to 1915. The Act I also restored the statutory minimum wage for immigrant labourers. It was fixed at Rs. 5 for a man and Rs. 4 for a woman for the first three years of the contract and Rs. 6 and Rs. 5 respectively for the last two years. This statutory minimum contract period continued till 1901. It was in 1901 the Act VI raised the wage to Rs. 5/8 for a man and Rs. 4/8 for a woman.³⁰

Henry Cotton, Chief Commissioner of Assam, criticised the indentured system in 1901 when the Assam Labour and Emigration Bill was being discussed in the Legislative Council and said that it was a pity that a labour in the jute mill got Rs. 6-10 a month, while his counterparts in the tea gardens received Rs. 4 only.³¹

In 1906 Assam Labour Enquiry Committee studied the economic condition of Assam tea garden labourers. The report said that a family consisting of one working man, one working woman and

²⁹ From C Marshal, Protector of Labour, Sylhet and Cachar to Deputy Commissioner, Cachar no. 20, 24J. 1863, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, Emigration, 1 March 1868, no. 24, NAND
³¹ Ibid.
one working child would have earned averagely Rs. 14 in September 1905 and under Rs. 12 in March 1906 because March was the lowest earning month and September the highest.

In 1921, another committee examined the economic condition of tea garden labourers and found that prices had risen considerably during the war and the wage increase was not proportionate to the rise of price. The condition was far worse in Cachar. The Commissioner of the Surma Valley stated in 1922,

To live in comfort a man would require to earn Rs. 10, a woman Rs. 7 or Rs. 8 and a child Rs. 4. The actual earnings of a man at this time were Rs. 6/3/4 in Cachar. 32

Bonamali, a male worker of Bando Tea Estate of Lakhipur subdivision told the Royal Commission on Labour Inquiry, the wage in all I could do to get enough food to eat, how could I save! I am in debt....to various banias. 33

**CONCESSION IN THE WAR PERIOD**

During the war period the Indian Tea Association recommended concession rate seeing the mood of the labourers and the pressing socio-economic situation and intervention of the Congress and Communist minded people of this and other places. With regard to the Surma Valley, the following concessions were effected from January 1, 1942:

(a) Rice was sold at rate of 8 seers to 5 seers weekly for an adult and 2 seers for a child;

(b) A cloth allowance of Rs. 3 for men and Rs. 2/4 for women were to be paid before the Durga Puja in 1941.\(^{34}\)

In 1942 a scheme of cash allowances was made in addition to concession rice supply.

(i) 6 pies, 4 ½ pies and 3 pies on the daily hazira of men, women and children respectively;

(ii) A monthly allowance at the above rate;

(iii) Cloth allowance worth Rs. 5 for men, Rs. 4 for women and Rs. 2 for children at each of the pujas.

In 1943 there was modification in the scale of concessions in food stuffs. Rice for adult male was 4 seers weekly, at Rs. 5 per maund. For adults women 3 seers weekly at Rs. 5 per maund. For a child 2 seers weekly at Rs. 5 per maund.

Other commodities:

- Dal - 2 seers per month at 3 annas per seer
- Salt – ½ seer per month at one anna 6 pies per seer
- Mustard oil – ½ seer per month at 3 annas per seer
- Gur – 1 seer per month at 3 annas a pies per seer.\(^{35}\)

No other major changes were made during 1945 and the concessions or cash payments in force in 1944 continued. In 1946

\(^{34}\) P. Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 314.
there took place variations from district to district with regard to issue of food stuffs.

The following table shows the earnings of Cachar tea labourers from 1905 to 1922.

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Rs.</th>
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<td>1922</td>
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Source: P Griffiths, *op. cit* , p. 309.

Considering from all angles one would not escape expressing that the condition of the tea garden labourers of Barak Valley was one of misery and exploitation. The Bengali intelligentsia played a big role in highlighting the sad state of affairs of the labourers. We have
discussed two different political activists who took up the cause of the tea labourers in Barak Valley.

With the passage of time the labourers became quite conscious of their rights. The years 1920-22 witnessed increasing number of strikes and protests in expression of their grievances. One concrete example of the labour strike was that of Chargola and Longai valley estates. The workers there had agitated demanding increase in wages and the management was in no mood to budge an inch. With non-cooperation movement set in the labourers being denied of their rights, responded to the call of the non-cooperation activists. The labourers from Anipur T.E moved towards their home on 3 May 1921. They were persuaded to return to their gardens, but the labourers instead marched ahead shouting 'Gandhi Maharaj Ki Jai' and proceeded towards Chandpur Railway station to proceed to their native place. Having failed to persuade them, the local magistrate Kiran Chand Dey gave firing order to the Gurkha Rifles where upon many labourers were killed and several other injured. The water of Padma river was reddened with the blood of the labourers\(^*\).\(^{36}\) Thus, the economic grievances provided a weapon for political action. The Gandhian call generated fearlessness among them. In the historic Chargola exodus, A K Chanda of Silchar and Chittaranjan Das of Calcutta appeared as emancipators of the exploited coolies.

\(^*\) This event was known as the Great Chargola Exodus where 43% of the labourers left their gardens.

\(^{36}\) Amalendu Guha, op. cit., p. 112
These events aroused and furthered the national sentiment of the labourers and they became more conscious. Another epoch-making incident in the labour history of Barak Valley was the Arunabond Labour Strike of 1939. The main grievances of the labourers were underweight of the tea leaves plucked by the workers, ill-treatment of the European planters towards labourers and lack of freedom. The tea labourers received a tremendous support from all political parties for the cause they fought. These were several minor incidents which were the results of the continuous oppression that the labourers were subjected to. The labourers were no longer isolated and untouchables. Their movements merged itself into the wide stream of Indian nationalism.

In conclusion, one may opine that the condition of the tea garden labourers of Barak Valley in pre-independent period was one of suppression and exploitation. But the situation changed when their initial lethargy and inertness wiped out as a result of their political participation in the Gandhian movements. So, gradually socio-economic situation changed for a better living.

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37 Late Viswanath Upadhyaya, an interview conducted on 27 February 2000 at Cachar Shramik Union, Silchar, also 'The Musalman', 5 March, 1921.