The cultivation of tea in the Brahmaputra Valley started from 1837, but the discovery of tea in the Barak Valley was made in 1855. Williamson of the Assam Company applied for waste land for the purpose of cultivation of tea in Cachar. Rule was made for the grant of waste land in Cachar in 1856 and the tea industry was first established in Burhangur in Cachar. Tea grants were made under the old Assam Rule of 1854 and fee simple tenure rule of 1861. Both ways the period of tenure was for 99 years.¹

This introduction of tea industry in Barak Valley in 1856 and its expansion was not without labour problem. The indigenous people of

Barak Valley were traditionally agriculturist and were too well enough to work under someone for a wage. The Superintendent of Cachar reported to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal on 20 January 1862, "...the people of Cachar are generally speaking too well off to labour for wages, except on their own fields....the very highest wages would not tempt him from his own fields". The paid labour system was also completely unknown to them. This posed a great problem to the ever expanding industry which required an increasing labour force. R Stewart, the Superintendent of Cachar was wrong when he said, "with regard to labour I do not anticipate there will be any great difficulty in obtaining the quantity which may be required, if not in Cachar, in the neighbouring district of Sylhet, the inhabitants of which district and of Jayantia came very willingly to Cachar and settle down in it". Even his assumption that each acre of tea cultivation would require the constant service of one man which could be obtained from neighbouring densely populated district of Sylhet also did not come true. The Bengali agriculturists of Sylhet had no inclination to join as tea garden labourers as there were ample opportunities of employment there. It may be mentioned that Sylhet also had tea gardens and the passage and environment there was better than that of Assam or Cachar.

An attempt was also made to employ the hill tribes of Cachar, like the Kukis, Nagas, Cacharies and others into tea planting work by

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2 General Department Proceedings, November, 1862, WBSA
3 J B Bhattacharjee, op cit., p.993
the agents of tea companies. It was a matter of great importance to offer every inducement to those tribes to abandon their migratory habit to take root on the soil and amalgamate themselves with the peasantry of the plains. They were made free from the payment of hill house tax. But in a thinly populated district like Cachar, where labour was so scarce, this offer of inducement could not solve the problem of labour shortage in tea industry.

It appears from the *Bengal Administrative Report, 1867-68,* that the planters sometimes usurped the grazing fields and encroached upon the *jhum* rights of the tribal shifting cultivators. The planters even disrupted inter-village communications by fencing the partition of the existing public roads and denying the right of way to the villages.

Having failed from all quarters of inducements to obtain labourers from the local population and the neighbourhood, on May 13, 1858, the manager of Goongur T.E. Mr Sunderman put a proposal of importing labourers from north India. Mr Stewart readily agreed and opined “it would be a measure attended with much benefit to the country, and to the tea planting interests”. He also expressed his opinion that the coolies be given the opportunity to take up cultivation of their own while labouring in the tea gardens. This facility would motivate the labourers to settle in Cachar permanently and be a

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5 Ibid., p. 144.
6 Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj,* New Delhi, 1983, p. 15
7 J B. Bhattacharjee, *op. cit.*, p. 192
permanent source of labour to the industry. The period then, coincided with the migration of Indian labourers to Mauritius and West Indies. It was assumed that the willing migrants would prefer Cachar to a distant foreign land. A proposal to this effect was submitted by the tea committee to the Government of Bengal to import labourers from north India. The Government of Bengal, knowing fully the dearth of labour force in the district accepted the proposal and allowed the immigration of labourers with immediate effect. Thus, the immigration of labourers into Barak Valley started from 1858 after initial difficulties.

CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO IMMIGRATION

There were several factors for the immigration of such a magnitude of labourers to the North East India. To begin with, the Chotanagpur plateau in the early and mid 19th century was marked by several unrests. In the early second half of the 19th century the region witnessed Sardai Larai, Birsa movement, the Tana Bhagat movement, the Santhal movement of 1855 and the Kharwar movement. These movements were violent in nature and left a trail of death and destruction of men and money. In the tribal area of South Munger and South Bhagalpur, Santhal leaders were replaced by strangers called mustajirs leading to the resumption of old low rates of rent.

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8 ibid., p. 193.
been fixed at the time of land reclamation.\textsuperscript{10} The tribals went through immense sufferings and as to be out of such situations. They immigrated to the North East India, particularly Assam and Cachar. E T Dalton the Commissioner of the Chotanagpur Division in 1872 said, ‘the unfortunate simple tribal races were neglected by their new masters, oppressed and deprived of the means they had formerly possessed of obtaining redress through their own chief’.\textsuperscript{11} The Deputy Commissioner of Old Lohardanga district said that in some villages the tribals had completely lost their proprietary rights. Under the Kamiauti system the tribals had to serve as slaves for life and even their children were forced to serve as long as their debt was not cleared.\textsuperscript{12} Under such a situation it was imperative for them to find an alternative means of survival.

Destruction of handicraft industries and the influx of cheap machine made goods into the Indian market reduced the artisans and craftsmen of India to simple wage earners. The introduction of the system of cash payment of revenue forced the peasants to sell their crops to the mahajans on a price dictated by them. In case of the failure of the crops the peasants were compelled to mortgage their agricultural land as security. Once a loan was taken it was impossible for a peasant to come out of the vicious circle of loan till he parted

away with the land mortgaged. Such a miserable situation forced the people to emigrate to the gardens of Barak Valley and Assam.

The famines of 1866, 1874 and 1896 and the government's apathic attitude to meet the food crisis and the Famine Commission's code proving ineffective in tackling the food crisis forced the affected people to emigrate to Assam and Cachar.

The traditional rights of the Bihar peasants of forests for pasture and irrigation, for wood for fuel, building timber, fruits, fodder which were essential to sustain the victims of famines were denied by the zamindars. Beside, the frequent floods, epidemics and the social oppressions of the lower caste at the hands of the higher castes led the people to find alternative in emigration.

In 1888 an enquiry was conducted in some villages of Patna district, and it was found that the minimum size of 'subsistence holding' for a family of five was 7 bighas and 40 percent of the peasant families owned less than 4 bighas. In Gaya district 48 percent of the families did not own 5 bighas even. The survey and settlement reported in some north Bihar districts in 1890s revealed that more than 45 percent of the families owned less than subsistence holdings. The bonded labour system was also widespread in the districts of Gaya, Patna, Purnea and Bhagalpur. Sonepur in Saran

15 B. Choudhury, 'Eastern India', Dharma Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, New Delhi, p. 163
district also became a great emigrating centre. The low and backward Bhojpuri speaking people of the district were the main recruits. They were hardy and sturdy people with a spirit of adventure and seriousness at work. A report of 1903 recorded that 64 percent of the population of the district supplemented their meagre income through emigration. A labourer would get only two to three annas and 3 pies in Saran. Such conditions opened the gate for mass migration of labourers.

Last, but not the least, when Bengal was partitioned in 1905, a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was created. The water communication was improved upon, the railway system which was already in existence also introduced some new branches that ran from Laksham junction to Chandpur. These services facilitated the labourers to emigrate to the tea districts.

**SYSTEMS OF RECRUITMENT**

Different methods were used to recruit labourers. The first system of recruiting labourers was the Arkatti System or Free Contractors' System. The *arkatti* was an individual or individuals appointed by the planters as agents in the recruiting districts to recruit labourers. Through this system, at the initial stage of recruitment of

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18. The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Eastern Bengal and Assam, Calcutta, 1909, p. i, NAND.

* The word 'coolie' is now considered derogatory and has been replaced in official documents by 'labourer' or 'mazdoor'.
the labourers in 1858-59 400 labourers were imparted into Cachar from Benaras, Ghazipur, Chotanagpur and Bihar. This system of recruitment led to gross abuses by the arkattis since there was no restriction upon them. Contractors collected coolies by the hundred on false promises of high pay and light work and despatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey, the result was shocking, mortality in the voyage, while many of the immigrants were of low caste and constitution which precluded all hope of their surviving many months in the jungles of the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys.

The abuses meted out by the arkattis to the destined labourers found expression in the words of one Kumar Dakshineswar Malia. He said, "the arkattis were devoid of all feeling of humanity, with scarcely any scruple of conscience, not content with enticing only the low caste people – away, often employ their vice-arts on young women of good, but ruined families. They often succeeded in their nefarious practices and bring shame and disgrace not only on the women they abduct, to ultimately swell the numbers of inmates of brothels, but also on the families to which the wretched women belong. For several years past, I have been a close observer of the most brutal outrages committed by these pests of society (arkattis) sometimes assisted by female arkattis whom they take into their confidence. These latter, owing to their sex, obtain easy access into good families and some

20 The Inland Emigration Manual, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1901, p. 4, NLC.
means or other ingratiating themselves into their favour and accomplish their object without exciting the suspicion of anyone. Thus, the arkattis impose upon women of high caste people whom they confine in their vile dense of pollution and after satisfying themselves with criminal enjoyments with the unhappy women, afterwards send to tea gardens, there to rot and die, or leave them to their fate. Innumerable cases of this kind had from time to time been brought to my notice. It is however, a wonder to me that in every case the culprits (arkattis) escaped quite unscathed. The abolition of arkattis is a desideration amongst all classes of the community. Therefore, on the broad principle of morality, I would advocate the total and speedy abolition of a system which has been denounced in unmeasured terms everywhere. The following quotation from the letter written by the magistrate of a district in the North Western province will uphold my view in reference to the abolition of the arkatti system, which is working great moral evils in places where it exists. The quotation runs thus ‘If common rumour be true, the free recruiting is looked upon here as a species of licensed abduction’.\(^21\)

Mr Grimley the late Commissioner of Chotanagpur described the arkattis as "a lawless body of men turned arkattis, who are frequently released convicts, or men of doubtful character".\(^22\) A loose

\(^21\) Labour Enquiry Commission’s Report, NLC, p. 31.
\(^22\) Ibid., p. 32.

* A place called Arkattipur in the neighbourhood of Silchar still bears the reminiscence of the torture of the coolies.
patron-client linkage is seemed to have established between the sahibs and the arkattis-sardars against the coolies.

In 1861, an enquiry commission was formed by the Government of Bengal to investigate into the working of free contractor's recruitment system. Following the investigation it was learnt that mortality on voyage was 10% to 12%\(^2\) and the contractors did little to improve its condition. As a result of this the First Inland Emigration Act, Bengal Act III of 1863 was passed to control emigration to Assam. According to the provisions of the act it was required to

(i) license all the recruiters,

(ii) all intending emigrants were required to be produced before the magistrate of his own district,

(iii) all emigrants were to be examined by a medical doctor whether fit enough to emigrate,

(iv) to be sent to a central depot, where he was to be put under contract for a period of four years,

(v) the steamers and boats carrying the labourers were also required to be licensed.\(^2\)

But unfortunately the legislation remained a legislation. There was no arrangement for proper inspection from the sides of the government and the tea management.

\(^2\) Ibid.
The Act also did not have any provision for protecting labourers after their arrival in the gardens. It was inadequate to protect the labourers from the unscrupulous European planters. It was also found that even licensed recruiters employed a horde of unlicensed sub-recruiters and labourers were made to emigrate by misrepresentation. The labourers who wanted to go back to their homeland after a short experience in the garden life were forced to stay back. Flogging was a common method of punishing the workers when the latter was discovered of an attempt to abscond or performed his duty unsatisfactorily.\(^{25}\)

The Bengal Act III of 1863 was amended and Bengal Act VI was passed in 1865. This act provided for minimum wages, limited hours of work, i.e., 9 (nine) hours per day, and 6 (six) days per week and contracts were not to extend beyond three years. It was also mandatory to maintain a hospital. A protector and an Inspector of labourers were empowered to visit gardens to supervise everything including the authority and labour relation.\(^{26}\)

This act also did not work satisfactorily. In 1868, again a commission of enquiry was appointed to look into the working of the Bengal Act VI of 1865. The Enquiry Commission found that the coolies were still imported through inducements and misrepresentation. The licensed contractors still employed unlicensed sub-contractors. The gross cruelty became less but the death rate

\(^{25}\) *Tea Industry in Bengal*, Bengal Secretariat, Calcutta, 1873, p. 115, NLC.
\(^{26}\) P Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 270.
became alarming due to bad housing, overcrowding, improper water and insufficient water. A statement of the death rate is mentioned in the Appendix A(a). The commission then proposed for recruitment of labourers by garden sardars. Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the sardary system of recruitment was recognised but the arkatti system was not immediately abolished. Under the sardary system, a sardar used to go to his original place outside the Barak Valley and brought his own relatives and friends. He had the greatest influence with his kith and kin. The recruitment through sardars was commonly known as Sardari System. Under this system a labourer either a male or female, chosen by the garden management was sent to the recruiting season which generally began from November and lasted 3 to 4 months. The sardars induced men and women to come to Cachar showing all the advantages of work and prospects of ultimate settlement in independent holdings where they could form their own societies. Many joined out of their desire to work with their relatives already in Assam and some others joined out of poverty. The Bengal Act II of 1870 continued the provisions of the Act of 1863 and 1865 regarding medical examination, the signing of the contract before the coolie was despatched to the tea districts, and supervision of conditions of transit to the tea gardens.

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27 Indian Tea Association, to all members of the Association, Calcutta, 6 July 1905, p. 128, NLC.
28 P Griffiths, op. cit., p. 272.
Progressive views were gradually gaining ground while the hatred for the contractors was growing all the more. At the same time, there was an attempt to recruit local labourers which consisted of the immigrant labourers who decided to stay back in the tea districts after their expiry of contract. It may be mentioned that Assam, Cachar and Sylhet were included in the same tea district before the creation of the chief commissionership of Assam in 1874. However, in 1873, the Government of Bengal considered a proposal to divide the tea districts into two whereby Cachar and Sylhet would form separate tea districts and to permit the planters in Cachar the free recruitment of tea labourers.\(^29\)

At that time recruitment through garden sardars was growing in popularity and the sardars usually brought labourers without any contract. It was after their arrival that a contract enforceable under Act XIII of 1859 was executed. It was like free recruitment carried out by the planters. The Bengal Act VII of 1873 allowed free recruitment outside the provisions of the Act, provided the relevant contract did not extend over a period of one year.\(^30\)

Bengal Administration Report, 1867-68, gives the figure of Assam plantation labour force as 34,433. Of them two-thirds were imported and one-third local labourers. The total number of outside recruits after death and discretion etc. stood at 24,000 in the Brahmaputra Valley and 20,000 in Silchar and Hailakandi on

\(^{30}\) P. Griffiths, op. cit.
December 1872. However, during May 1863 to January 1868 a total of 52,155 labourers were imported to Cachar. Of them, 2456 died during the voyage. The journey having taken a month, the rate of mortality was characterised to be alarming.

During the 70s of the 19th century the policy of recruitment of labour from the Northern, Central and Eastern India was going on in full swing. The Deputy Commissioner of Cachar informed the Commissioner of Dacca in 1873 the difficulty in getting labour at low rates might be lessened by removing the regulations for recruiting and transport of labourers to Cachar. The first few years of export to Cachar showed that the regulations were necessary but the Cachar Deputy Commissioner felt that it was not so because fewer labourers were imported. He deemed the sardary system as the most advantageous both to the employers and the employed.

Statistics of this immigration though was not adequate still they supply us information as to change in the ethnic composition of labour resource in the tea gardens of the Barak Valley.

The annual report of the Superintendent of Emigration on the transport of emigrants to the labour districts of Assam, Cachar, Sylhet recorded fluctuation of transport of labourers to the tea districts of Cachar and Sylhet as shown below:

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1872-73  6,271
1873-74  10,460
1874-75  10,423

During the first half of the year 1875, 5958 labourers were imported, 4229 by garden sardars and 1729 by contractors, the number for the whole years was probably 9000 or more. In 1876 of the 10423 coolies sent to Cachar and Sylhet 6348 were despatched by garden sardars and 4039 by contractors. The resolution on the Inland Emigration Report for the year 1878-79 recorded the number of class A labourers as 1830 and class B 3810 which totalled 5640. In 1879 the number of adults added to the labour force of the district by importation was 3499. There were also 74 children and 210 infants imported. Of the coolies imported under Act VII 2554 were imported by garden sardars and 523 by contractors. There were 422 non-Act coolies imported. This was much less than that of the previous year when 6454 Act VIII and 850 non-Act coolies were imported. An analysis of the labour force in Cachar at the beginning and end of the three years i.e., 1877, 1878 and 1879 showed that there had been a steady diminution in the number of Act VIII coolies. The number of non-Act coolies increased during 1877 by 2000 adults. Thus, there were at the end of 1877, 1878 and 1879 respectively 13888, 12128 and 8871 Act VII coolies and of non-Act adults at the same period

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35 Annual Report of the Superintendent of Emigration on the transport of emigration to the labour districts of Assam, Cachar and Sylhet for the year 1874-75, p. 234, DRRS.
36 Annual Report on Tea Operation in Cachar for the year 1875, letter no. 393 R, dated Cachar, the 14th May, 1876, DRRS.
there were 28861, 29240 and 28895 respectively at the beginning of 1877.\textsuperscript{37}

In later years of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century the immigration of the labourers in the valley took place in a massive scale. In 1881 the Government of Bengal set up another commission to examine the working of Bengal Act VIII of 1873 and it was satisfied with it. The Commission's Report led to the passing of Bengal Act I, 1882. This Act came to be known as Dhubri\textsuperscript{*} System. Under this system coolies were sent to Dhubri and from there contracts used to be executed. The Act introduced

(a) a statutory minimum wage, subject to completion of the daily task,

(b) it provided for payment of subsistence allowance in case of sickness

(c) it gave inspectors power to reduce scheduled tasks.\textsuperscript{38}

During the first year of the operation of the Act of 1882, the number of garden sardars increased and they were put under local agents. In 1882 the number increased by 600. The licenses of several contractors were cancelled for misconduct and the percentage stood at 2.61 in 1882. The number of licenses granted to local agents by the end of 1882 was 48. Out of 2329 garden sardars who obtained

\textsuperscript{37} Letter of Deputy Commissioner of Cachar forwarding the Annual Immigration Report for the District of Cachar. Letter no. 123, dated the 7\textsuperscript{th} May, 1880, SVBITA.

\textsuperscript{38} Dhubri is the headquarters of Goalpara district in Assam.

\textsuperscript{39} Amalendu Guha, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 40.
certificates 1074 were placed under the control of local agents.\(^{39}\) Under this Act some 4578 were imported. The tea population rose from 62879 on 1\(^{st}\) January 1882 to 66097 on 1\(^{st}\) January 1883.\(^{40}\)

The Act I of 1882 abolished the contractors system but it gave rise to many abuses. According to Lyall, the women who emigrated to Assam and Cachar without husband often became prostitutes in the gardens or contracted unlawful marriages with others. An Assistant Superintendent of Police, Mr Owen, who had worked in one of such gardens corroborated this view. According to Ganganand Mukherjee, Deputy Magistrate in charge of emigration Manbhum had 58 applications in 1882-83, complaining the elopement their wives, brothers and sisters. Only three cases of applicants succeeded in tracing out the lost women. Village arkattis used to entice the young girls and unmarried youths from their homes bringing them secretly to a recruiter of free emigrants who work under the 1882 Act without license. He was also free to send his labourers without the knowledge of their guardians. There were several cases of women being induced to leave their homes for the tea districts.\(^{41}\) The claimants of England’s civilising mission in India would be dissatisfied seeing the sad plight of the labourers and the burning issues of the coolie trade. Condition of them was that of "beasts in a

\(^{39}\) J C Jha, op. cit., p. 58.
\(^{40}\) Resolution on the Cachar Administration Report for 1882-83. NALC.
\(^{41}\) Letter of J F K Hewitt to Bengal Government, 11 June 1883 (Gen. Emigration) No. 216J, Proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, Inland Emigration, August 1883. NALC.
managoria". Under the contractor system the number of license recruiters working under six contractors was 211. They registered 7081 labourers in the recruiting districts. Of these 4777 were for Calcutta on the way to Assam, Cachar and Sylhet while 2304 for Guaiundo on the way to direct Cachar and Sylhet. To do away with evils the Government of Bengal enacted the Act of 1889 giving powers to local governments to prescribe rates to travel, accommodation, food supplies and other arrangements for labourers en route to labour district in Assam. However, the abuses increased. Any person who wanted to make a living by the system established himself as a contractor or agent or arkatti for the collection of the labourers and their disposal to any employer willing to take them. In the Surma Valley most of the sardars’ recruits were brought as non-Act adults. The contractors coolies also increased by 8513. The sardars’ recruits could not be competed by that of the contracts in 1895, the reason being the great majority of the non-Act adults imported were recruited by the sardars. Thus in 1895 the sardari recruitment was fairly successful in Surma Valley districts. However, the cost of labourers particularly during 1887-88 and 1888-89 had been rising high upto Rs 80 per head upto Dhubri or Goalundu but upto the tea gardens the cost varied from Rs. 90 to 100

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42 Amalendu Guha, op. cit., p. 40.
43 Bengal Administration Report, 1884-85, Calcutta, 1885, p. 34
44 J C Jha, op cit., p. 68.
or more. According to the contractors cost of an adult labourer engaged in the garden was as the table given below:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Cost of labourer in Cachar</th>
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<td>1872</td>
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<td>1887</td>
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<td>1888</td>
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The abuses in no way decreased. In order to amend the Inland Emigration Act I of 1882 the Act VII of 1893 was passed. Here the maximum term of labour contract was reduced from 5 to 4 years, but the term of the labour contracts executed in the labour districts was restricted to one year when they were not executed before an Inspector or a Magistrate. Under this Act of 18893, 818 in 1894, and
1153 Sardari labourers were imported in Cachar. Contractors labourers amounted to 827 in 1894 and 1895 in 1895.45

In 1895 the Government appointed a Commission to inquire into labour supply for large industries and recommended for the total abolition of the free contractors' system.46 The welfare prescriptions for the labourers by the Act proved to be nothing but utopian venture and the linkage of arkatti, sardar – foreign capitalists in the way of patron-client deal which further increased the sufferings of the tea labourers of this valley.

Despite the fact, that the labourers were passing through untold miseries, the import of labourers continued in greater measure. By 1890, a total of 51,894 labourers were imported and it increased to 75,412 in 1890s and in 1901 a total of 129,063 labourers were imported into Cachar. Of the mentioned number, 50,287 were from Assam, 49,309 from Bengal, 13,725 from the United Province and 11,921 from Central Province.47 The labourers who immigrated from Assam were not the local people of Assam but all those who had come from United Province. They preferred Cachar to Assam as the former was not so much inaccessible and jungle lands in nature and lands for cultivation were available near the gardens. The immigrated labourers in the beginning of the 20th century stood at 4 lakhs in

45 E A Gait to secretary, Government of India, 10 October 1896. Letter no. 586, Emigration, 420R, Shillong, Proceedings, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, July 1897. SVBITA.
47 J B Bhattacharjee, op. cit., p. 204.
Cachar. Further, statistics of labourers and production annually are available which are mentioned in Appendix – A.

So the immigration of tea labourers became continuous process and changed the demography of Cachar like that of Brahmaputra Valley.

In 1901, the Government of Bengal passed the Act of 1901, which provided for strict leasing and registration. The Act encompassed (i) closing of any area to recruitment by unlicensed contractors, (ii) examination of intending emigrants as to their free consent to come to Assam or Cachar without any coercion, undue influence, fraud, misrepresentation, (iii) consent of husband, lawful guardian.

The implementation of the Act of 1901 posed a great obstacle to the free flow of labourers to the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. Therefore, the agents of sixty-two tea companies, firms and others interested in tea cultivation in the districts forwarded a memorial to J B Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam on 29 July 1904. They represented upwards of 66 percent of the total area under tea cultivation in those districts. The list of these signatories and their area under cultivation is shown in Appendix – B for consultation. The signatories drew the attention of J B Fuller to the question of increasing and improving the labour supply for tea gardens. Fuller understood the situation and agreed to withdraw the Act of 1901 to

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48 R K De, an interviews taken on 20 April 2000 at Silchar
49 R K Kar, op. cit., p. 14
amplify the Act XIII of 1859 and to abrogate the Act VI of 1901 for the purpose.\textsuperscript{50}

The memoranda submitted by the planters of Cachar and Sylhet created ill feeling between the planters of the Surma and the Brahmaputra Valleys which can be seen from a letter of Sauth Sylhet Planter to the Editor, \textit{Indian Planters Gazette}, 10 March 1905.

It may be mentioned that Mr J Mackeroch Sras was appointed Forwarding Agent for Cachar and Sylhet coolies with headquarters at Gualundo.\textsuperscript{51}

But the situation of the labourers did not improve any more. There always existed innumerable personal and 'club-life' ties between the white planters and the while administrators. In 1906 the Assam Labour Enquiry was set up and found that most unprincipled of the recruiters was the upcountry men who were responsible for most of the abuses in connection with recruitment. The committee recommended that the character of the recruiters should be certified and license should be given only to those who were from the district. As a result of this the recruitment by the unlicensed contractors was completely abolished in 1908. Fuller suggested many panaceas for making recruitment career, freeing it from the stigma of unpopularity and producing better results in general, \textit{intre alia}, (i) to grant land rent-free to labourers after seven years residence in the province,

\textsuperscript{50} From Messrs. Sanderson \textit{et al.}, London, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 601, Emigration 40002 – R, Shillong, 5 September, 1904, pros 35, p. N2, WBSA

\textsuperscript{51} P. Griffiths, \textit{op. cit.}, p 205.
(ii) to employ a superior clans of sardar, (iii) to add a repatriation clause to Act VI, (iv) to delete sections 195 and 196 from Act VI, which authorised employers to arrest absconders, under certain limitations without warrant. Even earlier, Fuller had referred to a good deal of free emigration in the early 1860s before the existence of any special labour laws, as tending to prove that prior to the labour laws freer emigration existed. In 1870s also there was no such unpopularity either on account of the long journey of the special acts like Bengal Act III of 1863 or Act VII of 1873. But the suggestions of Fuller failed to touch the real cause of ‘free flow of labour’.

*The Times* in an article on this subject remarked that the popularity of recruitment must not be taken by itself, but in conjunction with the popularity of employment. Two contradictory factors appeared with equal prominence. ‘Coolie’ hated to go to Assam and he hated to return if once went. After arrival on the gardens there ensued a great and genuine conversion. He suffered a sea change and tea change. After a little time the kidnapped youth and the abducted women would have to be re-kidnapped and re-abducted before one could induce them to return.

Such was the nature of the colonial emigration policy which prevented the easy flow of labour in the gardens of the Surma and Brahmaputra Valleys.

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53 *From Indian Tea Association to all members of the Association, cir. No. 16, Calcutta, 6 July 1905*, p. 128, SVBITA.
In 1915, a radical change was made by Act VII of that year, which abolished the contractor and the *arkatti* system of recruitment and made the garden *sardars* the only recruiting agents in the recruiting districts. The Rege Committee criticised it as "the act of 1915... limited recruiting to gardens *sardars* holding a certificate from their employers and working under a licensed local agent. An estate willing to obtain a collection from a district from which it had not previously recruited, had no option but to send down a garden *sardar* who would be a stranger to the district and could not be depended on to bring in labour." The Act of 1915 had successfully removed the contractors from the scene but the limitations it imposed on the method of recruitment were undesirable and not in the best interest of either of the tea industry or the labourers. Even then this act and the later acts could not solve the twin problems of wage-rise and emigration to this and other valleys. Various half-hearted measures, were undertaken through legislations. But the white planters’ interests reigned supreme and the labourers were to suffer until the colonial regime withered in 1947. But the interference of the tea management sometimes retarded their natural flow which also ended from that year.

The Act XII of 1920 limited the period of local contract to one year. The annual contract made provision for annual advance or bonus. The labourers accepted it readily. The payments were also

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54 P Griffiths, *op. cit.* p. 7
made in advances but frequently there were just bonuses as renewal of agreement. They came to be known as Girmit (agreement) bonuses.\textsuperscript{56}

In 1926 Royal Commission on Labour was appointed and among many other recommendations the Commission recommended for collective arrangements for forwarding labourers. Thus, tea District Labour Association came to be formed. The Commission also recommended that Assam Labour Board whose work was concerned with recruiting and forwarding, should be replaced by a Controller of Emigrant Labour who would be concerned not only with these matters, but also with the welfare of the immigrant in Assam and Cachar.\textsuperscript{57}

It appeared from the minutes of a meeting of the General Committee of the Indian Tea Association, Surma Valley Branch, placed before the Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam, for appointment of a veterinary surgeon, to deal with the ravages caused by rinderpest and anthrax. Chairman of the Association W T Cathoart also paid a visit to Karimganj, Badarpur and Silchar to cope with situation. Financial grant was accorded. Further train time table was rescheduled to facilitate the general passengers and labourers travelling to Silchar, Salchakra, Badarpur, Karimganj, Sylhet etc.\textsuperscript{58}

But this piecemeal half-hearted measures could not solve the core issues like ethnic problem, general health condition, socio-economic

\textsuperscript{56} R K Kar, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 15-16.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} From the Indian Tea Association, \textit{op cit.}, p. 129.
change and interference into other affairs detriment to the interest of the tea societies established in the tea gardens.

The Act XXII of 1932 followed a general scheme of the commissions' recommendations. According to the provisions of the Act, the recruits were volunteers; they knew the conditions of service which were set before the recruits; arrangements were made for *forwarding the labourers from his home to Assam and Cachar*, the employer was bound to repatriate, if he so desired, after three years of service. Under the framework of the Act, recruitment was carried on through the Tea District Labour Association. Even this system of recruitment could not bring an end to exploitation, harassment and torture of the immigrated labourers.\(^{59}\)

**TRANSPORT OF THE LABOURERS**

There is no clear information about the journey of the labourers to the tea districts of Cachar and Assam in the first two years of the transportation of the labourers. But in 1862, the impending problem of the transport of the labourers was discussed and took for granted that journey by boat to Cachar would be much shorter than that to Assam.\(^{60}\) Thus beginning from 1858 the transportation of labourers by boat to Cachar and Sylhet started. The work load at Kushtia was ever on the increase. The expansion of Kushtia office was imperative.

\(^{59}\) P Griffiths, op. cit., p. 284.

\(^{60}\) From Secretary, W F Ferguson of Landholders and Commercial Association to E H Lushington to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, 7 March, 1862, NLC.
Therefore, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar requested the Bengal Government for acquisition of two plots of lands at the Sadar station of Cachar and the other at Fenchuganj at a cost of Rs. 100 debitable to the Labour Transport Fund, for building depots to disembark coolies imported under the Act III (BC) of 1863. In November of the same year i.e., 1865 a piece of land at Katigora in Cachar was sanctioned for the construction of a depot for disembarking the labourers under the Act III (BC) of 1883.61

The mode of transport and transit was much responsible for the mortality among the emigrants. The steamers were often found to be overcrowded, dirty and vulnerable to attacks of cholera and other diseases. Most of the depots were ill-roofed, others insufficiently raised from the ground and all with inadequate sanitary arrangements. The labourers had to sleep on the moist earth. One of the depots had open sheds, providing no shelter from rain and sun.62

The government from its end, took several measures to prevent further mortality. Therefore, it permitted only steamers with two latrines and a flat with four privies. Chloride of lime, carbolic acid or some other efficient disinfectants were required to be used at the expense of contractors. But in spite of the precautions the mortality rate among the emigrants who arrived in Cachar on 21 July 1865 on the steamer ‘Colgong’ and flats under the charge of an Indian doctor

61 Ibid.
62 Resolution on Surgeon Major Cambell’s Report on the Arrangements for the Transit of Emigrants to Assam, Bengal General Administration for the year 1872-73, p. 4, NLC.
Ali Bux there were 59 deaths. The percentage of morality was 22. Cholera broke out on 6 June in the Sundarbans and out of 14 cases of cholera 11 succumbed. On the same steamer and flats Indian doctor Tipan Malik and Ishwar Chandra Chakravarti took 335 labourers of Messrs Andrew and Hendry's. They were mainly Bhojpuri speaking people of west Bihar and east UP with a few Dhangars. Ten of these Dhangars died. In desperation the Medical Inspector of Labour Transport, R A Barker wrote to the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar that the steamer of Jardine, Skinner & Co. carried 30 men of whom a few died, 19 women of whom 5 died and 10 children of whom 2 died. Of another batch of 116 coolies for the Ohencony Plantation under the charge of Iswar Chandra Chakravarti only 6 died.63

In October 1865 Burtol Plantation of Begg, Dunlop & Co. received 106 labourers. Murlidhar Plantation of Robert & Charried got 66. On November 22, of the same year mortality rate of the coolies in the country boats was 12.6 percent. The survivors landed at Katigora Depot by mistake where the Deputy Magistrate charged the doctor Tipan Malik and contractor A B Anderson & Hendry of ill-feeding the recruits.64

In 1867, Sir John Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar declared that there was a mortality among coolies on the voyage to Cachar which was generally described as “rivalry the horrors of the

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63 From R K Barker, Medical Inspector, and Officer, Cachar to Captain R Stewart, Deputy Commissioner of Cachar, 21 July 1865, no. 88, Proceedings of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Emigration Department, August, 1865, no. 94 NAND.
64 J C Jha, op. cit., p. 98.
middle passage." In 1868, J Winchester sent three of his servants to Rouchi with money to help some of their relatives or friends to emigrate to Cachar with food, conveyance etc. They were given a letter of introduction for James Young at Calcutta. But at Bundu in Chotanagpur a certain Balwa Ram, a coolie recruiter snatched away the letter and the badge of the peon and misused them. This was an important example of how unauthorised recruiters bypassed the law and harassed the labourers.

In 1872-73, the number of emigrants who came to Cachar and Sylhet was higher than that of Assam. The percentage of mortality in the first category was 1.29 in 1871-72 and 1.30 in 1872-73 and in the second category 1.54 and 2.30 respectively. The labourers sent to Cachar in 1873-74 numbered 10334. The contractors coolies were 2668 and that of Sardari 7666. The monthly mortality among the contractors received labourers was 61 with a percentage of 2.28. Among those recruited by the garden sardars it was 224, the percentage of mortality being 2.92, during the voyage.

In 1882, 1883 and 1884 the mortality rate was 4049 and 95 per 1000 respectively. Commenting on the figures for the year 1883, the then Commissioner, Sir Charles Elliot wrote,

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65 Resolution on surgeon Major Cambell's Report on the Arrangements for the Transit of Emigrants to Assam, Bengal General Administration for the year 1872-73, p. 4. NAND.
66 From Winchester to J N Edger, Deputy Commissioner, and officiating Protector of Labour, Cachar, Bikrampur, 6 June, 1868, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, Emigration, August 1868, no. 14. NAND
67 From J G G Grant to Officiating Secretary, Bengal Government, 15 July 1873, No. 54 S, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, 1873, no. 22-23., NAND.
68 Ibid.
It is difficult to say what measures can be taken to put down this terrible mortality. The boat voyage from Gualundo to Cacahr took on average of 32 days in 1883, the shortest duration being 18 and the longest 48 days; and a death ratio of 19 per mile is a thing which no civilised government can contemplate without concern.\(^{69}\)

Dr Cambell established that malaria was the main cause of the death of several coolies aboard the steamer or boat or at the transit. He also enquired into the conditions attending the transit camps and made several recommendations with a view to the prevention of cholera and for the general well-being of the coolies during their journey by river. He dealt separately with the large mail steamers and with the small feeder steamers which run on the higher reaches of the Kusiara river (Barak) during the cold weather months.\(^{70}\)

It was also found out that a great many of the free emigrants travelled as ordinary passengers and were fed on chira. This arrangement was no satisfactory, as chira was not so nourishing as a cooked food, and owing to the absence of supervision, it was probable that the ration was not given always. It was contrary to the rule 3 of the rules framed by the Chief Commissioner under which it was laid down that the agent or other persons in charge of the coolies must supply them on board the steamer with two cooked meals daily. The feeder steamer which plied in the Surma Valley from Fenchuganj upwards was to have new arrangements. Before Dr Cambell’s deputation the steamer

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\(^{69}\) Resolution on Surgeon Major Cambell’s Report on the Arrangement for the Transport of Emigrants to Assam, 1872-73, p. 5, NLC.

\(^{70}\) Ibid.
were licensed as day steamers but the coolies had to sleep on board and hence, the steamers were to be treated as plying by night. There were also no arrangement for cooking on board. Dry food was supplied to them in small quantities. The water supply was also defective, 'no hospital and sanitary provision. A medical officer was provided only when there were Act coolies on board. Dr Cambell effected a scheme of daily run service, built rest houses at the end of each run, where the coolies would take rest and given cooked food on arrival and before departure the following day. For the embarkation of the coolies, a debarkation was established at Madna, where the coolies for Habiganj were landed. The depot at Fenchuganj was also improved and a medical officer was put in charge who would perform all duties of an embarkation agent. Shelters were provided for coolies landed at Manumukh, Sialtek and Jatinga. An attempt was also made to secure a more suitable site for the depot at Karimganj.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 5-7.}

In 1891, 4311 emigrants were reported to have arrived in Cachar. In 1892 the total labourers numbered 5434. During the journey 24 inmates died of cholera and other 5 died of other diseases. In 1897 in 276 vessels 31313 labourers were imported to Cachar and Sylhet. Of these 32 died. The 'Act coolies' transported to these districts were 7276 against 5551 in 1896.\footnote{From R Maclead, Superintendent of Emigration to Secretary, Bengal Government, General Department, no. 1970, 3 April 1894, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, General (Emigration), no. 1, July 1894 NLC} During the voyage to Cachar in 1897 there were 1674 sardari coolies of these six died of
cholera. In the same year among 905 special local agents labourers, there were two deaths.73

In 1905-06, 267 trips were made, carrying on an average 18 emigrants in each trip as against 467 and 301 trips, with an average of 45 and 12 emigrants respectively in the previous year. The trip to Cachar and Sylhet took 3 days and 12 hours.74 In 1908-09 there were 7293 emigrants to Cachar and Sylhet from the central provinces. In 1903, Fuller suggested that during the river journey by boat or steamer the supply of cooked food be stopped and they should be allowed to cook on board for themselves or permit them to purchase their favourite dry food (chira), gur (jaggery) or sattu (ground gram). The Indian General Steam Navigation and the Rivers Steam Navigation Companies agreed to offer facilities for both these alternatives. Coolies from Gualundo to Chandpur and from here the labourers travelled on rail to the Surma Valley districts.75

The report on the administration of Bengal, 1914-15 recorded that the depots, places of accommodation and rest houses for the emigrant were inspected and kept in proper sanitary condition. The transport arrangements were also satisfactory. This is evident from the fact that among 2316 emigrants sent to Gualundo by the licensed contractors there were no death during the journey and also among

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73 From C Banks, Superintendent of Emigration at Calcutta, to the Secretary, Bengal Government, 29 April, 1898, No. 414, Proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal, General (Emigration), August 1898. NAND
74 From C Banks, op. cit., no. 553, December 1906. NAND
75 From C Banks, to Bengal Government, General Department, 29 April 1908, no. 1556, proceedings, Lieutenant Governor, Bengal (Emigration), no. 1908. NAND.
the 1099 sardari labourers embarked for Cachar and Sylhet there was not a single case of death. Even during the steam journey to Chandpur none of the 3389 emigrants who set off for the Surma Valley died.\footnote{E A W Hall, Report on Inland Emigration for the year ending 30 June, 1918, Calcutta, 1918, p. 3. SVBITA.}

The transportation of the labourers to the labour districts became better in later years as improved means of transport were brought about. The labourers who came to Cachar all these years stayed on even after the expiry of their contract. In the course of time they formed a separate community of tea gardens of their own.

**DIFFERENT LABOUR DISTRICTS OF INDIA**

The following are the labour districts from where the labourers were recruited and imported to Barak Valley.

**Bilaspore**
- Gond, Gondan, Panika, Chanmar, Kurmi, Teli, Koiri, Kamar, Keot, Rato, Baigha, Manjhi, Kol, Kharwar.

**Raipur**
- Gond, Gore, Kamar, Lohar, Panika, Keol, Rabidas, Kawar, Kurmi, Mahra, Chamar, Teli, Lodhi

**Balaghat and Bhandra**
- Gond, Mohar

**Singha**
- Porja, Goala
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<tr>
<td>Sambalpur</td>
<td>Gond, Kole, Munda, Oraon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jabalpur</td>
<td>Gond, Kol, Bhaiga, Panika, Lodhi, Kurmi, Kahar, Chamar, Kori, Ahair, Kotwar, Dhobi, Lohar, Sonar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ranchi and Palamao</td>
<td>Oraon, Munda, Kharia, Korwa, Kurmi, Lohar, Gond, Bhuiya, Bhumij, Ghasi, Chik-Baraik, Dhobi, Ahir, Panika, Teli, Kumber, Bedea</td>
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<td>Hazaribagh</td>
<td>Goala, Bedea, Bhuiya, Chamar, Dhom, Dusadh, Ghasi, Ghatwar, Kahar, Kumar, Loiri, Kurmi, Munda, Santhal, Turi, Oraon</td>
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<td>Chaibasa</td>
<td>Munda, Ho, Bhumij, Santhal, Oraon, Bhuiya, Tanti, Ghasi</td>
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<td>Purulia</td>
<td>Santhals, Bhumij, Kurmi, Mahato, Mohalis, Bauris, Bedea, Rajwars.</td>
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<td>Cuttack</td>
<td>Oriya, Pan, Tanti, Sawara, Bawri, Gore, Chassa, Gondo, Khondait, Khonds.</td>
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<td>Bezwada</td>
<td>Kalingi, Reddi, Mala, Madika, Telenga, Golla</td>
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<td>Nellore</td>
<td>Muchi, Mala, Telenga, Yanadi</td>
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<td>Ghazipore</td>
<td>Bhar, Musahcar, Teli, Chamar, Ahir,</td>
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Chapter 4 gives a brief account of each of these castes.

LABOUR RECRUITING ORGANISATIONS

There were several organisations that were engaged in recruiting labourers. They were serving the interests of the white capitalists and bothered least for the uplift of the general conditions of the labourers. Of them, the first of its kind was the Planters’ Association formed in 1859. After a few decades Longlai Valley Employers’ Association, the General Coolie Recruiting Association came into being. In 1892 Tea District Labour Supply Association was formed. In 1917, the Assam Labour Association and the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association were amalgamated to form the Tea District Labour Association which
was the only recruiting organisation that supervised the recruitment of the labourers into Assam.\textsuperscript{77}

Thus, under the described systems of recruitments and transport tens and thousands of coolies immigrated into Barak Valley not losing their ethnicity entirely but undergoing several changes while interacting with others. Matters like ethnic composition, social transformation, their socio-economic conditions, folk-literature in a new environment will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.