

**Historical Background Of Labour Recruitment In The Tea Plantation
Industry Of Assam.**

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ABSTRACT

The tea plantation industry of Assam is about 172 years old. The tea plantation industry is historically a product of the British colonialism. However, the tea plantation industry is a labour-oriented industry. To ensure the success of the tea plantation industry, a large number of labourers had to be recruited from various parts of the country. Therefore, the paper attempts to examine the process of recruitment of labourers in the tea gardens of Assam during the British colonial period.

Key Words: Assam, Colonialism, Labour, Plantation, Tea Industry.

INTRODUCTION

The tea industry plays a vital role in the national economy of India. It is the second largest earner of foreign exchange. The tea industry is mainly concentrated in Assam. Assam has produced approximately 57.2% of tea in India. However, at present, Assam has more than 800 registered tea garden. Tea plants were discovered growing wild in Assam way back in 1823.¹ In the course of period, the commercial tea cultivation was begun in the different part of Assam under the patronage of British entrepreneurs. It is noted here that the tea industry is a labour-oriented Industry. With the introduction of tea industry in Assam, a huge labour force needed to working in the tea garden. Therefore, this paper mainly highlights the labour recruitment process in the tea garden of Assam under the British government during the colonial period.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives are specifically formulated:

- I. To study the historical process of migration of Tea Plantation workers.
- II. To study the labour recruitment system in the tea gardens of Assam

UNIVERSE OF THE STUDY

The research period covers a period from 1823 to 1947. However, the study area is mainly confined to the Tea community inhabited region of Assam.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Both primary and secondary data has been extensively used for the purpose of this research. The primary source of data has been also collected from Census Report, Statistical Data from the Tea Board of India, the archival records, Government Proceeding and Reports while secondary data has been collected from various books and articles written by different scholars on the tea plantation workers, and the articles that published in the different journals, Souvenir ,Magazine and News Paper etc. Information has also been collected from the websites.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A number of literatures are there which deals with my research topic. Some review of literature on this line has been presented.

One of the significant works on the history of the Tea Industry in India is “*The History of Indian Tea Industry*” by Percival Griffiths which published in 1967, contains important information on the development of Tea plantation economy in various parts of colonial India. It also deals with the workers problem faced by the industry in Assam and also the wage structure, condition of workers etc. during the colonial period. Moreover, the book is a rich source of information of the tea industry of Assam.

Amalendu Guha’s book “*Planters Raj to Swaraj : Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*” (1977) highlights the migration of tea workers into Assam from outside. Amalendu Guha’s book also highlights the exploitative nature of plantation regimes. “*The Tea Industry of Assam: Origin and Development*” (2008) by Pradip Baruah deals with the history of the tea industry in Assam. This book highlights the tea industry of Assam covering

all aspects like origin, development, production, garden management system, labour migration, and recruitment system of labourers.

One of the pioneering works on the history of the Tea plantation workers in Assam is “*The Tea Labourers of North East India: An Anthro-Historical perspective*” (2009), edited by Sarthak Sengupta, contains twenty two research articles covering subjects like-migration of the workers in tea plantation sector in the North East India, their identity, ethnicity, socio-economic condition and their life and settlement there.

Moreover, different aspects of identity construction and assimilation process of tea labourers have been discussed by Jayeeta Sharma in her book, “*Empire’s Garden : Assam and the Making of India*” (2011). The book mainly contains six chapters. In the Chapters I, II and III, Jayeeta Sharma clearly explains the origin and development of tea industry in Assam.

DISCUSSION

However, the labour arrangement for the tea plantation industry was very expensive in Assam during the British colonial period because the ‘native’ Assamese people did not interest to work in the tea gardens. However, during the beginning days of the tea industry, the British capitalists had to depend mostly on Assamese and occasionally on the Nagas, the kacharies and the Singphoos. The Nagas were mainly employed in clearing jungals.² Similarly, few Singphoos were recruited in the tea garden but they were independent and self-sufficient under their own chief. They did not want to work in the tea garden as a wage labour. It is a rare thing deed for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden.³ Although a large number of labourers from the Kachari community were employed in the tea plantation industry but they did not gentle or obedient to the British government; so sometimes they raised their voice against the British. The Assam Company also imported Chinese labour force to work in the tea gardens of Assam. Due to demand of high rate wage, the Chinese labour force was withdrawn in 1843. However, the local labourers were the sole source of labour till 1859.⁴ Meanwhile the Assam Company made an attempt in 1841 to import labour from Chotanagpur region but due to Cholera, this effort was failed. At the same time, with growth of the tea industry, the physically skilled and cheap labour force became necessary. Therefore, the British government decided to import the labour force from outside Assam.

However, the Tea Planters Association first made an initiative to organizing a labour migration from Chotanagpur and Bengal province in 1859. In fact, in the year 1859-1860, the British entrepreneurs first brought 2049 number of labourers from outside Assam for working in the tea plantation industry. These labourers were mainly imported from Chotanagpur and Medinipur region. In contrast to Chotanagpur coolies, earlier tea laboring groups such as the Chinese, local Assamese and Kacharis were regarded as *aggressive*, congenitally *lazy*, or addicted to *opium*.⁵ It is also found that the tea company brought 84,915 labourers from 1863 to till 1866. Notable, among those 30 thousand labourers were died.⁶ In fact, till 1921 the number of labourers which imported to Assam was 1½ Million.⁷ Moreover, about 250000 labourers came to Assam for working in the tea garden from Chotanagpur between the years of 1870 and 1900.⁸

In order to import labourers from various part of India for the tea gardens of Assam, two distinct agencies for recruiting labourers in the tea gardens were in operation. To implement this, the two system of recruitment were taken, namely- Contractors System of labour recruitment, and Garden Sardars System of labour recruitment. Between the period 1841 and 1859, the British planters made an attempts to recruit labourers from lower Bengal region. But the labourers recruited from this region were not suitable for climatic condition of Assam. However, in 1859, Planters Association was established to conduct the labour importation activity smoothly. Meanwhile, Colonel Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam warned the tea planters not to accelerate the expansion of tea cultivation without solving the problem of sufficient labour supply. The Company tried to recruit labourers from Orissa, Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh and also decided to appoint agents for this purpose. But this system of recruitment could not prove to be successful. Hence, the planters decided to adopt the indenture system of labour recruitment. The passing of Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859 empowered the planters to put the recruits under penal contracts.⁹ The main aim of this Act was to providing punishment for the breach of contract by the labourers. The Act enabled them to prosecute the labourers according to contract papers.¹⁰ It may be noted here that recruitment of labourers to the tea plantations in Assam from 1841 to 1870 was mainly in the hands of the contractors known as Calcutta Contractors or 'Arkattis'. Moreover, a Contractor was a licensed person for specific area whose main duty was to supply labourers for the tea gardens of Assam. In fact, this system became known as the 'free contractor system because there no restriction upon the contractors or Arkattis.

Under this Act of 1870, the government was made to recognize the garden Sardar system to recruit labourers, but the *Arkattis* (licensed recruiters) not allowed replacing. So, from that time till 1915, both 'the methods of recruitment were in prevalent, side by side'.¹¹ The Sardar was generally a labour in the garden and was licensed to recruit labourers on behalf of the garden. Moreover, this system of recruitment was better than the Contractual system of recruitment which was abandoned through the Act of 1915.¹² The Sardars who took care of the labourers, brought by him because they were living with them in the same labour line. Both shared pleasure and pain and thereby reposing confidence on each other. Thus, the Sardari system of recruitment became indispensable to the tea industry in the early half of the 20th century.'¹³ Further, the Bengal Act of 1882 was enacted which came to be known as the Dhubri System of Recruitment. Under this Act, everything was done in the recruiting areas for acquire labourers and sent them to Dhubri in Goalpara District without executing contract.

Further, the demand of labour in the tea gardens of Assam rose. The Tea District Labour Association (TDLA) was established for the purpose of recruitment of labour in the tea plantation industry of Assam as a result of Act of 1932. 'The recruits came from various communities namely, Mundas, Chera, Kol, Kheria, Asur, Santal, Sawra, Oraon, Paidi, Odde, Gonds, Koya, Parja, Dam, Majhi, Godaba, Tanti, Mala, Turi, Telenga, Bhuiya, Kohar, Bawri, Kamar, Lohar, Kumar, Nayaks and many others. The last recruitment was in 1960 after which further recruitment was stopped as the industry became surplus.'¹⁴ The transportation of the labourers for tea cultivation in Assam from outside was a serious matter as thousands of labourers imported to Assam during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is found that the tribal people who wanted to work in the tea gardens of Assam brought to Calcutta by rail. Hence, they were kept in Calcutta for registration and medical examination. After the arrangement of all necessary requirement, the recruits had taken to Kooshtea (Kusthia), a river port on the bank of river Ganga from where they were sent to Assam by the steamers.¹⁰¹ Generally, the river Surma (Barak) and river Brahmaputra in Assam was the main source of river bone trade which directly linked with Calcutta. It is found that two main routes of importation labourers from Bengal converged at Dhubri, viz.-North Bengal route and North East Bengal route. Since then, the recruits were brought to the Brahmaputra valley via Calcutta through Dhubri.¹⁵ It is also found that approximately 40% of the total dispatch labourers between

1864-67 died in journey. Dead bodies of such people for want of any provision for respectful and decent burial/ cremation were thrown into the river in a most frightful and humiliating manner.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The above study can be summarized that the tea garden population constitute a major segment of the total population of Assam. However, the tea plantation industry of Assam was the result of the hard-work, cheap and migrated labourers who worked in the tea gardens of Assam under the British planters. It is observed that these labourers from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic background were mainly brought into Assam from various parts of India. Under new plantation environment, they were subjugated to strict industrial regulation. As a whole, they had to adjust with new working culture in Assam.

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