



Labour Migration, Abuse, and Desertion in the Tea Plantations of Colonial Assam

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Abstract: Assam's tea industry has an extensive and intricate history. The tea industry in Assam was established by the British company after losing its monopoly in china. It was a very labour intensive industry and for the growth of the tea plantations it was depended on extensive human labourers and suitable land. Through waste land regulations, the British got substantial tracts for tea plantations. The problem, however, was the labourers. This paper evaluates the living condition and what led the labourers to desert the tea plantation that had come to end their suffering in their native homeland. This paper looks into the Commissions published by the British government that helps to understand how the immigration process took place. The paper examines how the early planters confronted the labourers. This research explores how the planters dealt with the issue of labourers deserting their gardens. To comprehend their lives on the tea plantation of Assam, it is crucial to understand the type of abuse they were facing. To prevent any outside influences, the planters placed the immigrants in the restricted tea garden. This paper will explain the difficult living circumstances that forced some people to flee the garden because they could not put up with the abuse.

Key words: Desertion, Tea, Abuse, Migration

I. INTRODUCTION

The discovery of a tea plant set in motion the colonization of Assam by European planters. A new channel for capital investment and exploitation was created. The Assam Company was established in February 1839 at a gathering of merchants in London with a capital of 5,00,000 pounds in 10,000 shares of 50 pounds each, of which 8000 were to be distributed in Great Britain and 2000 in India. It was India's first firm to manufacture tea, and an Act of Incorporation passed in 1845 restricted the liability of its owners, making it the country's first joint-stock company outside of the banking industry. The Company received authorization to establish itself on other properties besides acquiring two-thirds of the government's Tea Gardens. The Assam Company Ltd. had no corporate rivals in the sector of tea production and cultivation in India since it was founded in 1839.¹

The issue of tea labourers was brought about by the establishment of tea plantations. A need for labourers developed because of the extensive clearance of the forest and establishment of the plantation. Because of the apparent refusal of Assamese agricultural labourers to work in tea plantations, the planters raised concerns regarding local labour.

However, throughout the early years, plantations struggled with a significant labour shortage since the most suited regions lacked sufficient population. Initially, Chinese labourers were imported, but they were expensive and time-consuming. They were abolished in 1843, and the planters attempted to employ native Assamese labourers until 1859. This was another failure because, despite the colonial authority increasing

¹Kalyan K. Sircar, "Labour and Management: First Twenty Years of Assam Company Limited (1839-59)," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 22 (May 31, 1986), pp. M38-M43.

land revenue by 15% to 30%, the peasants in Assam were unwilling to labour on the crops. The planters then enlisted the help of private contractors (arkatis) to recruit employees from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, and the surrounding areas of the province of Central (Madhya Pradesh).² The arkatis utilized shady methods to attract untrustworthy people suspecting tribal who realized, while on the tea plantations, that they did not differ from slaves.

They were forced to rely on migrant labour, most of whose movement was forced upon them. The plantation system came to be associated with a labour force that was not just native but more often of foreign origin. Immigrants and their descendants make up most of the labour in Assam's plantations. The labourers were primarily from the tribal groups of the Bihar region of Chotanagpur Santhal Pargana and its neighboring tribal regions in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.³

The indenture approach was used to maintain the labour force for the tea plantations in Assam. The key intermediary in labour recruitment across regions was the Sardar. The Act of 1859 served as the cornerstone of both the contract system and the recruiting system, since it reduced the cost of expensive labour, allowing planters to transfer the price of hiring employees. In the 1860s, the Sardar recruiting process began. The sardars used for recruiting, also known as Garden Sardars, came under great examination and were the subject of governmental and popular debate in the late nineteenth century.

Fraudulent methods were used to recruit the labour force. The recruited labourers travelled for more than a month via river transportation to reach Assam via Calcutta. During the journey, no suitable facilities, food, water, sanitation, or medical care were provided. It caused a significant mortality rate. According to William Nassau Lee, private parties hired coolies under false pretenses. He talks about how their arrival depot had no governor, protector or doctor present.⁴ The tea plantation had drawn the government's serious notice, the Bengal government acknowledged. It was claimed that every shipment of labourers from Calcutta had resulted in deaths from cholera and other illnesses. After they arrived, the condition for the migrant labourers did not get any better.

II ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

Desertion was the most common approach to escaping the brutalities of plantation life. It was referred to as absconding by the planters, and it was a serious offence under the existing labour regulations. Desertion has been seen as a prominent style of resistance and a personalized escape tactic from the hard plantation reality. Such understandings do not always recognize that, under colonial classificatory systems, desertion was used as an overarching category that stretched from individual withdrawal of services to departure of smaller and even larger groups.⁵

Most of the recruits, especially the tribal and semi-tribal peasants, came to the plantation lands with their families, and their connections to their native habitat were entirely severed. After being forcibly detached from their traditional home and older ways of production and taken to the tea plantations, the tribesmen and peasants were detained in concentration camp-like conditions. Because the immigrant plantation labourers belonged to distinct ethnic groupings than the neighboring Assamese peasantry and indigenous tribal people, the planters found it comparatively easier to retain them under control.⁶ They were kept in separate coolie lines and were subjected to severe supervision day and night.

The Bengal Native Labour Act III of 1863, points out the process of recruitment, transit depot, and transportation. Recruiters are licensed and potential immigrants are brought before the magistrate of their respective districts. He should be examined for fitness to labour on the tea plantation, and the contract

² Sharit K. Bhowmik, "Plantation Labour Act and Child Labour," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 42 (Oct. 17, 1992), pp. 2287-2289, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4399022>, last accessed on 16-10-2022.

³ ibid

⁴ Marcuse Rediker, "The Slave Ship: A Human Story," New York: Penguin Books, 2008, as cited in Rana P. Behel, "One Hundred Years of Servitude," Tulika Books, 2014, p.46

⁵ Nitin Varma, "Producing Tea Coolies?: Work, Life and Protest in the Colonial Tea Plantation of Assam, 1830s-1920s," M.Phil Dissertation, Eingereicht an der Philosophischen Fakultät III der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2011, p.10.

⁶ Ratan Das Gupta, "Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 44/46, Special Number (Nov., 1981), p. 1867.

should not last over four years, and it must be signed in the presence of an Emigration Superintendent.⁷ Steamers and boats should be licensed as well. However, the statute was ineffective in offering any protection after they were at the plantation. The legislation was intended to safeguard the labourers and reduce mortality during travel and upon arrival at the tea plantation. It failed in both conditions. However this legislation failed to protect the labourers as a result Act II of 1870 was introduced.

The Act II of 1870 was to ensure that precautionary steps were to be taken for the sanitation of the labourers on onboarding for the tea districts. However the act only made changes for the journey to the tea garden and didn't change the issue of abuse or deception by the recruiting agents. The labourers were to follow the previous laws and were up to the mercy of the garden managers.⁸

The reasons for desertion was that once the labourers were sent to the tea estates they had to face the jungle and not the actual tea gardens, they were assigned to clear up the for which were extremely dangerous for their health. They had to deal with the climate change, survive with insufficient food, no proper housing and along with that they had to clear up the forests to make a tea garden out of it. And the labourers were physically unfit for the task. And they were not even provided proper medical assistance in case of health issues, which leads to mass desertion.⁹

To deal with this issue Act VI of 1865 was introduced, this act changed the contract from previously 5 years to 3 years, and changed the wages to Rs. 5 for man, Rs. 4 for woman and Rs. 3 for children. Along with that a protector of labour was to be assigned who was assigned to cancel contracts in case the labourers were unfit for the job or if the garden was unfit and caused major mortality issues. But this act also speaks about deserting labourers and how the employers of these labourers were empowered to arrest them within the district. And sentence them to imprisonment and even if a labour was convicted to desertion and upon serving his term he was not to be released. As after the completion of his term, he had to enter into a fresh contract before the district magistrate. The act however failed to protect the interest of the labourers and thus a revised act was introduced.¹⁰

The Act II of 1870, this act found that the labourers were often recruited by fraudulent methods and deception. He was fed a lie of better life in Assam's tea garden, a life better than his native hometown. But upon entering the garden he saw the lies that were fed to him and along with that the protector of the labourers failed them as well. However this act also allowed the employers to arrest the labourers without any warrant but this time he had to present the labourers to the nearest police station, the only thing that really changed in this act was that after the labourers had served his period, which was imprisonment for six months for desertion, his contracts were cancelled.¹¹

Similarly The Act I of 1882, was introduced with the main agenda being to assist a better immigration of the labourers. This act intended to provide a proper execution of the contract, and also to renewing the contract for the time expired labourers. This act had desired to provide a uniform system of recruitment as to not get the labourers sign the contract through fraudulent methods, and the act suggested that the employers to not hire recruiters and instead bring in free labourers and to have them sign the contract under this act. However it didn't work and led to the Dhubri system of recruitment.

This system of recruitment was even worse, as when the labourers were under the recruiting agents, the agents had to make sure to follow a proper sanitation process, and in the absence of it. The mortality grew heavily which in case led to another amendment to ensure that the labourers would be ensured proper treatment on their way to Dhubri.

The labourers from the very first moment of being recruited to being in the garden had to face rather harsh reality. As they even lacked the basic amenities for life as the low, marshy terrain, tainted water, and lack of adequate drainage provided ideal conditions for disease growth. According to the Deputy Commissioner of

⁷ Rana P. Behel, "One hundred years of Servitude, Political and Economy of Tea plantation in Colonial Assam, Tulika Books, 2014, pp. 46-47.

⁸ Assam labour commission p8

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

Darrang, “the committee believes the water to be bad, and they are supported in this view first by its taste and appearance, and by the statements of the manager in charge of the garden and the native doctor; the former declaring that the mortality was because of the water, and the latter stating that food taken along with it remains undigested.”¹²

According to J. W. Edgar, the mortality rate among plantations was significant in the early years of the tea districts. According to him, the tea gardens imported 84,915 labourers between May 1863 and May 1866. However, according to the 1866 records, only 49,750 gardeners were working.¹³ The remaining ones are thought to have died or deserted the garden, breaking their contract.

Large-scale desertion happened in the garden and voyage back to their native villages in the United Provinces, Central Province, and Madras. A special Commission was created in July 1862 to look into the situation, and its report painted a terrible image of life on the tea plantation as labour.¹⁴ The Company had to appoint many guards along the boats transporting the labourers to Assam in order to prevent desertion.

III FINDINGS

The study’s findings, based on analysis, summarize the reason for death and desertion. The study aims to comprehend the hardship that the workers encountered before deserting the plantation.

We perceive from Ashley Eden’s claims that the mortality rate in every shipment of coolies to Assam had a rate of up to 50%. Coolies were imported in enormous groups, much like cattle.¹⁵ It has been seen that some coolies from the Biswanath Tea Garden’s Dikrai Tea Estate were deserting in August 1896. They were observed wandering the Inner Line in the Assamese Darrang area. They believed they were taking the fastest route possible from Assam to Bengal. However, they were apprehended while travelling back to their homeland. Among the captured coolies, just one woman got away. Her report states that there were thirteen kidnapped coolies, six of whom were men, four of whom were women, and three of whom were children.¹⁶ It was shown that the coolies had no intention of returning. The labourers were afraid that if he goes back, the garden managers may torture, jail, or perhaps execute him for leaving the Garden.

The Act of 1863 was intended to put a stop to these abuses. However, keeping the coolies in unsanitary circumstances at depots exposed them to cholera. When these disease-ridden frail labourers arrived at the tea plantations, the existing climate and working conditions made matters worse. In the report of 1868, the commissioners were appointed to examine the state and prospects of a tea plantation in Assam and remarked on its connection to the report of 1863. They criticized the 1863 Act in particular for lacking regulatory teeth and clarity, claiming that it failed to provide for medical inspection at labour disembarkation depots, restrict overcrowding aboard steamers, and prevent unlicensed contractors from whisking away recruits and skirting its provisions. Without delving into cholera etiology, the commissioners asserted that there is little doubt that the germs of disease have been imbibed in the depot.¹⁷

The statute of 1865 also established two requirements. First, a minimum wage rate was established, and then protectors of labour were appointed to inspect the circumstances in the gardens and prevent the ill practice of labourers. The legislation was enacted; however, the requirements were not followed.¹⁸ The Act

¹² Suranjan Chatterjee and Ratan Das Gupta, “Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 44/46, Special Number (Nov., 1981), p. 1862. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4370381> >

¹³ Rana P. Behel, “One hundred years of Servitude, Political and Economy of Tea plantation in Colonial Assam, Tulika Books, 2014, p.47

¹⁴ Rana P Behel,” Power Structure, Discipline and Labour in Assam Tea Plantation Under Colonial Rule”, *Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 2006, pp. 143-172.

¹⁵ Proceedings of the Council of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal for the Purpose of Making Laws and Regulations, from February 1, 1862 to December 31, 1864, pp. 185-186 as cited in Suranjan Chatterjee and Ratan Das Gupta, “Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840-80”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 16, No. 44/46, Special Number (Nov., 1981), p. 1862. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4370381> >

¹⁶ Ranju Bezbaruah, “Runway Tea Garden Labourer, the Abors and the British”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 55(1994) pp. 639-645. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4414342>>

¹⁷ Arnab Dey, “Diseased Plantations: Law and the political economy of Health in Assam, 1860-1920,” *Modern Asian Studies*, page 1 of 38, Cambridge University Press, 2017 <[doi:10.1017/S0026749X1600053](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X1600053)>.

¹⁸ Commissioner's Report, Evidence of J B White, March 20, 1868, p xciii.

established a nine-hour workday and a six-day workweek. It also said that a contract couldn't be extended for over four years. These Act's requirements, however, were not followed because of a lack of adequate inspection. This also applied to the plan to build a hospital in each garden. The aforementioned committee of inquiry determined that the protection provisions had failed.

To prevent desertion, the planters had to designate guards on the boat transporting the workers to Assam, as well as seek the help of local government authorities in prosecuting the workers' absconders. According to the Assam Labour Enquiry Commission of 1906, recruiters were responsible for recruiting abuses. Contractors gathered coolies by the hundreds on false promises of high wages and easy work and dispatched them to the tea districts, taking no sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey; the result was disturbing mortality.¹⁹

To counteract the abuses, the Assam Labour and Emigration Act were established in 1901, which limited the arkati system of recruiting.²⁰ W.S. Coutts, Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi, expressed his concern about the abuses and stated that the purpose of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901 was to stop the abuses associated with unlicensed recruiting.²¹ The Act made the recruit procedure much more difficult, yet abuses persisted.²² Mr A. Earle, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department, was inspired by this to recommend more strict regulations to prevent the smuggling of intended immigrants from prohibited regions.²³ To check the abuses, D.J Macpherson, Officiating Commissioner of the Bhagalpur Division, noted that prohibitive notices had been issued in several of the neighbouring areas where the Act of 1901 had hitherto not been implemented.²⁴ The Royal Commission of Labour found in 1930 that, while the Government of India and the Government of Bengal passed a series of laws to rectify the abuses prevalent in recruitment, and while they did sometimes ease the issues of the recruits, recruiters evaded the law and abuses continued.²⁵

IV CONCLUSION

The study can be concluded by understanding the indentured system and the law that were meant to ensure human rights and how it failed them with every passing act.. The commissions that were set up in response to the abuse of the labourers were examined in the paper. The government took legislative steps to regulate recruitment on tea plantations. It attempted to check the welfare of the labourers. It eventually acted in the interests of the planters. This paper discussed the different mistreatment labourers experienced beginning with the recruiting process. The recruitment itself was based on deceptive tactics and misleading claims of better wages. The Company's gardens in Assam were far away from the districts, which made it difficult to recruit there. Country boats were used for transportation, which was unsafe and slow. They were ultimately transported on a steamboat to the garden, where the mortality rate was higher than 50%. They were

¹⁹ Priyam Goswami, "Industrialisation and colonial penetration in Assam in the nineteenth century a sectoral analysis of the Tea, coal and oil industries," Ph. D. Thesis, North-Eastern Hill University, 1993, p. 100

²⁰ Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board, Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1920 as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

²¹ WBSA, Emigration Department File I -A/1 10 April 1901 A 21a letter From W.S. Coutts I.C.S. Deputy Commissioner of Ranchi, to The Commissioner of the Chota Nagpur Division Ranchi as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

²² The Assam Labour and Emigration Act of 1901 made by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Assam Secretariat Press, Shillong March 1902 as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

²³ WBSA, Emigration Department, File 1-A/1, 17 February 1905, A 19. Letter No. 862, Calcutta, from A. Earle, Esq., Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department, to the Travelling Superintendent of Emigration, Bengal and the Central Provinces as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

²⁴ WBSA, Emigration Department File 1-A/1 February 1905, A-4 5 a letter From D.j Macpherson Esq. C.I.E. Officiating Commissioner of the Bhagalpur Division, To the Secretary of the Government of Bengal General Department as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

²⁵ Royal Commission of Labour, Vol. V. Part 1 Evidence Assam and the Dooars 6.1, Labour Bureau: New Delhi Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1931 as cited in Srijita Chakravarty, "Children Employed in the Tea Plantations of Assam 1880-1930," Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 2014, Vol. 75, Platinum Jubilee 2014, pp. 478-483.

transported on a ship that lacked sufficient accommodations, food, and medical care. Even if they got to the plantation, they had to face the reality. The labourers found themselves at the plantation in the middle of a marshy jungle far from human habitation where food was scanty and they had to watch their family and fellow labourers get sick and die. They had low, wet floors, leaky roofs, and sidewalls that were falling apart. Their living conditions were poor. The reality of being cut off from human society, the miserable living conditions, and the struggle to survive on little to no food. The workers had to witness as their family members and other workers died because they could not handle such harsh living conditions. They left the plantation at a certain point, breaking their contract. The labourers knew if caught, they would be subject to the torture of being flogged or beaten to death yet took the chance. The government's efforts to bring commissions for the well-being of the workforce were overshadowed by the urge for maximum profit through exploiting cheap labourers.

