



ASPECTS OF INDENTURE REGIME IN THE TEA PLANTATION OF ASSAM

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ABSTRACT : Tea Plantation in Assam gives India an important position in the map of the world. Assam and West Bengal are the two leading provinces of contributing the production of tea in India. Being a labour intensive is the unique feature of the tea plantation. The labourer working in the plantation industry happens to be the backbone of tea plantation. Tea plantation of Assam marked the beginning of the extraction of natural resources by the colonial British regime. It set the new avenues of investment of capital and exploitation of resources at cost of the suffering and misery of tea plantation workers. Because of the scarcity of labour in the tea plantation of Assam and as well as reluctant of local natives to work in tea plantation therefore a good number of labourer belong to different ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritage of other provinces of India were recruited. In the present paper an attempt has been made to examine the process of recruitment of labourer in the early period of tea industry of Assam. The paper also deals with the Indenture Regime of British Tea Planters to recruit labourer in the tea industry of Assam under which the labourer were exploited relentlessly to pursuit profit.

Keywords: Assam, Indenture Regime , Labour Recruitment, Tea Plantation.

I. Introduction:

Tea plantation in Assam dates back to the colonial history. Though as per the historian's record, tea as used by some tribes of North East India, but its settled cultivation started after the annexation of Assam under the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 into the British Colonial Regime. Ever since then many changes were made to the political, economic, and demographic structure of pre colonial Assam. Tea plantation being a labour intensive industry which required the planters to hire huge amount of labour force for which the locals were inadequate and unsuitable. These phenomenon led to the import of labourers from other states of colonial India. In order to maintain the stability and immobility of the migrated labourers, the colonial planters imposed various draconian contracts on the labourers which became one of the prime symbols of the plantation industry. Therefore this paper will draw heavily on the some aspects of the process of recruiting plantation workers and the various legislation which regulate the tea labour recruitment in the tea industry of Assam during colonial period.

II. Objectives of the Study:

The present paper seeks to examine the following aspects of Tea plantation in Assam:

- i) To analyse the process of recruitment of tea industry of Assam.



- ii) To examine the reasons for the push and pull factors of the tea labour migration of Assam.
- iii) To study the colonial laws regulating the recruitment process of tea plantation in Assam.

III. Methodology:

The present paper is based on the historical and analytical method to discuss the issues of labour recruitment to the tea industry of Assam. Apart from that the paper adopted secondary sources of information which are collected from different books and journals respectively.

IV. Results and Discussion:

A. Recruitment for Assam Tea Plantations in Tribal Areas:

In 1840, the first tea company, namely the Assam Company started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam and the introduction of tea gardens started the beginning of a new economic enterprise in Assam. Though capital and land was easily forthcoming for expansion of this industry but labour was not. The growth and lure for profit extracted from the tea plantation resulted the great demand for labour to work in the tea plantation which began the unprecedented movement of labour population in Assam. Migrant labour constituted the very core of plantation production in Assam. The planters found the local communities unwilling to become the 'particular type' of labour and labelled them 'lazy' and 'indolent' [1]. This necessitated the import of labour from outside Assam. This began in the middle of the Nineteenth century and continued all throughout the colonial period and went on till a decade or two after independence. In order to sustain the tea plantation in Assam planters began to mobilized the agrarian communities of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa and United Provinces, consisting mostly of 'tribals' and 'aboriginals' who are marginalised by the colonial land revenue policies. The migrant labourers were transformed into indentured 'coolies' for plantation production [2]. It is after the discovery of tea in Assam in 1834, recruiting parties were sent to Chotanagpur to obtain a share of the 'magic of dhangar labour power'. Chotanagpur became the fertile ground for recruiting tea garden labour for the British Planters. It was the homeland for the Munda and Oraon tribe who suffered very badly in terms of alienation from their land. Under the colonial administration tribals of Santhal Parganas and Chotanagpur not only suffered from land alienation but the restriction on the use of common and forest resources and limited scope for the expansion of cultivation, forcing them to seek wage employment. In the nineteenth century, colonial state had not succeeded in bringing north eastern peoples under sufficient control to enforce contracts or cheapen labour. So planters preferred tribes who had been exposed to British civilisation endeavours already and moreover, would be isolated in the gardens[3]. It was also known that the tribals had suffered much in the recurrent unrest in the Chotanagpur Plateau. Even in the second half of the nineteenth century the Sardari Larai, Birsa Movement and the Tana Bhagat Movement in the Chotanagpur division and the Kharwar Movement in Santhal Parganas left these areas in turmoil for long time[4]. It is suspected that the Colonial Administration



deliberately followed the policy of encouraging the process of alienation from lands in order to ensure availability of labourers for plantation work in Assam and North Bengal. The colonial regime began to follow the policy to enhanced the number of wage labourer to meet the scarcity of labour as against the increased demand for the process of capitalist process of industrialisation in India which was started in the mid- nineteenth century. By deliberately exploiting and uprooting tribals and peasants from their land which forced them to turn as wage earner and to work in harsh condition of plantation.

Emigration into Assam Tea Gardens For Selected Years Between 1885 and 1900

Date	In Assam	From Chotanagpur and Sathal Parganas	Percentage
1885	21,144	9,790	46.3
1886	22,715	12,160	53.5
1887	29,090	16,385	56.3
1895	56,501	18,369	32.5
1896	61,301	16,122	26.2
1897	66,328	28,078	42.3
1900	45,044	17,605	39

Source- The Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, Calcutta, 1906.

B. Indenture Regime and the Tea Plantation of Assam:

The migrant agrarian communities and tribal people were transformed plantation workers and categorised as ‘coolies’ which was almost universally used for migrant labourers who had been mobilised from different province of India to work in the plantation economy of Assam. While it may be worth mentioning that bulk of this labour migration towards Assam plantations was marked by the complaints of coercion and abusive recruitment practices. Though there are other factors too played towards the migration of labour to the plantation of Assam but most of the time they were recruited to fraud and abuse. After the arrival in the plantation, the coolies were made to reside and work under coercive strategies of labour control and ‘clockwork’ industrial discipline[1]. It is to be noted that emigration of the labour into tea gardens was not voluntary nor were they ‘free- labourers’ and they were recruited forcibly having had to sign a contract (indenture) for a stipulated period of working in the tea gardens of Assam. A special type of recruiting agents called Arkattis were appointed by leading European Labour recruiting agency House, who were reported to use all sorts of nefarious and fraudulent practices to sign contract. But a new labour legislation was introduced in the year 1865 which remain force in the Assam tea plantation with periodic modification, till the first decade of the twentieth century. Again with the amendment of the prior act, The Bengal Act VII of 1873 introduced for the first time provision of recruitment by licensed garden Sirdars, and also for the recruitment outside the Act on short term, one year civil contracts[5]. However the official enquiries carried out in 1868 and 1873 revealed the picture that even the statutory minimum wages for indentured labour in



Assam were not paid, living and working conditions continued to be deplorable with high mortality of labour. The labour 'Protective Provision' of the Act often remained unimplemented. With the extension of Workmen's Breach Contract Act, 1859 to the tea districts of Assam in stages from 1863 to 1876, the managers virtually resorted to the system of forced labour. Even the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act was repealed in 1926 but the planters resorted to the practise of exploiting and keeping tea garden workers isolated from the public contact, managers continued to deprive the workers of their freedom of movement. This further strengthened the crime against humanity by violating the rights of the tea plantation workers. Hence the marginalised agrarian communities and tribal people became the fertile ground for the recruiters who transported them to Assam to work as 'coolies' under indenture contracts and forced them to undergone all kinds of servitude in the plantation of Assam.

5. Findings of the study:

The following are the findings which can be derived from the study:

- 1) Migrant labour constituted the core of plantation economy of Assam. Having failed to utilise the local communities of Assam to produce tea British planters kept the profit margin high by paying abominably low wages to the labourers brought almost as slaves from the poverty ridden areas of Chotnagpur, Bihar, Orissa and the Madras presidency. Thus migrant labourers were transformed into indentured 'coolies'.
- 2) Industrial capitalism that was started in the nineteenth century colonized India triggered a massive mobilisation of marginalised agrarian communities to work in different parts of Colonial India. Poor peasants and tribals who were deprived of land and their forest rights who were the victims of capitalist process of industrialisation, forced to work under indenture regime of work pattern in plantations.
- 3) The Tea labourers of Assam did not possess bargaining power in the labour market and was forced to sell their labour for an indefinite period of time thus virtually transformed themselves to be a mere commodity and slave for the planters.

V. Conclusion:

The above study can be summarised that the tea plantation of Assam is the result of the hard work and suffering of migrated labourers who worked under the indentured subjugation of the colonial planters. Despite the resistance and slightest chance of escape of tea garden labour was always meted with harsh punishment and moreover isolationist policy of British tea planters made the workers always dependent on them. Assam is now recognised for producing one of the finest tea in the world but it is at cost of the expenses of millions of death and deprivation of tea garden workers under the colonial rule of exploitation and unfree labour regime imposed by the conditions of colonial capitalism.



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