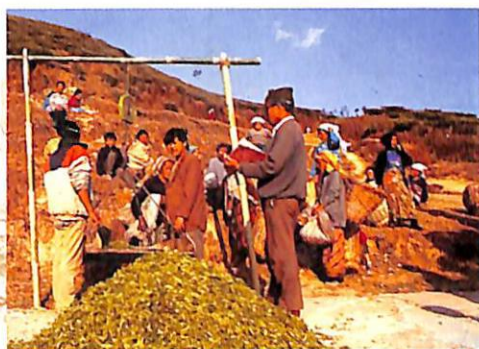


State and Society in North-East India

A Study of Immigrant
Tea Plantation Labourers



Purnendu Kumar

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Preface

The present volume is the revised version of my doctoral thesis entitled "Tea Garden Labour of Cachar: A Study in Socio-Political Perspective", which is the most comprehensive and original one. No work has been done prior to this.

Assam found a significant place in the global map due to tea plantation. The colonial powers brought immigrant labourers from Bihar (mainly from Chotanagpur), Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh to cater the needs of the agro-based tea industry in Assam. The local labourers thought to be sufficient at the initial stage, but were found inefficient, lazy, irregular and disinterested in plantation work. They considered plantation job below their status and dignity. As such a large number of labourers on contract basis were brought from outside Assam. However, they stayed back even after the expiry of contract period and settled permanently in the tea estates of Assam. At present, the descendants of the immigrants have become part and parcel of Assam; for all practical purposes they have made it their permanent abode.

It is a fact that the labourers were starved, illiterate, innocent and exploited people in their place of origin. They were alluded by the agents to bring them to this inhospitable and inaccessible tea plantation area. Bribery, coercion, deceit, false promises (*money falls from the tree, if shaken*) were the tactics applied by the agents to bring them here. In course of their journey through steamer, boat and later on by train, they suffered immensely and many men, women and children died due to various diseases (*cholera, dysentery etc.*), hunger and congestion.

Those who survived were sent to the tea gardens of Assam (including Cachar Valley) like animals. They were kept in barracks without caring for the privacy of women. Subsequently, plantation life began and gradually better plantation environment appeared. Divergent ethnic groups, living together made many compromises, sacrificed their tradition, mother-tongue and cultural values. However, they helped establishing the edifice of the tea industry in Assam. They left no stone unturned to make the industry viable and prosperous.

The study covers three districts of Barak Valley — Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi where more than 15% of the total population is constituted by the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers settled from many generations in the vicinity of the tea gardens. Many labourers having subsistence agricultural background escaped from the rigorous plantation life and settled in nearby vacant land. They adopted agriculture as their mainstay. Similarly, after expiry of contract, many labourers voluntarily left the plantation work and settled in those vacant lands and started cultivation. These groups of labourers were branded as ex-tea garden labourers. They are now settled in many villages/bastees of their own.

Tea garden labourers including ex-tea garden constitute an important segment of the total population of Cachar. They are part and parcel of socio-economic and political life of Cachar. Their socio-cultural interaction with other linguistic and cultural groups remained closed in the past but now, the doors have been opened and as such there has been acculturation among the immigrant labourers with the local culture. Besides, the emergence of the urge for political identity along with the spread of education, political awareness, trade union activities among the tea garden labourers highlighting unemployment and various other demands have ushered in an era of assertions and identity.

The main objectives of the study are:

- (i) To study the main causes of poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and socio-economic backwardness of tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers of Cachar.
- (ii) To study the working conditions, income and relationship with other workers, living condition at home, main problems of these labourers and the role of the family in their habitat.

- (iii) To study and analyse the extent of socio and economic exploitation, atrocities perpetrated on the tea garden labourers of Cachar.
- (iv) To study acculturation process of the tea garden labourers of Cachar.
- (v) To study and analyse the political perception of the tea garden labourers including ex-tea garden labourers of Cachar and their role in local, regional and state politics.
- (vi) To study the attitude of the tea garden labourers on different societal aspects — social, economic and political.

The study is most significant in present day context, considering the rising trends of labour unrest and sporadic disturbances arising out of increasing unemployment, extreme poverty and illiteracy among the tea garden labourers. The rising frustration and step-motherly treatment of the management and partial neglect by the government machinery result in strikes, lockout, violence and sometimes brutal killings of Managerial staff. These developments naturally draw attention to social scientists and scholars of various disciplines to make in-depth study of the situation. The immigrant plantation workers of Cachar like other parts of Assam have also added new dimension to ethnic turmoil of Cachar. The sociological and anthropological aspects of study in the changing national scenario is another significant aspect of the study.

The universe of our study is confined to the tea garden labourers of South Assam (Barak Valley). The crux of the study centres round the historical antecedents, the socio-economic and political life of the tea garden workers who contribute a major share in the economic advancement of the state and the country as a whole through foreign exchange by the tea export. The study further includes the exploitation and harassment of the workers by the management and indifferent attitude of the proprietors. The role of trade unions and other NGOs also comes under the purview of the study. From empirical study of a sample tea garden namely Kashipur, relevant data and other materials have been collected. The general study of all other tea gardens of Assam, or Tarai and Doars regions of West Bengal, the hierarchy in plantation, process of recruitment, wage pattern, job opportunities are same all over the tea estates of

Assam. Therefore, the study of any sample tea estate will be the representative of all.

The data and other materials have been collected from both published and unpublished sources as well as field study of different tea gardens of Barak Valley and Assam Valley (Brahmaputra Valley). Initially some library works have been done to get first hand information on the subject. For that, National Archives, New Delhi, State Archives of West Bengal, Calcutta, National Library, Calcutta, JNU Library, New Delhi, Gauhati University Library, Guwahati, Dibrugarh University Library, Dibrugarh, North Eastern Hill University Library, Shillong, Indian Tea Association (Surma Valley Branch, Silchar), Tea Association of India (Barak Valley Branch), Tea Board, Regional Office, Silchar, Cachar Cha Sramik Union, Silchar have been thoroughly consulted. During the period, many valuable materials were collected from these institutions and organisations. The technique of research is data oriented, based on field works. For primary information a questionnaire method was used followed by extensive sample (118 houses) survey of households (workers) belonging to different ethnic groups and other castes engaged in plantation work. The information collected from interview and case study were supplemented by data collected through personal observations. Besides, some managerial staff, seasoned trade union leaders and activists having special knowledge of tea plantation have been interviewed.

In fact, no work has so far been done on socio-economic and political life of tea garden workers of Assam. P. Griffith, in his work "History of Indian Tea Industry" (1967) and E. Gait, in his work "The History of Assam" (1935) have made passing reference to the historical background and development of tea industry. However, they did not mention any socio-economic and political aspect of plantation workers' life.

J.B. Bhattacharjee, in his book "Cachar under British Rule in North East India" (1977) has simply made a casual reference to the tea garden labourers of Cachar. R.C. Awasthi's work on "Economics of Tea Industry in India" (1975) and Amalendu Guha's book "Planters Raj to Swaraj" (1977) have analysed the economic part as well as historical and political part of the tea industry workers in general but no specific study on Cachar have been made. S.S. Harlalkar, in his work "Socio-Economic Study of Tea

Garden Labourers of Assam" (1973) has thrown some light on socio-economic life of the tea workers of Assam in general but no in-depth study has been stressed upon in respect of Barak Valley. S. Bhowmik, in his work "Class Formation in the Plantation System" (1981) and S.K. Bose, in his book "Capital and Labour in Indian Tea Industry" (1954) have taken the thread of Marxist ideology and coloured the socio-economic aspect of the tea plantation workers of India in their own way. Many other scholars and researchers in their unpublished works have also studied various features of tea garden workers of various plantation districts of Assam, which are considered incomplete in many respects. Thus the present study is necessitated to draw a vivid picture of the socio-economic and political life of the tea workers (tea garden labourers including ex-tea garden labourers) of the whole district of Cachar (South Assam), which remained unexplored till today.

The present work is divided into 8 (eight) thematic chapters. The First Chapter is an introduction to the problems and highlights the historical and geographical aspects of the problem; the Second stresses upon the historical background of the development of tea industry in North East India and the problem of labour immigration; the Third highlights the process of labour recruitment and labour immigration from the poverty-stricken provinces of India; the Fourth emphasises on the socio-economic and political profile of the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers of Cachar (Barak Valley); the Fifth highlights on the management of tea plantation right from acquiring land for plantation down to final dispatch of tea leaves to markets; the Sixth deals with the impact of tea garden labourers on the economy of the district Cachar; the Seventh comprises the comprehensive study on the political participation of the plantation workers in Cachar summarising their political consciousness, voting behaviour and their role in Cachar politics and finally, the Eighth Chapter sums up the entire research works and illuminates the thrust areas of the study. The objectives of the study and various hypotheses have been tested and critically analysed in this concluding chapter.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Eighteenth century English poet William Cowper's view 'the cup that cheers but not inebriates' still holds good in the modern civilized society. Now-a-days tea has become one of the cheapest universal beverages in the world. People, right from the intellectuals, down to the ordinary manual workers in different fields of activities feel pleasure while sipping tea, and get relief, relaxed and refreshed. Earlier, the Europeans, particularly the British and Americans were habituated of taking tea regularly. The Asiatic countries followed the taste of tea much later in 19th century. Gradually it became universal and people from every walk of life enjoy the pleasure of tea. Tea is regarded as a stimulant and it contains important ingredients like caffeine, protein, vitamins etc. It reduces mental tension and gives little rest to mind.

Tea plantation in India is virtually a gift of the British colonial administration. The history of the tea plantation as elaborately discussed in subsequent chapters reveals that strenuous efforts were made to develop plantation in North East India, particularly in the Assam Valley and its success encouraged European planters and entrepreneurs to expand the plantation throughout the region which was favoured by the geographical factors. In the Surma Valley* also the first tea plantation was started in

* The tea plantation has developed along the Brahmaputra river in northern Assam and along Surma river (now Barak, the upper part of the same river which remained in India after partition) in South Assam (Cachar). For convenience sake, the northern part is called Assam Valley and southern part, the Barak Valley or Cachar. The Assam Valley includes Lakhimpur, Darrang, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Kamrup, Sonitpur, Goalpara districts. The Barak Valley includes Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts.

1855–1856 by the Williamson and Co. near Barsangan (near present Kathal bagan) and its success opened the eyes of many planters and adventurous capitalists and entrepreneurs who applied for grant of land in Cachar. The early administrators of Cachar¹ like Capt. T. Fishers, Lt. G. Verner and R. Stewart also took initiative to promote tea plantation in Cachar. The 'wild rush' of the planters led to liberal grants of land, on easy terms under the patronage of the colonial administrators for tea plantation, and within a short time many gardens were opened in Barak Valley. Before 1861, it was less than 50 but in 1869 it increased to 71 with 8600 acres. Later by 1895, it reached up to 199 covering an area of 280172 acres.² At present Cachar is the seventh leading district in India in respect of production of tea.

Table 1.1
Top ten tea producing districts

<i>Tea producing districts</i>	1992	1993
Dibrugarh (Assam)	139.38	142.73
Dooars (West Bengal)	118.94	129.90
Sibsagar (Assam)	91.93	96.88
Darrang (Assam)	78.08	81.85
Nilgiris (Tamilnadu)	69.97	77.03
Idukki (Kerala)	40.84	51.04
Cachar (Assam)	43.69	42.44
Terai (West Bengal)	21.43	27.27
Coimbatore (Tamilnadu)	25.01	26.25
Darjeeling (West Bengal)	9.87	10.85

Source: *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 4 September, 1994.

The number of workers accordingly went on increasing and immigration of labour increased.

Tea plantation is a labour-oriented work which requires large number of labourers. The local labourers initially engaged did not meet the requirements; hence, the importation of labourers from outside Assam was thought and action taken immediately. Within a short time the entire Assam tea plantation area was covered by immigrant labourers. At present the number of gardens though reduced but the number of tea garden labour and their dependants has increased manifold. This has opened the gate of innumerable socio-economic and political problems within the State. Keeping these important points in view the study begins with the description of

historical and geographical features of the district which favours tea plantation.

A Short History of Cachar

The province of Cachar formerly called Hirimba, was informally attached to British dominion on 13th June, 1830 following the death of the last king Govinda Chandra who was without any heir. The province was subsequently, annexed by the British on 14th August, 1832.

The original district of Cachar with Hailakandi and Silchar sub-division was known in older times as 'Hirimba Desha' named after the demons Hirimba who married Bhimsena, the second Pandava of Mahabharata and gave birth to Ghatoutkacha. Till 16th century, the rulers of Cachar used to be known as Hirimbeshwar.³

In 13th century Barak Valley was ruled by Tipperah — a section of Bodos and the capital was at Khalangshi now known as Rajghat on the bank of the river Rukni in Cachar. The Tipperahs moved eastwards and with Tulsidwaj as the reigning Prince, an independent kingdom was established in 15th century A.D. In the beginning of the 16th century Cachar was annexed to Tripura. The authority of Tripura in Cachar came to an end when Koch rulers defeated the Raja of Tripura at Longai now in Karimganj district and the Koch general Chilarai left a contingent of Koch soldiers at Brahmapur now known as Khaspur near Udharbond in Cachar. Later, Cachar came under Hirimba kingdom.

The kingdom of Hirimba once extended to a vast area covering a part of the present Nowgong district and western portion of Sibsagar as well as the entire belt of Cachar, North Cachar and Karbi Anglong district but during the reign of Raja Govinda Chandra it began to shrink gradually. After the annexation of the plain portion of Cachar by the British on August 14, 1832 by the proclamation of Governor-in-Council, Capt. T. Fisher was appointed Superintendent of Cachar who administered the district from Cherapunji and subsequently shifted to Doodhpatil from where the headquarters were finally shifted to Silchar. The official nomenclature of Cachar appeared on the administrative map of Assam on September 1835 and the old name of Hirimba was wiped out from the age-old map of Cachari kingdom.⁴

The British annexed North Cachar in 1854 and tagged it with Cachar. Cachar was later on included in the Chief Commissionership of Assam in 1874. The post of Superintendent was redesignated as Deputy Commissioner. Mr. R. Stuart was appointed as the first Deputy Commissioner of Cachar who was later on succeeded by a civilian officer J.W. Edgar, ICS. Hailakandi was made another sub-division on June 1, 1869.⁵

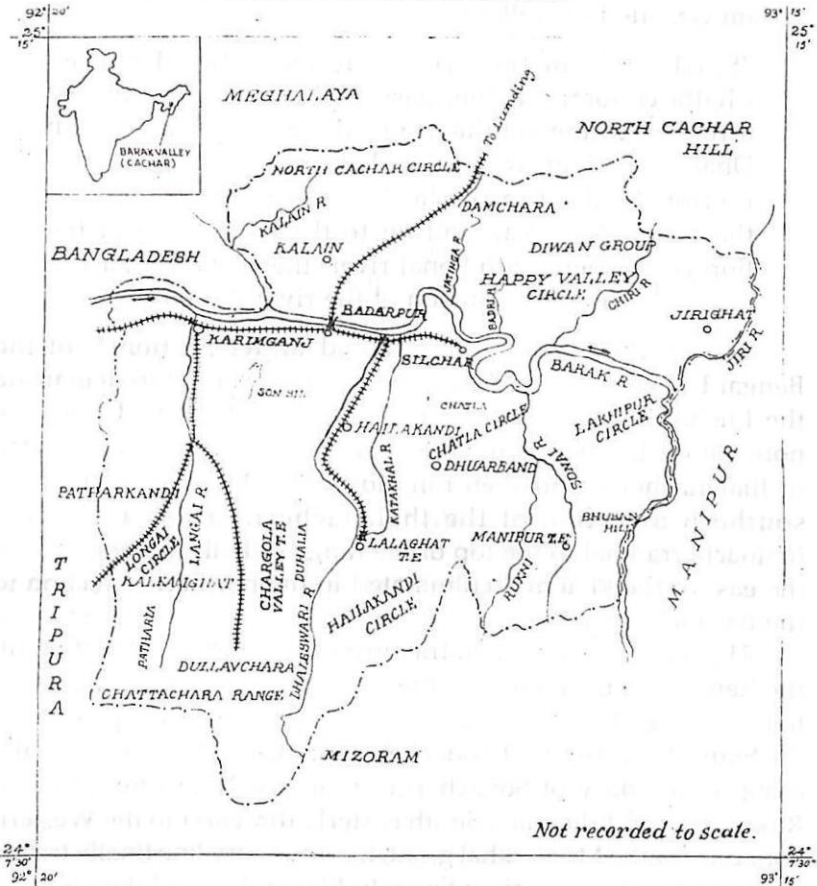
The partition of India in 1947 brought a radical change in the political map of the Indian sub-continent. A new state Pakistan came into existence; the eastern wing of which was named as East Pakistan. Three and half thanas* of erstwhile Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet district was transferred to Cachar and rest attached to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). North Cachar sub-division was carved out of Cachar district on November 17, 1951 and was attached to the newly constituted district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills with the headquarters at Haflong. Subsequently, Cachar district was bifurcated on July 1, 1983 and Karimganj sub-division was upgraded as a separate district. Hailakandi, a sub-division of Cachar was also made a separate district on October 1, 1989.⁶ Thus, the old political map of Cachar was re-arranged keeping in view the political consideration as well as geo-political compulsions.

Boundary

The Barak Valley districts (Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi) are situated between 24°8" and 25°15"N latitude and 92°20" and 93°15"E longitude covering a geographical area of 6962 sq. km⁷ (Map of Barak Valley with tea gardens). The Cachar district has two sub-divisions, namely, Silchar and Lakhipur. Hailakandi and Karimganj districts have only one sub-division each. The Barak Valley districts are surrounded by Khasi-Jaintia and North Cachar Hills in the north, Lushai Hills and Hills of Tripura in the south, Manipur Hills and the Barak River in the east, while Bangladesh on the west. The boundary clearly reflects that the Barak Valley is surrounded by Hills from three sides and plain land from one side.

* The Redcliff award (boundary demarcation between India and Pakistan) gave Ratabari, Patharkandi, Badarpur and half part of Karimganj Police Station of Sylhet district to India and rest part to Pakistan (now Bangladesh).

BARAK VALLEY TEA CIRCLES



Reference

1. River
2. Stream
3. State boundary
4. Railway Line



Map 1: Tea Estate in Barak Valley

The original southern boundary of Cachar as depicted in the Assam Gazette is as follows:

"Starting from the great Trigonometrical survey Chattarchhora, the boundary shall run in a south-east direction to the confluence of the Bhorobicharra with Dhallassur river, whence it shall take a North-East direction to the top of the Bhayrobi tilla, thence to the top of Noonvai, and on to the confluence of the Borocooliachera with Sonai river, thence South-East to Tipai Mukh at the junction of the river Barak."⁸

The notification of 1875 framed under Section V of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation of 1873 sought to demarcate the Lushai Hills frontier from the plain of Cachar. Under the notification the boundary line started from a few miles north of Jhalanacherra and then ran along the Dhaleshwari river in southern direction of the Jhalanacherra grant across the Jhalnacherra khal to the top of the range of Hills immediately to the east of the khal and culminated in the northern direction to the Baruncherra grant.

The boundary line then traversed in an easterly direction till the Rengti pahar range from the western branch of Rengti pahar to the source of the Jalunga then traversed along Jalenga river to the South East corner of Sonacherra grant. The line followed the eastern boundary of Sonacherra grant and Noarbund grant to Rukni river and then in a South easterly direction to the Western boundary of the Monierkhal grant, the boundary line finally trends west and South to the river Sonai to Mainadhar and then following the western grant to the river Barak.

Physiography

The Barak Valley is a heterogeneous land of high hills, low lands and level plains. In fact, the valley is the upward extension of Bengal plains.⁹ Almost the entire area of old province of Bengal deltaic region succinctly described as new mud, old mud and marsh including Surma Valley has, however, a common structural and very similar way of life and an historic entity and linguistic and cultural unit.¹⁰ The entire valley region is punctuated with high lands (locally called tillah) and low lands of an average height

of less than 30 meters from the sea level. The area is characterized by doubly plunging anticlinal and synclinal valleys. The general trends of the hills are North-North-East to South-South-East. Most of the hill ranges are dissected and eroded along the dissection to form round topped small hillocks which are found scattered along the flanks of the hill ranges. These are separated by narrow valleys having poor drainage system leading to drainage congestion. The highest hill range of Barail group of ranges which connects the north Manipur hills and Khasi range along the North of Cachar districts ranges between 2500 ft. and 6000 ft. The average height represented by Jhiri hill range which is the highest hill range within the jurisdiction of Barak Valley is about 7660 feet above the sea level. Some hills on the eastern side are as high as 2700 ft. Bhuban Hills which is the important range south of Barak runs north and south at a short distance of 700 to 3000 ft. height. The Rengti pahar range also runs north and south from the watershed between Sonai and Dhaleswari river. The Rengti Pahar breaks into various spurs in the north which drains directly into Chatla Haor. The Tilain range also runs north and south (10 to 500 feet). The Sarispur or Sidheshwar Hill which forms the boundary of Cachar and Sylhet (before partition) varies from 600 to 2000 feet.

Rest of the land of the Barak Valley is flat land of an average height of 100 feet.* The horizontal drop from Silchar to the nearest sea point is 1:6000 approximately. The principal river of the valley is Barak (Barobakra) which rises on the southern slope of the lofty ranges of Nagaland (Japro Peak, 30–50 m) and forms the Northern boundary of Manipur (locally called Kairong).

The important tributaries from the hills are Jiri (the first affluent to join Cachar district and forms the boundary line between Assam and Manipur), Chiri, Badri, Madhura and Jatinga. These are hilly rivers, which have swift current during monsoon period and mostly carry boulders, gravels and sand suitable for building construction.¹¹ The rivers coming from the south and draining the Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts are Dhaleshwari, Katakhal,** Sonai, Rukni, Singla and Longai.

* Silchar 26 m, Karimganj 18 m, Lalabazar 24 m, Badarpur 19 m, Patherkandi 26–28 m, Kalain 17–18 m.

** The river Katakhal did not exist in the year 1832. On January 10, 1869 there was severe earthquake. As a result the topography of Cachar was badly affected.

The Barak river and its tributaries deposit different layers of shale and mud which form hard sub-soil of the valley. It provides thick blanket of mud stone that restricts downward percolation of water. As a result, there is heavy run off water during normal rainy days. The water table is deep and there are abundant ponds throughout the valley. In a nut shell, the valley consists of four categories of land — the hills, plains, intermittent high land (locally called tillah) and low land area full of water (locally called bheels or haors). Proportionately, plain land covers 45% of the total area followed by tillah land (30%) plateau area (20%) and bheels (0.5%).¹²

Geology

The entire Cachar plain is composed of massive bedded sand stones and shale of the Oligocene geological era (Tertiary age). Surma group of rock formation of Miocene period consists of sand stones, sandy shale, silty stones and conglomerates. The entire zone is the area of intense geotectonic activities and there are major tectonic adjustments within its affected seismic zone. The valley has major earthquake experiences.^{13*}

Soil

The soil of the districts within Barak valley falls under two textured classes. The silt clay and loamy soil is found mainly in plateau and flat area, and coarse sandy loam in tillah areas. As a matter of fact, the soil of the entire valley is the mixture of alluvium, sandy and muddy loam, superimposed upon stones, gravels and conglomerates. The muddy soil is rich in humus contents, which is mostly confined to river banks and low lying areas. The

... contd.

The river Dhaleshwari having its source in Lungleigh, Mizoram flew through Hailakandi town and meets Barak near Badarpur. The earthquake filled its bed for a length of about 2 km near Ganjakhauri village 16.5 kms south of Hailakandi and diverted its course eastward along a small tributary which in course of time became the main river known as Katakhal. (Interview from A.K. Singh, Manager, Barne Breaze T.E.).

* January 10, 1869 (R-7.35), January 30, 1924 (R-7.5), October 23, 1926 (R-7), January 26, 1950 (R-8.8), December 31, 1984 (R-6.2), Sonai area badly affected.

tillah land is mostly lateritic having acidity. The pH value of the soil of the Valley ranges between 4.5 and 6.5 only (less than 7.0 acidity, more than 7 alkaline).^{14*}

The best soil for tea cultivation is a like friable loamy with porous sub-soil which permits a free percolation of water. The tea is highly intolerant of stagnant water.

Climate

The general climate of Barak Valley is neither too hot nor too cold, it is rather humid. The valley by its geographical location is shut in by hill ranges from three sides which have great influence on climate. The rainfall-temperature chart of an average 10 years of Silchar and other places (Table 1.2) reveal that the temperature varies between 32.84°C maximum and 9.18°C minimum. The rainfall chart of the different places within the valley indicate that the annual rainfall exceeds 3000 mm (although 39 mm in 1930). The uncertainty of monsoon throughout the country does not show uniform rainfall in the valley also. Silchar, the district headquarter-

Table 1.2
Temperature, Humidity and Rainfall of Silchar: 1984-93

Months	Temperature (°C)		Humidity (%)		Rainfall
	Max.	Min.	6.13 a.m.	1.13 p.m.	(mm)
January	25.67	09.18	97.50	53.40	010.73
February	27.51	13.28	96.50	47.50	061.07
March	30.42	17.60	93.20	50.20	136.20
April	31.29	20.90	92.80	63.90	338.47
May	31.22	22.36	92.90	70.80	439.50
June	32.70	24.76	94.40	74.00	576.00
July	32.10	24.90	95.60	76.70	501.00
August	32.97	24.80	95.60	72.90	366.95
September	31.94	24.10	96.30	75.40	412.80
October	31.70	22.23	96.20	70.50	229.40
November	30.44	17.53	95.90	57.50	040.00
December	27.45	12.84	97.70	54.90	022.70

Source: Annual Scientific Report, T.R.A., Jorhat, 1995.

* The tea leaves thrive in an upper limit of pH value of soil between 6.0 and 6.5 only. Moderately good tea leave can be found growing at pH value of 4.5 and 5.0 and a few have been reported as low as 4.0, the lowest value attainable without the presence of free acid.

ters experienced 426.2 mm in March 1994 while in the preceding year it was only 188.2 mm. The north-west portion of the Barak Valley received higher rainfall than Longai and Chargoala Valley (439 mm annually as against 2774 mm in Chargoala and 2665 mm in Longai, 3469 mm in Happy Valley, 3510 mm in Lakhipur, 3145 mm in Chatla, 3085 mm in Hailakandi).

The humidity of the air varies between 92.8% and 97.5% maximum and 47.5 and 76.7% minimum. During the month of June, July and August the high temperature accompanied with high humidity (minimum difference 10–15%) makes the climate suffocating and a feeling of laxity prevails everywhere. As such the climate is not an ideal one.¹⁵

Vegetation

The climate and soil condition has a pronounced effect on the growth of natural vegetation in this valley. The lateritic soil having high acidity does not allow luxuriant vegetation. However, the predominance of other natural factors have led to the growth of different types of timber, bamboo, reed, grass. The important timbers are Jarul, Nageshwar, Kurla, Phuma, Ratha, Cham, Gamair, Shundi, Jam and Simul. These timbers are mostly grown in the hills of Cachar and other southern part facing Mizoram border. In the north bordering Naga Hills, there are also timber forests. Besides, Mango, Pipal, Neem, Kadam and other shady trees along with bushes and shrubs are available in abundance while Betelnut, Coconut, Banana plants are found everywhere.

Assam found a place on the global map due to tea plantation engineered by the British rulers. It is the adventurous, enterprising skill, commercial interests as well as political will and forward looking policy of the colonial rulers that tea plantation flourished in the entire North-East India. The tea plantation in Assam valley was established during 1836 by the colonial planters. It was in the year 1856 that the first tea plantation started at Barsangoon, a few miles south of Silchar town.^{16*} The subsequent chapter has thrown light on the historical background under which tea plantation developed in Cachar and how the labour problem was solved by

* Tea was started in Bengal from 1840, Cachar 1855, South India 1865, Sri Lanka, 1873.

emigrating large number of labour from poverty and famine stricken districts of Bihar, Orissa, MP, UP and Bengal. In the beginning, the European planters thought to run the plantation with the help of local people of Sylhet and Jaintia the inhabitants of which district came very willingly to Cachar and settle down in it.¹⁷ Kukies were also employed but they were found misfit because they were extremely lazy. So, they also failed to provide partial solution of labour supply.¹⁸ The local labourers were loath to work hard mainly because they had limited wants. They were satisfied with humblest food, plain clothes and smallest habitation. These requirements of their daily life were produced by their own toil. Further, they were reluctant to work in the garden since the employment in the garden was not befitting to their status and self-sustained economy. Moreover, their socio-economic background discouraged them to join tea estate job.

Being an agro-based exercise, the tea plantation is a labour oriented enterprise. It requires constant labour force at every stage from nursery to final despatch of tea chest for sale in the market. In the early part of the plantation, the manufacturing process was not mechanised and everything was done manually. Thus, the tea plantation requires, from the beginning, resident labour who are easily available and are at the beck and call of the management. The local labour remained absent from the garden during peak season on the simple pretext of attending religious festivals, marriages and other ritual ceremonies. Consequently, the planters faced acute labour problem. The absence of labour during peak season hampered the smooth running of the plantations work. As a result, the immigration of labour from outside Assam was thought to be indispensable. Besides, the European planters also thought to prefer uprooted labour who could be easily controlled and exploited if they are housed within the garden. Consequently, the labourers from poverty-stricken and heterogeneous, linguistic and cultural groups belonging to different provinces were brought to the tea plantation areas of Assam including Cachar and Sylhet.

The planters' idea to bring labour from outside was favoured by the deplorable condition of the people in their districts due to acute famine and starvation inducing them to seek fortune elsewhere.¹⁹ The famine of 1876-77 badly affected Madras, Bombay,

North-West Province, Awadh and Panjab which helped migration of hungry and starved people to the districts of Assam. The British planters exploited the opportunity and recruited a large number of labourers through their agents called 'Arkattis'.^{20*} Thus, labourers from famine and poverty-stricken areas of Bihar (Chotanagpur, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dumka, Buxur, Gaya, Palamu, Bhagalpur, Mongher, Chapra and Patna) Orissa (Ganjan, Kalahandi), Madhya Pradesh (Raipur, Bastar, Bilaspur, Raigarh), Utter Pradesh (Deoria, Balia, Basti, Mirzapur, Gazipur, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur), Bengal (Medinipur, Purulia, Bakura, Burdwan) were recruited by the agents under contract system. Though the climate was favourable for tea plantation it was not favourable for the planters. The high temperature, extreme humid climate, diseases like Malaria, Cholera, Kalazar, Small pox, Dysentery, and Typhoid were widespread. All these negative factors hampered the pioneering work. However, frantic efforts were made by the adventurous European planters despite unsuitable and inhospitable climate for them to develop tea plantation in Assam by appointing 'Arkattis'.²¹ They were the agents of the planters who infiltrated into the remotest villages wherever a suitable opportunity occurred. They resorted to all sorts of nefarious and fraudulent practices for tempting or forcing men and women in the country side for 'Agreement', i.e., a contract to serve for at least a period of three years to be made by the starved people. This was in reality a trap for reducing them to slavery. They were kept in a closely guarded depot pending their despatch to the tea gardens in Assam.

While on journey for more than a month indentured labourers were given limited quantity of dry ration and were forced to embark on the country boat beyond its capacity. They were virtually packed up in the boat like animals and no human consideration was even thought of regarding the privacy of the women. Due to long journey and bad climate many labourers and their children who were poor and ill-nourished, deluded by the 'Arakattis', died en route because they were unable to withstand the hostile climate of North-East India. The dead bodies were

* One of the methods of recruitment of labour was through licensed contractors who themselves employed licensed recruiters known as Arkattis. (Arkattis—literally means pilots)

thrown into the river water like beast. No where in annals of mankind was such a great dishonour shown to the dead as was meted out to the newly recruited tea garden labourers dying under trying circumstances. Those who survived reached their destination in Cachar in psychologically depressed mood and most frustrating appearance. They were at first put in the concentration camp at Katigorah or Silchar from where they were sent to different tea gardens. The moment the uprooted men put their feet on the soil of Cachar their hopes and aspirations were shattered by the blow of misfortune. They were disheartened and perplexed to find a typical geographical environment. As a matter of fact, they were not accustomed to such an environment. They were asked to clear the jungle first and to make huts or common barracks for their dormitory living. In case of any refusal to work, boots and kicks of the European planters were the only reply. Migrants were subjected to round the clock surveillance of the garden chowkidar.²² After detection, they were whipped mercilessly by the managers and in fact, cane was indispensable accompaniment of the garden manager. The outraging of the women's modesty was also not rare in the garden world. They were treated as the object of 'hire and fire' at par with men.²³

The planters enjoyed extra authoritarian power over the labourers. They were not only the masters of the labour but also magistrates to decide disputes, arrest and punish them for breach of contract. They arbitrarily exploited the labourers and beat mercilessly whenever they tried to escape from the garden. The labourers were discriminated and had to suffer injustice from them because the planters treated them of inferior breed. They were treated as 'beast in a menagerie'. Sometimes Saheb called them as black feather to be used for their selfish end.²⁴ The sorrowful and heart burning feeling forced the labour to shun their tears in the isolated and most secluded part of the tea garden. The folklore of the tea garden women workers of the garden reflects the feelings of the workers.

*"Hai re nirmohi Shyam
Faki dia anlo Assam."*

("O Cruel God, agents brought us to Assam by bluff")

Instances are numerous when the women labourers were occasionally tied up to a tree and their clothes lifted up to the waist and were beaten on bare buttocks with leather strips or boots.²⁵

For sexual atrocities committed upon the female workers of both immigrants and local tribes, many victims even committed suicide to escape such torture. Lamenting upon such inhuman behaviour of the planters it has been remarked:

"It is very painful to contemplate that those who call themselves Christian even by name should so far forget the most solemn injunction of the Bible that they should not feel the least compunction to tempt away by the glitters of gold, a class of ignorant and simple hearted women and rob them of a treasure which is even more precious than the richest diamond that may adorn a throne!"²⁶

Such inhuman treatment and sexual exploitation of the tea garden women workers have been highlighted by social activists and many trade union leaders. It is indeed a well known fact that the tea gardens were managed by the European managers during the British days. They were vested with powers to arrest and imprison the labour living in the estates for many wrongful acts. This power was misutilised for creating a terror and doing oppression. Women living in the estates were often utterly dishonoured and demoralised by having illicit sexual relationship. At one stage the increasing number of illegitimate Eurasian children, reflecting the slur on Indian posed a serious problem. Attention of Mahatma Gandhi was drawn to this situation who wrote in *Young India* his serious concern and warned both Indian and European Managers of the tea gardens to refrain from dishonouring womanhood.²⁷

The sensational Khoreal shooting case during April 1921 in which Reginald William Read, Assistant Manager of the Garden wanted a labour girl named Hira to live with him and on being refused Mr. Read shoot down her father Gangadhar and her brother Nepal.²⁸ This is a heinous crime and inhuman treatment meted out to labour. Similarly, one Mr. Dowson, Manager of Badarpur Tea Estate (who served Esabeel TE also) used to dance with female workers in his bungalow in naked condition. On being refused he used to punish them and harass them economically too.²⁹

The Baladan Murder case 1892 is also the story of European Manager's atrocities on women workers. The manager was a man of bad character who used to exploit the chastity of the innocent female workers, although in most cases the incidents were given different colours and many persons were falsely implicated.

The present occupational pattern and acute poverty of the labour community is the result of existing pattern of employment as well as exploitative measure adopted by the planters. Further, illiteracy among the tea garden workers and lack of awareness among them due to less contact with the outside world, have put them in such a position of perpetual slavery. Prolonged poverty of the workers, regular indebtedness and frustration due to unemployment of their sons and daughters always burdened their spirit.

Area-wise Distribution of Tea Plantation in Cachar

The river Barak is the life line of the district from all practical purposes. The river divides the district into two parts — the north and south. From the plantation point of view, the important plantation circles are — North Cachar circles in the extreme north west, the Happy Valley in the middle and the Lakhipur circles in the north-eastern region. The southern part of Barak provides four tea plantation circles — Chatla Bheel circles in the east which includes hillock and bheels, the Hailakandi circle in the middle, having mostly flat land, Chargola circle and Longai in the south and south-western parts of the districts. Thus, altogether, there are seven plantation circles or valleys where tea plantation has been developed in course of time. From plantation point of view, the Planters' Associations (Indian Tea Association and Tea Association of India, Silchar Branch) have divided the entire district of Cachar into seven circles.

Cachar, with its undulating carpets of green and sun kissed valleys, is a melting pot of various different cultures and ethnicities. The Dravidian, Kols, Bhills, Austric and Aryans and Non-Aryans living together have formed unique cultural assimilation. The tea garden labourers belong to different ethnic and linguistic groups, prominent among them are the Santhals, Mundas, Bhumij, Oraons, Khonda, Kishan, Nagesia, Savaras,

Table 1.3
Distribution of tea circles with area in Barak Valley

Sl. no.	Tea circles	Area
(1)	North circles	10830 acres
(2)	Happy Valley circles	8140 acres
(3)	Lakhipur circles	9950 acres
(4)	Longai Valley circles	11800 acres
(5)	Chargola circles	7650 acres
(6)	Hailakandi circles	11760 acres
(7)	Chatla circles	10970 acres
	Total	71100 acres
(i)	North of Barak river	28920 acres
(ii)	South of Barak river	42180 acres

Source: Tea Association of India (Barak Valley), Silchar.

Godvas, Karmkars, Proja, Pankhas, and Madrasis. Initially, they used to speak in their mother tongues and now began to speak in local language 'Chillo-Millo' or perverted Bengali. Bhojpuri is commonly used and understood by every garden labourer in Cachar tea estates. There are some non-tribals in the tea estates who belong to other caste Hindus like Goala, Koiri, Kurmi, Teli, Kahar, Pashi, Ghatwar etc. who share the same pleasure and pain of the garden life and are at par with each other in status and respect in the eyes of management. In the garden both the tribal and non-tribal groups of worker from many generations have developed a culture of their own which is different from that of local inhabitants who are away from the garden life. The social life of the tea workers is confined to the parameters of the garden only which is like an island of isolation. In fact, under socio-economic circumstances they remain half fed, half clothed and lead a sub-standard life. Their social status is very low. The planters, managers and other supervisory staff, look down upon the tea garden labourers and consider them sub-human beings. This is evident from the report of the Census Commissioner of Assam 1931:³⁰

"In Assam, a coolie is always coolie and whether he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. Indeed from many points of view, the social position

of a coolie or ex-coolie was worse than any class in the province”

The labourers are identified everywhere in the garden with torn cloths, lacerated faces, dusty shoes, frustrated and exhausted look and above all dark complexion. These are the typical characteristics of the tea garden labourers. They were treated by the British planters not as human beings but as animals. This feudal outlook has not changed and continues to influence the minds of the Indian planters even today.³¹

The tea garden workers have become socially and culturally acclimatised in the soil of the tea garden of Assam. They have been for all practical purpose become part and parcel of Assam. Their ancestral places have been forgotten by more than 20% of the labour. A sizeable percentage of them simply know their ancestral places but have not visited the places any time. They consider the garden as their permanent abode and treat the place as temple of love, affection as well as the temple of bread and butter. Whenever tea tree grows, the place is sacred whether it exists on the mountain slope or on the plain field.³²

Of all the problems confronted by the labourers, the problem of wage and fringe benefits is most pressing and persistent. There is still discrimination in their daily wages and wages offered to the workers are much lower than the wages prevailing in other sectors of the country.³³ The Labour Commission 1868 opines:

“The most garden, especially in Assam, labourers earn very much below the minimum wage. During 1881 the tea garden workers used to get Rs. 3·50 whereas an ordinary worker in Bombay during 1860–62 got Rs. 7·50. Even at present a tea garden worker gets Rs. 35·30 per day whereas outside the garden the same labour gets Rs. 50–70 per day.”³⁴

This discrimination had a great impact on the economic activities leading to stagnant economic status of the workers.

The housing problems faced by the tea garden labourers are also acute and painful. They are living in isolated and solitary jungles of labour line. Their accommodation even from Indian standard is horrifying. The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 has not been fully implemented. As such most of the workers live in thatched houses partly mud-built and partly bamboo plastered

with mud and cow dung. The ground is damp and infected with white ant. The report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India in 1931 observes:

“... the average number of persons per room is four which, judged even by Indian standard of city life must be called bad ... thirty three percent of the population live in rooms occupied by more than five persons at a time and 1% in room occupied by over 20 persons at a time. The number of persons living in rooms containing from 6 to 9 persons which is more than 50% of the labour line.”

From the very beginning the labourers and their dependants were neglected and socially and culturally cut off from the mainstream of national life. They were not allowed to go outside the precinct of the tea estates and no outsiders were allowed in past to enter without proper information to the management. Consequently, their life did not get exposure to the modern life. In matters of education and political awareness, their role in past was negligible but with the passage of time and change in the management's attitude and establishment of trade union organizations, the labourers are coming forward to play active role in collective bargaining as well as redressal of various grievances.

The nature of political behaviour of the tea garden labourers is one of the most fascinating social segments in the society and polity of Assam — the segment which has been uprooted from its own native soil by the greedy dictates of economic history of colonial India and transplanted here but not allowed to have new roots in present soil and denied the scope of natural branching out even after independence. They are still treated as outsiders and are socially and economically discriminated by the indigenous people.³⁵

The political behaviour and level of political information in respect of tea garden workers vis-à-vis ex-tea garden workers have been less as compared to the neighbouring villages. The degree of political interest and political involvement of the tea garden labourers are still in rudimentary stage. It has not attained maturity due to obvious reasons, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters in details.

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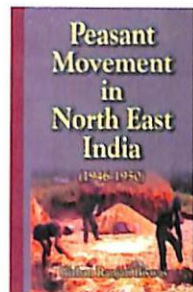
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ANOTHER BOOK OF INTEREST

Peasant Movement in North-East India (1946-1950)

Dr. Girban Ranjan Biswas



Historians situated in main land India and All India Communist records make us believe that Tebhaga Peasant Movement was only a Bengal phenomenon. They have failed to take notice of similar upheaval in the peripheral region (NE) of India. The Tebhaga Peasant Movement in the Barak Valley witnessed police firing and state repression. Nevertheless the movement successfully defined contours of the politics in the region.

Contrary to the existing myth that Tebhaga Movement happened in Bengal, the present work makes an in-depth analysis of similar development in North-East India on the basis of Communist Literature of Assam, Police Records, Contemporary Newspapers and oral witnesses from the surviving participants. The work extends our understanding of Tebhaga upsurge. This work could reveal the truth that whereas in Bengal the Tebhaga Movement though far more militant, and intensive then Assam failed to get any desired result for the bargadars but in North-East India particularly Assam the Tebhaga Movement forced the Government of Assam to recognise the rights of bargadars and enact Adhiars Protection Law in 1948.

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