

Employment and Labour Market in North-East India

Interrogating Structural Changes

EDITED BY
VIRGINIUS XAXA, DEBDULAL SAHA
AND RAJDEEP SINGHA

SOUTH ASIA EDITION



A Routledge India Original

Employment and Labour Market in North-East India

Interrogating Structural Changes

Edited by Virginius Xaxa,
Debdulal Saha and
Rajdeep Singha

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	x
<i>List of tables</i>	xii
<i>Contributors</i>	xx
<i>Preface</i>	xxiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xxvii

Introduction	1
DEBDULAL SAHA, VIRGINIUS XAXA AND RAJDEEP SINGHA	

PART I

Structure and patterns of employment in North-East India 17

- 1 **Labour and the labour market in North-East India:
a historical exploration** 19
VIRGINIUS XAXA
- 2 **Changing trajectories of economic growth and
employment in North-East India: an empirical
assessment** 39
ANJAN CHAKRABARTI
- 3 **Structure and quality of employment in North-East
India: a socio-religious analysis** 73
AJAYA KUMAR NAIK AND NITIN TAGADE

4	Women's employment in North-East India: trends and patterns	102
	BORNALI BORAH	
PART II		
	Work, employment and labour in industries	149
5	Beyond standard outcomes: the state of employment and labour in the tea industry of Assam	151
	DEBDULAL SAHA, RAJDEEP SINGHA AND PADMINI SHARMA	
6	Work, control and mobility in the manufacturing industry: a study of the cement industry in Assam	175
	PIYALI BHOWMICK	
7	Fostering employment in the handloom sector in the North-East through cluster development: a case study of Mizoram	193
	RAMA RAMSWAMY	
8	From craft to industry: understanding the dynamics of handloom weaving in Manipur	224
	OTOJIT KSHETRIMAYUM	
PART III		
	Migration and labour mobility	261
9	Employment potential of migrant workers in Meghalaya: an empirical exploration	263
	JAJATI KESHARI PARIDA	
10	Out-migration and labour mobility: case studies from Assam	284
	SNEHASHISH MITRA	

PART IV	
Employment diversification	317
11 Rural non-farm employment in North-East India: a temporal and spatial analysis	319
BHAGIRATHI PANDA	
12 Trends, composition and determinants of rural non-farm employment in Assam and its implication for rural income distribution	345
ANAMIKA DAS	
13 Employment diversification in Tripura	369
RAJDEEP SINGHA	
<i>Index</i>	390

Labour and the labour market in North-East India

A historical exploration

Virginus Xaxa

What is known as North-East India is not a single politico-administrative entity. Rather, it is an agglomeration of a number of distinct politico-administrative units in which people and territory have been organised at different phases of history. For a long time, it comprised the seven states and union territories of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram and was popularly known as the seven sisters. However, since 2002 the state of Sikkim has been added into the political entity. North-East India, unlike other geographical references such as Southern, Western, Northern or Eastern India, is more than a mere geographical position. Rather, it has developed into a distinct politico-administrative entity in the form of institutions such as the North-East Council and the Department of North-East Region (DoNER) in the Union Ministry. Yet the North-East is far from being a single distinct and homogenous region. An enormous diversity – geographical, economic, social and cultural – marks the region. The differences had and still have far-reaching implications on the nature of work, employment and the labour market in the region. This chapter attempts exploring the region through the lens of labour, employment and the labour market, keeping in mind the historical, ecological and administrative settings within which the people of the region had/have been located.

North-East India constitutes 8 percent of India's geographical area and a little less than 4 percent of the total population of the country (Rao 1983: 1). The entry of Sikkim into the North-Eastern Region in 2002 added 7,096 square kilometres to its territory, which makes up 3 percent of the total geographical area of the region (NEC 2015: xxviii). Geographically, the area of the region comprises hills and plains. Except Assam, other states of the region are

predominantly hilly. Even the Manipur plain/valley comprises just over 10 percent of the total geographical area of the state (Ziipao 2016: 3). The difference between hills and valleys overlaps with ethnic and cultural differences. The hills are almost exclusively inhabited by tribes and the plains by non-tribes, though not exclusively. And yet both hills and valleys are enormously diverse with regard to ethnicity, language and culture. The scenario is the same even now.

Much of the area falling under the region called the North-East was part of the province of Assam under colonial rule. Manipur, Tripura and in a sense Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA) were exceptions. The existing politico-administrative form is an outcome of the reorganisation that the region had to go through following demands raised by the people of the hills for independent states, including cessation from India. Following reorganisation, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh have emerged as tribal states. In the rest of the states, the tribal population forms a minority. They represent over 31 percent in Tripura, over 35 percent in Manipur and just over 12 percent in Assam (NEC 2015: 5–7). Prior to British rule, the bulk of this region constituted separate autonomous territories under kings, chieftainships and village headmen. They were annexed into the British territory at different phases of British rule, beginning from the early nineteenth century. Yet the region remained, by and large, isolated from the rest of the country all through British rule owing to lack of communication and the exclusive colonial administration designed for the tribal areas. Things have, however, greatly changed under India's agenda of rapid economic development and social change after independence.

Pre-colonial social formation

In the pre-colonial period, hills and valleys depicted different levels of economic and social formation. For example, valleys such as the Brahmaputra valley and the Imphal valley comprised kingdoms, having a well-established politico-administrative structure. Its foundation was laid on a higher stage of economic and social development, than the past as evident in the mode of livelihood and the accompanied technology and social division of labour and organisation. In the hills, on the contrary, there was no such development. Rather, the economic and social practices there varied widely. Those located in the fringe of hills and plains too had developed into kingdoms though their economic and social practices

were not of the same level as prevalent in the Ahom and Metei kingdoms. The Jaintia and the Dimasa kingdoms may be taken as cases in reference.

Plains/valleys

The emergence of kingdoms had given rise to a system of hierarchical stratification. In the Ahom kingdom, for instance, below the king there were ministers named as *burhagohain*, *borgohain* and *borpatrogohain* who were consulted while appointing officials called *phukans*, *rajkhawas*, *baruas* and *hazarikas*. These officials in turn had the privilege of appointing other officials such as *boras* and *saikias*. Under the system, every commoner, that is, all anyone not belonging to the nobility, priestly class or to any other higher castes and who fell between 15 and 50 years old, was a *paik*. The paiks were organised into four-member groups called *gots*. Each got sent one member by rotation for public works like building roads, boats, etc., while the others took care of his land during his absence (Barbora 1998; Barua 1974). The duty of a paik was to render service to the Ahom state, for which in return he was not paid a wage but was granted 2 *puras* (approximately 3 acres of land) of hereditary cultivable land. The royal services that the paiks usually offered were in the fields of defence, civil construction (embankments, roads, bridges, tanks, etc.), military production (boats, arrows, muskets), etc. The Ahom kingdom did not have a standing army till the beginning of the nineteenth century, and its militia consisted of paiks (ibid.). There were two major classes of paiks – *akanri paik* (archer), who rendered his service as a soldier or as a labourer, and *achamua paik*, who rendered non-manual service and had a higher social standing. Most of the lower paik officers – *bora*, *saikia*, *hazarika*, *tamuli*, and *pachani* – belonged to the *chamua* class. With growing divisions of labour, in the course of time, paiks were organised in a *khel*. Khels were a kind of occupational guild which aimed at protecting the interests of paiks. The paiks in a *khel* were organised according to a gradation of officials. Hence, a *bora* commanded over 20 paiks, a *saikia* had 100 paiks, and a *hazarika* had 1000 paiks. The more important khels were commanded by a *phukan* (6000), a *rajkhowa* (or a governor of a territory), or a *barua* (meaning here a superintending officer) each of whom could command between 3000 and 12,000 paiks (Barbora 1998: 17; Barua 1974: 48–78).

Under the Meitei kingdom, there was a system of labour service similar to the hierarchy of the paiks of the Ahoms. This was known as *lallup*. It is believed to have been introduced during the reign of Pakhangba and was in force until the British took over the kingdom in the 1890s. The whole Meitei population was divided into four divisions which performed lallup for 10 days by rotation. The British abolished the system and introduced the land revenue system, dividing the kingdom into four *pannas* or divisions. Lallup entailed that every male between the ages of 17 and 60 had to place his services at the disposal of the state, without remuneration, for a certain number of days each year. The number of days thus placed was generally 10 in every 40. This 10-day service was so arranged that a man worked for 10 days and enjoyed an interval of 30 all the year round. When an individual is ready to perform lallup, he was entitled to cultivate for his support one *par* (approximately 1 hectare) of land, subject to the payment of tax to the *raja* in kind. If an individual wished to skip his turn of duty, he had to either provide a substitute or pay a certain sum, which would go to pay for a substitute if required, or the other members of the lallup were to agree to do the extra duty on receiving the money. An officer called the *lakpa* presided over every lallup or class of labourer, and he was responsible for the performance of the prescribed duties. Women were excluded from the lallup system (Singh 2017, 1984; Xaxa 1992).

The gradation of offices and system of paik and lallup were products of the demands of the evolving state. From this system, it can be inferred that the demand for labour was essentially for two kinds of work – military and administrative, skilled and unskilled work.

Hills

Administratively, the hilly regions lagged behind the plains. They did not have an elaborate hierarchical system as was in the plains. Nor did they have a uniform political system, though there were uniform modes of making a living. Broadly, there were three types of political systems in the hills. One was represented by tribes, who did not have a system of chieftainship. The village elders jointly took decision over village matters. The second kind was represented by tribes organised under a chief, who invariably took decisions in consultation with the elders of the village. Third were tribes controlled by a chief, and decisions on village matters rested solely on him.

In the hilly regions, people practiced the system of shifting cultivation. The system is popularly known as *jhum*. It involves clearing of hilly slopes or forest areas, burning of the fallen trees and bushes and dibbling or broadcasting the seed in the ash-covered soil. When the fertility of the soil is lost, cultivators shift to other slopes/areas. They continue with this process until they return to the original slope or area. In this way, the cycle is maintained by rotation. In the past, the *jhum* cycle had been as long as 30 years. But this is no longer the case today. The increase in population and lack of alternate source of rural livelihood have been the key factors that have caused acute pressure on existing *jhum* land and led to shortening of the *jhum* cycle.

After the selection of plots, individual households carry out agricultural operations. Both male and female members participate in it; some work is generally done by males, whereas other is done by females. There are still other jobs in which both participate. The male members are largely involved during the initial phase of field preparation such as clearing forests, burning the debris, etc. Women and children begin participation in agriculture work from the sowing stage. Indeed, women play a dominant role in the later sphere of economic activity. Sowing of the paddy by broadcast is generally done by them. They also engage themselves in sowing by digging, weeding and harvesting, in which male family members also participate.

Some households seek assistance from outside the family to undertake such tasks as clearing of the forest, weeding, harvesting for individual households, and so on. Kin and neighbours combine to form a reciprocal labour group and work in each other's fields by turns. On the day work is being done in one's field, the owner of that field is required to serve a day's meal to all. Households obtaining such labour have to pay back by working for the number of days others have worked. A system of reciprocal labour thus constituted an important aspect of agriculture in the hills. Such an arrangement was more pronounced among the poorer sections of the agricultural population.

There were other modes of agricultural organisation, too. Those having control over land got it cultivated in a somewhat different way. There were chiefs to whom servants and bondsmen were attached. This gave them access to greater manpower, which in turn ensured a larger share of plots in shifting cultivation. Among the Mizos, the chief held land which was hereditary. The chiefs were

entitled to allot sites and land to village households for shifting cultivation. For cultivating the land of the chief, the villages had to pay six tins (a container with carrying capacity of approximately 20 kg) of paddy per household per annum. The chief also enjoyed the privilege of having slaves (Datta 1986). Hence, he could get his land cultivated through them. The *Sema Naga* chief, too, parcelled out his land to the commoners, and in return the latter had to work in the chief's fields and even fight against his adversaries as and when called for without any payment. The chief was also entitled to a certain number of days' work from each villager annually (Zimik 1987: 41). The organisation of production in shifting agriculture did not correspond with any definite mode of utilisation of labour power. Indeed, use of slave labour was fairly widespread among many hill tribes of the region. The Akas and Nishis of Arunachal Pradesh, for example, freely entertained the idea of slavery. Slaves came mostly from the Khoa and Sulung tribes. They had to till the soil and look after the field, cattle and household of their masters. Their work included cutting forests and clearing of jhum fields as well as harvesting crops. In return for their services, they were provided with food, shelter and clothing (Misra 1979: 2). This system has changed since the prohibition of slavery. Nonetheless, the rich men either purchased slaves or procured a number of wives for themselves. Often wives among them were nothing but labourers in the field and servants in the domestic circle (*ibid.*). Earlier, slaves were recruited or captured during raids; later, they were purchased and procured on advancement of loan. The payment of rent in kind or labour in the chief's field or both taken together was also in vogue among some tribal groups engaged in shifting agriculture. Hence, in the pre-colonial period, in the North-East, a system of labour exchange existed. In return for labour, men were either granted land for their sustenance or provided with food. Labour was tied to the king and to the land.

Entry of colonial rule

The British took over control of the territory known later as the North-East from the Burmese after the Yandaboo Treaty of 1826. The Burmese had been making repeated incursion in the North-East since the second decade of the nineteenth century and had gradually established their rule over the region. The Burmese rule, marked by anarchy, had caused enormous devastation in the region. The

British declared war against the Burmese and expelled them from the region. They signed a treaty whereby the Burmese were not to meddle in the affairs of the region. A little later, the British annexed the Brahmaputra valley including the Sadiya Frontier Tract into their territory. Other areas, mainly the hills, were added to British territory at a later period during different phases (Rao 1983). The expansion of their rule required their administration, which required manpower with different knowledge, skills and competence. There was thus a demand for labour.

Colonial administration

The entry of the British in Assam and later to other parts of the region led to an enormous expansion of the colonial state, which led to a large demand of personnel for manning the state. The manning of the state was contingent on different kinds and levels of knowledge and skills, critical among them being initiation into modern English education. In fact, state employment became one of the most sought-after features of the labour market not only in early part of colonial India but throughout the period. The nature and kind of such employment had been there under the Ahom kingdom, but the scale was unprecedented. Further, unlike the pre-colonial period, where officials were rewarded for their work in terms of grants of land and control of labour, officials were remunerated for service in the form of salary and wages. Such a development was more pronounced in the regions of the North-East, which was not only under direct rule of the British but which also formed part of the tract that came under general regulation. This meant that there was greater prevalence of such phenomena in the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys. The other parts of the region were either not under direct administration of the British, such as the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, or were outside of the tract of general administration and named as frontier or excluded areas. The British interfered little with regard to administration in these regions. Rather, they allowed the traditional system of governance, with some changes to mark the authority of their rule.

The expansion of administration and the recruitment of people to man the administration led to the emergence of administrative centres. A territory under control was in general divided into districts, which eventually gave rise to district administrative centres. Since there were fewer districts, there were fewer towns in the region.

During the colonial period, a district was further divided into subdivisions and further into blocks/police outposts, which in turn led to the emergence of townships and the growth of trade and commerce. Though initially it was small, as the administration grew and diversified into different departments, like the executive and judiciary, the volume of labour in administrative service expanded manifold. This led to the unprecedented rise in the size of non-manual labour force in the region, or what is generally referred to as the new middle class. This was manifest in the form of civil officials with different positions and ranks, teachers, lawyers, judges and journalists. Besides non-manual labour, government offices also needed manual manpower, though their number was tiny in comparison to white-collar non-manual workers.

The developments in the regions other than Assam were different. The British rule in Manipur and Tripura was indirect. The old system rule in the form of the king, his ministers and his officials prevailed but under the overall supervision of the resident representative of the British. In other parts of the region, especially the hills, the British, like in Assam, had direct rule but interfered little with the traditional system of administration. The regions were initially administered under the Bengal Eastern Frontier and Regulation Act of 1873. The act prescribed the Inner Line System, which prohibited any subject living outside the area from living and moving therein (Misra 2012). Later the area was brought into the scheduled district under the Scheduled District Act of 1874. The term was used for remote and backward tracts of British India. Much later, new nomenclature was introduced in the form of excluded and partially excluded areas. In view of such a policy, there was little scope for the growth and expansion of the British administrative structure in the region. The new employment opportunities in the government sector, whatever little emerged, invariably came to be occupied by the migrant Bengalis and the Assamese, as the inhabitants of the hilly terrain had no tradition of reading and writing. It was only at a later stage that a few managed to enter into this new form of labour that had come to evolve in the region. This was largely due to the role of Christian missionaries who introduced modern education among the hill people. The reasonably educated few found new employment in the British administration or institutions run by the Christian missionary institutions. They generally held lower-level positions in the British administrative institutions.

In the missionary institutions, they were employed as teachers and catechists. The British administration, from time to time, faced the need of human labour for carrying out certain activities at the local level. In such situations, the administration forced people to provide labour without remuneration, somewhat similar to a system of compulsory labour exacted under the Ahom/Meithei kingdom. There was still another form of labour market that emerged in the hills of the North-Eastern Region under the colonial period. This was the interim time of the First World War and Second World War, when quite a number of people from the hills were recruited for varying jobs related to war operations.

Emergence of the tea industry

India under British rule saw the introduction of new economic enterprises which required labour on a large scale. This led to the widespread movement of population to the areas of such enterprises. Movement was restricted within the confines of a given geographical area and at times went beyond. There was even movement of population beyond the country. Of regions that witnessed large-scale movement of population into the region, Assam had been one of the most striking. In fact, while the population in India grew at 52 percent in the period 1901–51, it grew at 138 percent in Assam during the same period (Davis 1951; Rao 1983). With regard to the movements of population in Assam from other regions, two have been referred most widely. One is the movement of the population to tea plantation estates, which the colonial capital introduced in the region from the second half of the nineteenth century. The other is the movement of Bengali Muslim peasants from erstwhile eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, who came more as a force to reclaim forest and swampy land for cultivation and settled there as cultivators.

Soon after Assam came under the British, there had been much experimentation to explore if tea could be grown. It is to be noted here that tea, by this time, was an item of consumption in Europe and had become an important item of trade in the European market. The major source of supply of this trade was China. However, due to the estranged political relations between England and China, the British had to look for alternate sources of supply, and this was how Assam and later northern parts of Bengal became fertile grounds for growth and expansion of the tea plantation industry

in India. From the beginning, the tea industry faced an acute shortage of labour. The population in the region was not only small but also unwilling to work. There were two reasons for this. One is that the area to be brought under tea plantation was covered with dense forest, and it needed to be cleared. Two was the low wage, which did not provide the incentives they needed. In fact, the wage in the plantation industry was lower than what was in vogue in neighbouring non-plantation areas. According to the subdivisional officer of Karimganj, the wages of labourers as per the Emigration Act in 1883 was just 3 rupees per month, whereas the Bengalese in the adjoining areas earned without difficulty 7 rupees per month (Bhowmik 1986: 8). However, even if labour would have been available, it would not have been adequate, given the pace at which the tea industry had begun to grow and expand.

Failing to procure labour locally, import of labour from outside the region became a major concern of planters. An attempt was made to import Chinese labour, but they proved expensive and troublesome. The planters hence focussed on sources within India but located miles away from Assam. They evolved an organised system of recruitment which continued to operate till independence. Workers either returned home or settled as peasant cultivators in the vicinity of tea estates after completion of the contract. After having settled as peasant cultivators, they provided seasonal labour force in the tea estates (Xaxa 1985). Kingsley Davis estimated that there were about 5 lakh (a *lakh* is 100,000) such immigrants living outside tea estates around 1921. Including the 8.4 lakh immigrants and their descendants still working in the tea estate, the total population of this class of immigrants was estimated to be approximately 13 lakh, which accounted for 16.6 percent of Assam's population (Davis 1951). In 1980, this class of immigrants was estimated to be around 45 lakh (*ibid*).

The organised system of recruitment in operation was broadly of two types – contractor and the *sardari* system. The contractor system was the principal mode in the early phase of recruitment. It ceased to operate from 1915 under the Assam Labour and Emigration Act 1915 (Guha 2016: 85). The system was so bad that the government was forced to appoint a commission of inquiry as early as 1861. Following this, the contractors, steamers and boats carrying labourers were licensed. Labourers were also produced before the judicial and civil authorities and made to sign a contract. In effect, the new system worked the same as did the old

one. Recruitment through abduction, enticement, fraud and raising hopes of earning high wages and attaining better living conditions were the normal means to lure and deceive the labourers. Much later, around the 1880s, alongside the contractor system, the sardari system evolved, which eventually replaced the contractor system of recruitment. A *sardar* was a tea garden labourer sent to his native place for recruitment of more labour for the tea garden (Xaxa 1985).

Since there was high demand for labour, ideally there should have been a high wage structure in the tea industry. The tea industry was, however, not prepared for it. The tea plantation enterprise, rather than paying wages based on supply and demand, sought to resort to forced labour (Bhowmik 1986: 9). This, however, could not be slave labour, as it was abolished not only in the west but also in India. As a way out, therefore, they resorted to what is known as indentured labour. Indentured labour ensured planters that the workers were bound to work on the plantation irrespective of the wages that they received. Indenture was given a legal recognition under the Workman's Breach of Contract Act 1859. The act obliged the worker to work for a minimum period of five years once he has been recruited. Under the act, the worker was liable for prosecution for any breach of contract, but it gave him no protection against the employers and laid down no conditions with regard to arrangement of his transit to his native place on completion of his contract (Bhowmik 2011: 239).

Labourers who moved to work in tea gardens came from different geographical regions. Initially, labour came mainly from Bengal, Bihar and UP. However, later, the labour force came mainly from tribal-inhabited regions of Bengal and the Madras Presidency and the Central province. In other words, they came mainly from the tribal regions of Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Immigrant labour for the plantation sector thus came from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. The population, as noted earlier, came in different phases. Many returned after completing their work in tea estates, and many stayed back in Assam. A large chunk also settled down in the vicinity of the tea estates and merged with the agricultural population. Thus, what is today known as tea garden population is of two kinds. One comprises those who still work in tea gardens, and the other consists of those who moved out of tea gardens and settled themselves as agriculturalists in the region. The two kinds of population are broadly

referred to as the tea garden and ex-tea garden labour population (Pathak 1984).

Mineral and forest extractives

Besides tea, coal, oil/gas and timber have been the other important enterprises that had their genesis in the colonial period. They, as Saikia (2011) says, played a key role in the British imperial economy. After independence, the oil and gas industry became the subject of intense competition for control between the central and state government. This resulted later in Assam's economic blockade, which aimed at restricting oil flows outwards from Assam. Needless to say, these new enterprises required manpower, technical and non-technical, for their operations and thereby created a market for labour. In Digboi, about 22 percent of the labour force was obtained from Assam. The rest of the workforce was recruited mainly from eastern Bengal, the United Province (Gorakhpur) and from Punjab. As in the tea industry, much of the labour in the oil/gas industry, too, came from outside the region through recruitment by contractors and sardars. However, by 1924, the Labour Bureau was established, applications were registered and work was offered by rotation. Labour came mainly from eastern Bengal, Nepal, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Local labour came mainly from the districts of Goalpara and Sibsagar. Labour in the oil/gas industry was organised almost in the same manner as in tea plantation enterprises. The management was under the British, while administration at the supervisory level was under the British and Indians, notably the Assamese (Barua 2014: 164–184). The notable difference between the tea and oil industries is that there was space for occupational mobility in the oil/gas industry, and the wages were high. Linguistic and regional differences were maintained at the place of residence. This was evident in separate barracks, called lines, corresponding to the respective communities, as has also been the case in tea estates.

The timber industry was the other among the extractive industries that opened up new opportunities for employment. Timber was in demand for laying out railway lines as well as for building offices and residences for its officers. It was also in demand for the tea industry, where it was used not only for building planters' bungalows but was important for packing tea for transportation to centres of auction.

Transport and communication

During the colonial period, there was also growth and expansion of means of communication. Railways, however inadequate they may have been, added value to the region. So did the inland waterways. These means of communication did give boost to the local economy, especially tea, timber and oil, and opened up new avenues for employment.

Modern education

Colonial rule and administration opened up new avenues of employment: state functionaries and officials with varying hierarchical positions were needed to run the state machinery. Colonial rule in the region also saw the emergence of new kinds of economic activities in the form of industrial enterprises such as tea, timber and oil, as well as trade and commerce. These new activities required different kinds of knowledge, skills and training. This resulted in the growth and expansion of modern education which went beyond school education, extending to the foundation of institutions of higher education such as colleges. Of course, their numbers were small, but they offered new prospects of employment as teachers, lawyers, journalists, managers etc.

Post-independence scenario

The state had been the key engine of growth and development in post-independent India. Hence, there had been massive expansion of state administration and state-led development. Indeed, the role of private players in development, be it infrastructure such as roads, railways, power, irrigation, agriculture, industry, education and health, has been negligible.

At the time India gained independence, what marked North-East India was economic and social backwardness. Among the states and union territories in the North-Eastern Region, Assam is the most industrialised and urbanised and has a much better infrastructure than other states in the region. Nonetheless, it lags far behind other states of India. This being the feature of the region, the rapid development of infrastructure and socio-economic development has become the Indian states' main plank in North-East India. It is to serve this end that the government of India created a new

institutional structure in the form of the North-Eastern Council (NEC) in 1972. This initiative has pushed the infrastructure development of the region at the forefront.

Infrastructure development

Quite a number of infrastructure development projects with regard to roads, railways and other means of communication had been initiated in the region since the late 1970s and 1980s. These paved the way for the emergence of a number of industries, cement and paper being the key among them. The building of infrastructure and the emergence of industries later needed manpower. Yet there was marked absence of participation of labour from the region in these projects. Of course, there were some exceptions, which came mainly from certain communities living in the plains of Assam. The marked absence of labour from the region was either due to the role of contractors who preferred to recruit labour from certain regions or due to the disinclination of local people from the hills to move out of their place or work as labourers. This may partly have to do with the agrarian social structure of the region. The absence of a skewed distribution of land generally marked the region. The region had therefore a low percentage of agricultural labourers. Landlessness was generally unheard of. The migrant labour brought in by contractors filled in this demand for labour and was involved primarily in earth cutting, earth removing and construction projects. The migrant labourers, whether employed in government or private projects, came mainly from Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. Wages paid to them were generally lower than the ones obtained by the local labourers. The contractor collected and distributed the wages among the labourers. He paid less than what was due to them. Medical facilities, as well as living place and sanitation amenities, were negligible (Xaxa 1989).

Durable employment opportunities emerged following the completion of projects, which were generally filled from among the educated in the region. They were not necessarily the local people. The presence of people from the hills even in regular employment has generally been weak. They have not been able to take advantage of these opportunities due to a combination of factors – one of them is disinclination to move out of their district or state. Further, they did not have information of employment opportunities in the new enterprises. Also, they lacked skills or qualifications.

Expansion of state administration

Post-independence, India saw further expansion of institutions introduced under colonial rule. This included state administration, modern education, industrialisation, transport and communication, etc. There has been a phenomenal change in the labour market situation in the hill states of the region following the formation of new states/union territories. The formation of separate states such as Nagaland, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh, as well as autonomous institutions such as an autonomous district council, territorial council, etc., opened up opportunities for employment at various levels in the state bureaucratic structure. With further decentralisation of the administrative structure, there has been greater reinforcement of state employment in recent years. The creation of new districts and administrative set-ups in the region from time to time has contributed to the growth of new townships. At the same time, the push of the market, arising since the economic reform of 1991, has led to a spurt of new economic activities and a shift of the population from rural to urban. Since 2001, however, there has been a phenomenal increase in the tribal urban population, especially in the hills. In fact, the share of tribal population to total urban population ranges from over 70 percent in Meghalaya and Nagaland to over 90 percent in Mizoram as per 2011 census. The same is merely 6 percent in Manipur and 5 percent in Assam. This has led to a visible change in the nature of occupation. The number of people engaged in the secondary and especially tertiary sector has seen steadily rising. However, only a small section of those engaged in the secondary and tertiary sector work in the organised sector, the majority being part of the unorganised one. The expansion of modern education at the primary, secondary and higher education level post-independence gave a huge boost to the employment market. The diversification and specialisation of education at higher educational levels gave further impetus to employment opportunities in the educational sector.

Mineral extraction

The mineral and extractive industries have seen vast expansion in post-independent India. North-East India has not been an exception. Oil and natural gas extraction expanded. Refineries were installed at a number of places within and even outside states. The

expansion did open new opportunities for employment of different positions and skills. Coal, limestone, timber and similar other extractive industries have spread in the region. These have been dependent more on migrant than on local labour. Further, there has been rampant use of child labour in extractive industries such as coal. For example, in rat-hole mining, the means and method of extraction demanded use of child labour. The state of Meghalaya may be taken as a point of reference. The use of child labour in coal extraction was so high that the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights had to intervene in the matter and even conduct raids. Transport and communication in the North-East, like in other parts of India, have gone through a huge expansion in the post-independence, though it is still far from adequate. These have opened various avenues of employment, both short- and long-term.

Migration from North-East India

The foundation of the tea industry in Assam was facilitated by immigration of labour from northern, eastern, central and even southern India, which went on uninterrupted from the 1840s to the 1950s. Today, the tea industry is in the process of movement in the reverse direction. The growth of the tea industry had slackened after the great depression of 1929. This had a bearing on the scale of the recruitment of labour. There was a steady decline, and after a decade after independence, it had almost come to a halt. Indeed, there was already enough labour for carrying out the work in the plantation estates. By the 1970s, there was not much demand for fresh labour, and labour that was already existing had become surplus. This led to a decline in permanent employment and the rise of temporary and casual employment. The transition from formal labour to informal labour had begun, resulting in insecurity of employment and a decline in wages, living conditions and welfare measures. By the 1980s, tea estates had begun to experience acute problems of unemployment, and people had begun to move out for work elsewhere, either on a long-term or short-term basis. The problem was no different among those who had settled as agriculturists in the villages, as land held by them was far from adequate to support the expanding family. As early as the 1980s, a large number of girls had begun to move to Shillong, Meghalaya, to work as domestic workers, and by the 1990s they had added Delhi as one of their destinations. The volume of such migration has increased

manifold since its genesis in the 1980s. Further, the out-migration is now no longer confined to girls. Young boys too have been increasingly moving out for work in towns and cities.

State employment in North-East India, like elsewhere in India, has been shrinking. This has much to do with the new economic policy of 1991 that has emphasised downsizing state employment as a part of the structural adjustment programme. However, no alternate systems of employment opportunities are emerging in the region. At the same time, there has been steady rise in levels of education, including higher education, among the people from the region, especially the hills. This has resulted in an unprecedented rise in educated unemployment, leading to movement of the people from the region to other parts of India in search of employment. Such was not the case until the early 1990s. In fact, after completing higher education in universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and similar other institutions in other parts the country, students invariably used to go back to their states. This is no longer the case today. Furthermore, even students at a lower level of training and skill have been moving out of the hills to seek employment, especially to South India. To the well-educated, the policy of reservation has acted as an aid. The North-Easterners are today visible in central government offices and central institutions of higher learning such as Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ambedkar University, the University of Hyderabad and similar other establishments. Others who have not been as fortunate have been working at call centres, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, beauty parlour, airlines and commercial establishments as sales men and women, as well as guards and housekeepers. Besides students who stay back, there are others who are located or studying in the region itself but are unable to find employment in the region. They too have been moving out of the region to other parts of India in search of employment. Some of these have even joined the domestic work sector.

The Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India prepared by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, points to the presence of domestic workers among Scheduled Tribes (STs) in North-East India. The data shows the presence of domestic workers in almost all states except Manipur, though the distribution among the states is far from even. Of the north-eastern states, the percentage of women domestic workers (aged between 15 and 59 years) to total female non-agricultural workers in 2011–12 was

8.5 in Arunachal Pradesh, 12.8 in Assam, 0.6 in Meghalaya, 0.2 in Mizoram, 0.3 in Nagaland, 1.2 in Sikkim and 5.1 in Tripura (ILO 2016). According to the NSSO 68th Round, the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of domestic work in Arunachal Pradesh is 35.8 percent, Assam 3.1 percent, Meghalaya 5.7 percent, Sikkim 15.3 percent and Tripura 16.5 percent, while corresponding figures for Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland are not available (ILO 2016). The phenomena are more notable in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh as compared to other states. The NSSO data point to a steady increase in the number of domestic workers, with Arunachal Pradesh leading. The hill tribal women getting into the domestic work sector is a new phenomenon among the tribal communities of the region. In Manipur, for example, the Manipur Domestic Workers Movement (MDWM), based in Imphal, has registered 1,500 domestic workers since its inception in 2007. It is the only organisation in Manipur which works for the rights of domestic workers and closely monitors their welfare, rights and dignity (The Peoples Chronicle 2017).

Conclusion

The existence of a labour market in the form of demand for labour precedes the advent of colonial rule in North-East India. This was evident in the demand for forced labour in precolonial times in the kingdoms that existed in the valleys and the practice of a sort of slave labour in the hills of the North-East. Those providing labour, of course, were neither free in the legal sense nor in terms of their ties with land. Remuneration for labour was provided by the state in the form of land/maintenance grants rather than a wage or salary. Under colonial rule, payment for labour did take the form of wages rather than land grants, but labour was far from free, both in the legal and non-legal sense. This was most evident in the tea industry until the second decade of the twentieth century. Since then there has been much change in the character of the labour market. Legal ties in the sense of bonded labour have been broken, but ties of labour to land have generally been intact. This is evident in the relatively small percentage of landlessness, especially in the hills. However, the land held is far from adequate, resulting in the increasing movement for salaried jobs/wage labour within the region and outside.

References

- Barbora, Sanjay. 1998. 'Plantation Systems and Labour Movements in North East India', M.Phil. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Delhi University.
- Barua, Arun Kumar. 1974. 'The Administrative System of the Ahom', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Gauhati.
- Barua, Ditee Moni. 2014. 'Polity and Petroleum. Making of an Oil Industry in Assam 1825–1980', Ph.D. Thesis, IIT, Guwahati, April 2014, pp. 163–176.
- Bhowmik, Sharit. 1986. 'Recruitment Policy of Tea Plantations', *North-East Quarterly*.
- Bhowmik, Sharit. 2011. 'Ethnicity and Isolation: Marginalization of Tea Plantation Workers', *Race/Ethnicity*, 4(2): 238–253.
- Datta, Partha Sarthi. 1986. 'Some Reflections on the Changing Agrarian Relations in Mizoram 1885–1986', Paper presented at Seminar on Changing Agrarian Relations in North-East since Independence, Shillong.
- Davis, Kingsley. 1951. *The Population in India and Pakistan*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- The Peoples Chronicle. 2017. 'Decent Work for Domestic Workers: A Dream or Reality?'. Retrieved from <http://thepeopleschronicle.in/?p=9924>. Accessed on 22 March 2017.
- Guha, Amalendu. 2016. *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam*, Guwahati: Anwesha Edition.
- ILO. 2016. *Indigenous Women and Domestic Work: A Study of Assam and Manipur (An ILO Research Initiative)*, New Delhi: ILO.
- Misra, Bani Prasanna. 1979. 'Kirata Karyokiness: Modes of Production in Tribal Societies in North-East India', in A. Das and V. Nilkant (eds), *Agrarian Relations in India*, p. 75, Delhi: Manohar.
- Misra, Bani Prasanna. 2012. Keynote Address. National Seminar on Governance, Socio-Economic Disparity and Unrest in the Scheduled Areas of India. Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Guwahati Campus.
- North Eastern Council (NEC). 2015. *Basis Statistics of North Eastern Region*, Shillong: North Eastern Council Secretariat.
- Pathak, Lalit P. 1984. 'The Enticed Immigrants: Imported Tribal Tea Labour in Assam, 1841–1960', *The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, II(4): 15–28.
- Rao, Venkata. 1983. *A Century of Government and Politics in North East India, Vol.1 (Assam) (1874–1980)*, New Delhi: S. Chand Company Ltd.
- Saikia, Arupjyoti. 2011. 'Imperialism, Geology and Petroleum: History of Oil in Colonial Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(12): 48–55.
- Singh, Pandit N. Khelchandra. 2017. *The Historical, Archaeological, Religious & Cultural Significance of 'Kangla': The Ancient Citadel of Manipur*. E-PaoBooks. Accessed 22 March.

- Singh, M. Jitendra. 1984. 'Slavery in Pre-British Manipur: a Historical Survey', *Proceedings of North-East India History Association*, Fifth Session, pp. 79-84.
- Xaxa, Virginius. 1985. 'Tribal Migration to Plantation Estates in North-East India', *Demography India*, 14(1).
- Xaxa, Virginius. 1989. 'Some Observation on Migrant Labour in Assam', *Migrant Labour in India - Report of a Workshop*. Centre for Social Sciences, Surat.
- Xaxa, Virginius. 1992. 'The Changing Agrarian Social Structure in Manipur', *Science and People*, September, pp. 1-9.
- Ziipao, Raile Rocky. 2016. 'Infrastructure Development in Manipur: A Study in Social Dynamics', Ph.D. Dissertation, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.
- Zimik, Chonchon. 1987. 'Naga Land Tenure Systems', M.Phil. Dissertation, Department of Sociology, Delhi University.