CHAPTER II

TEA GARDEN LABOURERS OF ASSAM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Before the arrival of Aryan people or probably from Neo-Polian age, a group of people entered India. Though they had migrated to all parts of India, they concentrated in the Middle Eastern part of India and started living permanently there. In history, we find them as Austric language group, which was divided into two groups, i.e., Austro-Asiatic and Austranasian group of people. Phukan Patgiri (2002) mentions that only Austra-Asiatic group of people were found in India. They were divided into three categories, viz: Kol-Munda, Khasi-Nikobari and Monkhemer. The members of Kol-Munda family in India are known as Santal, Munda, Bhumij, Kharia, Hos, Koda, Kuruwa, Savara, Birhor, Gadab, Zuang, Malpahari sub group of people. The people of Koll-Munda are found in Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. During the British reign, the people of Kol-Munda family were brought by the planters to work in the tea plantations of Assam.¹

Subsequently, another group of people known as Dravidian group of people had arrived in India. They were also divided into four sub groups, such as, Telegu, Kanaddi, Malayali, and Tamil or Dravir.² According to anthropologist, the first group of Indian root of people was Negrito, but with passage of time they declined gradually and merged with Austric language group. Sanjoy kr. Tanti mentions in an article that in course of time Austric, Dravidians and Negritos were intermingled with each other and after this intermingling; the descendants of the Dravidian group of people were known as Orans, Gond, Kurmi, Kunbi, Konu, etc sub groups of people in India.³ These group of people were also brought by the British to Assam as indentured labourers.

¹ Phukan Patgiri (2002)
² According to anthropologist
³ Sanjoy kr. Tanti (article)
After the arrival of Aryan people in India, a new developed Aryan civilization started in the valley of river Ganga. Aryans were civilized than those of Austric, Dravidian and Negrito group of people, as a result of which Austric, Dravidian and Negrito people came under the subjugation of Aryan people. After the arrival of Aryan people, Veda and Purana were written by the Aryans in India. It is mentioned in the Veda and Purana that the earlier inhabitants of India were inferior group of people. They were recognized as ‘Nisada’ (hunter), ‘Dasa’ (slave), ‘Daishu’ (dacoit).

The tea garden labourers who were brought by the British to the tea gardens of Assam were descendants of those Austric and Dravidian groups of people. From the very beginning of civilized society in India (after the arrival of Aryan people), they were recognized as exploited, suppressed and inferior group of people under the feudal system of the Middle age. After the arrival of the British, the feudal economic system in India declined and a capitalist social system emerged. As a result of which, those exploited inferior group of people in general and tea garden labourers in particular had become worst victim of the capitalist society under the British rule. They had been transformed from ‘one system of slavery to another system’ \(^4\), became indentured or forced labourer as they were brought by the British to Assam by signing agreements with false promise of getting plenty of lands for cultivation and high wages for light works. Unfortunately, the socio-economic system of Assam could not provide any relief to improve their social and economic conditions. They still remain an inferior group of people, their society remains as dwarf as the tea bushes, a status-quo in their social status has been maintained since the arrival of their predecessors in Assam till this day.
2.1 TEA GARDEN LABOURERS OF ASSAM

Tea garden labourers of Assam, unofficially and popularly known as ‘Tea Tribes’ or ‘Adivasi’, were the decendents of ethnic communities brought by the British colonial planters as indentured labourers from various ethnic roots into Assam. They consist of both tribal and non tribal groups. They can be categorized into three groups. The first group belonged to the aboriginal tribal groups such as, the Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Kols or Hos, Bhumij and Santhals, Kurmis. The second most important group of migrant belonged to semi aboriginal castes like Ghasis and Gorait, Bouris and Turis. Then a smaller number was drawn from low caste Hindus like the Bhogtas, Chamars, Dushads etc. As such tea garden labourers are heterogeneous and multi lingual group of people. Regarding the tribes and castes of tea garden labourers, Sengupta (2009) mentions,

“The tea labourers of North East India are overwhelmingly composed of various tribes and a few caste population. Tribal communities like Santhal, Onan, Munda, Kharia, Gond, Khond, Kisan, Nagesia, Savara, Godava, Mura, Koya, Kherwar, Tasha, Manki, Mal-Paharia, Bhumij and the Pankha were mainly recruited. Some Hindu Caste groups were also recruited and they belong mostly to the groups like the Kurmi, Tanti, Pan-Tanti, Kamar, Kalindi, Kumhar, Ghatuwar, Ghasi, Turi, Baori, Chamar, Dom, Teli, Dushad, Mali, Mudi, Rajak, Robidas, Gowala etc. Besides these, there are also a good number of other ethnic groups that have contributed to the formation of the total labour population in North East India.”

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Regarding the communities of tea garden labourers, Behal (2014), mentions, “A large section of labourers were drawn from social communities officially ranked as aboriginal tribal groups: Mundas, Orans, Kharias, Kols or Hos, Bhumij and Santhals. The second most important group of migrants came from semi aboriginal castes like the Ghasis, and Goraits, Bauris, and Turi, a smaller number was drawn from low-caste Hindu communities like the Bhogtas, Rautias, Chamars and Dasadhs.”

From the above mentioned categories, it can be understood that the tea garden labourers are at present consisted of different of tribes and castes groups, which composed the tea and ex-tea garden labourers’ population. Regarding the castes and tribes of the tea garden labourers of Assam, C.S. Mullan, mentions in the Census Report of India, 1931, “Their name is legion, some are castes recognized in their provinces of origin as definite Hindu caste; other would be considered Hindu castes merely by courtesy, while other – such as the Mundas and Santhals – cannot be said to be castes at all but aboriginal tribal communities.”

The raw materials needed for the tea industry are tea-leaves (a bud and two leaves), machineries, fuels and workers. Among all these elements workers are the ‘life line’ of the tea industry. A large number of manual workers are required round the clock for the production of tea. These workers are of two categories i.e. official staff and labourers. The second category workers or labourers are greater in number and the success of the tea industry primarily depends on them. They are engaged in the tea gardens starting from the preparation of soil for tea plants, plantation of young
tea plants, various activities for bringing up the young tea plants such as, cleaning the plantation areas, pruning, mulching, manuring, digging drains, planting shade trees, plucking tea leaves, manufacturing tea, packing of manufactured tea and so on. Their strenuous efforts produce maximum green crops. As such tea garden labourers play a significant role in the tea industry.

In the year 1837, tea plantation was first started by the British at Chabua of Dibrugarh District. Since then, it has completed more than one and half century. At the beginning, the tea industry of Assam had to face great difficulties in finding workers from local Assamese people. The local Assamese people like the Kacharies, the Rabhas, the Morans and Motoks, the Kukis, the Nagas, the Singhphos and Apatanis were employed with active assistance of the chief of respective groups. But those arrangements did not prove to be very successful, because the local people refused to work in the tea plantations under the British planters.

In the mean time, the tea industry in Assam grew steadily, which created a constant demand for a large number of workers which was not possible to be solved with local workers as they had gradually been showing reluctance to work in the tea plantations. Consequently, the British planters hired labourers from China along with some tea experts. However, that arrangement was very much expensive and proved to be unsuccessful venture for the British planters. Under such circumstances, the British planters had to recruit labourers for tea industry from various cultural, linguistic and ethnic heritages from other provinces of the country. Presently they are spread over the district of Darang, Sunitpur, Nagaon, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, Cachar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Tinsukia and almost all the districts of Assam.

The tea garden labourers, as a whole, are considered to be one of the oldest, largest and important sections of the people of Assam. There are 96 communities of
tea garden labourers, who are enlisted in government records as tea garden tribes, out of which 36 communities enjoy Scheduled Tribes status and 26 communities enjoy Scheduled Castes status in other parts of the country except Assam. In Assam they enjoy ‘Other Backward Classes status. There are no reliable statistics about the tea garden labourers’ population, however, estimates vary considerably. At present the tea garden labourers’ population is about 20 percent of the total population in the state of Assam.8

2.2 ORIGIN OF TEA

Generally it is believed that it was the British who introduced tea in Assam, but in actual practice it was not so. It is known from the history or researches on the subject that tea plants were grown naturally in the forest of Assam and indigenous inhabitants of Assam used it as a food or drinks even before the British. In Assam the use of tea as medicine in cold and fever was in practice since a long time, because tea plants grew widely in the hills and forests of Assam. But due to the dearth of any recorded history of tea in Assam, it is believed that it was the British who discovered tea in Assam. But in 1815 Colonel Latter first reported to have noticed the habit of drinking tea among the tribal people of Assam.9 Dutta (2007) mentions that Col. Latter of British forces in India reported in 1815 that the Singpho hill tribes of Assam gather a species of wild tea, ate with oil and garlic, after the Burmese manner and also made a drink from it.10

The history of the habit of tea drinking is three thousand years old.Dr. Barua (2008) mentions that this habit originated in China about 3,000 years ago and tea was cultivated in South East China at first.Talukder and Hazarika (2010) mentions that Shen Nung, the Chinese emperor discovered tea in 2737 BC. First reference regarding
tea was found in Chinese dictionary ‘Erh Ya’, which is revised in 350 A.D. LU YU, a Chinese tea expert wrote a comprehensive account on tea in his masterpiece ‘Ch’a Ching’ in 780 A.D. The first use of tea in China as beverage begun in 6th Century A.D

There are some legends regarding the origin of tea. As mentioned by Dr.Barua (2008), one of the legends is associated with Daruma, who was the founder of Ch’an school of Buddhism. Daruma, while mediating for years together, dozed off in the middle of his meditation. When he woke up, he was exasperated by this fact and punished himself by cutting off his eyelids. It was believed that tea plants grew on earth wherever Daruma threw his eyelids. Thus, tea drives away sleepiness. There was another legend which was related to Shen Nung, a Chinese emperor who ruled in 2737 B.C. Once, Shen Nung went for a hunting trip. Accidentally, some of the tea leaves carried by the wind fell into a boiling pot. The properties of the tea leaves were discovered by him when he drank it unknowingly.

Dr. Dutta (2007) mentions that the tea plant was found naturally not only in South West of China but also in Upper Burma, Siam, Indo- China, and North East India. According to Samuel Bailden, tea was indigenous only to India and it was introduced into China and Japan from India some twelve hundred years ago. Dr. Barua (2008) mentions (with the help of other citation) that the place of origin of tea is still a matter of speculation and yet to be finally settled. According to Wight, tea probably originated in the region around the point of intersection of latitude 29° N and longitude 98° E, near the source of river Irrawaddy, which is the meeting ground of Assam, North Burma, South-West China and Tibet. The great rivers of South-East Asia flowing through this region, Yangtze Kiang, Mekong, Irrawaddy and Luhit dispersed tea to different areas from the place of the origin.
Regarding the origin of tea in India, some Chinese and Japanese legends are also found. According to these legends these tea sapling were taken from India and planted in China. It is mentioned in a Sanskrit Nidan, written in 10 Century A.D that the tea leaves were referred as ‘Shamapatra’ and the brew from the leaves as ‘Shamapani’ and ‘Sha’ was derived from ‘Shama’.12

2.3 BEGINNING OF TEA INDUSTRY IN ASSAM

With the increasing demand for tea in West, the East Indian Company intended that besides China there had to be a second source of tea. Gradually, tea trade with China became expensive for the British simply due to high expenditure as the payment was to be made in Silver.

At that time Assam was not fully under the domain of East India Company. In 1819, David Scott, the then agent to the Governor General in Assam, took interest in cultivation of tea in Assam and wrote to Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, the Botanist to the East India Company, Superintendent of Botanical Garden of Calcutta, to send Chinese tea plants and seeds from the Company’s Botanical Garden in Calcutta, to try them in the hills to the Eastward of the river Barhampooter (Brahmaputra).13 Unfortunately all the plants sent to David Scott were died.

In the mean while Major Robert Bruce, a venture cum businessman, went to upper Assam in search of trade. Later on, with the East India Company’s permission he became the agent of Purandar Singh, the Ahom King, and afterwards of his rival Chandrakant. Gait (1990) points out that the discovery of finding tea plants grow in wild forest in the upper part of the Bhahmaputra valley was made by Mr. Robert Bruce. In this context, Gait mentioned that Bruce visited Garhgoan for trading purpose in 1823 and there he learnt about the existence of tea plant from a Singpho Chief
(Nigrola), who promised to get specimen for him. Accordingly the Singpho Chief gave him some plants, which he handed over to his brother C. A. Bruce, a midshipman of a ship belonged to the East India Company. Some of the plants thus obtained were given to David Scott, by whom tea plants were forwarded to the Superintendent of Botanical Garden, Calcutta, for examination. In 1824, Dr. N. Wallich of Botanical Garden identified the plants as the same species, as the plants from which the Chinese manufactured their tea. It was the beginning of scientific study of tea in India in general and Assam in particular.

Although it is believed that it was the British who introduced tea in Assam, but some of the Britishers credited Maniram Dewan of Assam, as the discoverer of ‘Assam Tea’. Samuel Baildon credited Maniram Dewan as the discoverer of tea in Assam. According to him it was Maniram Dewan who told Major Bruce about it or may have first led the Major to where tea was growing. Moreover, some of the British capitalist, like Edward Scarth of Mohbandha Tea Company, W. Firminger of the Borelli Tea Company and George Simpson credited Maniram Dewan with the discovery of Assam tea, as he informed them and Bengali merchant that tea was indigenous and grow wild in Assam’s forest.

2.4 HISTORY OF MIGRATION OF LABOURERS

To quote Guha (1977), “the Raj appeared on the scene in the guise of saviours of the people suffering from a situation of chaos, lawlessness and oppression that had persisted since the 1770s, starting with the Moamaria Civil War and culminating in the Burmese occupation of Assam Plains (1817-1824). But it soon dawned on the people that the Raj had come to stay. Its purpose was to turn Assam into an agricultural estate of tea-drinking Britons and to transform local traditional institutions
in such manner as to suit the colonial pattern of exploitation.\textsuperscript{16} After the ‘Yandaboo Treaty’, Assam was annexed with the British Empire and the British rule started in Assam. At that time David Scott was appointed as the Commissioner of Assam and according to his proposal the administrative power of eastern part of Dhansiri River or upper Assam vested in the hands of Purandor Singha in the year 1833 on 1st April.\textsuperscript{17} During the reign of Purndar Singha tea plants were discovered in Assam.

In 1832, Lord William Bentinck deputed Captain Jenkins to report upon the resources of the country. Robinson\textsuperscript{(1941)} mentions that the subject of the tea plant was brought to the notice of Jenkins by Mr. C.A.Bruce, who furnished him with an official account of the localities where the plants grew naturally, and also informed about the different modes of preparation of tea used by the natives. However, till then the cultivation of tea on commercial basis was doubtful. During that period the trade relation with China declined and became uncertain. Considering the ‘tea mania’\textsuperscript{18} in British life, colonial ruler began to search the feasibility of starting tea cultivation in their eastern colonies. For this purpose, a Tea Committee was formed in 1834 by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India, which consisted of seven civilians, three Calcutta merchants, two native gentlemen, and Dr.Wallich of Botanical Gardens. Mr. Gordon was appointed as the Secretary of the Committee and he was sent to China to procure plants, seeds and persons skilled in tea manufacture. Meanwhile fresh enquiries on tea cultivation were instituted in Assam under the auspices of Captain Jenkins. The enquiry reports submitted by him at last convinced the botanists, the Tea Committee and the Government of the identity of the Assam plant with that of China.

As a consequence of the discovery, Mr. C.A.Bruce was appointed as Superintendent of the Government Tea Forest. He explored around Lokhimpur to
discover the tracts where the tea plants were plenty. As mentioned by Borpujari (1980) that Bruce hardly knew about the art of tea manufacturing when he took the charge of the government plantations. Therefore unlike the few tea-makers (tea manufacturers) from China, the plants and seeds were not the first priority to Bruce at the initial period of his efforts.

According to the recorded history, the tea industry in North East India is nearly 178 years old, which can be traced as back as to 1837, when the first experimental tea estate was established in Chabua, *(Cha-tea, bua-grow)* in Dibrugarh District. In 1839, the Assam Tea Company was formed. It was the first tea company, which started production of tea on a commercial basis in Assam. In 1858, another company, i.e Jorhat Tea Company was formed. Tea Cultivation in Barak Valley (Cachar District) Assam was started in 1855-1856.

At the early stage of tea industry in India, the main obstacle that the planners had to face was the scarcity of skilled and unskilled labourers. Therefore, first of all they tried to procure skilled labourers from China. Towards the close of 1836 Gordon procured two tea manufacturers from China and the initial difficulty was overcome. In early 1838, another batch of Chinese consisting of two green tea-makers, two box-makers and one canister-maker made their way into Upper Assam. Borpujari (1980) mentions that Bruce was very much intelligent, so he undertook a training programme with a dozen Assamese, keeping a fear in mind that Chinese expert might not be available in adequate number whenever needed. He also declared a reward of Rs 30/- each on them being found proficient within a reasonable time in the manufacturing of tea; and latter on the recipient of the award was to be appointed as a ‘*Tekela*’ or tea-maker on a salary of rupees ten p.m. At the initial stage of the tea industry, the Assam Company tried to import Chinese labourers from their settlement in Singapur, Batavia,
and Penang. In 1839 and 1840, they had succeeded in procuring several batches of artisans and labourers through their agents.\textsuperscript{20} But the Chinese tea-makers and labourers were costlier than those of Assamese ‘Tekelas’ and labourers. Guha (1977) mentions, “a Chinese tea-maker could not be employed at less than rupees forty whereas the best Assamese Tekela received only rupees ten per month. While an ordinary Chinese labourer on contract for a period of three years demanded rupees sixteen a month, his Assamese counterpart could be employed even at rupees four.”\textsuperscript{21}

On the other hand, on account of the strained relations with the Government of China, recruitment of labourers became very difficult. So, the Company had to employ the indigenous artisans and labourers in the tea plantations.

The Assam Company recruited labourers from the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam such as Moran, Motok, Kachari, Kuki, Naga, Shingpho and Apatani etc. But those attempts were proved to be unsuccessful because the local people were reluctant to work in tea industry. The members of local ethnic groups were agriculturist. Their socio-economic background prevented them to work as tea garden labourers. Already a good amount of lands for agriculture were under their possession. As such they enjoyed almost self-sufficient economy. So it was not required for them to work for their daily livelihood in tea industry which was owned by the British. On the other hand, the members of local ethnic groups were free minded and independent. They possessed certain specific characteristics of their own, which guided their life style. Therefore, they did not want to give up their life-style and adopt a new industrial labourer life style under strict surveillances of the British planters. Though the labourers from Kachari community were large in number but they were not gentle or obedient to the British, sometime they revolted against them.\textsuperscript{22} Occasionally the Nagas and the Singphos were employed. By offering a feast to the community or by gifts of
beads, cutleries, looking-glass etc. to their respective chief, the Nagas were employed in cleaning jungals.\textsuperscript{23} But the Singphos were different group of people, they followed a different way of life, they had no inclination of work for so long, they had enough of rice and opium for their immediate requirement and would brook no control as to whether they worked or not.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover at that time, adult population of Assam was very scanty, because many of them died during ‘Moamaria Rebellion’ and ‘Burmese Invasion’, some of them fled away to upper side of Assam due to the atrocities of Burmese invaders, some of them died of disease like kalajor (Black Fever), malaria, cholera and so on. So, only a few labourers could be employed by the Company. On the other hand, Assamese local people were reluctant to work in the plantation because most of them were agriculturist, as such, they could work only on off-seasons and so it was very much difficult to procure local labourers of same batch again and again. The British planters tried to lure them by offering a good wage. The wage of a labourer was one rupee per month in 1824-25; in 1839 it was Rs. 2–8, and in 1858–59 it mounted up to Rs. 4–8.\textsuperscript{25} Recruiting agents (Duffadars) were appointed for recruiting labourers. They roamed from village to village in search of labourers. They even forced the young men of the villages to drink and brought them to work in the tea plantations. In spite of such contrivance it was not possible to have sufficient labourers in seasons when they greatly needed. After 1852, due to the rapid growth of the tea plantation, the problem became serious. Almost every planter, big or small, entered into blind competition to push on their tea cultivation.\textsuperscript{26}
2.5 LAND REVENUE

To solve the scarcity of labourers the planters’ community decided to request the Government to increase the land revenue and ban on cultivation of poppy. Guha (1977) mentions,

“Facing on acute labour shortage, the planter community urged upon the Government to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Yet another recommendation of their’s was to put a ban on the cultivation and sale of opium, the widespread consumption of which was believed to have made the local people apathetic to work.”

Subsequently, the British Government responded favourably. A 15 to 30 per cent increase in the land revenue rates on the dry crops lands of four districts – Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgoan was ordered. Government also put ban on poppy cultivation in 1860, except North Indian opium, which was a profitable business for them. However, these arrangements of the British Government resulted in many side effects. Due to hike of land revenue in some parts of Assam, people reacted to the new assessment by organizing ‘raij mels’ (people’s assemblies). In Lakhimpur district, the people protested in a normal way. On the other hand, due to ban on poppy cultivation except in North India, people were forced to purchase high-priced Government opium, instead of growing it themselves.

2.6 RECRUITMENT OF LABOURERS FROM OUTSIDE ASSAM

From 1941 to 1961, the colonial planters brought several batches of labourers to Assam from the tribal area of central-eastern India. The colonial planters adopted
two different methods of recruitment of labourers to the tea plantations of Assam, viz. Contractors or Arkatti system and Sardary System.

After realizing the fact that the tea industry would not be developed or run with the local labourers as well as the Chinese labourers, the colonial planters decided to import labourers from outside Assam as an immediate effect. Under such circumstances Major Jenkins believed that there could be no solution to the problem unless effective measures were taken to recruit labourers from densely populated areas outside the province. According to the suggestion of Major Jenkins, the Tea-Committee urged the Bengal Government to import the ‘Dhengas’ from the South-West Province. The Bengal Government and authority in Calcutta agreed to procure Dhengas. The authority in Calcutta agreed the proposal of the Committee, because it would not only provide adequate labourers to the Government plantations, but enable them to employ the labourers during the off-seasons in the construction of roads and public buildings. However, the effort made by the Government of Bengal was not successful. In 1841, the Assam Company for the first time brought 652 numbers of labourers from Hajaribugh. Unfortunately, half of them died of cholera and others fled away. Subsequently, several efforts were made by the Government to recruit labourers, which ended in failure. The terms offered by the colonial authority were not attractive for the labourers, and rumors were spread that those who had gone to Assam none had returned, all of them died. But, the Assam Company continued to recruit labourers by sending ‘sardars’ at frequent intervals to their native districts. Due to lack of proper communication facilities and long distance to be covered into the tea plantations of Assam, the transportation of labourers became very difficult. Guha (1977) mentions that there were certain instances when a whole group of Dhengas deserted before they reached the destination and the conditions of recruitment were
inhuman. Labourers were brought on the open dock of the steamer, and they easily caught by diseases like cholera, diarrhea, and dysentery etc. Sarmah (2008) in his research work, ‘Asomia Jatigathan Prakria Aru Jatiya Janagosthigata Anusthan Samuh’ (Assamese Nationality Construction Process and the National and Ethnic Organization in it), mentions about a secret document on ‘Report of Cholera on Board the Steamer ‘Burma’, in which a description of the unhygienic condition of the steamer (Burma) during the carriage of labourers by the British planters was mentioned. According to the report, labourers were kept on the dock which was made of wooden plies. There were gaps between the plies on the floor, through which liquids easily could pass through to the down floor; on the other hand, meals were cooked in big boilers in the down floor. Meals were served directly from the boiler in the same plates on which cholera infected labourers already had their meal. Apart from the steamer ‘Burma’, recruited labourers of other steamers such as, ‘Punjab’, ‘Simla’, and ‘Progress’ were caught by cholera which led to the fatal condition of hundreds of recruited labourers on the way to Assam. As a result of which the British Government was bound to make regulation to restrict the numbers of recruits and banned the system of carrying labourers on the docks or near the hot boilers or in narrow spaces. It is worthy mentioning here that the task of importing labourers from outside Assam was not very easy. Only country boats or elephant were the options to travel, which took a long period to reach Assam from Calcutta. In 1859, Planters Association was formed to conduct the migration activities smoothly. The company decided to hire labourers from West Bengal, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Madras and Maharashtra and decided to appoint agents for this purpose. Adhikari (2012) mentions that the candidates, who were likely to be appointed as assistant, were sent to Rangpur and Pawana district of Bengal for the collection of labourers provided that
if they could able to procure labourers then only they would be able to get salary. But, this system could not prove to be successful, because the numbers of recruited labourers were very few. The only legislation till then found was, the Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act of 1859. The Act aimed at providing punishment for the breach of contract by the labourers. The recruiting agent employed by the planters, notorious people. Ex-convicts, burglars, thieves, dacoits were appointed as the recruiters, who adopted the typical method of *arkattis* recruitment. These included loan advancement to potential victims, tempting young men with liquor or women and kidnapping young girls and marrying them off in the depots, a system known as ‘depot marriage’. Guha (1977) mentions that men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped, and traded like cattle; absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves.

It was in 1861, the Indian General Stream Navigation Company started regular navigation on the river Brahmaputra, and also provided facilities for the carriage of labourers. As a result of which, to some extent the Company got relief to solve the labourer scarcity in the tea industry. Consequently, the planters decided to delegate the task of labourer supply to the private agencies in Calcutta. These agencies utilized the services of professional ‘*arkattis*’ or native recruiters, who operated in various districts of Eastern India and forwarded the recruited migrants by rail to Calcutta, from where they were sent to Assam through a river route. These recruiters tried to collect labourers by hook or by cook from various illiterate backward and poor ethnic groups of neighboring states of Assam.

On the other hand, the mortality rate of recruits was very high. During the period from 15th December 1859 to 21 November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 recruits from outside, out of which 250 or 11 percent died on the way. Of a total of 2,569 recruits, who were sent down the Brahmaputra in two batches during the
period from 2nd April 1861 to 25th February 1862, as many as 135 died or got drowned and 103 absconded. Out of the 84,915 recruits for Assam between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 30,000 died by 30th June 1866. 37 The high rate of mortality of those migrated people affected the planters, because they had to bear all the cost of recruitments and commissions to the agents. The price charged by the contractors per recruit ranged from Rs. 12/- to Rs.20/-.

However, recruitment of emigrant labourers had been taking place before 1863 without any state control or check. In February 1863, when the Bengal Native Labour Act III was passed, the colonial government began to intervene in the recruitment system of the labourers to tea plantations of Assam. According to this Act, all the recruiters had to be licensed; every emigrant was to be produced before a magistrate of his own district; that the period of contract was to be four years and which should be explained to him in front of the Superintendent of Emigration; every intending emigrant had to be medically examined; and adequate sanitary arrangements for the conveyance of labourers had be provided by the recruiters. However, the Act failed to improve the condition of labourer recruiting policies of the colonial planters. The journey of tea labourers to Assam was woeful, as they were brought by the recruiters on the dock of the ship. Some of them died of diseases, some of them tried to flee away from the ship and jumped into the sea and those who were caught by the supervisors were tied by their hands and legs and treated as beast. On the way to Assam, ‘coolie depots’ were set up by the company for the convenience of dispatching the labourers to the plantation areas. Those depots were set up by the side of the rivers, such as Silchar, Kathigora, Syleth, Fesugang, Moulabibajar, Harigang, and Krimgang. 39 The condition of the ‘Coolie depots’ was very unhygienic, even there was no proper place for sanitation. In such a messing condition most of them were caught
by Cholera, Malaria, which led to the fatal condition of the labourers. As the labourers had to come on an open dock of the ship, many of them died due to heavy rain and heat of the sun, some of them fell down into the sea from the open and unprotected docks. After entering Assam labourers were kept in ‘coolie depots’ set up by the company at Guwahati, Tezpur, Silghat, Negheriting, Kokilamukh, Biswanath, Bihalimukh, Dhansirimukh, Kamalabari, Dikhowmukh. From the ‘coolie depots’ they were sent to the plantation areas, where again they had to live under the strict surveillance of the planters. Similar condition occurred after arrival of the labourers in the plantation areas. The moment they reached Assam, they were sent to particular area of the tea plantation and forced to live in a common barrack under perpetual fear of wild animals and white European ‘Sahibs’ (the British planters). Beside these, labourers had to face the scarcity of foods within the plantations. Surplus food production in the districts was not sufficient to meet the abrupt increase in demand.  

As a result, the planters had to arrange food for them, which was to be imported. But, the planters gave priority to the importation of large numbers of labourers to meet the demand caused by major extensions of the tea plantations than the importation of food for the labourers.

The Act III of 1863 failed to bring any fruitful results. As a result, the Act VI of 1865 came into operation as an amendment to the Bengal Act III of 1863. which stipulated minimum monthly wages (Rs 5 for men and Rs 4 for Women), a three-year contract, a nine-hour work day, and a government inspector of labour empowered to cancel the contract of labourers on complaints of ill treatment. The Act empowered tea garden managers to arrest the absconding labourers without warrant. Desertion and indolence on the part of the worker was made criminally punishable under the Act. The act applied only to newly recruited labourers and not time expired labourers or
locally recruited labourers. On the other hand, the planters were in need of cheap labourers, whom they could employ in the tea plantations under their strict surveillance. It was very common practice of the planters to engage the ‘time expired’ labourers in the plantations by concluding another agreement. Behal mentions that time expired labourers or locally recruited labourers were increasingly contracted under the Workman’s Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859 which was extended to Assam in 1864. Thus the Acts implemented by the Government helped the planters to legitimize their indenture policy for the sake of their interest.

Though the Act of 1865 was well conceived, but it did not work satisfactorily. Guha (1977) mentions that due to lack of proper inspection, all the provisions of Act were not observed by the planters. A Commission of Enquiry was constituted in 1868 by the Bengal Government to examine the state of affairs and prospect of cultivation of tea in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet. The enquiry report led to the Amendment Act of 1870. Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the ‘Sardari’ system of recruitment was recognized, though not allowed to replace forthwith the ‘Arkatti’ system. However the planters did not cease to practice the old system completely. From that time till 1915, both the methods of recruitment were in vogue, side by side.

Under the ‘Sardari’ system, ‘sardars’ of the gardens were sent to bring labourers from their home districts. Another amendment passed in 1873, which permitted free recruitment outside the provisions of the Act of 1865, provided that the contract did not extend beyond one year. By this Act penal clauses were removed, as a result of which planters were not at all interested in this mode of recruitment. However, this provision indirectly legalized their old practice of inducing time-expired emigrant labourers to enter into fresh contracts under the Workmen’s Breach of Contract Act (1859).
Between 1850 and 1890 was a period of rapid growth of Tea Industry in Assam. Dr. Barua (2008) mentions that several factors responsible for the growth of the industry in Assam such as, government grant on easy terms and conditions to the planters, leasing of land to the planters at a nominal rate, low investment cost for cultivation, emergence of private entrepreneurs in cultivation of tea, availability of labourers in the early years, formation Indian Tea Association in 1881, spread of tea cultivation in government plantations, introduction of improved method of manufacture, operation of daily steamer service between Calcutta and Guwahati (Guwahati) in 1883, opening of railways in Assam and establishment of Calcutta Tea Traders Association etc. However, the recruitment of the labourers continued to be under the supervision of the Government. Guha (1977) mentions that by the mid-sixties, the policy of recruitment of labourers from other provinces was well under way. Gradually, the numbers of labourers in the tea plantations had been increased. Out of a total population of labour force of 34,433 in Assam proper, as reported by the Bengal Administrative Report for 1867-68, 22,800 or two-third were imported labourer; and only 11,633 or one-third were local labourer. The total number of outside recruits, net of all wastages by way of death, desertion etc, stood approximately at 24,000 in Assam proper and 20,000 in Cachar on 31st December 1872. During that period a mad race for growing tea was persisted among the planters. The planters initiated a campaign for drastic cost cutting measures combined with rapid expansion. So, the planters were disappointed with the recruiting procedure which caused high cost of recruitment mainly due to restrictions imposed under law. Behal mentions that by that time the cost of bringing emmigrant labourers up to Sibsagar district had increased from Rs 35 per head in 1875 to an amount between Rs 66 to Rs 84 in 1878. Consequently, the Bengal Government appointed a Commission
to consider the matter, and the Commission agreed with the planters in their demand for deregulation of recruitment. As a result, in 1882 the Labour District Emigration Act I was passed. This Act facilitated free recruitment of labourers to Assam which was known as ‘Dhubri’ System of recruitment. Under this system unregistered emigrants were directly taken to Dhubri in Goalpara district of Assam. From there, they were sent to the plantation areas. Goalpara had been declared as tea district under the new act.

Under the Assam Labour Emigration Act of 1915, recruitment through Arkatti system was made unlawful and the ‘Sardari’ system remained as the only system of recruiting of labourers in tea plantations of Assam.\textsuperscript{49}

Consequently, in the year 1917, the Tea District Labour Supply Association was formed to control and co-ordinate the recruitment under the ‘Sardari’ System. Since then, this was the only organization which concerned with the supervision of recruitment of the labourers. However, in 1955 about 11,00 labourers recruited from outside and from 1959 recruitment from outside Assam had been drastically reduced.\textsuperscript{50} During that period the problem of unemployment of the emigrant labourers became an important factor for which planters had to face the problem of settlement and employment of the labourers in the plantations. By that time the Plantation Labour Act came into force, so the planters had to provide fringe benefits to the labourers working under the provision of the Act. As a result of which, planters employed only the requisite amount of labourers on permanent basis and employed excess labourers only in peak seasons of the industry. In 1960 onwards, recruitment from outside was stopped and Tea District Labour Association was abolished.\textsuperscript{51} Though, at the initial stage of labourer recruitment system, only the male members were recruited, but slowly emigrant labourers started to bring their families and other
members with them. The shifting of families and emigration of labourers were made in many batches till 1960.

2.7 SOURCES RECRUITMENT OF LABOURER

In the early stage of Tea Industry, the migration of labourers to the tea plantations was a very common practice. A large section of the labourers were recruited from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Ranchi, Palamau, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, and Manbhum district of Eastern India, and district of Orissa, United Provinces and Central provinces. Regarding the recruitments of labourers Guha (1977) mentions that in 1884-85, 44.7 percent of the recruits were from Chotanagpur, 27.2 percent from Bengal, 21.6 percent from U.P. and Bihar, 9.2 percent from Bombay, 0.7 percent from Madras and 5.5 percent from within Assam. In 1889, half of them were found to have been recruited from Chotanagpur, about a quarter from Bengal and about 5 percent only from Assam itself. After recruitment from their home land labourers were brought to the depots on foot and forwarded by rail to Calcutta where they were temporarily housed in the depots established by recruiting agencies or contractors, about hundred miles from Calcutta. Batches of the assembled individuals were later taken to Koostea, and dispatched by steamer and flats to Cacher and Assam tea gardens.52

2.8 CAUSES BEHIND THE MIGRATION:

The scarcity of cheap labourers to work in the tea plantations of Assam led the colonial planters to recruit labourers from outside the province. As a result, the tribals and backward caste Hindus from Central-Eastern India were recruited by the planters to employ as indentured labourers in the tea gardens. Certain ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors
had been the significant reasons of emigration of the labourers. ‘Push factors’ like famine, earthquake, flood, draught, epidemics and social and economic oppression of the lower castes at the hands of upper castes and the zaminders led to the emigration of the several tribal communities and lower castes. On the other hand, the agents of the planters were the ‘pull factors’. The tempted words of *arkattis* were the important reason of labourer emigration. Besides, financial crisis the emigrant labourers had to suffer in their homeland from social anarchy and inhuman torture of the feudal lords, for which they were compelled to migrate under false promises of the recruiting agents. Labourers were told by the recruiting agents of the planters that money falls from tea plants. They promised to provide easy work and better pay, unlimited land for cultivation. The recruiting agents put psychological pressure on the labourers who were ignorant and poor, alluring them with false promises.

By the second half of the British rule in India, there were severe famines in which millions of people lost their lives. In 1866-67, Orissa suffered an acute famine.\(^53\) It was caused due to the draught condition. The people had to suffer from a severe food crisis in the region. The situation could have been faced with the import of food grains from adjoining areas, but the Government, after a wrong study of the gravity of the situation, did not feel the necessity of importing food. When the situation developed into famine, and the government wanted to supply food from adjoining areas, but due lack of communication and transportation facilities it was hampered. One million people, constituting one-third of Orissa’s population, died in the famine. Some areas of Bengal and Bihar also suffered at that period from acute scarcity.\(^54\)

During the same period, again in 1866-67, there occurred a famine in a vast area of the then Madras Presidency covering Bellary, Salem, Coimbatore, South Arcot
and Madura.\textsuperscript{55} Abrupt stoppage of food supply from Orissa, failure of rainfall which led to scarcity of food and price hike and ultimately to famine. In spite of Government attempts to provide relief and an expenditure of more than ten lakh of rupees, the number of the dead reached 4, 50,000.

The next notable famine occurred in Bengal and Bihar during 1873-74.\textsuperscript{56} The draught occurred in the areas led to crop failure and created sudden and acute food scarcity, which turned into famine. However, the Government undertook a wise policy to control the situation by importing food grains from outside.

Another similar crisis occurred during 1888-89, in Northern districts of Bihar and the Gujarat areas of Orissa suffered a serious famine.\textsuperscript{57} Consequently within two years, famine raged over certain areas of Madras and Bombay Presidencies. Ajmir, Marwara, Bihar and Bengal were also worst victims of famine. Again, in 1896-97, a great famine hit large areas of India both in the North and South. The Central Provinces and the North-Western Provinces, parts of the Punjab and certain areas of Bombay Presidency were the worst affected areas. In all, more than sixty million people in British India suffered from that famine.\textsuperscript{58}

The British planters took the opportunities and recruited labourers without any trouble from these famine stricken areas of the countries, such as Bihar (Chotanagpur Tribal region), Orissa (Ganjam, Kalahandi areas), Madhya Pradesh (Bastar, Jabalpur, Bilaspur), Uttar Pradesh (Deoria, Balia, Basti, Gazipur, Azamgarh and Gorakhpur), Andhra Pradesh (Guntur and Visakhapatnam) and Bengal (Midnapur, Purulia, Bankura and Burdwan).

Singh, Narain and Kumar (2006) mention that the peasant revolution of Bengal and Bihar was one of the ‘push factors’, which had accelerated large scale emigration. The period of 1860-80 was the period of turmoil in many parts of Bihar and Bengal.
The tribals of Chotanagpur region had to suffer much in the recurrent unrest. The Sardari Larai, Birsa Movement and Tana Bhagat Movement in Chotanagpur division and the Kharwar Movement in Santhal Pargana had caused great turmoil in the tribal belts of Bihar and led to destruction of crops which caused miseries to the local people. The innocent people were dying with hunger. As a result of which to escape from social and economic oppression they agreed to work in the tea plantations of Assam.

Another significant cause for the emigration of the labourers was the social and economic exploitation by the upper castes and the zamindars in their home land. These group of people belonged to lower and down trodden communities, they were innocent, illiterate; and had to live under inhuman atrocities of zamindars in their homeland. They wanted to escape from the atrocities of the zamindars and poverty, so that they were easily agreed to come with the British agents to work in Assam with the hope for a better life. Thus the excessive exploitation of poor peasants and landless labourers by the zaminders and their amlahs was one of the main reasons of the migration of labourers to other places in search of bread.

2.9 INTRODUCTION OF COINS AND TOKENS IN THE TEA GARDENS

At the initial stage of tea industry in Assam, the British planters used various types of tokens for the payment of the labourers employed in the tea gardens. Tokens are popularly known as close circuit money. With the development of the tea plantations towards the end of the nineteenth century, the number of labourers recruited to the plantations also increased. Labourers had to be paid either at task rate or as weekly payment in cash which led to great demand for small coins. In the early stage of the industry, all the members of a labourer’s family were employed in the tea
plantations in different task according to their age and sex, even small children were also employed. They earned only a few rupees and annas per month. So, each garden had to manage numbers of small coins for the payment of the labourers. On the other hand, in those days the price structure of all necessities of life was low and hence the need for small coins was also great.\textsuperscript{60}

At the initial stage of the tea industry, it was the part of the duties of East India Company to supply coins to the tea gardens of Assam for the payment of the labourers. The supply of coins in ‘pai’, ‘pice’ and ‘anna’ produced by the East India Company was inadequate, so that the garden authorities had to face a problem for the payment of the labourers. As such, the planters decided to introduce their own coins to meet the problem of shortage of coin for the payment of labourers.

The introduction of tokens in the tea gardens of Surma Valley and Brahmaputra Valley by the planters, contributed significantly to the transaction patterns of the plantations located in the remote areas. Bose (1715-1937) mentions that these tokens were dominated to suit the task rate. Some tokens had the face value, other showed a task, expressed as a full, half or quarter. Besides, the tokens were of various shapes, the shape of the tokens represented the value, which was known to illiterate labourers and to the shops in the respective garden areas.

As mentioned by Dr. Baruah (2008) that several reasons peculiar to Assam precipitated the scarcity of coins. The banks and controlling offices of India were situated in Calcutta and sending remittance from Calcutta mint to remote areas was very difficult, the facilities for internal remittances were virtually non-existent. The difficult terrain and absence of proper road communication stood in the way of the transportation of the coins from the source to the tea estates in Assam. The government treasurer in Assam could not supply sufficient quantity of coins required.
So, arrangements were to be made with Bankers in Calcutta. The bullion could be sent by government steamer only up to Gauhati and thereafter own arrangement was required. Transit by country boat or steamer was fraught with risk and required precautions.

Under such circumstances, around 1870, tea gardens of Assam decided to introduce their own coins to meet up the requirement of coins for the payment of the labourers. However the introduction of the tokens had its own advantages and disadvantage. Bose (1715-1937) mentions that there are no reasons to doubt that the traders and bankers in the tea gardens found this monetary system to their advantage. The geographical boundary of these tokens was restricted to their place of circulation. Hence, the tea labourers were virtually forced to spend their money to the approved traders or bankers of the gardens, to buy their day to day needs. This system virtually monopolized the internal trade to a few, and favoured them with enormous profits. The Rajasthani traders, who were hailing from North Western part of the country, played a significant role in the garden management as bankers. The tokens or the coins, whatever they got as their wages, they had to exchange with the commodities of their needs in the shops owned by the Rajesthani bankers. This was done only to confine the labourers within the plantation areas. Various ill treatments meted out by the garden supervisors had to be borne by the poor labourers. The restricted value of tokens probably forced them to stay on the same plantation. Since their savings, if any, could be utilized only where they worked. Rajasthani businessmen were mainly hailing from Sikar, Udaipur of Rajasthan and different part of Hariyana. Tasha (Prantik, 1-15, May 2014) mentions that they were allowed to establish business shops within the boundary of the garden and even they were allotted big plots of land by the planters for establishing their business and houses. Generally these businessmen built
their grocery shops which were surrounded by well protected walls and even iron grills at the entrance, covering a big area, within which they built godowns, and own private rooms where they used to live with their families. They were not charged any rent or taxes for their business or houses they lived in and anything else. There were no other shops inside the gardens, except the shops own by these businessmen. In all tea gardens the model of these shops was same. The Rajasthani businessmen at the same time acted as the bankers of the gardens. They provided money to the planters needed for the payment of the employees, labourers and for other purposes. Even today this process has been continuing in some tea gardens of Assam. The notes and coins introduced by the planters for the payment of the employees could only be encashed in these shops. In the same article Tasha also mentioned that in some cases Rajasthani businessmen themselves introduced their own coins to meet up the crisis of coins. For example till 1988, the Rajasthani businessmen, popularly known as Mayaram of Cinnamara Tea Estate of Jorhat District, introduced own coins, which was made of aluminum. The shape of the coins was round shaped 50 paise coin, and triangular shaped 25 paise coin, with a hole in the coins. These coins were known as ‘Mayaram coins’. Now a day, the business of the Rajasthani people inside the tea gardens has declined, some of their predecessors have become the proprietors of tea gardens, and some of their predecessors have sold their properties inside the gardens and started new business in the urban areas. The tea garden token era ended and new tokens were last ordered in the late 1930’s. However, the supply they had on hand continue to be used up to approximately the middle of the 20th century that is 1950s.
2.10 CONCLUSION

The ancestors of the tea garden labourers were illiterate, so they could not keep any written history about their past. They only verbally pass it through generation after generation. A few documents regarding their migration were found which were written by the British writers or official documents regarding their migration.

The emigrant labourers were traditionally agriculturist, but in the tea industry of Assam they have become industry labourer and forced to settle within the tea garden as ‘coolie’ (as called by the British planters) community, which brought a drastic change in their family structure and some new features appeared in their social structure like class identity, occupational diversity, nuclear family, a different language, common festivals and so on. On the other hand, some of them could not adjust themselves in the plantation environment and decided to leave the plantation work and settle down in the nearby villages or bastis. Gradually they acquired agricultural land or other properties and cut off their connection with the tea plantations. They are popularly known as ex-tea garden labourers (unofficially).

During the conversation with the family members of the respondents it was known that some of their relatives, who were settled in town areas and became educated, do not like to keep relation with them which hurt them very much. In this regard the words of Arun Kharia (son of Sanu Kharia, the freedom fighter) are worth mentioning. In an interview with Prof. Arun Kharia, told the researcher that “the only things belong with us as a ‘Tea Garden Labourer’ is our title, and nothing else. We are very much busy with our day to day life and society; as such we are detouched from them.”
Notes and References

2. ibid. p-83.
4. The barbarous subordination under serfdom was replaced by indentured labourer system. Assam’s tea gardens were no exception, where the indentured labourer system was established around 1860. The coercive method employed in these gardens was similar to the system, practiced under serfdom.
15. ibid, pp-21-22
18. The success and rapid progress of the tea companies (Assam Company and Jorhat Tea Company) and individual tea planters attracted the British capitalist for further investment of capital. A major push came in 1860, when Lord Canning, Viceroy of British India, offered large tracts of wasteland at throwing price for opening new plantations in Assam. The generous offer stimulated a wild speculative boom, the ‘tea mania’, marked by the hike of tea prices, soaring profits and the mushrooming of large number of new companies for producing tea.


21. ibid.


26. ibid


28. ibid.

29. ibid, p-10.


35. Guha, 1977, op.cit. p-18


38. ibid.


41. ibid. pp-6-7.


44. ibid.

45. Ibid. 46.9 ibid.


50. ibid

51. ibid


54. ibid.

55. ibid, p-192.

56. ibid, pp-192-193.

57. ibid, p-194.
58. ibid, p-194.

59. Singh, Narain, & Kumar, 2006, op.cit.p-44.

60. Baruah, 2008, op.cit.p-278.