

Tea Labourers in the Barak Valley

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Tea industry is the gift of the colonial administration aimed at extracting revenue. The genesis of the tea plantation in Cachar is invariably linked with the life of the labourers from distant corners of the northern as well as the southern part of the country. They were brought by the British. There are evidences which clearly testifies that labourers were brought here even from abroad like Fiji, Mauritius etc. An attempt is being made here to give an outline on various tea-labourers in the valley based on the local source as well as interviews with the elderly persons.

With the advent of the British rule in Cachar in 1832, the authorities of Cachar encouraged the new settlers for cultivation. As the soil was found 'to be the granary' of the surrounding region, there was the need for adequate manpower. In course of time, the commercial motive of the Company inspired them to utilise the fallow or waste lands to a new venture of tea-plantation. Mr. Williamson happened to be the pioneer of tea-plantation. He undertook the venture at Barsangun on the 1st May 1856. He was given ¹waste land for tea plantation for a period of 99 years.

The first Superintendent of Cachar Thomas Fisher and later on Captain Sterwart cherished wrong ideas about the labourers. In a letter Captain Stewart wrote, "with regard to labour I do not anticipate there will be any great difficulty in obtaining the quantity which may be required, if not in Cachar, in the neighbouring district of Sylhet, the inhabitants of which district and of Jayantia ² come very willingly to Cachar and settle down in it'.² But here the authorities were mistaken on the ground that Cachar happened to an agricultural place, where the paid labour was unknown. Moreover the inhabitants like Kacharis, Nagas, Manipuries, Kookies proved to be useful- assistants in cutting jungles and clearing them, but to them the work of plantation would prove an unsuccessful one³. To meet the situation for the 'benefit to the country and to the tea planting

interest,⁴ process of immigration slowly started. This process of immigration bears an eloquent testimony of coolie oppression, during the period 1874-1905, by planters and their hirelings the - 'Arkattis' and 'Sardars'. These agents were entrusted with a remuneration of Rs. 120-150 for every recruit under a contract⁵. They frequently induced their victims by temptation for better economic life. The unfortunate poor people gradually developed a new idea 'gach hilale paisa jhare, 'whoa kono dhukka naike baa,' whuha bahut paisa baa'⁶ Having been convinced, they led an indenture bounded life. As a matter of fact, those poor fellows could hardly understand what the contract meant. This agreement or contract is still common to the people of the garden areas as 'Girmit' and the whole process therefore, termed as 'Girmitia' Chalan or Depet Chalan. Another in human practice was that they were identified with sort of mark in their body. Again strong vigilance were kept in the Choukies so that they might not get any chance to leave the garden. It is said that, they were supplied with wine by the lords to get them relaxed.

The majority of the labourers in Cachar came from Bihar, Uttar-pradesh, Andra-pradesh whereas in the gardens of the Brahmaputra Valley most of the labourers belonged to West Bengal, Birbhum, Bankura, Saotal Parganas etc. A careful investigation of some of the gardens made it clear that in the valley of Cachar as per records of the I.T.A. (Indian Tea Association) about seventeen or eighteen families came from Andra-pradesh and settled in the gardens of Kassipur, Kanchanpur, Chandkhira etc. Their ancestors are still living there possessing the surnames like Mal, Nunia etc. Some workers from Tamil-Nadu settled in the gardens of Adamtila, Bhubrighat (near Patherkandi) and known as Saliha, Naidu, Telenga, Rally etc. Large number of people from Bihar migrated and settled in gardens. They are familiar as Ahir, or Goala, Yadab, Kanu, Kurmi, Kohar, Kairi, Kambar, Rabidas (Kori), Chaube, Tewari etc. Curiously enough very few people came from Orissa only with the exception in some of the gardens like

Safenjuri (Medli T.E.), Baithakhal and Putni, where their ancestors are still in existence. They are Panda, Mohanti, Das, Khodal, Tatua etc. The reason for this small number indicates their better economic condition.

Strangly enough, people from the remote parts of Fiji island came as tea-garden workers here. From an investigation, it was gathered that in the Ichabil garden there was a person named Ram-prasad Kairi (Kachhi) of 90 years old. He narrated the circumstances which compelled his family to come to this area. As narrated by him, in the year 1914, the agitation of 'Bharatbangshis' created much disturbances in the island. The agitators took recourses to violence also. There was an incidence of a bridge on river Wewa being demolished by the agitators. Some places were destroyed too. To get rid of all these revolutionaries the then Fiji Govt. ordered expulsion of the Indian originals from Fiji. So, the family of Ram-prasad together with others came to Calcutta, having spent 28 days continuously on sea. One of his brothers Biseswar Prasad remained in Subadalo, now the capital of the island. His sister in-law was a well-to-do person having nearly one thousand cows in possession. The whole family was engaged in Sugarcane plantation there.

Ram-prasad stayed in Calcutta for a long time. But family chaos compelled him to shift at Kanpur where his mother started working at Swadeshi Carter Mill. Meanwhile, his father died and Ram-prasad was financially handicapped. All of a sudden he met two Sardars (dalal) - one Ram Charan and the other was Lala. He thus fell a victim to the trick of these middlemen and enrolled his name alongwith other family members in the Depot. They were given essential commodities like one dish, one blanket and one lutia (ghati). From Kanpur to Gazipur they reached sat the Juri station (now in Bangladesh) and ultimately settled in the Ichabil garden. From the statement of Ram-prasad, it has become clear that he was a an influential man among the workers in the garden. He had an working knowledge of English and was familiar as *gababu* perhaps the distorsion of the word 'guard-babu'. Ram-prasad expressed sorrow for his brother and sister whom they left at Fiji and stated that the British authorities tried to

contact them but in vain.

In the Ainakhal garden, there was a man named Wanchilu who came from China and worked as engine fitter. Gradually, he became the president of the tea-garden Panchayat.

Although, there was crisis for labour and arrangements were made to import them, yet the system was a defective one. The unscrupulous contractors used to despatch the Coolies in an inhuman way. The journey took more than one month's time. In most cases they had not been provided with sufficient food, clothing, medical assistance and even ventilation also. As a consequence, the rate of mortality cherished to be alarming. During the period from May 1863 to January 1868, a total of 52,155 Coolies were imported to Cachar. Of them 2,456 died during the voyage. Besides, there was no proper shelter for them since their arrival in the station. So, to avoid delay and expense of sending coolies from Sadar station of Silchar to Hailakandi and other distant plantation areas; proposals were made for new sheds or barracks for accommodation at the cost of Rs. 25 each in Cachar, Badarpur, Katigora etc. in the following manner.

<u>Cachar</u>		Rs.	<u>Badarpur</u>		Rs.
1.	Mohurriir	- 10/-	1.	Mohurriir	- 10/-
2.	Chapraseses	- 10/-	2.	Chapraseses	- 10/-
3.	Sweepers	- 5/-	3.	Sweepers	- 5/-
<hr/>		Total - 25/-	<hr/>		Total - 25/-

Thus, it improved the problem of accomodation of the labourers to some extent. Again, in response to the constant demand of the tea planters, an amount of Rs.45,000 were sanctioned by the Govt., as per report of Captain Stewart, the Superintendent. It was stated that, (1) a road from the station of Silchar to the Chatlabil viz. Goongoor, Silcoori, Dargakona to jalinga (2) a road running down the western side of the Hailakandi Valley beginning at panchgaon proceeding along the west-bank of the Dhaleswari river towards Lalamukh (3) a road running down the estern side of hailakandi to Burniemukh and proceeding along the

Katakhal (4) a road from the station at Silchar to the Udharbond bazar (5) a road from Silchar station eastward viz Sonaimukh to Nandigram. In addition to this, Rs. 500/- was to be expended for preparing a landing ghat at panchgaon at the confluence of the river Barak and Dhaleswari. Thus, all these measures were adopted to improve the tea-industry.

Besides tea labourers in the bondage of agreement, a good number of people from Bihar, U.P. and other parts came and engaged in different professions thus indirectly related to tea-plantation-like Keot, Malla, Sarnakar. In course of time some of them happened to be the owner of estates and acquired a high position in the society. One such Sri Prasad Ray of the Goala community was familiar as "Chattradhari Zamindar" and his wife still familiar as 'Rani-Saheba' in the Sonakhira garden as a symbol of their age old pomp and glamour.

Similar instances are still existing in some garden areas and tales are even in vogue relating them. Thus, Shambu Dayal of Katlicherra was a Sarnakar (Goldsmith) by profession. Another Suresh Chasa of Lala-bazar is still an old man of about 90 years. His father Nanda Sarkar came as a tea garden labourer. Economic stringencies did not give him scope of education and sometimes he had to read in the light of the lamp-posts in the street. His father tried to bring it in the notice of the authority but in vain. But at the time of retirement of the Sahib, he wrote a farewell address which enchanted the Sahib also. Later on, he joined the Air Force.

Thus, the labourers although attached directly or indirectly to the tea plantation also developed a social structure which is still in existence. For example, the surname of Nunia although common to the people of Bihar yet there is gulf of difference between the Nunias of Andhra-pradesh and Bihar. From a conversation it was gathered that, Mr. Nunia had no surname at all. His forefathers were engaged in earthworks. At the time of his admission to the school, the Head Pandit gave him the surname 'Nunia' and his original name 'Lakhmia' was also changed. Now their matrimonial relation is confined with the group composed of Mal, Naidu, Saliha, Nunia and so on.

The Kanu or banias were the business people among the Biharis. The Brahmins in this community acquired a high status in the society and the Goalas had their low social standing. Among the Goalas, there are seven classifications like Kanuzia, Darhore, Krishnath, Majroth, Gararia, Gajroth, and Khatick Goala etc. Their classification according to origin, social usages and customs will be a source of further study for future investigators.

Notes & References

1. B.R.P., Vol. No. 1202, letter no 88, 26th May, 1858.
2. C.R., 4th September, 1855.
3. B.R.P., letter No 161, 10th November, 1862.
4. Quoted in D. Dutta, "Beginning of the Tea Industry in Cachar", **Purbasree**, Silchar, 1965, pp. 2-3.
5. Amalendu Guha, **Planters Raj to Swaraj**, New Delhi, 1977, p. 43.
6. Babul Narayan Kanu, Barak Upatyakar Chabanuar Loko Sanskritir Ati Abhas", **Ashom Sahitya Sahba Journal**, Silchar, 1986-87, p.78.
7. Interview with Mr. Rabia Nunia and Bablu Narayan Kanu, Itkhola, Silchar.
8. B. R. P., No. 161, 10th November, 1862.
9. J.B. Bhattacharjee, **Cachar Under British Rule in North East India**, New Delhi, 1977.
10. B.R.P., Vol no. 10, Letter No 4375, 16th September, 1863; C.R., 15th March, 1867.
11. B. R. P., 10th November, 1862.