

Tea holding to absentee ownership: Chatla Pargana in the Barak valley

Ratna Dey

I

The Valley of Barak comprising Cachar and hailakandi District was annexed to the British dominion in 1832. The initial period was of transition and experiments in the filed of administration and revenue. Gradually radical reforms in the field of land revenue were initiated scraping the Khel system and grouping all lands into the Parganas.¹

At that time population was scanty, land was in abundance. For fiscal and administrative view point Cachar had been thus divided into 22 parganas which continues till present day.² The administrators wanted to utilise the natural resources and to extract revenue as far as practicable. That tempted them to make best utilisation of the fallow/Patit lands.

The Barak Valley entered into the revenue map of British India after about two decades of annexation and in 1856, the first tea garden was installed at Barsangaon now known as Kathal, a village in the Chatla pargana.³ Very soon, tea plantation came to be recognised as a profitable business to the planters. Accordingly, 'Waste land' plots were surveyed and settled finally to the grantees for tea plantation on condition that 500 acres were to be given as lease to each applicant interested in tea plantation.⁴

Towards the 1870s gardens of Chatla pargana viz. Ghungoor, Silcoorie, Dargakona, Loharband came to be recognised as the tea plantation areas in the District which seems to be an important phenomenon. To encourage plantation covering new areas waste land rules for 99 years was introduced in 1854 and then a set of rules came into force from time to time in 1862, 1874, 1876 respectively.

But the scarcity of skilled labour for plantation proved to be a great problem as Cachar happened to be agriculture place. To meet

the situation and for the 'benefit to the country and to the tea planting interest process of immigration slowly started. This process of immigration bears an eloquent testimony of coolie immigration, during the period from 1874-1905 by planters and their hirelings - the Arkatis and Sardars. A good number of people including men, women and children from different parts of Bihar, U.P and even from Andhra Pradesh came to seek job in the estates. After their arrival in the estates, they were subjected to intense exploitation and torture to the abnegation of human consideration. This labour immigration opened a new phase in the history of the tea plantation,

After serving a term as tea garden labourers some of them tried to escape due to (1) exploitive and oppressive treatment by management, (2) Some however, had settled in the fallow land trying their fortune in agriculture or preferred other avenues of employment instead of remaining as bonded labour, (3) In course of time some of the gardens turned out to be unproductive and thus the employees of the abandoned garden were settled in the adjacent areas of the gardens and thus a number of *bastis* emerged.

The present study seeks to analyse the situation under which these "indentured labourers" had established new settlements, formed new social set up and how a new socio-economic and cultural pattern had emerged in the Barak Valley.

II

It has been stated earlier that, Chatla Pargana in the south-east part of Silchar happened to be the pioneer of the tea plantation area in the valley. As a matter of fact, some gardens of the valley were abandoned because of low productivity and the labourers accumulated land and constituted basti area. At present, there are many ex-tea garden labour villages in the tea growing Districts of Assam of varying size. These villages by and large are situated close to the tea garden.⁵ Barak Valley is not an exception in this point. Here large number of basti areas are found in the tea garden areas of the entire district. Moreover, the ex-tea garden employees during their tenure of service in the garden and also afterwards accumulated large areas of land or Miras. The concept of Miras is associated with land as the word Miras is equivalent to estate or land and therefore they came

to be designated as Mirasdars.⁶ They can better be called as Non-Indigenous Mirasdars, because there are also other Mirasdars residing in the valley who have got no relation with these tea plantation population.

With a view to trace the emergence of Non-Indigenous Mirasdars in the Valley, Chatla Pargana has been taken as an entry point. Survey was undertaken in different ex-tea garden villages like Kathal, Silcoorie, Ghungoor, Loharbond, Duwarbond, Sonacherra Part I & II, Tarutazabari, Bariknagar Part I & II, Jogiabasti in Sildhubi helped to make an observation about the following :

- 1) Land accumulation pattern.
- 2) Emergence of Mirasdars.
- 3) Socio-economic scenario of the valley.

Based on the above view points the study reveals some identical features and also some peculiar features. Their detailed history based on local sources and supplemented by other documents had been referred to in the different proceedings of the NEIHA.

Identical Features

(1) Most of ex-tea garden inhabitants had migrated in connection with tea plantation; few came with their relatives in search of better way of life. (2) While working in the garden some enterprising youths and new-comers used to clear jungle lands or waste lands. The rules for leasing jungle lands, in Assam and Cachar stated that, "unassessed waste lands not previously cultivated or only cultivated in the Jhoom method and long since abandoned, may be granted on lease for ten years in lots containing not less than a hundred and not more than a thousand acres".⁷ Hence, they cleared and acquired plenty of lands in this way. (3) Tea garden manager also favoured settlement of time expired labour to adjacent lands so that these labour force can be utilised as 'causal labour' during the tea plucking season in addition to their regular labour force.⁸ (4) Those who possessed enough land had *raiya*s in their principality. There were also instances of forfeiture of land in case of non-payment of revenue in due time. So some sort of exploitation prevailed all along. (5) The social custom i.e. marriage relation was prevalent between the Mirasdars

and the *raiya*s. Sometime marriage relation followed the offering of land and thus indicating social mobilisation of the garden people from different parts of the valley. (6) *Mirasdar*s, to commemorate their name were involved in construction works like public schools, temple promotion etc.

Peculiar features

Some notable features are : (1) In the West part of Chatla Pargana - i.e. people are enjoying *Malikana Sativa*. By a Deed of Conveyance Mr. J.D. Gardiner, manager Silcoorie T.E. in 1948 sold about more than 1715 bighas of land to three influential persons of the locality who in their turn sold the land to 107 persons as 'Pattadar'. The kith and kin of the former three persons claimed their forefathers to be the *Mirasdar*s, but all of them are having the same document. The printed document exacting the transfer issued by tea-garden officials in all probability was a case of forgery. It is also an instance of Benami transfer of land. Because, the land was taken as a lease for 99 years by the Cachar & Dooars Tea company Ltd., from the British for tea plantation. So before the completion of 99 years this transfer was no doubt unauthorised and illegal. Moreover three *Mirasdar*s who sold land as 'Pattadar' was also an illegal one as it was done without making any correspondence with the Revenue Officer. Further these *Mirasdar* were having *raiya*s in their control. So two tier system is prevalent here. (2) In the east part of the Chatla Valley the picture is a bit different. In Ghungoor, Silcoorie area a good number of people had migrated to the valley as workers in the garden. When the garden became unproductive, the company offered them lands to enjoy. They are still enjoying land. Some of them purchased some plot and possessed the right of *Malikana Sativa*. The only available document is *Kacha Khatian* issued by settlement officers of the District remarked as Redeemed Lease.⁹ But those who did not acquire *Malikana Sativa* are still having their *Mirasdar* whose descendants are still alive. They also did not get any right to reconstruct permanent buildings.

There are also other examples of claimants in the Chatla Pargana who are enjoying land as Jot *Sativa* and still paying revenue @ 5/- per bigha to the *Mirasdar*.

From the above facts it can be asserted that the Pargana Chatla represented a peculiar feature of landholding pattern i.e. from tea holding to absentee ownership of land which is based on some illegal documents and tricks of the colonial planters. In some parts two tier system, exists i.e., Mirasdar and the *raiya*t. In some other places *Mirasdar* and various types of inhabitants enjoying land as *Malikana Sativa* on the one hand and some are enjoying *Jotsatva* on the other i.e. in a word two tier and multi tier system is prevalent.

Notes and references

1. Dey, R. Non-Indigenous Mirasdarss in Pargana Chatla : A Retrospect,' *NEIHA Proceedings*, 1991 pp. 371-375.
2. Jamabandi Register, 1951-52, Cachar District Records, Silchar.
3. B.R.P., Vol 1202, Letter No. 28, 26th May, 1856.
4. Bhattacharjee, J.B., *Cachar under British Rule in North East India*, Delhi, 1979, pp. 192-193.
5. Phukan, Umananda, *The Ex-tea garden Labour Population in Assam : A socio-economic study*, Delhi, 1984, pp. 2-3.
6. Dey, R., "Mirasdar in Cachar : A Tradition or A Myth", *NEIHA Proceedings*, Kohima, pp. 300-303.
7. B.R.P., April, 1873.
8. Ibid No. 5 p. 1-12.
9. Discussion with Jaharlal Kurmi, 80 years, Ghongoor.