



**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

SEVENTH SESSION

PASIGHAT : 1986

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NORTH EAST INDIA
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PREFACE

It gives us great joy to find that the Association has been growing in strength over the years as the premier research organisation in North East India. Our strategies of grass-root research, inter-disciplinary approach, and group orientation for an objective understanding of the nature of socio-economic developments and social formations at different points of time have started to yield the cherished results. The membership of the organisation has been steadily increasing. Our more than three hundred members today are the researchers from the Surveys and research departments and the teachers in the Universities, Colleges and Schools spread over all the seven States in the North-East, besides a few from outside the region. Our members are not from History but also almost all the Social Sciences and Humanities streams, and this is because of our faith in the study of history as a science for socio-economic development. Our annual sessions are major academic gatherings in the region, attended on an average by hundred and fifty delegates from all over the region. A large number of research papers are presented and discussed in the annual session each one of which is a substantial addition to the existing literature. Our proceedings volumes are acclaimed as major references on North East India. We get requests for copies of current as well as back volumes from all over the country and even abroad.

We have also been able to create some enthusiasm about research in the history of the region. The researches in the history of North East India are going on in all the Universities in the region. A large number of M. Phil. and Ph. D. candidates are working in regional history. There are on-going individual research projects by teachers and professional researchers. The seminars are occasionally organised in various institutions. A fair number of research publications have come out in recent years and many more must be in the pipe lines. The under-graduate and post-graduate level courses in the history of North East India are offered in the Universities in the region. Some of the State departments are planning to introduce the study of the history of the concerned State in the schools, and some of our members are cooperating with the SCERTs in preparing the text books. The emerging important functions of this Association are to coordinate the on-going researches, to design a perspective for research, to develop appropriate tools and methodologies, and

to create literature in the history of the region so that it may be possible to prepare a Comprehensive History of North East India in the next few years.

The present volume is the Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Session of the North East India History Association held at the Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat on November 11-13, 1986. Professor J. B. Ganguly, Director, Calcutta University Post-graduate Centre, Agartala presided over the Session which was inaugurated by Shri Khapriso Krong, Minister of Education, Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Shri B. K. Kakoty, Principal, and Dr. S. Dutta, Head, Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru College, Pasighat did us great honour as Chairman of the Reception Committee and Local Secretary of the Session respectively. Besides its high academic contents, the delegates shall cherish the fond memory of the session for warmth of the reception extended by the organisers and the colourful entertainment programme. Our thanks are due to the authorities of the Jawaharlal Nehru Colleges Pasighat and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

I am personally thankful to my colleagues Dr J. P. Singh, Dr. O. P. Kejariwal, Dr. Milton S. Sangma, Dr. D. R. Syiemlieh and Mr. Abhijit Choudhury for the help in editing and publishing this volume. We are also thankful to the Indian Council of Historical Research and the North Eastern Council for financial assistance.

Shillong

The 25 September 1987.

(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

General Secretary,

North East India History Association.

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Capital-labour relation : A Study of Tea-Plantation in Assam (1835-1926.)

Subhas Saha

The study of capital-labour relation in any specific area of the world, by their very nature and character of objective laws of the productive system has revealed the dominance of violence and aggression by the former upon the later. The capitalist growth has simply accelerated the process and strengthened the acuteness of such dominance in a very sophisticated manner. The case of severity and intensity are well reflected in the colonial economy.

The penetration of British colonial economy in Assam through the plantation of tea also followed the same process. The plantation economy with its well-organised management and patronisation from the imperial political power pursued a policy of 'human drain' by way of large scale labour immigration.

No doubt, the discovery of tea-plant and the subsequent flourishing growth of plantation in Assam has injected new dynamics in the economic development of the region. But it was an involuntary process instead of revolutionary. Keya Dev has rightly pointed out¹

"the plantation economy from its very inception developed in the form of regional enclaves within the spatial structure of the traditional agrarian economy of the Brahmaputra Valley."

The 'regional enclaves' was an outcome of the co-existence of traditional and modern economy side by side. The policy of recruitment made it more critical, resulting in serious socio-economic problems. The capital-labour relation was thus strained further. The cloak of such class-conflict was an inevitable consequence.

The paper, exclusively based on primary sources, intends to study the capital-labour relations, its background and nature for the specified period till 1926.

Growth of Plantation

Despite the controversy over when and who discovered the tea-plant in Assam there is no doubt that the first experimental plantation was made by the Company in 1835 in the district of Lakhimpur. The experiment in plantation from 1835 till 1852 was not at all commercially commandable. It was only after 1852 that some prosperous achievements could be achieved and it is

reported officially to have a cultivated area of about 3967 acre with an estimated outturn of over 700000 pounds of tea². After 1852 there was a rapid cultivation of tea in Cachar, Sylhet and elsewhere resulting in a mushrooming of tea-gardens all over the province. The table below gives a vivid picture of plantation growth .

TABLE - I
Brahmaputra Valley

District	Mature Plants	Immature Plants	Total	Approximate out turn in pounds
Goalpara	380	36	416	144825
Kamrup	4604	218	4822	789384
Darrang	20884	3745	24630	11275835
Nowgong	10856	1145	12002	326946
Sibsagar	50503	7441	57994	180944557
Lakhimpur	32793	7391	40184	15567207
TOTAL :	120021	19997	139994	49061304

Surma Valley

Sylhet	40300	7574	47874	18649385
Cachar	53184	6106	59290	16506444
Khasi Hills	20	10	30	4000
TOTAL :	93504	13690	107194	35159829
Grand Total	213525	33667	247192	84221133

The above statistics reveal that the growth of tea plantation was largely flourished in mainly five districts of Brahmaputra Valley and the districts of Sylhet and Cachar of Surma Valley. The period from 1852 till 1892 has therefore rightly been called as the Tea-plantation foundation period

Crisis of labour : The plantation economy needs large number of labour. The demand for labour supply could not be realised locally in Assam, a province predominantly based on feudal-tribal agrarian economy. The indigenous labour supply was therefore, very scanty. A very small number of Assamese, Garo, Mikir, Lalung and Kachari labourers could be availed in the tea districts of Brahmaputra Valley. In the Surma Valley the planters employed Mizo, Kachari, Khasi, Bengali and Tripuri labourers⁴. These indigenous recruitments were seasonal workers and did not like to work permanently. The result was that the growing tea plantations in Assam were threatened by serious labour crisis.

In view of such labour crisis, the planters started pursuing the policies of labour immigration. In 1863, an Act for the regulation of the transport of native labourers emigrating into Assam and Cachar was passed.⁵ The regulation of internal immigration of labourers was soon made an weapon by the planters for large-scale recruitment. The popularly known *Arkatia* or *Girmitia* (Agreement System) was thus started. By 1888 a bulk number of 46293 native labourers were recruited into Assam of which 30839 were in the Brahmaputra Valley and the rest in the Surma Valley.⁶

The unfavourable climate, *Kala-zar*, lack of medical treatment, communication hazards, insufficient food and many other factors helped in increasing the rate of mortality among the immigrant labours. The fear psychosis of mortality forced the immigrant labour to desert. This large scale desertion and high rate of mortality caused further labour crisis. The horrible situation thus created can well be understood from the reports of the Cachar District Commissioner who described the condition 'as rivalling the horrors of the middle passage'. In a resolution of the General Administrative Report of Bengal, Sir George Campbell wrote 'the Assam Service on the Brahmaputra is very dilatory and unhappily not infrequently attended with great loss of life'. Commenting on the figure of mortality for the year 1883 the Chief Commissioner, Sir Charles Elliot wrote,

"It is difficult to say what measures can be taken to put down this terrible mortality. The boat voyage from Goalando to Cachar took

and more wretched set of human beings I never saw before."¹²

Capital-labour conflict, its nature and character

It was not before the enactment of the Trade Union Registration Act in 1926 that the working class could achieve trade union rights. The organised labour movement as such, therefore, was out of question before 1926. But the very objective laws of capitalist plantations economy and the prevailing class-based system has provided bases of conflict between the capital and the labour. The conflict was inherent in the system itself and was reflected in varieties of forms.

The large scale desertion from the gardens is the most striking example of labour revolt against the oppressive system of immigration and the plantation economy. Desertion was, of course, not uncaused. The low wages, ill health, unhealthiness of the garden, occurrence of epidemics, bad management, changes in the mode of management unfavourable to the *coolies*, private quarrels and intrigues, indolence, indebtedness, enticement, desire to get a bonus in another garden are few reasons behind their desertion.¹³ Though most of desertions were made towards their native lands, some were of internal characters, from one garden to another within the province.

The deserters were invariably caught and brought back with the help of the *Sardars*, cases were filed against them and sent for trial by the planters on charge of violating the agreement. Sometimes the managers and the planters themselves used to punish offenders. Non-deserters were threatened with discharge¹⁴ and forcibly put under ghetto.¹⁵ The consequence was that the capital-labour relation no more remained mutual. Table II below gives us statistics of unrest in the plantation areas reflecting the degree of conflict.¹⁹

TABLE - II
Statistics of Offences

Offences	1886	1887	1888
Unlawful assembly	16	36	15
Rioting	53	45	17
Culpable homicide or attempt to it	5	3	3
Murder	3	6	1
Attempt to commit suicide	8	6	7
Assault	18	40	37
Causing hurt	30	25	23
Grievous hurt	31	3	16
Theft	89	96	113
Total :	243	260	232

From 1920-1921 the grievances of the labourers started bursting out in the form of spontaneous revolt. *Gheraos* and strikes began in almost all the gardens. The unrest in Karimganj tea gardens, in Doom Dooma groups of gardens in Lakhimpur district, Monabarie, Halem, Khairabari, Sunajuli and Kacharigaon gardens of Darrang district, Jabaka, Barkathani, Mathurapur, Amguri, Barchila, Deopani, Jafri, Hatikhuti and Makum gardens of Sib-sagar District are to be mentioned particularly. The most important and fundamental difference between these strikes with those of earlier strikes was an active and militant protest instead of desertions. The strikes were made on a charter of demands of which the demand for higher wages and protesting against the supply of low quality rice as ration were of vital importance. The strikes were spontaneous and basically unarmed but militant in character. In Sunajuli and Khairabari tea gardens of Darrang District, the strikers turned violent and resisted the armed polices. They attacked with bow and arrow, spear, lathis and other weapons. Though the strikers were basically against the plantation authority, sometimes, it was directed against the exploitation of the *Keyan* (Marwari) *Mahajans* and the ill-behaviour of the garden *baboo*s.

Conclusion

The capital-labour relation in the tea plantation in Assam was conditioned by the colonial economy. So far as ideologies were concerned, both colonial and capitalist mentality was fully operative among the planters and therefore, the relation⁶ was, in reality, a master-slave relation.

The study also reveals the growth of working class movement, though initially unorganised, but the influence of outsiders cannot be ruled out. The activities of the nationalists during the Non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and the initiative undertaken by some of unknown trade-unionists are also to be mentioned.¹⁷ The capital-labour relation in the plantation economy turned into new directions since 1927 with the growth of trade union movement.

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Conclusion

The capitalist labour relation in the tea plantation in Assam was conditioned by the colonial economy. So far as ideologists were concerned, both colonial and capitalist mentality was fully operative among the planters and therefore, the relation was in reality a master-slave relation. The study also reveals the growth of working class movement though initially unorganised, but the initiative of outsiders cannot be ruled out. The activities of the nationalists during the Non-cooperation movement of 1920-21 and the initiative undertaken by some of the town-adepts are also to be mentioned. The capitalist labour relation in the plantation economy found its new dimensions since 1927 with the growth of trade union movement.

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