

## Tea Garden Tokens – New Finds

S.K. Bose

Till date, numismatists have listed seventy four tea gardens in erstwhile greater Assam which were known to have struck tokens<sup>1</sup> mostly between c1870 and 1914. These tokens co-existed with British India coins of small denomination. The latter were in short supply and the token virtually constituted the local currency for paying the vast number of garden labourers during that period. These tokens were encashable not only in the garden which issued them, but also in the local shops and weekly markets.<sup>2</sup>

The difficult terrain also facilitated the survival of such a close circuit money over a long period. As no other authentic document is available to historians or researchers, these tokens provide valuable information on the wage and economic structure. A large number of tea garden tokens were denominated as well as dated. Such tokens can certainly be treated as living documents of the contemporary period. Even the Labour Enquiry Committee of 19 21 had recorded that these metal tokens, to a large extent, served the purpose of legal tender.<sup>3</sup>

We are aware that one of the bases of fixation of wages in tea gardens was *hazri*. This represented a specific task which was expected to be completed in a day by the worker, and for this task, a standard daily wage was paid. Many gardens paid their labourers each day; each morning metallic tokens were issued for the previous day's work. The shape of the token varied according to its value of whole or full *hazri*, three quarter *harzi*, half as well as quarter *hazri*. These tokens naturally had always monetary value in the garden. The *hazri* system was replaced just before the second war by the unit system, in which payment was made for every unit of work completed. We have come across a number of tea garden tokens denominated to 3 pice to one rupee, which probably helped to pay the labourers in terms of specific value rather than *hazri*.

Recently, the author has noticed a quarter *hazri* token of the Daragaon Tea Estate, Sylhet, in the coin cabinet of Mr. J.P. Goenka, Kolkata.<sup>4</sup> This previously unknown token was probably used either to pay for any extra work done by a worker over and above his *hazri* or for payment to a child labourer. The details of the above token are provided below :

- 1) Garden : Daragaon, Sylhet
- 2) Year : Not mentioned
- 3) Metal : Copper
- 4) Shape : Round
- 5) Diameter : 25 m m.
- 6) Obverse : The word DARAGAON has been inscribed above and the word SYLHET below in the form of two arches. In the center is a pierced cross.
- 7) Reverse : The words A QUARTER in two lines and *Hazri* below. Besides the above, the date 1932 has been rudely stamped; 1 and 9 lie below QUARTER, while HAZRI is flanked by 3 and 2. In the centre is the same cross described above, whose adjacent arms have been linked through straight lines. It thus appears that the cross is inside a rhombus.

In this connection, the tokens so far noticed by the numismatists are not large in numbers, if we keep in mind that in the then Sylhet district (Assam) alone there were 142 tea gardens,<sup>5</sup> the majority of which paid the labourers daily through tokens.<sup>6</sup> The large number of gardens in the Brahmaputra valley also had their own tokens, many of which are yet to be traced, but whose descriptions are known mainly from Heaton's records (Ralph Heaton Sons, the Birmingham Limited) who received and executed orders from the gardens during 1876 to 1931.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, though it was assumed that these tokens were in circulation probably up to the end of the British rule in India, evidences are pouring in that not only the metal tokens but also paper tokens are still in force in many be the reason for the same. Recently we have come across a metallic token which was issued by the Tonganagaon T.E., a tea garden in upper Assam. It appears that the denomination on this token has been mentioned in decimal currency. The figure 10 mentioned thereon certainly represents ten *paise*, i.e. one tenth of a rupee. Though no year has been mentioned on the above mentioned token, it is certain that this was struck not before A.D 1957.<sup>8</sup> when coinage under the decimal system was introduced in India. This very tea garden token is quite similar in design with that of the ten *paise* coin issued in India between 1957 and 1971.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Notes & references*

1. a) E. Pridmore, *The Coins of the British Commonwealth of Nations*, Part 4 INDIA, VOL. II (London, 1975), pp. 204-228.

- b) S.K. Bose. *Coins And Tokens of Assam (1715-1937)* (Shillong, 1999), pp. 45-65.
- c) J.V. Scaifc, 'Assamese Tea Garden Tokens', *The Numismatic Circular* (London, Jan. 1952).
- d) N.G. Rhodes, 'Some Notes on Assam Tea Garden Tokens', *N.I.Buletin*, (London, Feb.1990), pp.29-32.
- e) W.W. Woodside, 'Assamese Tea Garden Tokens' (Addendum), Spink's *Numismatic Circular*, (London, Jan. 1958).
- f) S.K. Bose. 'A Token of New Finds from Tea Gardens of Assam', *JNSI*, Vol. LVIII, pt.1&II, (Varanasi, 1996), pp. 101-104.
- g) *Idem* 'Tea Garden Tokens of Assam', *COIN 2000* (Kolkata), p.42.
- h) *Idem* 'Asomor Chah Bagichar Mudra', *Asomor Chah Janajati Samaj Aru Samasya*, (Assamese) Ed. T.Konwar (Sonari, 2000), pp. 43-50.

References of a few tokens published in the JNSI had already been published elsewhere, hence not mentioned here.

- 2. Assam Labour Enquiry Report, 1921.
- 3. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p.301.
- 4. The author is thankful to Mr. J.P. Goenka, Kolkata, for allowing him to publish the related token.
- 5. A. Chaudhury, *Srihatter Itibritta* (Bengali), Part I (Annexure), Srihatta, B.S. 1317, pp. 21-27.
- 6. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report*, 1906.
- 7. E. Pridmore, *op. cit.*
- 8. D. Chakravarty, *Nineteenth & Twentieth Century Coins of India* (Kolkata, 1979), p.73.
- 9. *Ibid.*, p. 74.



Obverse

Quarter hazari token  
of Daragaon T.E.

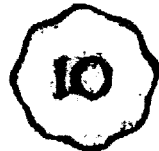


Reverse



Obverse

Ten paise token of  
Tonganagaon T.E.



Reverse