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Exploitation of Tea-Plantation Workers in Colonial Bengal and Assam **Mr. Aritra De**

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Abstract

The British traders started tea plantation in India as early as in 1830s. Their experience of exporting tea from China gave them ample opportunity in India for running the tea industry. They did not face any trouble as they experienced Chinese deterring policy in this sector. They started plantation initially in Assam and subsequently expanded their base in Darjiling and Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Most of the workers in tea plantation were migrated from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Recruitment of migrated people as labourers enabled them to gain more profit at the cost of cheap wages for labourers. The British traders introduced the system of recruitment of labourers through agents and contract system. Breach of contracts on the part of the labourers was visited with severe punishment. The owners also followed stratified wage system among labourers by which female and child workers were the worst victims. The workers had to pass their livelihood in a hygienic and inhumane conditions and such livelihood pattern would inflict them with severe diseases frequently. Many workers were in life-long contracts and their destiny was vested with the owners. As most of the labourers were migrated from outside they were not in a position to go against the orders and whims of the tea garden owners. Beside acute poverty experienced by them in the past did not encourage them to go for protest.

Key Words: Tea-plantation; Owners; Labourers; Wages; diseases.

Introduction of plantation in the Indian sub-continent by British traders dates back to The East India Company's experience of long relations with the export of tea from China from the beginning of the 18th century. The Company traded British woollens and Indian cotton for Chinese tea. However, when the Company's monopoly over export of tea from China was abolished by the Charter Act of 1833, the directors of the Company felt urge in seeking out alternative ways of procuring the commodity and obtain control over it. The northeastern part of India as a potential place for the successful production of tea was well attested by Major Robert Bruce, who had visited the country as early as in 1824 and had found evidence of tea leaves in the hilly jungles of Assam. Therefore, with the annexation of Assam in 1825 by the East India Company large jungle tracts of Assam were cleared up and tea plantation was seriously considered by the company. As a result of such effort, first consignment of Assam tea was sent to London in 1838. The success of the first sample led to the establishment of the Assam Company in 1839 and within a short course of time several other plantations were set up in the adjoining districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of Bengal; Idukki and Wynad districts of Kerala and in Coimbatore district of Madras and the Nilgiri regions of southern part of India.

The Court of Directors as well as the British government fully utilized this scope of intensifying and propagating the industry over which they had complete monopoly and by which they would

have to no longer compromise their commercial interests as they had to do in China due to the Qing Dynasty's deterring trading strategies. Such an industry would help in maintaining the British balance of payments and would develop into one lucrative commercial product for export had determined the colonial government back home and so they passed several legislations and acts to increase their scope of production. Although in the beginning setting up of plantations was restricted in the hands of the Company officials, but in 1854 when the Act was Waste Land Rules passed, it opened up the tea gardens to several European entrepreneurs who bought large tracts of land and set up their plantations resulting in the influx of sterling and rupees in the market. Therefore, almost ninety percent of the investment of sterling by these entrepreneurs and the British were made on the plantation in the northeastern region of the country while by the twentieth century, the rupee joint stock companies rose from 113 to a staggering number of 141. (Misra, 1987: 231)

At the onset of the tea plantation industry the areas which were considered ideal for such plantations were sparsely populated as these were previously jungles with a very few tribal population. Therefore labour recruitment emerged as a serious concern for the plantation owners. Although the British encountered problems with China but they had never undermined the Chinese expertise in the skill of plucking tea leaves. The Chinese workers due to skill and experience were recruited considerably in the Assam tea gardens. However within a course of time the planters realized that they were unable to control these workers as J.W. Masters, the tea superintendent criticized the Chinese labourers by stating that, "they object to do anything else but make tea. When spoken to, they threaten to leave the service if they are insulted by being asked to work".(Griffiths,1967:65). Gradual disobedience and protesting nature of Chinese workers led the British owners to make alternative arrangement for long term benefit of the industry. Accordingly by the middle of the 19th century, the company at Assam sought to recruit local workers in addition to the existing Chinese and the Naga workers. The newly recruited workers, mostly local Assamese, were paid lower wages than those of the Chinese workers. Moreover, the planters made attempts to train these local workers on the art of plucking by the Chinese who were professionals in this field. Such labourers were regarded by the owners as 'taklars' or tea-makers. Unfortunate in their attempts to discipline and control these workers, the planters noted that the taklars were highly reluctant to work in the plantations with such meager wages and would often desert their jobs without any prior notice. Few others who would remain in the plantations would often carry out demonstrations and strikes mostly during payment dates and created severe obstacles in the way of the successful functioning of the tea gardens. The problem in recruiting labour was multi-faceted. Chinese labourers were connoisseurs in this particular work as they not only demanded high wages but died from tropical diseases like malaria and Kalazar (black water fever). On the other hand, the planters were unwilling to employ local tribal people in their plantations without any prior agreements as they feared that these local labourers would have an advantage in negotiating their wages. Moreover, as these areas were very sensitive to tropical diseases therefore local people were reluctant to risk their lives for such meager payment. Nevertheless, by the second half of the 19th century, Chinese labourers became rare in the plantations of Assam and the forerunners of such commercial enterprises and the capitalists had no alternatives but to find other means to meet their requirements and to hunt for an ideal workforce which would be brought easily under their control for increasing their margins of profit. In the beginning such a policy seemed unrealistic for the colonial government but these businessmen became able to procure cheap labour from outside the adjacent areas and other parts of the country. Their intention behind such a strategy was not to lure large number of workers to this industry by providing them with handsome wages, but to employ a

certain number of people at an exceptionally low cost. This, according to them, would lead to maximization of production leaving large profit margins due to low wages.

The colonial rulers took several steps to establish their control over the people by resolving labour issues. The Workman's Breach of Contract Act passed in 1859 stated that workers had to labour for a prescribed period of five years and that the owners of the plantation were vested with powers to arraign workers who tried to break the contract. Regrettably for the workers, the act "gave him no protection against the employers and laid down no conditions with regard to the arrangements of his transit to the tea districts" (ibid: 269). The colonial rulers brought to India a system of labour recruitment which was known as the indentured system, that was previously a familiar way of recruiting labour in other European colonies until the first half of the twentieth century. However, in India this system was first introduced in the Assam tea gardens in the year 1859. Under the system, planters established contacts with licensed contractors who had their headquarters in Calcutta. In course of time, the city emerged as the largest center of labour recruitment industry to these plantations. These contractors were mostly European and they again had agents who were referred as 'arkattis' or professional recruiters. These people were villagers, both men and women, and their task was to transport workers either by convincing them or by making false promises and luring them to work in these plantations. There was a popular belief that such people would often mix drugs into the food and drinks of villagers and carry them off when the former had become unconscious. Once the 'arkattis' were able to dupe poor people into entering the contracts of planters, the worker became the victim of circumstances and was forced into a subservient life as diverse means and ploys were employed by the planters to confine workers in their mesh of lies and mendacities. This system has often been related with the feudal modes of labour employment and has been seen as a semi-feudal system under the veil of capitalistic rationale. Hugh Tinker's study on such labour recruitment system led him to compare it with the system of procurement of slaves in the past. His reasons behind such a comparison may have been the fact that workers within the tea plantation industry were forced into certain oppressive contracts which isolated them from their roots as well as their normal lives under the mercy of plantation owners (Bhowmik, 2011:237). Moreover, indentured labourers were also sent abroad to work in other plantations set up by the British colonial rulers such as the British Guyana. These labourers were never expected to return as they were forced into contracts which were either constantly renewed after their expiry or were forced to work even after the expiration of such contracts. The 'arkattis' were notable for their notoriousness and wickedness. These people were so ruthless and avaricious that they employed all possible means to bring people for deputation in these plantations. Therefore, they were referred by the local people as "the 'scum of the earth' and 'heartless scoundrels and they were feared as much as a man-eating tiger'" (ibid: 239). An eyewitness named Father Johann Hoffman who was a German Jesuit cleric, had mentioned about the ways in which these 'arkattis' or agents of the colonial planters worked and procured labourers. He mentioned that "they deceived the people by saying that the tea gardens were a government concern, and at times the arkattis also dressed in such a manner as to convince people that they represented the government. These agents would stoop to any level to lure people away from their homes to the unhealthy tea districts. Young people and unhappy and deserted wives were given false promises of better marriage prospects. Through lying and trickery they would get some people excommunicated from their villages, leaving them no alternative but to go to Assam. Wives were kidnapped from their husbands, and husbands from their families, leaving people destitute and poverty-stricken. Heart rending tragedies

which can rack every one of the most sacred feelings of a human family were for long years, enacted so to say, constantly in all villages” (Hoffman, 1964: 158).

Furthermore, the government intensified their control over workers by replacing the above mentioned act with the Inland Immigration Act of 1863 which although reduced the contract period from five years to four, but it further gave the planters the right to arrest workers who tried to escape. There were several instances of workers being arrested after their escape in Dibrugarh, Assam a notice was issued on April 12, 1912 which stated that “a gang of 30 absconders was captured on last Tuesday noon. Gardens concerned enquire immediately at the *Times of Assam* office with usual reward, feeding and advertisement charges. Feeding charges-4s a day, per head” (Behal, 1985: PE-20). Moreover the various ways in which the workers were captured and punished reflected the attitude of the colonial planters who saw these workers no less than criminals. These planters would often hire public ferrymen, as the Assam Labour Report mentioned in 1902-03 that planters passed orders to arrest labourers who were suspected of running away from their employment, and therefore the planters felt that inflicting personal reprimand would be the best way to bring about discipline and order among the deserters as well as a reminder to those who worked in the plantations. Those labourers who were caught by their masters were severely punished by being whipped and then put behind jails for at least few months. The rewards that were given to the allies in this capture were actually a portion of the future payments of the runaway workers. An alternative to imprisonment was by fining the escaped labourer which varied from rupees 20 to a staggering 100 rupees. Moreover, the Assam Labour Report of 1892 stated that “in 1885 out of 558 labourers arrested on the charges of desertions, 482 were convicted and in 1892 out of 1055 arrested 992 were convicted” (ibid: PE-20). From the above mentioned reports it can be stated that the oppression within the tea plantations were so great that workers would often desert their jobs. Without even committing any kind of crimes they were prisoners within the plantations as their lives were controlled by the owner. They were forced to leave their choices and rights behind and dedicate their lives in the production of a valuable commercial product whose benefits were enjoyed only by the colonialists and their cronies. The condition of work was most hostile for the workers as they faced tremendous harshness and cruelty from the planters. As mentioned by Percival Griffith, “The planter was bound by his contract to clear one-eighth of his land (leased to him by the government) within five years and he could ill-afford to lose his labor . . . short work was punished with flogging and absconders, when recovered, were also flogged” (Griffith, 1967: 270).

Within a short period of time the indentured system became inconvenient for the tea planters as it was exorbitant. Therefore the planters sought other alternative methods of recruiting labour which would be cost effective. The introduction of the ‘sardari’ system in 1870 proved beneficial for the planters, and it became the most efficient way of labour employment. After 1926, gradually the indentured system of procuring labour was abandoned and this system of labour recruitment became popular. These ‘sardars’ were recruited by the manager of the tea estate through the Tea Districts Labour Supply Association that was an organization of all the estate managers in Calcutta formed in 1877. The organization paid for the ‘sardars’ expenses during travel and also provided them with advance payments. After the ‘sardar’ completed his task of fetching workers to the tea estates, he was provided with a commission on the basis of the gender of the workers (Sharma, 2009: 1311). In case of a male worker, the ‘sardar’ was given the contract money or ‘girmit’ of rupees 12 and rupees 8 for a wife labourer. The contract was sealed by acquiring the thumb impression of the labourer thereby cementing his fate within the plantations. Moreover, the labourers were under thorough observation of the ‘chowkidar’ and as the coolie lines were part of the estate therefore contact with

the outside world or any other person was not allowed. There was a general arrangement between managers of nearby estates not to employ workers of other estates. This therefore served as a confinement in the way of the free movement of labourers. Workers' intention to leave their present job and get involved in other plantation was strictly prohibited. As the Rege Commission mentioned in 1946, the condition of these illiterate and poor labourers are miserable as their destiny depends on the whims of their owners. Being brought far away from their homes they feel insecure and hopeless while the planters utilized these emotions to entrench their domination over the workers. It is evident that there was a general sense of abhorrence and resentment among the local people regarding the tea plantations. A feeling of disinclination was visible as other industrial ventures like textiles attracted a considerable amount of population who voluntarily joined them. Throughout the colonial era, migration of people from remote areas and villages to the towns and cities in search of jobs was widely visible. Another possible reason for their apathy and reluctance towards plantation jobs may have been due to the fact that tea as a commodity was uncommon to the Indians until that time and moreover, these people were also unaware of the techniques of obtaining and processing tea leaves. It was completely a new trade in which the Indians were not skilled. Finally, the most obvious reason was the notion of being dominated by foreigners and that the trauma of being subjugated for the rest of their lives may have been too much for the natives of the land.

Within the plantation industry there were mainly two broad categories of work where the first dealt with the process of planting tea samples and the accumulation of tea leaves after their complete maturity. The next process involved the processing and fabrication of these tea leaves for export. There existed a division of labour within the workers where activities related to plucking of tea leaves and their refinement was distributed between male and female workers as per their dexterity in the work. Several other categories of employment of workers existed within the plantations which are more aptly demonstrated in the following table which shows the distribution of population on the basis of occupational units:

Occupation	Male		Female		Total		Remarks
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Line chowkidar	4	2.08	—	—	4	1.06	Total in the garden 5
Other chowkidars	4	2.08	—	—	4	1.06	Total 4
Sardar (outdoor)	7	3.65	—	—	7	1.85	Total 10
Sardar (factory)	3	1.56	—	—	3	0.79	Total 3
Factory (skilled)	1	0.52	—	—	1	0.26	
Factory (unskilled)	33	17.19	10	5.38	43	11.38	24 males and 10 females have been employed on temporary basis for the plucking period
Tractor driver	1	0.52	—	—	1	0.26	
Dresser (hospital)	—	—	1	0.54	1	0.26	
Outdoor work (including plucking)	123	64.07	170	91.39	293	77.52	10 males and 40 females are temporary workers

Others	16	8.33	5	2.69	21	5.56	Cook	1 (hospital)
							Paniwala	4
							Male	2
							Sweeper	8
							Cowmen	8
							Peon	2
Grand Total	192	100.00	156	100.00	378	100.00		

Source: Kar, R. K. (1979), *A Migrant Tribe in a Tea Plantation in India: Economic Profile*, Anthropos Institut, Anthropos, Bd. 74, H. 5./6, p. 771.

Therefore from the above table it can be stated that of the number of people employed in the job of plucking of the tea leaves includes 91.39% females and 64.97% male labourers were distributed into various kinds of work including outdoor activity. (ibid: 772)

Among the policies of labour employment, the main intention of the planters was to employ as many persons as possible but at a very low wage rate. Therefore they found that their best way of obtaining such labour was to recruit an entire family instead of individual workers. This system of migration of an entire family led the planters to cut off workers from their ancestral homes in order to prevent workers to have excuses of returning back. In this way family recruitment within the tea plantations became the cheapest form of labour as by recruiting an entire family the planters assigned wages per family that was much less than what individual workers would get if they were recruited separately. On the other hand, the entire family was bound by a contract and so their entire lives were spent within these estates. Every member of the family- the females, males and the children were assigned separate jobs and this employment based on the family enabled the planters to have a secure labour source which were disciplined and trained. These families would therefore work for generations in the plantations ensuring the planters' future supply of labourer. The following table shows the percentage of labour taken as a family unit employed in the Ranjan tea plantation of Dibrugarh district and Manasi tea plantation situated in the Darrang district of Assam during the twentieth century:

Ethnic Composition (Percentile) of the Labour Force Working on Ranjan and Manasi Tea Plantations²		
Ethnic Group	Percentage of Families	
	Ranjan	Manasi
Tanti	37	48
Munda	15	8
Oraon	9	—
Bauri	9	—
Santhal	8	—
Nayek	6	—
Kharia	3	—
Khond	3	—
Kishan	2	—
Goala	4	6
Keot	1	—
Lohar	1	—
Savara	—	15

Gore	—	3
Teli	—	4
Bhor	—	2
Demar	—	2
Mahanti	—	2
Telenga	—	2
Birhor	—	2
Rajput	—	2
Kumar	—	2
Tossa	—	2
Ghasi	2	—
Total	100	100

Source: Kar, R. K.(1984),*Labour Pattern and Absenteeism: A Case Study in Tea Plantation in Assam, India*, Anthropos Institut, Anthropos, Bd. 79, H. 1./3, p. 16.

The colonial authorities were extremely strict in their dealings with the labourers and such a nature of their domination was attested by the Rege Commission or the Commission of Inquiry on the Conditions of Tea Plantation Labour in India and Ceylon of 1944 which stated that “the employers are highly organized and powerful whereas the workers are all unorganized and helpless” (Bhowmik, 2011:241). Most of the labour forces within the tea plantations of northeastern India were migrants who were brought from different parts of the country. These workers were mainly residents of the Chotanagpur region of Bihar as well as the Santhal districts, while a considerable number of work forces were brought from the adjoining areas of Orissa, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. These migrants therefore had to settle in the areas around tea gardens and would work through their lifetime for generations. Areas around the tea plantations witnessed the accumulation of several ethnic tribal communities like Oraon, Munda, Santal, Kheria, Nagesia, Ho, Asur, Parja, Korowa, Ghasi, Kherwar, Baraik, Gond, Mahali, Turi, Malpaharia, Bhogta, Kissan, Savar etc. as a result of their employment. The policy of employing labourers from these tribal belts served a dual purpose – on the one hand they were the cheapest form of labour in contrast to the locals who would often bargain their wages; on the other hand, these poor people had no other choice but to accept the work in the plantations as frequent famine and droughts had left them to destitution while the oppressive agricultural policies along with the imposition of various kinds of taxes and illegal cesses by the administrators and their agents left them helpless.

Although in the tea plantation districts of India slavery was not observed, but in the hilly areas of Assam and West Bengal the labourers were brought to work in such a manner that it reflected an essence of being enslaved. These labourers were divided into groups and the planters then assigned them different tasks for their designed purpose (Bhadra, 2004:48). Within the tea plantations of northeastern part of the country a system of management and control of labourers were undertaken by the planters through the ‘hatta-bahira,’ where in the plantations of Assam policemen with arms were installed while the North Bengal Frontier Rifles were positioned in the plantations of Dooars and Darjeeling (Rasaily, 1998: 88).

Since the colonial period the percentage of female labourers were considerably higher than the male labourers. The very nature of the plantations were considered suitable for the women work force as this industry being agro-based employed minimum level of mechanized instruments and machines. Such a skill could be easily taught to these illiterate tribal women folk. Another reason

was the submissive nature of the feminine gender. These women generally migrated with their husbands and provided with the most stable workforce. Although they were paid very low wages but they were never vocal like their husbands, or showed signs of desertion from their work. The history of plantation industry is invariably associated with the development of colonialism as the domination and exploitation of the colonial planters over the poor and illiterate native workers both physically and mentally is deeply embedded within the very concept of the plantations. Therefore the plantations are the best instances of colonial domination of the capitalists and this industry remains the instance of an employment of labour with the lowest level of payment. Women workers were mostly recruited in large numbers in the tea estates of India and even in the tea plantations in countries like Sri Lanka. However, the planters distributed labour within their estates in a way which completely diminished the working capacity of women. Such a vast employment of women workforce was also preferred by the colonial planters as it was presumed that “women are naturally more suited to plucking tea leaves as they have “nimble fingers”. They are also thought to be more committed, efficient and docile than men” (Bhadra, 2004: 46). Most importantly, as these women migrated from the remote tribal areas; they were ignorant about their rights and capabilities. They continued to work under the planters being loyal throughout their lives even with such miserable wages. During the colonial period certain plantations recruited labourers through several other means where an instance of the Chandmoni Tea Plantation of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal can be mentioned. Within the plantation, apart from recruiting workers through the popular ‘sardari system’ several other private agencies also served the purpose. Most interestingly, labourers in this tea plantation were also brought by a Catholic Church situated near the estate. The records from the church stated that while male workers were brought from tribal areas as workers, women arrived in the area either with their relatives or by marrying a worker employed in the tea gardens. Therefore, these women became increasingly associated and assimilated within the plantations as workers alongside their husbands. There were certain specific tasks within the plantations like clipping or pruning that were assigned to male workers while women, based on their age, were consigned lighter and moderate tasks that took less efficiency. Within the plantations men were also assigned tasks which required a lot of physical strength such as hoeing and sprinkling of insecticides and pesticides on the plants. On the other hand, apart from plucking tea leaves, women workers were given tasks like providing manures, weeding, collection of seeds from under the tree shades, bifurcating the soil and also preparing the nursery beds. Among the women labourers those who were physically weak due to old age or by birth were given tasks such as separating the stalks from the tea leaves and were also entrusted with the responsibility of the preparation and proper maintenance of the nursery beds. During a normal working day, a woman labourer was sometimes given the task of either pruning of about sixty to one hundred bushes or weeding about 160-200 bushes of tea plants (ibid: 96). An ex-tea worker of the Phuguri Tea estate in the district of Darjeeling named Kaumati Khati, described the ways in which women labourers took care of their children as well as their daily duties in the estate. She stated that women who had very young children had no other choice but to carry the young ones in small sacks which were similar to a cradle in front of their bodies, while they would also carry the baskets for tea leaves on their shoulders. Another woman named Padma Tamang who was also a worker of the Phuguri tea estate reminisced her active days in the plantations where she mentioned that “they would pick us according to our height and stature. My *maili* (second daughter) was shorter than her third younger sister (*saili*). Although she was younger, *saili* got the job instead of her elder sister! Earlier the conditions were different. It was very tough. Tea bushes during our times were big and were very high. Nowadays the bushes are small. We literally had to climb the tea bushes. Working conditions

were horrible. If we reached late for counting (attendance) in the morning then they (overseers) would ask us to return home. This whole area was mostly jungle. (She says pointing towards the area around her house). Then houses as such never existed as we have today. They were mostly *kuchha* houses. Now the workers have all the facilities they want. We came to Phuguri when Finlay *sahab* was here. He was married to a *chhokri*. I think I was 30 years of age then. (She was talking about the year 1930). My husband followed later. Kaman Singh Sardar brought us here. He had set up thirty to thirty-five houses. The *Kamis* were already here. They mostly came to work as *kal-walas* (fitters). *Kamis* mostly lived in Godamdura (long house near the godown). There were also a large number of *Tamangs* here in Phuguri. I had been working since the age of 12 years. Those days work was only for five days. Saturday and Sunday were holidays. A *chhokra* got two *annas* as *hazira*. An *aurat* got three *annas*, *marad* four *annas*. *Tirpal* was not provided during those days. Women would ask the men to hold their 'kokro' while climbing uphill" (Rasaily, 1998: 89).

Another astounding feature of these plantations was the increasing employment of children as labourers along with their family. During the year 1939, the tea plantations in the Terai regions of Darjeeling had a workforce of which 43% were women, 29% men and 18% children labourers. There was a considerable rise in the percentage of people employed as four years, in the year 1943, the district had a workforce of which women constituted 49% of the labour force while men constituted 34% and 17% children workers (Bhadra, 2004: 47) The Investigation Committee which arrived in West Bengal during the twentieth century mentioned in its report the large number of recruitment of child labourers. Although the planters established crèches for the children but employment of the later as labourers began from a very young age and there was no established age limit above which a child could be employed. As per the Report of the Royal Commission of Labour Inquiry (RCLI) in 1931, "one manager in Assam admitted that children started work at 4, 5 or 6 years of age, and another said that children started on light tasks as soon as they could walk. Some stated that their children did not become workers before 9, 10 or even 11 years of age. The rationale behind the planters' employment of children was the workers being agriculturists were accustomed to allow their children to start work at a very early age" (ibid, 90).

Regarding wages assigned to tea labourers a testament of a worker of the Phuguria Tea estate reflected the various sub-divisions of payment within the plantations. He recollected his childhood days as a labourer in the plantation, "I started working at the age of eight, (year 1932) as a *lokra*. By the time I turned thirteen years of age I became a *chhokra*. We had to begin work with 3 *annas* as weekly wages. It then increased to 4 *annas* along with the *aurat*. After this we reached the category of a *marad* with 5 *annas* per week. According to our heights and stature we would be categorized. The *kamdaris* would check our heights. Whatever it is we had to first work with the women. Other workers like tea maker, *dafadar*, *rotiwala*, *chowkidar* earned Rupees 9 per month. The *dakwala* earned Rupees 14 per month as his work entailed a lot of travel. Sunday was a holiday for him. Wages were paid on a weekly basis. A *lokra* got 6 *paise*; a *chhokra* got 8 *paise* or 2 *annas*. An *aurat* got 16 *paise* or 4 *annas* and a *marad* got 20 *paise* or 5 *annas*. I donot remember how much the super (senior) staff workers earned at that time. Sunday would be a holiday but at times when the flush would be high they (the manager) would ask us to work. Till date this is practiced. In Phuguri there were sixty-seventy labourers including the *chhokras*. The nature of work for the *chhokras* was of clearing the overgrowth of grass and weeds around the tea bushes. Plucking too was an important task for them. Thosadays tea bushes were high and big. We would work mostly barefoot. We would get blisters in our feet during the rains" (ibid, 91-92). Therefore it is evident from the above statement that the structure of employment within the tea plantations were quite complex and was

divided into various categories not only based on the amount and intensity of work, but it also largely depended on the age and physical structure of the workers employed. Moreover, children from a very young age were put to certain other kinds of tasks which did not require any kind of skills. Such tasks as was evident in the tea plantations of Darjeeling district included removing caterpillars from the tea bushes while the planters often employed children to kill mosquitoes and yellow insects which fed on young tea leaves in exchange for 14 annas. During the second half of the nineteenth century, wages in the Assam tea plantations were only 2 rupees per month. However, several other alternative methods of payment were also evident in the years from 1860-64 where alongside an increment in cash payments to 4 or 5 rupees; pieces of land as grants along with rations at concessional rates were given to the labourers. There was also a certain amount of discrimination evident between male and female labourers related to wages as while in the year 1866, male labourers were given the same amount of rupees 5 as wage per month. On the contrary women labourers witnessed a decline in their wages from 5 rupees to 4 per month and the reasons behind this decrement in wages was stated by the estate owners as a result of the massive supply of women workers in the plantation. Their interest behind the reduction in wages of women lay in the fact that such would enable them to increase their margin of savings while recruiting as many women workers needed within a very limited wage. In the succeeding years the wages of women labourers in the Darjeeling district was fixed at 4-8 rupees for twenty six days of work while men were paid between 5-8 rupees and 3 rupees for children. The Assam district tea plantation wages were much less than labourers of the plantations of Darjeeling. An officer of Karimganj district of Assam in 1883 stated that, "that wages for tea plantation workers were less than three rupees a month during the last season. Bengalis in the adjoining villages earned without difficulty rupees seven a month" (Bose, 1954: 87). Among the other tea producing districts of West Bengal in the plantations of Jalpaiguri district, workers were paid rupees 3 per month which was much less than the wage of agricultural workers usually earned before the establishment of tea plantations.

Alongwith such insufficient wages, living conditions of these workers were also uninhabitable. The planters emphasized only on the production of tea rather than on the health and proper living conditions of the workers. Within the Assam and Bengal tea estates, the settlements of labourers were extremely crowded and there were no proper sanitation and ventilation facilities. Being a worker of a tea plantation in Darjeeling district since childhood, Sukbir Khawas, described the place where workers were provided accommodations and the conditions in which they had to survive to work. "There was no permanent house for the workers. Wherever they would get jobs they would go. Houses were built of thatched roofs fenced with *titepati*. We then had no feelings for the houses in which we lived. It was made of hay and was barbed with *titepati*... The company provided us with nothing. We would sleep on sacks and even cover ourselves with sacks or our mother's sari and sleep" (Rasaily, 1998: 95). Therefore such unhealthy living conditions had a direct effect on health while the situation was worsened by the fact that these areas around plantations were already infested with mosquitoes carrying diseases like malaria and unclean drinking water caused severe hill dysentery. One of the most fatal diseases that frequented these areas was cholera due to the absence of proper health clinics and medicines. Moreover, in the plantations of Assam the labourers were often infected with hookworms and the negligence of the owners of the estates were noticeable. Proper construction of labour settlement would require huge expense and the owners were reluctant to do so. Therefore, even the basic necessities like toilets, latrines and proper shelter did not receive their due attention. During the periods of food shortages, the rations kept to be used during famines were given to the labourers. While the colonialists brought food for themselves from

other countries like Nepal, the labourers were ordered to grow vegetables in their kitchen gardens but they were mostly provided with 'bajra,' a type of millet in place of rice. During days of food shortages the labourers would eat their meal only once and it would consist of boiled squash, fried maize and 'rotis' made out of the millets. M. Balfour in "Maternity Conditions and Anemia in the Assam Tea Gardens" mentioned that anemia was evident among almost all the workers especially women due to lack of nutritious food in the plantations. Such under-nutrition due to deficiency in minerals and vitamins led to stomatitis among both male and female workers and in certain extreme conditions it caused death of the workers. In relation to the number of deaths within the plantations, the numbers of births were extremely low. The reason behind such a situation was that women workers were not given maternity leaves and on the other hand, the later felt that pregnancy would hinder their work and the wages they received would not be sufficient to feed another mouth. Another possibility guessed by the Indian Tea Association was due to the "weakness of marriage ties amongst the coolies" (ibid, 106). As per the estimates, during the years from 1880-1901, the average birthrate of women workers was 86 per 1000 that sharply contrasted the average birth rates of the non-workers in Assam which stood at 127 per 1000. Moreover in the year 1918, in five districts of Assam, there were reports of 113 still births in contrast to 569 babies who were born alive (ibid, 107).

The British traders explored the possibility of tea industry in colonial India and especially in the eastern and north-eastern parts of India. It was a fertile ground for new and profitable ventures for traders of Britain in India. The main cause of instituting this tea plantation was not challenged by Indian traders and workers as they faced in textile, sericulture, indigo and jute industry. Besides supply of cheap labour force became a strong support-base for colonial traders in the country. Migrated labourers from different parts of the country considered the job as a boon for them despite severe exploitative measures adopted by the owners of tea plantation. Another important factor for smooth running of the tea plantation was absence of workers' movement despite severe deprivation of them by the owners. Workers being the outsiders have not been able to bag local support to protest against such deprivation. Therefore, exploitative nature of tea garden owners during the colonial period with reference to recruitment and working condition of labourers remained unchallenged.

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