



Jus Corpus Law Journal

Open Access Law Journal – Copyright © 2022 – ISSN 2582-7820
Editor-in-Chief – Prof. (Dr.) Rhishikesh Dave; Publisher – Ayush Pandey

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0) License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Establishment of the Empire's Garden in Assam and the need for Coolie Labours

Anuja Barooah^a

^aNMIMS, Mumbai, India

Received 27 July 2022; Accepted 27 August 2022; Published 30 August 2022

The British establishment of a tea garden in the northeastern state of Assam after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1836 brought a considerable transformation in the socio-economic profile of the state. After the "Planter's Raj" was established in the Assamese jungles, there were significant changes occurred. The entry of over a million labour migrants permanently altered Assam's social landscape and fostered a new idea of class, racial, and cultural differences between the native population and the immigrants. This essay examines the British establishment of tea gardens in Assam, the development of the "coolie" labour force for the Assam tea business, and the horrors that these workers endured.

Keywords: *tea garden, transformation, planter's raj, coolie.*

INTRODUCTION

Assam has long been cut off from simple access to neighbouring regions due to a variety of transportation constraints. Difficult geography helped monarchs maintain independence from external groups like the Mughal invasion while emphasising the area's natural and economic uniqueness. Natural barriers like the Naga Hills separated the Assam plains from its neighbours in the Himalayas and the Sino-Iranian region. Other natural barriers on land and in the water

made it difficult to establish long-distance connections with the Gangetic plains of Northern and Eastern India. Despite being approximately three thousand miles long, the Brahmaputra River and its tributaries were difficult to travel on because of year-round turbulence and seasonal flooding. The disadvantage of other land routes connecting the Brahmaputra and Gangetic plains was that they had to travel through dense jungle and high-altitude terrains like the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Rains and floods rendered such locations almost impassable for long stretches of the year. Calcutta was reached after an arduous two months. It took as long to get from Assam to Calcutta as it did from Cape Town to London. However, in the 1830s, British explorers found tea jungles in Assam, an eastern Indian state that had just joined British India as a result of the Anglo-Burmese War. The Tea Committee of British India issued an important statement on December 24, 1834. The Committee proclaimed a "very important and profitable" discoveryon subjects associated with this empire's agricultural or commercial resources."¹ The Tea Committee of the East India Company publicly recognised this tea discovery in 1836. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Assam tea industry remained predominantly a British-funded colonial operation run by white planters. Local gentry and peasants were permitted to take part, but only in subordinate and dependent capacities.²

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why did the British take a such keen interest in making and developing tea gardens in Northeast India considering the topographical challenges that they faced?
2. What were the challenges faced by the British in the establishment of a labour force and how did they invent the 'Tea Coolie'?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research paper is to study the reasons why Tea plantation was so necessary for the British Empire and how did they develop this industry over time, also this paper aims to

¹ J Sharma, ' "Lazy" Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry' (2016) 43(6) Cambridge University Press 1287

² *Ibid*

study the barriers faced by the British in establishing Tea Plantation, the main being finding an able and skilled labour force in the terrain of completely “Lazy natives”.

TURING THE JUNGLES INTO GARDENS

China and tea were practically synonymous until the mid-nineteenth century. Even in Monsoon Asia, where tea grew wild, the leaves required extensive preparation. The Chinese Empire produced, consumed, and traded tea for many centuries before the industrialising societies of the contemporary West made it a common commodity worldwide. There was a monopoly in China. The British Empire's involvement in tea cultivation stemmed from a need to find a substitute for Chinese tea imports. After the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824, Assam was freshly included in British India, and it was during the 1830s that British explorers discovered wild tea in the Assam jungles. British administrators and botanists believed that Chinese specialists and the China plant were essential for the development of the Indian tea industry. In order to achieve this, they established an experimental company in Upper Assam to cultivate tea in nurseries using illegally imported Chinese seeds and seedlings.

The plant was found thanks largely to Gunboat Captain C.A. Bruce. Lord William Bentinck, the then governor- General said that “A clever agent should go down to Penang and Singapore, and... coordinate procedures for obtaining the genuine plant, as well as the actual (Chinese) cultivators... who will then be engaged, with the promise of generous remuneration, to continue the growth.”³ The tea growers now hybridised the “wild Assam tea” with the cultivated Chinese variety. Under Bruce's direction, the newly hired "China manufacturers" processed the first batch. Bruce sent this tea on a lengthy journey from the forests of Upper Assam to Calcutta and then to London by shipping.⁴ In January 1838, some Assam tea landed in London. The London experts responded with cautious optimism. The researchers found the tea to be "acceptable for a first experiment." At an auction, it did, however, sell for a record-breaking 21 to 38 shillings per pound. This costs almost twenty times what the China variety normally costs. Empire tea

³ ‘Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions, with the Discovery of the Tea-Plant, and of the Countries Adjoining Assam’ (Smith, Elder & Co 1839) 24

⁴ *Ibid*

was clearly embraced by patriotic British customers. This gave metropolitan investors the green light. Henceforth, there was a provisional Assam Tea Association set up in February 1839 to discuss the further planning and requirement of the tea plantations. This committee met up in London. Following that, these London merchants founded 'The Assam Company,' a new joint-stock company with a capital of £500,000. Now, Assam's Wasteland Rule of 1838 permitted leasing or selling vast tracts of "wasteland" to European companies for a discount. The New Assam Company started operating in Upper Assam in 1840.⁵ The next problem that came up was the lack of labour. In the beginning years, the British found that Only cultivated China teas or China-Assam hybrids are permitted. They considered the pure Assam kind to be too wild to eat. Son of a high-ranking Ahom minister, Maniram Barbhandar Barua (1806–57). Maniram worked as an interpreter for the British when they self-exiled in Bengal.⁶ Maniram Barbhandar Barua was a key intermediary with villagers in the early years of colonial administration, providing the colonial state with knowledge about resources as diverse as gold and silk. Even according to his local biographer, he was the one who first made the Assam tea plant known to the Tea Committee. Maniram skillfully applied his knowledge to improve tea cultivation as it expanded. As colonial institutions spread further into the area, Maniram's strong local connections made him seem risky to the British administration. Upper Assam's residents, for example, venerated him as the "Kalita Raja" (Kalita caste's ruler), a title that the British were reluctant to accept. The records give no indication of why or when he was fired. The Assam Company sacked him as a result of his interest-based response to a British employee slapping him, according to Assamese mythology. According to another story, Maniram offended the Assam Company by establishing his own tea farms. He was allegedly suspended on suspicion of stealing his employer's seed and labour.⁷ Further, there was an inquiry conducted by Justice Mills in 1853, and in response, Justice Mills branded Maniram as "clever but unworthy and intriguing" and was kept under surveillance. Maniram participated in the Great Rebellion of 1857 and was put to death for treason in 1857.⁸ Following his treason conviction in 1857, the East

⁵ J Sharma, *Empire's Garden: Assam and the making of India* (Duke University Press 2011) 28-31

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ HA Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company 1839-1953* (Edinburgh 1957) 343-344

⁸ *Ibid*

India Company seized Maniram's tea estates. The owner of the Williamson and Magor managing firm, Captain Williamson, paid a price to purchase these estates.⁹ In present times Williamson Magor continues to be one of the pioneers of the tea business in India. By 1900 Assam could be described as “A broad plain with little jungle to be seen.”¹⁰ The major crop on the lower levels is transplanted rice, while tea has been grown on the higher altitudes.”¹¹ By 1858, over 50 years earlier, the Sibsagar district had 15 tea estates on 13,977 acres of the projected 1,612,636 acres of wasteland in the region. The colonial tea industry expanded to 164 estates and 244,653 acres by 1901. 357,135 acres of rice and other crops were sown.¹² On the plantations, the caste Hindu Assamese and Bengali *mourners* (clerks/overseers) became the supervisory personnel. Teachers grumbled about students leaving for plantation appointments after they earned higher grades. The jobs varied from the head clerk (hurra mohair), who wrote letters and kept accounts, to paymaster clerk (Hazrat mohair), who observed coolies at work and paid them their hazards (pay) in the evening, and storeroom clerk (godown mohair), who distributed new supplies and tools and weighed chosen leave.¹³ “Garden Babus were local society's middle classes styled in the vernacular by a word that can be interpreted as "respectable classes" in contrast to manual workers.” The Hindu and Bengali gentry often disciplined the coolies on behalf of the white sahibs.¹⁴

As the popularity of the tea industry grew in the late nineteenth century, Assamese lawyers, traders, and retired clerks used their savings to buy rural land. In these areas, several of them started modest plantations. However, they were constrained by a lack of funding and the advantages enjoyed by wealthy British businessmen. Among these native planters, Bisturam Datta Barua, a businessman from a high caste gentry background, was possibly the most prosperous. Bisturam entered the tea industry by selling tea seeds to major colonial businesses. He used his authority as a government-appointed mauzadar (rent collector) to persuade Kachari peasants to plant tea on the property owned by his family. Local tea planters often sold their tea

⁹ Anjan Baruah, *Assamese Businessmen from Maniram Dewan to Robin Dutta* (MK Baruah ed, 1995) 10

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ J Sharma (n 5) 1294

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ J Sharma (n 5) 1313

¹⁴ *Ibid*

leaves to larger British-owned estates, to whom they were subsidiaries. It was always dangerous to be in such a reliant relationship. The big planters had complete control over quotas and were free to set prices as they pleased. Many local planters went out of business as a result of this. Bisturam Barua, on the other hand, profited after establishing a long-term, quasi-patron-client relationship with Williamson, Magor, and Company, a prominent managing agency business. With their antiquated equipment, Williamson's company assisted him in establishing his own manufacturing. The two biggest local planters were Jagannath Barooah, with 400 workers on 800 acres (out of a total holding of 2,811 acres), and Bisturam Datta Barua, with 173 workers on 246 acres (out of 823 acres). Local planters frequently supported Assamese nationalists' cause when they started to criticise the Planters' Raj at the beginning of the 20th century. Benoy Prasad Chaliha, who eventually became the Chief Minister of Assam, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and other well-known nationalist figures came from Assamese planter families, as did Nabin Chandra Bordoloi.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE OUTSOURCED LABOURS AND 'LAZY NATIVES'

"Genuine" Chinese tea-growers appeared to be required to keep the China plant alive in Assam. As a result, the tea company hired Chinese workers in its early years. Although it was simpler for British agents to get Chinese labourers through established labour networks in Singapore and Penang, the workers' sincerity was called into question more and more.¹⁵ Remarkably soon the Chinese Labour force began to dissatisfy the British calling them "turbulent, obstinate and rapacious."¹⁶ Upper Assam's ecology possessed another difficulty as it invoked high labour costs and from June to September 1840 to 1841 Chinese who were unable to work were dismissed. "They object to doing anything other than making tea," raged J.W. Masters, the tea superintendent. When confronted, they threaten to leave the service if they are asked to work in an insensitive manner.¹⁷ The Chinese men could also not adapt to the surrounding of Assam and suffered diseases such as Cholera and could not adapt to the unfamiliar food.¹⁸

¹⁵ Sharma (n 1) 1291

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ Sharma (n 1) 1292

¹⁸ *Ibid*

This resulted in the Assam Company turning towards locals like the Nagas. Nagas had no use of money and therefore they could be paid in shells, bread, and rice. However, the Nagas skipped a lot of working days. The prevailing cash shortage did attract a lot of the locals to work in the gardens and the British paid them far lower wages than the Chinese workers. These workers frequently quit after receiving only a small wage since they couldn't stay at work for lengthy days. It was impossible to find them when they escaped. Chinese tea farmers had all but vanished from Assam's tea estates by the early 1860s. Bhaat (cooked rice) was the Assamese term for a meal. Their diet consisted primarily of rice, fish, and steak (wild greens). The Assamese, unlike the Chinese, had not yet adopted tea as a beverage. Assamese being rice eaters, it was grown in almost maximum habitats. However, peasants initially turned to mustard, which was historically farmed for oil and sold to traders for cash, as they needed marketable commodities in the new cash economy that the British built. Opium eventually overtook mustard in popularity.

Opium, as opposed to mustard, benefited from a rapidly expanding market. The average after-harvest price per seer in the 1840s was Rs 5, while the retail price increased to Rs 80 during the lean months. The opium-growing peasants received advances from the "Marwari" traffickers. So, eventually, rice became the food crop and opium the cash crop. Given the abundance of land, most peasants were not interested in wage labour. For instance, a government representative pointed out that it was exceedingly uncommon for an Assamese living far from home to travel far from home just to work on a tea plantation. This is how the British discovered the 'Lazy native' British Officials felt that the unpopularity of labouring work was due to underlying indolence, perhaps a climatic or racial feature. Not only were Assamese peasants lazy, but nature seemed to aggravate their weakness by providing good soil for easy crop growth. For Assamese peasants, homegrown opium was an unnecessary luxury, just as alcohol was for industry workers in Britain. The moral turpitude was heightened by the fact that the luxury was gained almost for free from the peasant's own garden. Peasants were allegedly feeding opium to their wives and children since it was so readily available.¹⁹ A British Judge suggested that

¹⁹ J Sharma (n 5)

“Opium should be available to the people, but they should be made to work for it”.²⁰ A local restriction on the production of opium in the area was put into place in 1861. Local apathy and unreliable labour were two issues the tea industry faced, and the official prohibition of local opium appeared to provide solutions for both. After 1861, a network of opium dealers with state licences was established. Peasants in Upper Assam have persisted in refusing to join the ranks of tea labourers under any circumstances other than their own. They were replaced with Lower Assam-based Kachari "tribal" tea producers, who brought momentary satisfaction to the tea plantation's workforce. Plains caste groups were seen by Europeans as ethnically distinct from indigenous people and more civilized than those who lived in hilly and forested areas.²¹ The people of the hills were referred to as 'aboriginal' or 'tribal people by the British. Residents in the Lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang, and Goalpara are known as the Kachari. The British political officer in Nepal and Himalayan explorer Brian Hodgson referred to the Kachari people as being of the Tamilian race. Hodgson emphasised how Tamulian populations, like the Kacharis, were physically suited to live in environments and climates that were unfavourable to Caucasian races because of their extended exposure to mountainous terrain.

In order to guarantee that they will be able to do at least a double day's work in a single day, kachoris—who travel in groups of ten to twenty—will only undertake a mission. They frequently pack up and transfer to another location where their skills are in demand once a garden is restored to its former glory and the work falls short.²² Observers noted that throughout the growing and harvesting seasons, Kachari men frequently offered to work multiple shifts on the plantations in order to return home with a sizable amount of rupees. Once more, the British obsession with the Kachoris was in vain. Regardless matter whether they were Kachari seasonal migrants from Lower Assam or Upper Assam, the reality was that all local labourers tended to come and go as they pleased. Assamese villagers who reside close to the plants.²³ Tea pickers were apprehensive to start work without first getting paid in advance. Peasants from the Kachari

²⁰ Sharma (n 1) 1297

²¹ *Ibid*

²² George Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, Thacker, Spink & Co 1884) 126

²³ *Ibid*

tribe participated in an insurrection in Lower Assam's Phulaguri in 1861 against the prohibition of opium and the imposition of a new agricultural tax. A British officer was slain in the ensuing altercation. As a result of this occurrence, colonial opinion painted Kacharis as 'bloodthirsty' and 'primitive.'²⁴ Planters complained that local labourers who departed after receiving advances lacked the capacity to discipline them. Employers may use the new Workmen's Breach of Contract Act in British India after 1859, although planters said it was pointless to file "tedious legal suits" because defendants had virtually no attachable property.²⁵ Even the racial logic failed in finding the appropriate Labour for the tea gardens. Because of their strong belief in primitiveness, they had to go even further afield for suitable labour.

THE 'COOLIE LABOUR' AND THE HARSH ATROCITIES FACED BY THEM

South Asian labourers were brought to Indian Ocean sugar fields to replace African slaves in the 1830s. Coolies were the term for these workers. The process of 'de-peasantization' was long and painful. These displaced hill people had no choice except to become obedient and productive labourers wherever they could. As was the case with the sugar business, such groups became prime targets for tea plantation recruiting. Hodgson grouped the Assamese and Chotanagpur tribals together as Turanian aboriginals of the Tamilian race. By the 1860s, however, anthropological guides had distinguished the two groups to reflect their unequal status as colonial labourers. The people of the Chotanagpur plateau worked on Indigo plantations, railways, and tea gardens. They were a source of cheap labour and they were genetically very adaptable in nature. The term "coolie" was coined to describe tea plantation workers. The word 'coolie' is thought to come from the Tamil word 'kuli,' which means 'wage.'²⁶ It has long been used to describe labourers at the bottom of the Indian Ocean labour market. Between 1870 and 1900, it is believed that 700,000 to 750,000 tea industry recruits migrated to Assam.²⁷ Around 250,000 men, women, and children are among them Chotanagpur was their hometown. This workforce was constantly monitored, both during and outside of

²⁴ Sharma (n 1) 1303

²⁵ *Ibid*

²⁶ Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830- 1920* (Cambridge University Press 1974) 236-366

²⁷ *Ibid*

working hours. Industry handbooks recommended two watchmen for each line of coolie huts, which should be constructed in straight rows so that the watchmen could travel easily between them. This level of control was in stark contrast to the planters' relationship with local workers, whom one observer sarcastically described as "mon Khushi coolies, or labourers who do as they want."²⁸ Compared to earlier tea recruiters, the bodies of enslaved labourers were more susceptible to oppression. They were locked up at night in the dirt of the housing lines, where they were essentially imprisoned. These immigrants were compelled to reside in a remote, forested location. They were not allowed to interact with the villagers in any way. Because of his lack of knowledge of the area, flying was nearly impossible.²⁹ Assam's white owners sexually exploited female coolies, and many of the mixed-race, illegitimate children that resulted were sexually exploited as well.³⁰ There was a draconian work regime. An arbitrary practice of torture was an intrinsic element of this penal regime, with investigations revealing practices such as beating stubborn employees to death and rubbing pepper into the sexual organs of female coolies, all testimony to the final dehumanisation of this workforce. There was a Penal provision established, however, the remaining was limited to papers themselves. In Assam, the authority to self-arrest produced a virtual Planters' Raj.³¹ Wages and medical treatment were not enforced due to a lack of administrative resources and political will. From the Act of 1865 to the Act of 1901, the minimum salary of Rs. 5, Rs. 4, and Rs. 3 for adults, women, and children, respectively, remained unchanged. Legal provisions also limited work to 6 hours per day and 6 days per week.³² This also remained limited to the papers themselves. Workers' knowledge of their rights was inadequate. Despite the abolition of the punitive clauses in 1926, the Royal Commission of Labour discovered that workers continued to fear imprisonment at the hands of planters if they left their jobs before their contracts ended three years later.³³

²⁸ HA Antrobus (n 7) 1308

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ Planters' illegitimate children do not appear in official records, but do so in oral accounts and family papers

³¹ Hugh Tinker (n 26)

³² *Ibid*

³³ International Labour Office, *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India* (6(1) vol, International Labour Office 1930)

The coolie labourers often regarded Assam as ‘the end of the world but still many of them had no choice but to migrate for employment.’³⁴ The Santhal children looked at Assam as a ‘death trap’ from where their ancestors had never returned. Assamese local habitants-maintained distance from the ‘coolie’ habitats because they considered themselves respectable men. Pura Borkalita expanded on this respectable concept saying ‘We are *bhala manush* (respectable men) and do not carry weights for others.’ There were hardly any interactions between the locals and the ‘coolies’ because of the harsh restrictions imposed by the British however the Upper Assam’s villagers were permitted to sell goods in the weekly markets in the gardens (*haats*). The prejudices of the villagers toward the coolies were shown in a number of songs and pieces of writing that were published at the time. In a telling conversation between two lovers, an Assamese folk song describes a guy who wishes to work in a tea garden and his girlfriend pleading with him not to go to a place where “there is not a jot of happiness to be found.” The song further denigrates the female coolies by alleging a lewd coupling between them and white men.³⁵ Bolinarayan Bora’s essay titled “*Sah Bagisar Coolie*” again brings out the prejudiced sentiments of the locals on how they viewed the coolies. He writes ‘Listen, reader, to how the coolie lives and what kind of creature it is.’³⁶ “A coolie is a person whose skin is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, whose home contains bird, pig, and dog, whose hand holds a *bilayati* [foreign] umbrella, and whose hands hold a hoe and basket among the tea bushes.”

CONCLUSION

Even after the expiry of the contracts within coolies in the early 20th century the Coolies continued to migrate to these plantations mostly because of the land availability and the fertility of the banks of Brahmaputra making the land very suitable for cultivation. The Brahmaputra Valley’s population increased by 15% from 1891-1892 in Upper Assam. Coolie violence and resistance in Assam have progressively escalated since the turn of the century. There were 141 documented occurrences of riots and unlawful assembly between 1904-1905 and 1920-1921.

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ Prafulladatta Goswami, *Bihu Songs from Assam* (Guwahati, Publication Board 1988) 201

³⁶ *Ibid*

However, with the anti-colonial attitude during the freedom there arose a sympathetic attitude towards the locals for the coolies and sought to incorporate them into mainstream society. In opposition to the British treatment of coolies after their evacuation from Chargoa, the Gauhati Pleaders' Association, a local lawyer's group, ceased its legal activities.³⁷ Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, an Assamese lawyer and tea planter, spearheaded the protest. Today they are identified as the 'tea tribe' also in Assamese they are known as *Adibasi* or *Baganda*. These tea tribes depend on the tea plantation sector and they seek inclusion in the list of 'scheduled tribes.' Today the tea industry's hierarchical forms have been sustained by Indian industrial houses that have inherited them from British planters and colonial states.

³⁷ Hugh Tinker (n 26)