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# **Recruitment of Tea Labour into Assam and Evil day of Women Labourer**

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### **Abstract**

*The contractors or the arkatis did the recruitments of labours in initial years of tea plantation in Assam. At the time there was no restriction upon the contractors. Therefore the arkatis, who were ex-convicts, burglars, thieves, dacoits etc. adopted typical methods of recruitment. The notorious Arkatis treated women recruit like animals and forcefully slept with them and this brought shame and disrespect into the lives of these unfortunate young girls. The journey to the garden was also not easy. The labours were treated like animals and they to go through various Depots to reach their final destination. These people had no idea as to what garden they will go to. The story behind the cheap women labour to Assam and their fearful misfortunes can fill any human heart with pity. Most importantly, the misfortune of the labourers has been highlighted here.*

**Key Words: Women labourer, Depot marriage, Arkatis, Assam, Tea plantation, Brahmaputra.**

**Introduction:** Tea cultivation started in Assam in the year 1834. With the extension of the tea cultivating sector, the first and most prominent problem faced by the tea planters was the problem of insufficient labourers. The local people were reluctant to get involved in the cultivation. According to Gait (1994), there was very few landless labour in Assam and people who have land naturally prefer the independence and ease of their position as cultivators to the discipline and regular labour of the teagarden. Assam Company in its early ears paid its imported Chinese staff – some 70 workers at one stage – four to five times the wage rate paid to the corresponding categories of Assamese labour. After the services of the Chinese workers were dispensed with in 1843, the local people remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859. The Nagas, the Kacharis and the Singphos were the first to be appointed for this purpose. Among the local people, the most important source of recruitment was the Kachari tribe of the Darrang district. Besides, peasants of nearby villages in their slack season were also employed through contractors.

**Recruitment of Tea Garden Women Labourer into Assam:** The works of the tea gardens continues for the entire year. There are different types of works for men, women as well as children. Those works are possible only when the tea labourers (known derogatively as ‘coolies’) stay in the gardens itself with their families. Plucking of tea leaves is a major and a completely specialised job in the tea production process and is done by the female work. Besides, the women labourers are involved in plucking of leaves, dried the leaves, and chopped and stored them into gardens for packaging and men dose the planting of tea sapling, pruning, digging and cleaning forests for new garden. ‘Some time the fixed work is also shared by women workers’. Likewise, some time, due to

the lack of women labourers, preparing tea as well as plucking leaves had to be done by the male labourers. 'Employment of women in plantations historically was sought by the planters in order to contain the male labour force and to ensure a steady reproduction of cheap labour as recruitment costs were expensive'.

In Assam, sufficient labourers were not available and especially after the revolt of 1857, the worker had to be imported to Assam from outside because of the increase in the number of tea gardens in Assam. Therefore, the tea planters started importing large numbers of labourers from outside the state and in this way from the year 1859; the era of importing labourers from different states of India to Assam began. It is notable that in those places where the labourers were imported, were 'poverty –stricken and famine affected areas' etc. Such labourers were easily available in large numbers and could be hired in minimum wages. There were two important system of recruitment of labour in the tea plantation of Assam viz. Contractor System and *Sardari* System. The first successes were close to the Western labour of Assam at Rongpur, where 400 labourers were recruited and then marched the 160 miles to Guwahati. In the beginning the labourers were mostly from Chutanagpur, Ghajipur and Banaras. Labourers were also brought from Santhal Paragana, Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, 'Ranchi, Palamau, Singbhum, Hazaribagh and Manbhum districts of eastern India, and districts of Orissa, United Provinces and Central Provinces'.

The contractors or the *arkatis* did the recruitments of labours in initial years. At the time there was no restriction upon the contractors. Therefore the *arkatis*, who were ex-convicts, burglars, thieves, dacoits etc. adopted typical methods of recruitment. These included loans advanced to the potential victims, tempting young men with liquor, kidnapping of young girls and women and marrying them of in the depots marriage 'and 'were notorious badmash'. Those *arkatis* were 'mostly Calcutta based, Hindu and Muslim Indians, as well as a few Britons'.

**The harsh story behind women tea labour campaign:** The story behind the cheap labour to Assam and their fearful misfortunes can fill any human heart with pity. Most importantly, the misfortune of the labourers has been highlighted here. Some contractors were appointed by the tea companies for bringing labourers. These contractors used to visit the villages and towns of different states and mingled with the poor natives. These people passed their days with utter difficulty because of their poverty. They had no land of their own for cultivation or 'failure of crop'. Many landless people were suffering bitterly under the oppression of the landlords or Zamindars and no kind of labour being obtainable. Taking the advantage of this situation, the contractors tried to persuade the meagre to come to the tea gardens of Assam by giving those hopes of a better life and monetary benefits.

The system of collecting labours and the hidden inexpressible reasons behind it is brought into light in Central Recruiting Agency Committee Report. Most importantly, the unpardonable, inhuman and offensive crimes of the contractors or *Arkatis* are vividly portrayed – these *Arkatis* lacked humanity. They didn't stop only by making the lives of the women of the poverty stricken families problematic; they even shamelessly with ignoble intentions tried to trick the young girls of the helpless families and wanted them in their own. To a large extent, they were successful in fulfilling their sinful desires with these helpless young girls. The notorious *Arkatis* treated them like animals and forcefully slept with them and this brought shame and disrespect into the lives of these unfortunate young girls. At last these young girls were sent to the city's brothel and were pushed into the business of prostitution in order to increase their number. Again sometimes the *Arkatis* used to make the unfortunate young girls helpless and used to send them to the gardens to rot and die.

**Depot Sadi or Marriage:** In the Chapter III of Act VI of 1901, subjected provision for the registration of single women (Section 34(3) and (4), to the high fees charged for recruiters, licenses, to the rigidity of the enquiries made as to a recruiter's character before he is licensed, and to the three days' detention required by section 44 before an emigrant is put under contract. With regard to the registration of women, there are doubtless cases where registration has to be refused because the evidence required by Section 34 cannot be produced, although there is no valid objection to the registration of the woman. If a single woman presented herself for recruitment at a coolie depot, the immediate suspicion was that she was either running from her husband or parents of ill-treatment or had been booted out. As a result married women were not allowed to volunteer unless their husband also did so, nor could unmarried women without parental consent. To deceive the law the contractors forcefully hired many young women and made them register the male in the Depots as their husbands against their own will. These kinds of forced marriages were termed as "Depot Sadi" or "Depot Marriage". These men and women were totally unknown to each other. Their religion, habits, language, custom and culture etc. were also probably different. The married women who were tricked and brought for transport were also forced to marry the young men of the Depots. In some cases, if a single woman refused for Depot *sadi* and 'whom the registering officer refused to register in a notified district are sent to a free depot to be sent off to Assam'.

In 1882-83 the Deputy Magistrate and in-charge of emigration of Manbhum had received 58 applications in complaining of the elopements of wives, brothers and sisters; and out of which only three cases of applicants succeeded in tracing out the lost women while fifty five cases were unsuccessful. Some of the cases of happened during the time of recruitment of women labourers are – (i) A young women, living near Lohardugga, suddenly disappeared; her husband suspected that she intended eloping to Assam, so he went to Ranchi, 46 miles off, with funds for several days search. No trace could be found to the girl in any of the Ranchi depots but he got clue that a girl answering to her description had been registered and forwarded to Assam under another name – (ii) 'In the 8th Nov. 1881, Ejudula married in the R. C. Chapel of Burudi, Dobo, a ryot of Sarwada, and followed her husband to Sarwada, Karam Sing a pagan boy of the same village, enticed the married women to the forest; and suspecting some mischief, the husband complained to Deosai, the village Munda, who promised to make trial and to punish Karam Singh, if found guilty. The young Pagan was afraid (or intentionally?), they were enlisted by Anthony Sirdar of Sukni, left the same day for Ranchi, where they declared themselves husband and wife. Dobo Ambrose, the true husband went to days later to Ranchi to claim her but it was already too late, they had been sent off already to Assam. This happened in May 1882'. (iii) In another case, a woman left her home and was supposed to have cookie depot. Her husband Sulema of Hesahatue, came to Ranchi, but found that she had been already sent off. Similarly, (iv) Sufia, wife of a man of Bari, went on a visit to her father's village; from thence she went away secretly with a Sardar. The father at once followed her, and overlooked her on the road to Ranchi; she refused to return with him. Her husband was not informed till afterwards. (v) Salmi, wife of Anandmasdi of Deogain, was staying in the same village as the above and went off with her. She also got off to Assam'. 'Men, women and children were enticed, even kidnapped, and traded like cattle, absconders were hunted down like runaway slaves'. It appears from the Assam Labour Enquiry Report, 1906 regarding the labour recruiting method that the 'Arkattis' as the professional recruiters were regarded by the people as 'the scum of the earth' and the heartless scoundrels' and were feared as much as man eating tiger Grunning, J.F. (1909) describe the procedure of labour recruiting method as follows-

*“The contractor employs a number of unlicensed recruiters (and usually also an even larger number of unlicensed men) who go round the villages and endeavour to get people to consent to emigrate. As soon as a recruiter has induced a coolie to emigrate, the intending emigrant is taken to a registering officer, who, after questioning him to ascertain whether he is willing to go and understands what he is doing, registers his name. He is then taken to the contractor's depot where he must remain at least three days before he can be placed under contract. This period was prescribed to allow the emigrant "to see his friends and to have a chance of changing his mind..."*”

But actual facts were completely conflicting. Some people did come believing that they would get a better life but in this way the contractors failed to convince most of the people. The contractors then started visiting the weekly markets and tried to persuade the poor people by distributing clothes, sweets and alcohol among them and showing them dream of a golden future in the tea gardens. In this way, by showing them greed, the contractors used to persuade these obstinate people and took them to the Central Labour Depot and made them register their name. Later when it became impossible to persuade the people in this manner, the contractors used their strength to bring them to the Depots by indulging in fight and even by giving them death threats.

If the Labour once entered the Depots, they were never again freed. Strict security was maintained in the Depots. After sending three days in the depot, if the contractor succeeded in getting a good price for him, the labour ('coolie' called by Britishers) was taken before the Government officer to execute a contract and was then sent to Assam. These labourer men and women were then all together loaded in the ships like animals and were imported to Assam. These people had no idea 'as to what garden they will go to, and it was very seldom that they obtain any part of the large price paid for them; usually the contractor and his recruiters take it all and, as the profits of the business are large, there was great temptation to unscrupulous persons not to be too particular how they get hold of coolies. A coolie is worth from Rs. 80 to Rs. 150 in hard cash and the recruiter was there to make money, honestly if he can, no doubt, but anyhow to make it'. Hence, these people were sold as animals and coerced and inadequately rewarded as slave labour.

**Conveying of Tea Labourer into Assam:** The journey to the garden was also not easy. The labours were treated like animals and they to go through various Depots to reach their final destination. It took nearly four and half months to reach from Calcutta to Sadiya. While hiring labours, they emphasised on hiring the whole family. In this way, more labourers would be born in the future and the labours would also not long to back to their country. Generally, they brought with them few items, a blanket, a lotah (brass pot), a hubble-bubble, and a small parcel done up in a handkerchief, containing lime and betel-nut and very rarely a comb. "The mode of conveying coolies up country is by steamer. A party of two or three hundred will, at certain intervals, leave Calcutta, despatched by the Government contractor to their various destinations. Arrangements were made always fitted up for carrying at least two hundred in every vessel. 'The after part of the upper deck is reserved for their space and here they are huddle together in a shameful fashion when there happens, as is of too frequent occurrence, to be an excessive number on board'.

In Assam, the tea labourers were brought to the tea gardens situated in the Brahmaputra valley through the river Brahmaputra and to the garden situated in the Barak valley through the river Barak. After imparting, the labourers were at first presented at the Depots situated at the different places and later they were transported to the gardens. These Depots were called "labourer Import Depot". These depots were meant for loading and unloading passengers from ships and boats.

Depots were of three types and each had different functions, they were given different names. The three types of Depots are – Debarken Depots, Landing Depots and Checking Depots-

1. Debarken Depots – In these Depots there were provisions for keeping the imported bonded labours. In Assam, name of the Debarken Depots in the Brahmaputra valley were situated in Tezpur, Silghat, Margherita, Kakilamukh, Disangmukh and Dibrugarh. The labours collected for the Barak valley were assembled in Goalando. They were then transported through the river Barak by ships and boats to various gardens of the valley. The Debarken Depots of Barak valley are situated in Silchar, Katigora, Sylhet, Phesuganj, Maulabi Bazar, Hariganj and Karimganj.
2. Landing Depots- The labours were landed in these Depots but there were no provisions for their residing in these Depots. Landing Depots were situated in Biswanath Ghat, Bihalmukh, Dhanshremukh, Kamalabari and Dikhowmukh. In Barak valley Landing Depots was only in Rangamati.
3. Checking Depots- In these Depots, the Government incharges used to examine the labours' medical and contract related papers. In Barak valley, the Checking Depot was situated in only Karimganj.

There were no proper provisions for fooding and lodging. There were also no special and separate provisions for the women labourers and 'no human consideration was there even with regard the privacy of women',

*“The family of three or four will take up their quarters by laying the blankets, stretched out one over the other — a protest against trespassers. Each family, or party, then occupies a space of about five feet square. On this location they will squat about until it is time to retire for the night ; then the blankets are distributed, and five minutes after this ceremony it would puzzle a person to be able to recognise that bundle as a man or a woman, or the smaller balls of blanket as children. There they lie huddled up close to one another, though the night be ever so hot, extending all the way down each side of the deck and two rows up the centre, allowing barely sufficient room for a passerby to avoid treading on some part of them. As the labours had to come in such unhygienic environment, they were infected with cholera and many labours began to rot and die in the middle of the river journey itself. During the daytime they chat together in groups, play a game of chance, smoke, or more often sit stolidly, doing nothing, but when the vessel stops, a few are given leave to go ashore to cook their food. A large pot boils all the rice at once, in order to save many fires being lighted at different points and their attendant risk to the vessel”.*

It was in 1841 that the Assam Company brought the first batch of labour from Chotnagpur area but all the members died en-route. Again, from 15th December 1859 to November 1861, the Assam Company brought 2,272 labours were hired and 250 among them died on the way itself. The dead bodies were thrown into the water in front of everyone. Among the remained labours of 2,569 recruits sent down the Brahmaputra in two batches, as many as 135 died or got drowned and the rest 103 ran away. Of 84,915 recruits for Assam between 1 May 1863 and 1 May 1866, 30,000 died by 30 June 1866. This High mortality did cost the planters and to cheque this labour mortality during the transportation period Government Act was passed 'the coolie conveying must completed to their destination' under the charge of a doctor, whose duty it is to accompany them throughout the whole of their journey until the last man is landed'. The labour Commission of 1862 noted that 'all

parties considered their duties and responsibility discharged when the living are landed, and the cost of the death adjusted’.

### Findings:

1. Women are more easily cheated than men, and are more readily caught by the wiles of the *arkatis*.
2. Labour is recruited mostly on a family basis but proportion of women to men amongst recruited by free contractors was very high.
3. Women recruitment was preferred by the planters because women workers are paid “chukri hazira” (girl wages) which are less than the men; for example, the monthly rate of Rs. 5 per men and 4 per women and this ratio was almost same in every garden in Assam though it considered that women labourers are better at plucking, pruning, Khulni (cutting dead wood), Thalli (weeding), etc.
4. From 1863 to 1901 a series of enactment were passed, of protecting the labourers against fraudulent recruitment, providing for them a proper and sanitary system of transport, and securing their good treatment and adequate remuneration during the term of their labour contracts but usefulness of the provision of the law had been largely neutralized by the fact that in Bengal there was only one Superintendent of Emigration for the province outside the Chotanagpur and Santhal Paraganas. So, in practical the recruitment system of tea labourers to Assam was far different from those acts and laws.
5. The abuses and inhuman behaviour perpetrated on the recruited labour by *arkatis* is still fresh in the memories of tea garden communities which is reflected through folk song and folk lore.
6. Under the Amendment Act of 1870, the Sardari system of recruitment was recognised, though not allowed to replace forthwith the *arkatis* (licensed recruiter) system. From that time till 1915, both the methods of recruitment were in vogue side by side but the inhuman treatment on women as well as men coolies was not stopped.

**Conclusion:** While coming to the gardens, the women labours had to bear the push and pull days after days throughout the journey amongst the male labours. In this way by entering Assam, they got a new life of slavery, losing their independence the hands of the garden owners. ‘On arrival, they were placed in charge of a garden Manager who was totally ignorant of their nature, languages, customs and usages Along with the male labours also had to work from the early morning. But still the women were paid lesser wages than the men. Moreover the Sahebs of the gardens also enjoyed sexual pleasure by bringing the wives and daughter of the garden labourers whenever they desired. And if the parents or the fathers of the girls objected them they had to face severe punishments. The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Bamfield Fuler described that once the wife of a tea labourer was beaten by an officer with a whip which made her unconscious and her clothes were also stripped. In Cachher district, the manager of Kharial tea garden wanted to have the young daughter of a tea labour for a night, but when the father opposed to this he was immediately shot to death by the manager. The guilty Saheb was however not given any kind of punishment.

These shocking incidents seem to be unrealistic in the present time but it is absolute truth. Moreover, even after doing such inhuman acts and violating rules, they were easily spared. They were even punished for their offensive deeds. The garden owners used to protect them their own personal benefits. Though, various laws were made in order to destroy the miseries involved in labours collection, the contractors continued to hire labours illegally against the laws. ‘Living far

away from their homes and hearths and contact-bound, these labourers were undoubtedly the most easily exploitable and exploited section of the people' Mr. Edgar (a Bengal Civil Service Inspector) dwells on the ill-treatment of labourers and the insufficiency of food. He cannot understand that it is a most runner's policy for a planter to ill-treat his men, on whom his very bread and butter depend". The report of Nabin Chandra Bardaloi also mentions about the women tea labourers as- The manager were allowed to treat the women labourers with disrespect, even they could keep hundreds of labour's daughters as their wives. Therefore the women labourers, who were brought to the gardens with golden dreams from different parts of the country, never got any special treatment for being a woman from the beginning of the journey till the end.

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