

## TEA PLANTATION IN ASSAM

This chapter discusses the historical emergence of society, tea plantation and labour emigration in Assam, Barak valley and Cachar district. Assam has a long convoluted process of its geographical, demographic, economic, political, social and cultural formations emerging right from the ancient period to the contemporary post-Independence times passing through the medieval/pre-colonial and colonial periods. Tea plantation in Assam emerged as a colonial phenomenon. The colonial history of Assam has very significant politico-economic underpinnings of and bearings on the economy and society in the tea garden setting. Therefore, a brief historical analysis of the socio-political formations specially of the colonial period with reference to the tea plantation is undertaken to look the gender relations in the tea garden setting in a historical perspective.

### **Socio-political Formations**

In the proceeding discussion socio-political formations are discussed in the

context of the state of Assam and the Cachar/Barak Valley region of it.

### **Assam**

In the North Eastern region Assam is one out of eight states- the other states being Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Sikkim. It is situated between the latitudes  $28^{\circ}18'$  and  $24^{\circ}N$  and the longitudes  $89^{\circ}46'$  and  $97.4^{\circ}E$  covering an area of 78,523 sq. km. in the North Eastern region. Broadly, it comprises two river valleys; viz., the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The former comprises the upper and lower Assam areas across which flows the Brahmaputra River in the state. The latter consists of three districts; namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi in the south of the state.

Known by different names at different historical times Assam has been **Pragjyotisha** in the pre-historic period, **Kamrup** in the medieval period and **Assam** since the Ahom rule (Dutta 1962). About the pre-historic Assam (Pragjyotisha) and her people is known vaguely from various traditions and mythology. According to Mahabharata the kingdom of Pragjyotisha was stretched up to the Bay of Bengal in the south and up to the river Karatoya in the west. The river Karatoya was considered as sacred as the Ganges of those days. In the puranas that were composed much later than the Mahabharata, Assam is known by the name of Kamrup. The Kalika Purana speaks of the Temple Kamakhya, the centre of Kamrup, and the Vishnu Purana informs of four hundred fifty miles' extent of Kamrup in the four directions from the temple. The puranic accounts include Assam, East Bengal and Bhutan in the Kamrup kingdom (Gait 1926, Dutta 1962).

Gait is of the view that the first authentic history about Kamrup is found only

after the visit of the Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsiang, during the reign of Bhaskar Varman. Kamrup goes under the rule of the Varmans in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. After the Varman dynasty there came the Salastambha dynasty during 650-990 A. D. and the Pala dynasty during 990-1138 A.D. (Gait 1926). After the decline of the Pala dynasty in the twelfth century A.D., the Kamrup Kamata Kingdom shrunk to west Assam (Kamrup and Goalpara) and North Bengal only. In the eastern or upper Assam it lost its political unity to the independence declared by the petty chiefs and dynasties; viz., the Baro Bhuyan, the Chutia, the Kachari, etc. (Dutta 1962).

But at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Ahom, a tribe of the Tai / Shan people, arrived in Assam (Mackenzie 1979). The founder of Ahom Kingdom in Assam, Sukapha, who is said to be the brother of the king of the North Burma known as Maulung had disputed with his brother over the succession of the throne of Maulung. Consequently he had to flee towards Assam after stealing the Samdeo from the Raja of Mungkang (Gait 1926). A number of Ahom kings ruled over Assam for nearly six hundred years by occupying many small dynasties and petty states that arose after the decline of Kamrup but they too faced foreign invasions such as Mohammedan invasion (1603-1673 A. D). The Ahom kingdom started to decline from the 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards due to various reasons. In the sleepy hollow of Assam, the Ahoms had lost the qualities that helped them won power and prestige while the adoption of language, customs and religion of their Hindu subjects speedily sank them into the position of mere ruling caste that ceased to present the characteristic of an alien race (Mackenzie 1979). Other reasons for the downfall of Ahom kingdom were Moamaria revolt, Barmese war, etc. The Moamaria tribe, supposed by some to have been a rude tribe, settled before the Ahom invasion on

the upper Debroo in the district of Moram were proselytized to Hinduism though they refused the supremacy of Brahmins and rejected the worship of Lord Siva. The insults and oppression perpetrated by the Ahom kings for several times led them to revolt. In 1769 A. D. the first Moamaria revolt that broke out under the leadership of their priest weakened the throne of Ahom kings. After the third and final Moamaria rebellion the Matak Rajya was established in the present Dibrugarh district with its capital at Bengmara (Tinsukia town). The Ahom government recognized the autonomy of the Matak kingdom headed by Matibar under the agreement made in 1805 A. D. Later on, the British used the Mataks and the Khamatis as a political screen between the Burmese and the newly acquired territories of the company during the annexation of Assam. The Burmese invading Assam in 1817, 1819 and 1821 A. D. succeeded to capture the whole Assam in the last invasion. But the Ahom princes Chandrakanta and Purunder Singh were determined not to leave the Burmese at rest and, therefore, each one constantly organized means for invasion of Assam. Sometime later, Chandrakanta could re-establish his authority over the western part of the country and in 1822 A. D. over Guwahati. But the success of Chandrakanta did not last long as the Burmese defeating him in 1822 made him to escape into Goalpara- the British territory (Gait 1926; Dutta 1962; Mackenzie 1979). The Burmese General sent an insolent message to the British Officer-in-Commanding at Goalpara and warned him that if Raja Chandrakanta was given any shelter the Burmese troops would invade the British territory to arrest him wherever he might be found (Mackenzie 1979).

The Burmese occupancy over Assam ended soon as a result of ever increasing open clashes with the British Government. The Burmese committed aggression in Cachar

and Manipur also. In Manipur after the death of the King Jai Singh a struggle for succession of throne took place among his sons. One of his sons, Marjit Singh, induced the king of Ava (Burma) who installed him as the Raja in 1828 A.D. This was soon followed by the Burmese supremacy over Manipur, and the other three brothers had to flee to Cachar (Chatterjee 2000; Gait 1926). The Raja of Cachar lying directly in the way of any force invading Eastern Bengal from Burma had sometime before placed himself under the British protection. Despite the repeated warning and expostulation the Burmese who then held the valley of Manipur kept on advancing upon Cachar and threatening Jaintia, no resource at length was left to the British India Government save to declare war (Mackenzie 1979:4).

In the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826 A. D.) the Burmese were defeated heavily and the reluctant king of Ava was at last compelled to accept the terms of peace offered to him on 24 February 1826 at the Treaty of Yandabo. The king of Burma agreed to cede Cachar along with Manipur, Jaintia and Assam to the British (Banerjee 1944) and recognized Gombhir Singh as the king of Manipur. The Yandabo Treaty laid down the foundation of the British rule in Assam.

After the treaty the British Government assumed the rule of Assam. But they did not take over the direct administration of the whole Assam at once. Immediately after the withdrawal of the Burmese troops, the British Government restored Manipur to Gombhir Singh and Cachar to Gobinda Chandra (Chatterjee 2000). For the Ahom kingdom territory in the Brahmaputra Valley the British Government made a different arrangement. With the exception of two tracts of Upper Assam, i.e. Sadiya and Matoo, it was decided at least for the time being to administer the country as a British province

(Gait 1826: 276).

The states of Matak, Khamti and Singpho were designated as the Agency Area of the East India Company whereas the rest of the Ahom territories in the Brahmaputra Valley were divided into two administrative units; namely, the lower Assam and the upper Assam with their capitals at Rangpur and Guwahati respectively. In November 1823 David Scott was appointed as the Agent to the Governor General for the whole Eastern Frontier from Cachar and Sylhet in the south to the Sikkim country in the north and invested with the responsibilities of the administration of Assam. Captain Neufville was appointed as the Assistant to the Agent and placed in direct charge of the upper Assam.

After observing much discontent among the Assamese people at the loss of their independence, David Scott sent a proposal for restoring central Assam to a prince of the former royal family. After Scott's death in 1831 his successor, Robertson, also followed his policy and in 1832 the upper Assam, except the tracts of Sadiya and Matak, was handed over to Purundar Singh as the protect prince on the condition of paying a yearly tribute of Rs. 50,000/-. At the time the lower Assam was divided into four districts; viz; Darrang, Nowgang, Kamrup and Goalpara (Mackenzie 1979, Dutta 1962).

In the initial stage of their rule in Assam the British Government appeared to be a disinterested protector of the people of Assam against the Burmese oppression. But soon they changed their strategy to annex different small states. Cachar, the first victim of the British imperialist greed, went under the company rule on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1832 and the Jaintia kingdom was annexed in 1846. Sadiya and Matak states of the Khamti and Bar-sanapati respectively were formally brought under the British rule in 1842 and merged

into the district of Lakhimpur.

After the annexation of Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys, the British expanded their territories into the tribal areas of Naga, Garo and Lusai hills in 1864-1899, 1873 and 1882 respectively. The British Government constituted all the Naga Hills (the Angami, the Lhota and the Ao Naga) into the district of Naga Hills under the direct British administration whereas both the Garo and the Lushai hills were formed into separate districts. At first, a part of the Lushai hills remained under the administration of the Bengal Government but in 1898 the whole Lushai hills were brought under the Assam Government. Thus, the whole Assam including the plains and the hills passed under the direct rule of the British Government (Dutta 1962, Gait 1926). During the early period of British rule, Assam was placed under the Bengal Government by a commission till 6<sup>th</sup> February 1874 when it was declared a Scheduled district and on 1 September 1905 it became a part of the Lieutenant Governor's province of Eastern Bengal (Chaube 1973). The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 raised Assam to the status of Governor's province. In 1935 the British parliament passed the Government of India Act and introduced the provincial autonomy in all the Governor's provinces including Assam from 1937 to India's Independence on 15 August 1947.

Before the coming of the British, Assam had in the north a boundary of the hills inhabited by the hill tribes such as Bhutanese, Akas, Daflas, Miris and Abors; in the north east-the Mismi hills inhabited by the Mismis; in the east-the hills of the Singphos and the Khamtis and the Patkai hills separating Burma from Assam and in the south - a chain of mountains from the west to the east known as the Assam range comprising the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia hills, the North Cachar Hills and the Naga Hills. But the boundary was

drastically changed during the British period as a result of the inclusion of many regions in Assam such as Sylhet and Cachar districts.

After the partition of India the district of Sylhet was separated from Assam to tag on to East Pakistan (Chaube 1973; Nag 1998). After Independence, Manipur and Tripura in the North East remained individual entities but the today's Arunachal Pradesh along with Mon and Tuensang districts of Nagaland was carved out as the North Eastern Frontier Agency. The states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram were the parts of Assam and later on each one got the status of statehood (Sharma 2002).

### **Cachar/Barak Valley**

The Barak is the lifeline river flowing down across the south Assam. A larger part of the valley remained with Sylhet district in the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) on partition of India. The valley was transferred to Assam from Bengal in 1874 A. D. and the part remaining with Bangladesh was again separated only in 1947. The valley situated between the longitudes  $92^{\circ}15'$  and  $93^{\circ}15'$  East and the latitudes  $24^{\circ}8'$  and  $25^{\circ}8'$  North covering an area of 69,412 sq. km. is bounded in the north by the North Cachar Hills district of Assam and the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya, in the east by Manipur, in the south by Mizoram and in the west by Tripura and Sylhet district of Bangladesh (Bhattacharjee 1991). After Independence the whole Barak Valley consisted of Cachar district was divided into four sub-divisions; namely, Silchar, Hailakandi, Karimganj and Halflong. In 1953 Halflong (North Cachar Hills) was separated from Cachar district plains in the Barak Valley. The district again split in 1984 and 1989 to carve out two new districts; namely, Karimganj and Hailakandi respectively. Now, three districts form the Barak valley in which Cachar district is centrally located. The area of



Cachar district is 3,786 sq. km that consists of two sub-divisions; viz., Silchar and Lakhipur, five revenue circles, 14 blocks, 163 Gaon Panchayats and 1050 villages. The district has a total population of 14, 42,141 persons, a literacy rate of 68.42% and sex ratio of 945 females per thousand males (Census 2001).

The Barak Valley, the name that Cachar district of Assam received in the divided India, originated after Independence. It is geographically an extension of the Bengal plains. The Indo-Aryan settlement extended into the valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limits of cultivable areas and, resultantly, there developed a distinct Bengali dialect group in the undivided valley from remote past (Bhattacharjee 1991, Chatterjee 2000).

The different kings ruled the valley in different times. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the ruler of the valley was Deves of Bhatara plates. In the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Bhaskar Varman the king of Kamrup ruled the valley as revealed by the six copper plates recovered from Nidhanpur village in Panchakhanda pargana of Sylhet District of undivided Surma Valley. After the fall of Varman dynasty in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the Harikela (ancient name of Srihatta Desh) state emerged possibly between 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. The fall of Harikela led to the formation of Tripura state which initially covered Cachar, Sylhet and Tripura. But the Tripuri rule in Cachar did not last long after the separation of sylhet (Nath 1981). The brother of the king of Koch Bihar defeating the Tripuri Raja appointed Kamalnarayan the Governor of Cachar who declared himself independent to rule from Khaspur, the traditional capital of old Koch rule in Cachar (Bhattacharjee 1991).

From 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Kachari rulers of Maibong started to expand their

territories to include the whole of the North Cachar hills, the Mikir hills and considerable part of Nowgang district of Assam. One of the rulers who married a Tripuri princess received the dowry of large territory in the foothills of Cachar (Chatterjee 2000). The Maibong kings started to quarrel with the Ahom rulers as despite the supremacy of the Kacharis in the hills Maibong was under the Ahom rulers who defeated them in 1556 A. D. The mighty Kachari king Tamradhvaja arose in rebellion against Ahom supremacy. Though Ahom re-occupied Maibong but somehow they left it. By taking advantage of the Ahom invasion, the Jaintia king Ram Sing occupied the Kachari kingdom and captured Tamradhvaja and imprisoned him. Tamradhvaja secretly communicated to the Ahom king Rudra Singh (1696-1714 A. D.) to beg his pardon and to solicit his favour for his own release from imprisonment. Rudra Singh freed him from imprisonment and imprisoned the Jaintia king. Later on, both the kings accepted the supremacy of the Ahom ruler. Tamradhvaja died in 1708. Dowager queen Chandraprabha ruled the kingdom in the name of infant prince for about fifty years. Tamradhvaja and, later on, Chandraprabha expanded the territories of the kingdom into the plains of Cachar by taking the advantage of quarrel among the Koch rulers of Cachar. The last Koch ruler Bhim Singh, the Raja of Koch state in Cachar, grew old and his daughter Kanchari married the Kachari prince Lakshmichandra (1745 A. D.). When Bhim Singh died the Kachari prince (Lakshmichandra) became the ruler of the plains of Cachar, i.e., the vast portion of the Barak Valley and started to rule Cachar from Khaspur - the traditional capital of Cachar of the old Koch rulers. But after one year (1772-1773 A.D.) he died and his son, Krishna Chandra Narayana (1780-1813 A.D.), ascended the throne (Guha 1972; Bhattacharjee 1986; Chatterjee 2000) during whose rule the socio-political history of Cachar became

apparent. He married a Manipuri princess, Induprabha. During his rule Cachar was in the front of threat of Burmese invasion. After his death Gobindachandra (1813-1830 A. D.) succeeded him. But he was a prince in name only. The Manipuri princes drove him out of his kingdom to escape in Sylhet - the neighboring British district. After the Anglo - Burmese war Gobindachandra concluded a treaty, the Badarpur Treaty with David Scott, the Political Agent of the Governor General of North East Frontier, on 6 March 1826 (Guha 1972). As a result, Gobindachandra became a tributary Raja of Cachar on the condition of paying Rs. 10,000/- yearly to the Company for the maintenance of an army that he failed to oblige (Chatterjee 2000). After the Burmese war he came back to Cachar and started to live in Haritkar near Badarpur where an assailant in 1830 A. D killed him. After the death of Gobindachandra, his step brother, the king of North Cachar or hill tracts, Tularam Senapati, claimed the vacant throne but the British rejected the claim summarily and the kingdom passed into the hands of the company's Government after the Governor General's formal proclamation on 14 August 1832. Captain T. Fisher (1832-57 A.D.) was appointed the Superintendent of the Cachar plains which was eventually made a district of Bengal and then in 1874 the British Government added Cachar to Assam as a new province (Gait 1926, Guha 1972, Chatterjee 2000).

The climatic conditions of the Barak Valley are conducive to the tea cultivation that was started after the British occupancy of this region in 1832 (Basu 2000). Williamson, the pioneer of the tea plantation in Cachar, undertook the venture first at Barsangun on the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1856, after which a large number of the tea gardens have emerged in the region, mostly between 1856 A. D. and 1900 A. D. ( Bhattacharjee 1991, Basu 2000).

## **Tea Plantation**

Tea plantation in Assam and in its Cachar/Barak region is discussed in the following account of events and actions.

### **Assam**

The origin of tea plantation in India can be traced back in the later part of 18<sup>th</sup> century when the then Governor General Warren Hastings introduced it as a new crop. But as nothing happened in this regard for a long time, many people thought that the East India Company having the monopoly of China tea trade lacked sincere interest in exploiting the possibility of tea growing in India (Kar 1975; Graffit 1967). In 1778 A. D. the great botanist Joseph Bank was asked to prepare a series of notes about the cultivation of new crops in India, who recommended for cultivation of tea as the climatic conditions of India were excellent for it (Chakraborti 1988). But for a long time no proper steps were taken for the cultivation. Robert Bruce, an adventurous trader was, the first among many who found the existence of tea plantation in the upper part of the Brahmaputra Valley in 1823 A. D. (Barkataki 1969, Bhattacharjee 1992). Bhuyan (1960) claimed that Moniram Dewan (an Assamese freedom fighter) first informed C.A. Bruce about the tea plant in Assam. Gait (1926) is of the view that when R. Bruce visited Goargang near Sibsagar in 1823 he found a drink produced from a local plant was used among the Singpho tribe. The Singpho chief Bishagayama told him about the indigenous tea plant. R. Bruce collected and sent the specimens of the plant to his brother C. A. Bruce who was the gunboats in-charge near Sadia at that time. C. A. Bruce gave the specimens to David Scott, the first Commissioner of Assam, who sent these to Calcutta for botanical test. The specimens were pronounced to be of the same family as found in China but not

of the same species. In 1832 C.A. Bruce made Captain Jenkins who came to Assam to report on the resources of Assam aware of the existence of the tea plant in this region. Calcutta botanists still doubted but they did believe about its existence (Gait 1926: 333-34). On 1 February 1834 Lord William Bentick, the then Governor General of India, set up a Tea Committee to make detailed investigation into it in Assam. The committee determined existence of the tea plants in the hillocks and jungles of Assam in 1835 (Barkataki 1969; Griffith 1967). G. J. Gordon of Makintosh and Company, Calcutta, was sent to China to procure plants, seeds and persons skilled in tea manufacturing. Meanwhile, the fresh inquiries made in Assam under Captain Jenkins and the report submitted by him with Lieutenant Charlton at last convinced the botanists, the Tea Committee and the Government about the identity of the Assam plant with that of China (Gait 1926: 334).

The first experimental tea plantation with the help of Chinese seeds was established in 1837 in Cha Bua, 28 km. from Dibrugarh (Kar 1980). C.A. Bruce was appointed superintendent of the Government Tea Forests. In 1837 Bruce sent the first consignment of the tea to Calcutta. But due to defective packing only a small portion could be consigned to the market in England. There it was found competing with the Chinese product. In the beginning Bruce took help of the Chinese workers and some local Assamese to open the tea gardens. (Gait 1926, Barkataki 1969, Kar n.d.).

In 1838 A. D. the Assam valley passed under the British administration and the experimental work in the Government Tea Forests was halted (Barkataki 1969). A private joint stock company, Assam Company formed in London, was the first among the many companies founded for cultivation and export of the tea on a commercial basis. The

company established factories at Dibrugarh and at the junction of the Burhi Dihing and the Tingri rivers under C. A. Bruce as its first superintendent. At the beginning the company almost failed due to lack of knowhow but by 1850 A. D. it emerged to produce the saleable tea at profit and by 1859 A. D. it acquired 4,000 acres of land under the tea cultivation and produced around 760,000 pounds of tea (Barkataki 1969; Gait 1826). By the year 1852 A. D. some individuals took interest to open tea gardens in the provinces. At the time of his visit to Assam in 1853 A. D. Mr. Mills of the Sadar Court founded three private gardens in Sibsagar and six gardens in Lakhimpur (Report on the Administration in NEI 1921-22).

The second tea company, Jorhat Tea Company with William Roberts as its first chairman, was formed in 1858 A. D. The conspicuous success of the two companies attracted attention of many capitalists, on the one hand, and the Government made liberal provisions for settlement of wasteland to encourage the tea plantations in the provinces, on the other. As a result, in 1859 A. D. 51 gardens were founded in several districts of Assam. Thus, the foundation of tea industry was laid down in India between 1856 A. D. and 1859 A. D. (Barkataki 1969, Phukan 1979). According to 1982 reports, in Assam total area under the tea cultivation is 2, 11,323 hectares (Bhattacharjee 1995).

### **Cachar/Barak Valley**

After two decades of the discovery of tea in the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley was also added to the tea producing regions. Cachar was invaded by the British in 1832 (Day ). At that time the jungles and hills of the area were covered with the indigenous tea plants. The Governor General of North East Frontier, David Scott, collected some specimens of the indigenous tea plants of Cachar and forwarded to the

Government of Bengal. He found the Government attaching importance to the discovery in view of its growing unfavourable relations with China (Bhattacharjee 1977). The Tea Committee subsequently found that tea plants were sufficiently available on hills and low lying jungles of the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys. In February 1855 R. Stewart, Superintendent of Cachar, forwarded some specimens of Cachar tea plant to Calcutta Botanical Garden. They were recognized as genuine tea plant. The committee then resolved to begin tea plantation in Cachar. The Board of Revenue on 12 January 1866 decided to grant land for tea cultivation under the Assam Rule of 1854 (Bhattacharjee 1977).

The Superintendent of Cachar then invited applications for undertaking tea cultivation in Cachar. G. Williamson, Superintendent of Assam Tea Company, and J. Graham were some early applicants. Williamson happened to be the pioneer of the tea cultivation in the Barak Valley, who was offered the first grant of 742 acres of land in Burrahangur in May 1856 for a period of 99 years (B.R.P., Vol.1202). Along with this the tea cultivation began in Cachar. The profit earning by the pioneer planters attracted the attention of a number of capitalists who applied for the grant of wasteland. By 1861 A. D. the Government issued 54 tea gardens regularly covering 80,000 acres of land under the Assam Rule (Bhattacharjee 1977).

## **Labour Emigration**

A discussion on the events and sequences of labour emigration in Assam and Cachar is undertaken here.

### **Assam**

In the early establishment of tea gardens the British planters were initially of the

view to employ the local peasants. But the locals did not respond to the new employment in view of (i) the civil war (1770-1791 A. D.), the Burmese invasion (1819-1824 A. D.) and the epidemic (1833-1854 A. D.) which had considerably restricted the labour supply in the plantations (Bhadra 1999); (ii) the wage labour considered somewhat deteriorating their social prestige in a self-sufficient economy (Griffiths 1967) and (iii) perhaps the reluctance of the British planters, too, for employing the willing locals and obviously their look for the uprooted labourers for easier control and exploitation (Kar 1999). To overcome the manpower hurdles the planters started procuring labourers from other provinces of India. To start with, the Assam Company carried the first batch of the emigrant labourers from Chotanagpur area in 1841 A. D. but all of those died on route (Phukan 1990). The mode of bringing labourers from the Central India to Assam, known as the **Arkatti System** or free contract system, was thus introduced.

The *Arkattis* or recruiting agents of the planters moved to the places from where labourers could easily be procured (Guha 1977). In most of the cases the planters had no connection with the recruitment of labourers and they were involved just in paying for the labourers. This type of arrangement resulted into disastrous competition between the contractors. The Enquiry Committee set up by the Bengal Government in 1861 A. D. to investigate the unsatisfactory state of affairs in labour recruitment found a great abuse of labour recruitment by the contractors. Therefore, in 1836 A. D. the first Inland Emigration Act, Act III (Bengal Code), was passed with the binding of the main provisions for license of the recruiters and registration of the emigrants before the magistrate of the district of their recruitment (Awasti 1973). Its major drawbacks were that (a) the act did not protect the labourers after their arrival on the garden and (b)



nothing was provided regarding wages and conditions of labourers in a tea estate (Awasti 1973). Therefore, another act, the Bengal Act IV 1865, was passed which prescribed minimum wages of the labourers, limited hours of the work and contract with the labourers not to be extended beyond three years. The act also provided for every tea estate to maintain a hospital. This act too was greatly abused by the contractors. The emigrants recruited from the lowest and most ignorant sections of the society often fell into snares of the recruiters either by fraud or misrepresentation and could never escape. The agents for collecting labourers frequently resorted either to criminal means like abduction of married women and children or to threats (Chattopadhyaya 1998). Therefore, in 1870 A. D. the act was amended to recognize the **sardari system** of recruitment whereby the gardens themselves recruited the labourers through the garden sardars. However, the Arkatti system of recruitment also continued along with it till 1915 A. D. (Kar 1999). Another two acts were passed in 1873 and 1882 A. D. and the latter one of these continued till 1901 A. D. In 1901 A. D. another act was enacted with the provisions that (a) recruitment by unlicensed contractors in any area was to be closed; (b) the labourers were to emigrate on the basis of their own will, without any force, fraud or coercion and (c) in case of women, an enquiry to confirm the consent of husbands or lawful guardians was necessary.

The Act VII of 1915 A. D. that abolished Arkatti or contractors system of recruitment and made garden sardars the only recruiting agents introduced the major modifications. This act remained in effect up to 1933. More reforms were introduced in the District Emigration Labour Act XXII passed in 1932 and enforced from 1 October 1933 to merely replace the Assam Emigration Act 1901. The act regulated the conditions

of recruitment of labourers for employment in the gardens to provide that (a) the recruits were volunteers; (b) the recruits should know the conditions of service before their recruitment; (c) the reasonable arrangement should be made to bring the labourers to Assam and (d) the labourers should be repatriated to their homes at the cost of the estate after three years' service (Awasti 1973: 150:51).

In Assam the imported labourers were 26,321 between 1872 A. D. and 1880 A. D.; 40,000 in 1892; 5,27,000 in 1923 and 10,00,000 in 1941 (Bhadra 1984). Their recruitment from other provinces of India continued till 1953 when the question of recruitment of the labourers in Assam was raised from a wholly different angle. The Government of Assam that was thinking seriously over the problem of unemployment and food shortage suggested for discontinuing the recruitment of labourers from outside the state. But soon the Government realized a gap between demand and supply of the labourers from within the state and, therefore, in 1955 it permitted the recruitment of some 11,000 outside labourers. But the recruitment of the outside labourers was reduced to negligible proportion by 1959 and it was stopped in 1960's (Kar n.d.). The labourers were mostly from Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, who mostly suffered from acute poverty due to infertility of soil, recurrent flood, drought or famine and exploitation by moneylenders and landlords (Kar: n.d.). Griffith (1967) is of the view that in spite of frank criticism of the less satisfactory features of tea garden life; in many cases they regarded the migration to Assam as an avenue of escape from destitution and even servitude.

### **Cachar/Barak Valley**

Initially, the planters of Cachar, too, wanted to employ local people in the

development of the tea industry. In a letter Captain Stewart wrote: *With regard to labour I do not anticipate there will be any great difficulty in obtaining the quantity which may be required, if not in Cachar, in the neighbouring district of Sylhet, the inhabitants of this district and of Joyantia came very willingly to Cachar and settled down in it (C.R. 4<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1855)*. Here, the authorities were mistaken because the indigenous people of Cachar who were traditional agriculturalists and unknown to paid labour were not willing to work as wage labourers in the tea gardens. Moreover, the Kacharis, Nagas, Manipuris and Kukis were useful assistants in cleaning jungles but in the plantation work they were unsuccessful one (Dey n.d.).

The problem made the planters to think of some alternatives to meet the labour problem. Sunderman, the manager of Ghoongur Tea Estate, placed a proposal to import labourers from North India. Superintendent of Cachar, Stewart, accepted his proposal and sent it to the Government of Bengal. With the permission of the Government for import of labourers there started the emigration of labourers in Cachar. From 1858 and 1859 A. D., 400 labourers were imported into Cachar (Kar n.d.). Of the 52,155 coolies (labourers) imported to Cachar from May 1863 to 1868 A. D. 2,456 had died during the voyage. Then, there followed the import of 51,894 labourers from 1880 to 1890 A. D., 72, 412 from 1891 to 1900 A. D. and a total of 129, 063 labourers by the year of 1901 A. D. in the tea gardens of the Barak Valley (Bhattacharjee 1977). The emigration took place under the Arkatti system, sardari system, etc. and the acts passed by the Government. The large scale labour emigration in Cachar gradually declined after 1904 A. D. Majority of the labourers came from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Orissa, who form the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic identities.

At present the Barak Valley has 115 tea gardens. According to the Tea Gardens Report of 1994 the daily average number of labourers employed in the tea industries is 59,501 in the Barak Valley and 4, 88, 838 in the Brahmaputra Valley (Mazumder et al. 1999).

In sum, the tea plantation area in Assam comprises two valleys; namely, the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. Geo-political and socio-demographic identity of Assam in the North East of India has been becoming all through the times since the pre-historic period. The colonial period of history has a significant impact on her geo-political, socio-economic and cultural formations. In the later part of 18<sup>th</sup> Century the British colonial rulers started plantation of the cash crop of tea as an extension of their experience of tea plantation in China. The planters brought the labour force mostly from northern, central and eastern states of India because the local people in their traditional social structure with self sufficient economy looked down upon any labour carried out for wages, on the one hand, and the planters preferred the uprooted labour from outside for its greater control and exploitation, on the other. Therefore, the labour force for plantation was procured from the poor, abject and low strata of society, which formed a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic fabric of the society in the tea garden setting. The labour force was liberated from the bondage in its traditional structure but it remained not free from superordination and exploitation. The recruiting contractors and planters replaced the traditional landlords and masters. As a result the hangovers of the traditional and colonial legacies are still reflecting their scars on the social life of the people in the social setting.