

The Notion of Indolent Native and the Causes of Importation of Labour from outside

British East India Company's Commercial Ventures in Assam

The British East India Company came to India primarily with the object of business. Their commercial motives had not changed even after the capture of India. Assam came under the British occupation, through the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. But even before the treaty, Company had given interest in the province specially in view of the possibilities of opening up trade facilities. The first authorized visit that Europeans paid to Assam in the pre-Yandaboo period was the expedition of Captain Welsh at the time of Moamoria rebellion. In 1792, Lord Cornwallis, in response to Ahom King Gaurinath Singha's appeal for aid, dispatched six companies of troop to Assam under "from motives of humanity and from a wish to be better informed of the interior state of Assam, its commerce etc."¹. Captain Welsh collected information about Assam and reported to the Imperial Headquarters describing the condition of the country. The British authorities of East India Company, both in England and India, had already interested themselves in the commercial possibilities of the North-East Frontier², Captain Welsh report on Assam its resources, possibilities of trade and industry, finally decided to intervene in the affairs of Assam. British official records regarding the Assam and its resources encourage the British to occupy Assam politically. Finally, the Burmese attack to Assam in 1821 has given the opportunity to the East India Company to annex Assam. Before the advent to Assam British official proclamation to the people of Assam was "We are not led into your country by the thirst of conquest; but are forced in our defense to deprive our enemy of the means of annoying us..."³. But soon after the treaty of Yandaboo they declared that – "although by our expulsion of the Burmese from the

¹ H.K. Barpujari, *Political History of Assam, Vol. I* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1999), p.3.

² A.C. Banarjee, *The Eastern Frontier of British India* (Calcutta: 1946), pp. 10-12.

³ H.K. Barpujari, *Assam: In the Days of the Company* (Shillong: NEHU Publication, 1996), p. 13.

territory of Assam, the country would of right become ours by conquest...”⁴. The colonization of North East India through the Treaty of Yandaboo was directly influenced by the policy of promotion of British commerce. British annexed Assam, which was the largest and richest in the region with the hope of commercial profits.⁵ The discovery of tea in 1823 and coal and petroleum in 1825 in the Brahmaputra Valley inspired the British to colonise Assam at the earliest⁶. These facts impressed the British authority about the commercial prospects in Assam. But the prevailed socio-economic structures of Assam make them depressed. *Khel* and *pyke*⁷ system which was particularly based on kind make the British administrator difficult to run as their system was based on cash. For that reason Britishers engaged to find out the alternative source of revenue collection, which led to the discovery of tea, coal, oil etc.

Discovery of Tea in Assam

In 19th century tea was the staple item of trade of East India Company. The Company Government was in search of a suitable place for tea cultivation to end the monopoly of the Chinese tea in the international markets. Tea shrubs grew wild in the Brahmaputra Valley, long before it was finally discovered, but no one knew for certain whether they bore real tea. It is said that in Assam people used tea as medicine in cold and fever⁸. In

⁴ *Ibid.*, George Swinton, the Political Secretary to the Government of India on 20th February 1824, to the Agent to the Governor-General, North East Frontier.

⁵ J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Trade and Colony: The British Colonisation of North East India* (Shillong: NEIHA, 2000), p.49

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ According to *pyke* system every male was to work for three to four months in a year for the state in lieu of tax for the land given to them for cultivation. An adult who was registered for state service was called a *paik*; four *paiks* constituted a *got*. The *paiks* were organised under *khels* according to the nature of their duties such as arrow making, boat-building, house-building and fighting. The whole adult population was divided into *khels* which ranged generally from three thousand to six thousand men and each *khel* was placed under an officer, *Phukan*, who was helped by other officials such as *Hazarikas*, *Saikias* and *Boras*.

⁸ Sarthak Sengupta & Jagadeshwar Lall Sharma, “Folksongs and Dances of Tea Garden Labourers of Assam”, in *Tea Garden Labourers of North-East India: A Multidimensional Study on the Adivasis of the Tea Garden of North East India*, eds. S. Karotemprel & B. Dutta Roy (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1990), pp. 214-226.

1819, David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General, Assam wrote in details to Mr. N. Wallis, famous Botanist of the East India Company, about the possibilities of tea cultivation in Assam. In 1823 Robert Bruce discovered indigenous species of tea in the forest of Singpho and Khamti areas and concluded a treaty with the Singphoo Chief. In 1823 Captain Jenkins and his assistant Mr. Charlton⁹, submitted their report and specimens eventually convinced the botanists and the Company Government that the Assam tea plant was identical with that of China¹⁰. The conviction was confirmed further when in south Cachar, the indigenous tea plant was first noticed in 1831¹¹. An expert group was sent to Assam by the Tea Committee to investigate regarding the scientific tea cultivation in the province. In this group the members were Mr. Wallich, Mr. M. Alland and Mr. P. Griffiths. This group had made an extensive travel throughout the province in search of suitable places for tea cultivation. In 1836 Mr. C.A. Bruce was sent to Assam as Superintendent of Tea Forest. With the consent of the expert view, C.A. Bruce started a tea-garden at 'Kundilmukh', in Sadiya in 1836, which seeds were collected from the Singphoo Chief. In 1837 another tea-garden was also started at Chabua, eighteen miles away from Dibrugarh.

The operations which were started under C.A. Bruce with the ultimate object of thriving the venture of private enterprise producing tea on a commercial scale proved successful. In 1837, twelve boxes of tea were shipped to London and this was followed in the next year by another lot of ninety-five chests¹². In 1839 'Bengal Tea Association' and 'Assam Company' had been formed in London. It appears that the intension of the East India Company was to experiment only to prove that the tea plant would grow in Assam and that tea could be produced as a marketable commodity, and then to leave it to private enterprise to produce it on a commercial scale. To facilitate the development of the tea industry under European capital, the Government made special rules of the grants to

⁹ Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Charlton were sent to Assam to investigate tea cultivation and its profits.

¹⁰ P. Griffiths, *The History of the India Tea Industry* (London: Weidenfeld Nicolson, 1967), pp. 39-41.

¹¹ J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under the British Rule of North East India* (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1970), p. 189.

¹² H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 2004), p. 40.

planters. The local authorities were directed by the Governor-General in Council to allow Assam Company or any other concern to commence operations and occupy such land as might be required under 'Waste Land Grant Rules, 1838'¹³. Under this rule waste land were offered to applicant on forty-five years, which was modified in 1854 under 'Old Assam Rules' which land was leased out for 99 years. In 1872 the total area taken up by tea planters in the Brahmaputra Valley was reported to be 364,990 acres¹⁴.

Exploration of Mining

Tea was not the only commodity to attract investor to Assam. Exploring and abstracting minerals and raw materials had been the prime aim of the Colonial British Government in Assam. Even before Assam's annexation, when in 1825 Lieutenant R. Wilcox, an officer of the 46th Assam Light Infantry was observed the petroleum at the river Buridihing. He saw oil "rising to the surface at Supkhong with great bubbling of gas and green petroleum." Wilcox also observed steam of coal in the bed of the Buridihing at Supkong¹⁵. In 1826, Wilcox informed David Scott about the easy procurability of coal in Upper Assam. Some specimens of these coals were sent to Calcutta for the perusal. The coal was found to be as good as English coal and 'the best ever found in India'¹⁶. In 1837 Lieutenant Bigge and Mr. Griffith also discovered coal seam at the bank of Namrup. In 1838 a Coal Committee was formed to report the availability of coal in this region. In 1838, Captain P.S. Hannay reported several coal beds in Jaipur. He also saw "muddy pools in a constant state of activity, throwing out with more or less force white mud mixed with petroleum"¹⁷. He also describe that this is indeed a "strange place...at times there is an internal noise as that of distant thunder, when it burst forth suddenly and then subsides"¹⁸. But exploitation of these minerals was rose tremendously after the formation of Assam Railways and Trading Company in 1881. Several collieries were set up at

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁴ E.A. Gait, *The Assam Land Revenue Manual* (Calcutta: 1896), pp. LXI-LXII.

¹⁵ F.R. Mallet, "Memoirs of the G.S.I." Vol. 12, (1876), pt.2, p.3.

¹⁶ Barpujari, *Vol. V op.cit.*, p.79.

¹⁷ P.S. Hannay, "On the Assam Petroleum Beds", *JASB*, Vol. 14, (1845), p.817.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Tikak, Namdang, Tirap, Ledo, Bargolai etc. Oil refinery was established in Digboi, which started production from 1901 onwards.

Commercialisation of Timber Trade

The development of tea, oil and coal field, also make growth of the commercialization of timber tremendously. The felling of Assam's forests for timber as well as to make room for tea plantations and mineral abstraction made large some destruction of forest. The encounter of the forested landscape was started with the discovery of the tea and other minerals in the forest land. The Colonial Government alienating the traditional rights of the people, converted forest into a commercial commodity. The reason behind the conservation and management of forest under colonial government was conversion of the forest resources into saleable commodity. The discovery of tea, oil and coal in the province need speedy and suitable means of communication, which led to the introduction of meter gauge railway in Assam. The necessary sleepers to extend the railway lines and tea boxes for packing tea, the forest of Assam has become profitable commercial avenues for colonial government. The growing demand of the forest produce led to the establishment of saw-mill industries in Assam. The first Saw-Mill was run by steam and established on the Dihing River just above its junction with the Brahmaputra with a view to supplying tea chests and timber to the tea planters and others¹⁹. Various Saw-Mills began to operate in the last decade of the nineteenth century; Assam had 11 of the 90 Saw-Mills that India had at that time, Lakhimpur alone having seven saw mills²⁰. The volume of production was also increased tremendously. Tea boxes which was manufactured approximately 1,18,000 boxes in 1889 increased to 4,12,000 boxes in 1900²¹.

¹⁹ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, (Forest) March 1882, Progs. 8-10.

²⁰ W.W. Hunter Ed., *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol.III* (1879), p.228.

²¹ *Annual Report of the Forest Administration of Assam*, 1891-92, para- 75.

The Notion of the Lazy Native

The villages in the Brahmaputra Valley offered all conditions that make for material prosperity. There was enough fertile land for all and much to spare if anyone ventured to clear the jungles. Hence, the great majority of the people were agriculturists of one kind or other and combined agriculture and traditional industry²². Rice, the common crops, was grown with little care and at small risk. While its cultivation yielded a large return without corresponding expenditure of their capital. The common people grew nearly every article of domestic consumption in their own fields and lived in ease and comfort. “In this enlightened country” wrote G.M. Barker, “each man is his own master and the life of a *ryot* is inconceivably and supremely happy”²³.

But changes occurred on the socio-economic scenario of the Assam, when indigenous tea plant, oil and coal were discovered. Its profitability and potentiality had awakened interest of the British capitalists in Assam from the early part of the nineteenth century. But because of the scarcity of the local labour British Capitalists had to face serious difficulties. C.A. Bruce, Superintendent of Tea Culture in Assam wrote in his report- “the want of population, labourers and tea makers is acute. They will have to be imported and settled on the soil”²⁴. The planters complained to Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy and Governor-General of India that “scarcity of labour is one of the most serious and real difficulties with which we had to contend. The indigenous population has been wholly insufficient to develop the province”²⁵. The reasons behind the scarcity of labour as cited by the planters and the official circles was the laziness and ease-loving nature of the indigenous people. Assamese people are ‘naturally indolent and largely self-sufficient nature of the village economy of Assam, to some extent was also one of the reasons of their not volunteering as labourers.’ In the words of Sir Percival Griffiths,

²²Priyam Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 1999), p.72.

²³G.M. Barker, *A Tea Planters Life in Assam* (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1838), p.77.

²⁴ C.A. Bruce, *Report on the Manufacture of Tea and on the Extent and Produce of Tea plantation in Assam* (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1838).

²⁵ Address presented by Tea Planters of Assam at Tezpur to His Excellency Lord Curzon, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, in Address presented to His Excellency in March 1900.

“the villagers enjoyed an economy which was almost self-sufficient and were therefore not much interested in the employment offered by the early tea planters, while the population of more developed parts of Assam were, as a rule, neither inclined, nor compelled by circumstances, to have come in search of work”²⁶.

The Government official report revealed that “the Assamese as a rule, an indolent apathetic race, and won’t stir themselves to work when they find that the produce from their crops is sufficient to keep them and pay their government revenue”²⁷.

In spite of these popular notions amongst the British officials against the Assamese people, Assamese peasants, mostly Bodo Kachari tribe, sought employment as labourers in the tea gardens of Assam. After initial hesitation some other Assamese were also induced to work as labourers during their ‘spare time’²⁸, and remained practically the sole source of labour for the industry till 1859²⁹. Writing about the Bodo- Kacharies, a plains tribe in the Brahmaputra Valley, as tea garden labourers, the Superintendent of the Assam Company wrote:

“the Kachari coolie is very much superior to the common Assamese as a labourers, has fewer prejudices of caste, eats animal food, drinks spirits and unless when perverted by the Assamese example and influence, abstains from the use of opium. These habits, while they tend to preserve their physical superiority also entail the necessity of increased industry for their provision”³⁰.

Besides, Bodo-Kacharee in large bodies continually migrate to Upper Assam, “bands of them go up, and serve for two or three years and then return to their homes, purchasing

²⁶ Griffiths. *Op.cit.*, p.267.

²⁷ General Administration Report of the Province of Assam for the year 1872-73, in the *Bengal Secretariat Proceedings*, General Department, during Oct. 1873 (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1873), p.18.

²⁸R.C. Kalita, “Immigration to Assam: British Policy and Assamese Middle Class (1826-1900).” in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 13th Session, (Shillong, 1993) p.179.

²⁹ *Royal Commission on Opium, Vol. II*, (ASA: 1894), p. 298.

³⁰ H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company* (Edinburg: Assam Company Ltd., 1957), p. 484.

cattle etc., with their savings. But any quarrel with one Kacharee coolie becomes the quarrel of all Kacharees on the tea garden and if they feel aggrieved, they behave in this manner”³¹. Except the Bodo labour, the Assistant Commissioner of North Lakhimpur wrote:-

“It is very rare things indeed for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. Their taking such work at all is generally attributable to temporary necessity as for instance inability to pay their revenue, wanting to get married and not having necessary means, being in debt to *keyah* and wanting if possible to escape payment of exorbitant interest, or as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of yoke of bullocks for cultivating purposes etc. etc.”³².

People from Naga and Mikir Hills were also came down to work in the plains of Assam. But they come down from the hills only during the months December to March³³. But these labour were little expensive. Labour can be obtained at eight *annas* per day per man, but these people never stopped for more than ten days at a time at most until the supply of rice they have brought with them is exhausted³⁴. They then return to hills to procure “fresh supply as they will not eat plains rice, and it is impossible to be certain if they will return or not”³⁵.

According to R.C. Kalita, “the aversion of the Assamese to wage labour was due to the prevalence of *pyke* service”³⁶. The Assamese society based on *pyke* and *Khel* system was the backbone of the society. They had to serve as *ranuwa* (soldier) *banuwa* (labour)

³¹ General Administration Report of the Province of Assam for the year 1872-73, in the *Bengal Secretariat Proceedings General Department* during Oct. 1873, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Office, 1873, p.18.

³² Griffiths. *Op.cit.*, p.267.

³³ *Report on the Working Plan of the Nambor Reserved Forest of the Golaghat Range, Sibsagar Division, Assam, for the period of fifteen years from 1904-1919.* ASA, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Kalita, *Op.cit.*, p.179.

when situation demanded. The practice of obligatory, *pyke* service under the Ahom rule was ‘obviously unpopular’³⁷. Even, the *pyke* service came to be looked down upon during the last few decade of the Ahom rule. R.C. Kalita argues that

“the attitude of unwillingness was due to a hang-over of the past when Assamese peasants were obliged to offer their labour in *paik* services under the Ahom Rule... the nature of... wage labour was treated as equal to *pyke* service prevalent under the Ahoms and the consequent aversion to all kinds of manual work... and this was more so with the coming up of a foreign Government in place of a native one”³⁸.

They were keen to keep their status quo even after the annexation of Assam by the British. Though they were bounded under the banner of the *khel* system but even then they were practically they are free. And they were happy in their village life and their limited resources. Mr. A.E. Campbell, Assistant Commissioner says that- “he has always found it most difficult to get labour for local roads and other works at Barpeta and somehow people have come to look on all worksmen for government as ‘beggars’ or impressed government labourers, and it matters not if they are paid double the rates obtainable elsewhere”³⁹. The Assamese people did not like to work in fixed time-bound services⁴⁰. The Assamese people on the other hand were averse to working for daily wages as “they affirm that by doing so they compromise their respectability...”⁴¹. They were also very much aware of their social status, and to work as labourers under the British meant a social degradation for them⁴². They denying which offered them the double amount

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.178-179.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ General Administration Report of the Province of Assam for the year 1872-73, in the *Bengal Secretariat Proceedings, General Department* during Oct. 1873, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Office, 1873, p.20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Hunter, W.W. (1998). *A Statistical Account of Assam, Vol. I*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication. p.336 (Original work Published 1879).

⁴² *Bengal Secretariat Proceedings*, 1873, *Op.cit.*

“as it lower their social position. It is the object of every *ryot* to obtain, if possible, or retain if he has already got it, the appellation of a “*bhala manus*, or gentlemen”⁴³.

They were willing to offer their service during their spare time. But they would prefer to list as a coolie for Upper Assam, where his fellow villagers cannot see his degradation, or even go about in rags at home and earn precarious livelihood by drudging for his well-to-do neighbours, but he shrinks from working as a coolie for government”⁴⁴.

There was another popular notion amongst the British officials that indigenous Assamese people unwilling to work hard mainly because they had limited wants. According to A.J.M. Mills Assamese people were satisfied “with the humblest of food, plainest of clothes and smallest of habitations. The requirements of their daily life were produced by their own toil; they cultivate rice, pulses, fruits (and) vegetable to supply their tables, mustard to light their houses (and) silk (or) cotton to provide their garments”⁴⁵. Whatever little trade existed, it was through door to door barter of commodities like clothes, cotton and *muga* yarn, rice, pulses, turmeric, mustard oil, tobacco and opium. Therefore it was impossible to procure coolies for any government work without impressing them⁴⁶. Writing about the scarcity of labour, the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong wrote:-

“I cannot procure; in fact ‘voluntary’ labour for special purposes is, I may say, almost unknown. I admit that day labourers are found in large numbers to work on roads, bridges, and tea estates etc., but difficult in procuring ‘voluntary’ labour arises when coolies are required for ‘public purposes’ for the conveyance of any government stores and property etc. These duties are considered by the coolies to be degrading and objectionable and almost everyman considered

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Mills, A. J. M. (1854). *Report on the Province of Assam*, p.XXXVIII.

⁴⁶ Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, August, 1868, General Deptt., Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat office, p.35.

himself far too respectable (*bhal manuh* as they seem to think) to condescend to perform such service”⁴⁷.

On the other hand Rai Bahadur Gunabhi Ram Barua, an Assamese gentleman of intelligence and good education, wrote as follows of his countrymen in 1888:

“The class of artisans is dying out. We get imported articles cheaper, and they are also better. For this reason indigenous artisans and manufactures are neglected. In former times there were *khels* of blacksmiths and goldsmiths and cultivators. They used to do work because they had to supply the wants of the king and the masters of the *khel*. By this mean the public used to be benefited. They held and enjoyed land under a sort of service tenure. The service system has now been given up, and the land revenue is the only demand now made. As the Government does not now require any articles, and as imported articles are being supplied, they gave up the work. They see that by payment of revenue they stand on an equal footing with those who were their masters. Compulsory labour has been abolished, and the people who have not yet forgotten the hardship of such labour have sought and found ease. They dislike to follow their former occupations as well as to render services to others. They regard rendering menial service to others, especially and to Government officers, as a kind of slavery”⁴⁸.

Health Condition of Assam

Assam has a moderate climate. Assam is freely open to the moister-laden winds from the Bay of Bengal and away dry air-current of the Gangatic plain during the hot weather. Rise of temperature in Assam is checked by frequent showers during the spring and summer. Because in Assam it rains for “eight months in the year and even the four

⁴⁷ Proceedings of the Hon’ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, October, 1872, General Department, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat office, p.5.

⁴⁸ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903, p.57.

months of winter are not free from rains”⁴⁹. The mighty Brahmaputra which divided Assam into two equal portion and its numerous tributaries created havoc during the rainy season. Numerous rivers on the one hand and the forest and hills made its climate damp and due to moisture and dampness diseases like Malaria, Typhoid, small-pox, gout etc. the most common diseases of the valley.

The health condition of the people of Assam was deteriorated, when the virus of kala-azar appeared in the nineteenth century. In 1883 the black fever epidemic (Kala-azar) appeared in Goalpara and later it appeared in Assam proper in 1888 and gradually spread throughout its length and breadth. During 1891 to 1901, the population of Goalpara subdivision decreased by 18 per cent and that of Kamrup district by 16 per cent. During the next decade, the population of Kamrup district decreased 7.10 per cent, that of Mangaldoi subdivision of Darrang by 9 per cent and Nagaon by 24.80 per cent⁵⁰.

Table 2.1
Number of death from *Kala-azar* in Assam from 1920 to 1940⁵¹

Districts	1920	1925	1930	1935	1940
Cachar	5	3	2	7	5
Sylhet	26	2,109	274	260	115
Goalpara	602	433	112	100	178
Kamrup	931	1,120	102	176	6
Darrang	256	478	185	91	221
Nagaon	846	1,445	132	52	161
Sibasagar	114	200	58	101	773
Lakhimpur	-	8	02	-	3
Garro Hills	18	435	84	58	70
Total	2,798	6351	951	845	1591

⁴⁹ Shihabuddin Talish, the historian of Mir Jumla, who invaded Assam in the middle of the 17th Century, made an assessment of the climate of Assam, *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol. I, part II, December 1915, in S.L. Barua, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2003).

⁵⁰ A. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2006), p.31.

⁵¹ *Source*: Annual Public Health Report of the respective year, ASA

Kala-azar, which is generally believed popularly to be an acute form of malarial poisoning which is specially liable to be communicated from the sick to the healthy. The impact of Kala-azar on the health condition of the state can easily be realized from the statements of the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon, when he wrote in 1903,

“...who has not travelled throughout it, and been into villages. During *basti* sites are common; but most struck to their houses till they died... ten or twelve Hojai villages at the foot of the hills near Doboka have completely disappeared”⁵².

There were empty spaces where earlier houses stood, and same sort of thing could be seen all over the province. This fell epidemic died many cultivating and labouring *rai-yats* and left helpless widows and destitute parents behind⁵³. Cultivation could not be properly carried on owing to the diminution in some families of cultivating members. So much land had gone out of cultivation that it has hardly any value except in the town. A man will not buy land when it can had for the asking⁵⁴. In 1897 the Deputy Commissioner, Nagaon, pointed out that kala-azar –

“not only caused a decrease in the number of the population, but has also produced a marked indifference in the mind of the survivors. The people have been so disheartened as to feel no adequate interest in their ordinary avocations and they often do not hesitate to resign even their most valuable *rupit* fields”⁵⁵.

In the Guwahati subdivision, the number of *bighas* of land under cultivation in 1887-88 was 379,377, but three years later, in 1890-91, this number had fallen by 10,946, but in 1894-95, about half of this loss had been regained. In the affected parts of Mangaldai, namely, the Pathorighat and Mangaldoi *tahsils*, there has been a steady decrease year by year from 208,096 *bighas* under cultivation in 1891-92 to 182,149 in 1896-97, or a loss

⁵² Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, April, 1903.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

of 25,952 *bighas*, which is just about one-quarter of the total. In Nowgong, the whole of which had been affected by the epidemic, there has been a decrease of 29,477 *bighas* of land under cultivation since 1891-92⁵⁶.

Table No. 2.2
Cases of Kala-azar treated from 1920 to 1940

Districts	1920	1925	1930	1935	1940
Cachar	75	442	376	478	728
Sylhet	158	10934	6326	3669	3306
Goalpara	1,569	6003	1439	1245	3194
Kamrup	2402	8758	1814	1463	1721
Darrang	387	5262	1106	758	1591
Nagaon	1816	13895	1440	1651	3129
Sibasagar	659	3285	1495	932	4078
Lakhimpur	9	99	23	12	13
Garo Hills	54	1952	1903	690	1385
Total	7118	60625	16319	11091	21130

Source: Annual Public Health Report of the respective year, ASA

Kala-azar was not only merciless in the number of its victims, but also in the way it killed. Men merely died in three months, and often lingered two years, sometimes even more. If two or three members of a family were attacked with the disease, all its little savings were spent to support them. The Garos were commonly credited in former days with taking affected persons⁵⁷ out into the jungle, and after making them unconscious with drink, setting fire to the temporary huts in which they were placed, and so burning them to death⁵⁸. Kala-azar not only claimed victims in a family, but left the survivors impoverished, if not ruined⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ *Report of an Investigation of the Epidemic of Malarial Fever in Assam or Kala-azar*, by Leonard Rogers M.B.B.S., London, F.R.C.S., England, (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Press, 1897), p. 133.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.130.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903.

Opium Addiction and Assam

The Assamese people were introduced to the poppy plant and its use during the days of the Mughal invasion of Assam in the seventeenth century. However, opium-addiction remained a vice limited only to a few rich men there until the middle of the next century⁶⁰. The drug used to be collected by saturating strips of coarse cotton cloth—each about three inches broad—in the juice obtained from incisions made into the poppy plant. Dried and lightly rolled up, these strips of cloth, known as *Kanee*. Poorer people prepared a drink by dissolving this *kanee* in water. Richer people extracted *madak* from it by evaporating the water, and they smoked it⁶¹. According to Maniram Dewan, poppy was first cultivated by Rajput Barkendazes at Beltala in the vicinity of Guwahati during the reign of King Lakshmi Singha⁶². It was through their agency that the opium habit spread through its length and breadth. Thomas Welsh, in 1792 observed that ‘poppy was growing in luxuriance in most of the lower provinces’ of Assam and that the reigning monarch; Gaurinath Singha was an opium addict⁶³. In 1809, Buchanan Hamilton wrote that opium in Assam was ‘raised in abundance for consumption and there is much used’⁶⁴.

Haliram Dhekial Phukan witnessed a great change in the case of poppy cultivation, he noted in 1829 that there was almost no place in Assam where poppy was not cultivated⁶⁵. Opium became a common drug to all Assamese that even A.J. Moffat Mills, Judge of the *Sadar Dewani* and *Nizamat Adalat* of Calcutta, when visited the province in 1853 to

⁶⁰ Maniram Barua, *Buranji Vivekaratna*. Mss. No. 272, Transcription No. 108, preserved at DHAS, (Guwahati:DHAS, 1838), p.424-24.

⁶¹ H. Dhekial-phukan, (1962). *Assam Buranji*. Calcutta, reprint and Edited by J.M. Bhattacharjee, Guwahati, p.110. (Original work Published 1828).

⁶² Mills. *Op.cit.*, p.75.

⁶³ S.K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations, 1871-1926* (Guwahati: Lawyers’ Book Stall, 1974), pp. 316 and 322.

⁶⁴ F. Buchanan Hamilton, (1963). *An Account of Assam, 1807-14*. reprint, Guwahati: DHAS, p.59. (Original work Published 1820).

⁶⁵ Dhekial-Phukan. *Op.cit.*, p.101.

enquire into the local conditions, he was convinced that ‘three-fourth of the population are opium eaters and men, women and children alike use the drug’⁶⁶.

But when the British government had the knowledge that the general people of Assam also have weakness to opium, taking advantage of this situation the British made it an article of universal consumption of the people of Assam and by doing so they augmented their revenues by leaps and bounds. For which the number of opium eater growing rapidly. Sir Andrew John Moffatt Mills, in the course of his official tour and inquiry in 1853, found that 75% per cent of the people of Assam were opium eaters⁶⁷, i.e., within 28 years of British rule (1826-53) the use of opium became most universal. In 1853 Haliram Dhekial Phukan wrote to Mr. Mills where he stated that- “before the accession of the British power, twenty-eight year ago, the use of opium was not so universal”⁶⁸. In the same vein, Johnston Long, Civil Surgeon of Sibsagar also wrote in 1853 that

“the lower orders in Assam were not permitted to grow the poppy or to use opium in any way” and the “unrestricted use of opium almost the peasantry of Assam were not permitted to grow poppy, or to use opium in any way, and the unrestricted use of opium amongst the peasantry of Assam are not of very old data”⁶⁹.

On the other hand the habit of taking opium grew among them when an idea spread that the consumption of opium would be helpful to get them cured from the attack of kala-azar. In this context Kali Ram Chaudhari, Extra Assistant Commissioner, Nagaon from his experience wrote- “I myself have seen instances of conversion of total abstainers into opium-eaters. I should not be understood to say that there was no opium-eating before the appearance of the kala-azar. There were certainly a large number of people who used to take opium in one kind or other”⁷⁰. According to an investigation conducted by Colonel Chopra in 1928, he found that the main causes of popularity of opium habit

⁶⁶ Mills. *Op.cit.*, p.19-20.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p.19.

⁶⁸ Mills. *Op.cit.*, Appendix- J, p.110.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* p. 631.

⁷⁰ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903, pp. 24-25.

among the Assamese people were: (a) Disease or minor ailment for which o medical advice was sought- 33% per cent. (b) Association with other addicts- 29.5% (c) Pleasure- 18.8%, (d) Hard work, worry or strain-13.4%, (e) Substitute for alcohol- 5.3%⁷¹.

Effect of the Habit

Opium had also its share in degrading its consumers. Opium is a habit forming drug, even when taken in moderation; it is perfectly clear that certain deterious effects manifest themselves. The most noticeable physical effect is a gradual weakening of the body which is accentuated when the addicts in his craving for the drug even neglected the bare necessities of food and clothing. It undoubtedly leads to physical, mental and eventually moral deterioration. Addicts lose their will-power, and subsequently their judgment become defective. The habitual use of opium incapacitates the individual from discharging his duties he is deprived of the dose at the right time⁷². Those who were addicted to opium eating were generally found averse to labour. In this connection Gunabhiram Barooah rightly remarks that “the consumers are weak in body and in mind, slow, lazy, forgetful, with willingness to swear and tell lies and commit petty thefts”⁷³.

Mills wrote in his Report, “the use of opium has with many almost become a necessary of life, and in a damp country like Assam it is perhaps beneficial if taken with moderation, but experience has shown that to allow every man to grow the plant and manufacture the drug unrestrictedly is almost injurious to the morale of the people. Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it”⁷⁴. Thus Mr. Mills supported the consumption of opium but he advocated the abolition of cultivation of poppy and production of drug locally. Because in Assam where the “deficiency of available labour... in a province so thinly populated but greatly aggravated owing to the

⁷¹ *Report of the Assam Opium Enquiry Committee, 1933*, ASA, p.23. Colonel Chopra of the Calcutta Tropical School of Medicine in 1928 published a Pamphlet on “The Present Position of Opium Habit in India” where he tried to trace out the growing popularity of opium among the Assamese people.

⁷² *Report of the Assam Enquiry Committee, 1923*, PHA, File no. 33.

⁷³ *Royal Commission on Opium, 1893*, PHA, File No. 261.

⁷⁴ Mills. *Op.cit.*, pp. 19-20, emphasis added.

immoderate use of opium⁷⁵. To tackle with this problem, The Assam Company solicited the Governor- General of India that ‘the cultivation of the poppy either altogether (be) prohibited or its cultivation heavily taxed; with the simultaneous introduction of Government opium for sale so as to realize a sizable amount of revenue for the Government and thereby to force the Assamese opium-eaters to labour to purchase the luxury⁷⁶. Accordingly government opium was introduced through vendor system.

Table No. 2.3
Opium Statistics of Assam: 1875-76 to 1939-40

Year	Assam Proper			Assam Province (including Manipur)		
	Consumption (Maunds)	No. Of shops	Wholesale Price Rs. Per seer	Consumption (Maunds)	Opium Revenue (Rs. 1000)	No. Of shops
1875-76	1,689	2,740	----	1,874	1,225	3,151
1890-91	1,208	829	37	1,308	1,812	946
1900-01	1,201	674	,,	1,291	1804	761
1910-11	1391	355	,,	1512	2462	416
1920-21	1519	272	57	1615	4412	315
1925-26	761	248	,,	838	4,494	300
1930-31	472	243	,,	512	2664	293
1935-36	230	----	95	296	1557	292
1939-40	68	179	,,	94	520	217

Source: Amalendu Guha, Planter Raj to Swaraj, Appendix 4, p.280.

Many scholars have pointed out that the British intervention in Assam and the adjoining hill areas was also motivated by economic interest. Narrations of British travelers of the rich natural resources of Assam were not unknown to the British administrators. Initially, when the Company’s troops marched into the province; they did not show the slightest

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Memorial of the Assam Company, to the Governor General of India in Council, dated 1st May 1857, Home Department; Revenue Branch Consultation 22nd May, 1857, No.4 NAI.

intension of annexing the province. Situation changed after the Burmese defeat and the earlier promises made by the British of only helping to re-establish Ahom monarchy were left behind and the British stayed on to rule the province of Assam. But soon they realized that they could not reach their goal because Assam was not a populous state in regards to its area. Abundance wasteland, peculiar social structure and revenue collection system and unique mindset of the people of Assam, compelled the Company Government to think about their plan. Society which was based on the *khel* and *pyke* system, where the peasantry lived in a state of ease as re-assessment took place at great intervals, but heads of families originally polled as one. During the intervening period the members of the family increased tenfold and thus the burden of enforced labour fell lightly upon the members of the family⁷⁷. According to Lt. Rutherford, “There is not a doubt that Assam until the arrival of the Burmese was in a most flourishing state and we could not afford the same system”⁷⁸. The same note of high tribute is also struck by Captain Jenkins who was on special survey duty in Assam in 1832-33. We find from his observation that

“It (Assam) has supported a very dense population on the whole happily governed. The wealth of the kingdom and the ambition of its princes appear to have subjected the inhabitants to faction, dissensions and foreign invasions and ended in reducing a flourishing and populous state to the utmost degree of wretchedness and degeneracy”⁷⁹.

From the time immemorial the river Brahmaputra has been contributing greatly in the socio-economic life of the Assam. The categories of soil, alluvial, laterite and red loam are to be found distributed, and for different uses land has been divided into *Vasti*, *Rupit*, for winter crops and *Faringati* for summer rice, sugarcane, mustard seed and other crops.

⁷⁷ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Home Political, 1832, July 23, Nos 70-71. Copy of memorandum regarding Revenue System of Assam drawn up by Lt. Rutherford.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Also R.M. Lahiri, *The Annexation of Assam* (Calcutta: Firma KLM private Ltd. 1994), pp. 271-272.

For the revenue purposes the pre-British rulers of the valley divided the land system into *Kheraj* (full revenue) *Nisfkheraj* (half assessed) and *Lakheraj* (revenue free). With their limited wants the Assamese people live happily. The economic life of the Assamese people was very rightly fit the Assamese proverb *Akalo nai bharalo nai* or “neither famine, nor granary”⁸⁰. The mighty Brahmaputra which divided the Assam into two equal parts makes its valleys fertile by leaving its silts. The valley has received all the good and evil effects of the climate, bestowed by the river system and the adjoining forests and hilly areas. A fertile valley though, “its climate is damp and relaxing, so that, while the people enjoy great material prosperity”⁸¹. The northern bank appears to be healthier than the southern one, which is due to moisture and dampness, caused by the rivers and forest. Humidity in summer and fog in winter it causes Malaria, Typhoid, dysentery, small-pox, gout etc. are the most common diseases of the valley. On the other hand deposit of silt by the river Brahmaputra and its tributary, cultivator produce maximum in a minimum labour which make them idle and lazy⁸².

On the eve of British annexation, the economy of Assam had almost ruined due to dark political age, the internal conflict of the Ahoms, the Moamoria revolution, the tyranny and atrocities of the Burmese etc. A section of people took shelter either in forest or hills to get rid of the atrocities of the Burmese. In this revolt and invasion, along with *kala-azar* Assam had to lose a considerable size of population. Moreover, to avoid any kind of physical labour a number of the Assamese people took shelter in *Satras* and *Namghars* as a *bhakat* in the name of religion. As a result of which a large area of agricultural land turned into wasteland. From the total cultivable land of Assam only some 24,000 sq. miles of its flat alluvial plains were habitable⁸³.

Assam during the Ahoms was a self sufficient village economy. They could produce every article in their own fields. Moreover their wants were also limited. The average

⁸⁰ Barpujari, *Vol. V*, p.140.

⁸¹ P.C. Chowdhury, “The Brahmaputra Valley: Its Civilization”, in *Assam and the Assamese Mind*, ed., Nagen Saikia, (Jorhat: Assam Sahitya Sabha, 1991), p.116.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Shahiuz Zaman Ahmed, “Factors Leading to the Migration from East Bengal to Assam (1871-1971)”, *India History Congress, 66th Session*, (Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan: IHC, 2006), p.999.

cultivator in the Assam Valley “will ordinarily only cultivate as much land as is absolutely necessary, and no more”⁸⁴. The Assamese people were only concerned about their immediate need and rarely was there any surplus for a rainy day. What the people consider themselves as comfort is only a condition “free from want, with sufficient opium and *pan-tamul*’ (betel-leaf and betel-nut)”⁸⁵. In 1888, Mr. Luttman-Johnson, Commissioner of the Assam Valley wrote –

“like the rest of Eastern India my division suffers from excess of the means of subsistence. In my division living is so easily earned that the people are demoralized, that is, they are too contented have few ambitions, develop no new wants...”⁸⁶.

In 1903 Mr. Darrah, Director of Land Record of Assam wrote:

“Assam where land is so plentiful, even the Assamese cultivators should voluntarily abandon their rights and become the under-tenants of others. Assamese had strong dislike to anything involving the least labour. There is nothing which the Assamese detests more than trouble. Anything which caused the slightest inconvenience is “*bor dukh*” to go to the cut cherry and point out errors in the lease which has been given him. It is “*bor-dukh*” if he is obliged to pass noon without his mid-day meal. It is “*bor-dukh*” to go out at all if the rain is falling⁸⁷.

The colonial state worried about the low density population and the reluctance of the local people to work as a labourer. But at the beginning they had to depend on the Assamese labour and occasionally the Nagas and the Singhos. British official also tried to win heart of the community or their respective chiefs by offering a feast or presents of

⁸⁴ According to Mr. Meliths, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, *The Land Revenue Report of Assam, 1897-98*, p.22.

⁸⁵ File: Revenue-A, April 1903, 11-43 p.34, ASA.

⁸⁶ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903.

⁸⁷ Mr. Darrah, Director of Land Record, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903.

beads, culleries, looking-glass etc.⁸⁸. The Nagas were employed in clearing jungles. But the Singhos ‘had no inclination of work for any so long they had enough of rice and opium for their immediate requirement and would brook no control as to whether they worked or not’⁸⁹. The Assamese, most of them being agriculturists, could work only in off-season and therefore it was difficult to have the same batch ‘even for two consecutive seasons’⁹⁰. To induce them competitive rates had to be offered; a labourer could be had in 1824-25 at 1 rupee per month, in 1839 at Rs. 2-8 and in 1858-59 it mounted upto Rs. 4-8⁹¹. To collect labour, duffadars or the recruiting agents roamed from village to village and often quite tactfully made the young men drunk and kept them away from their families and field by providing advance money⁹². In spite of such expedients it was difficult to have adequate number of hands at seasons when they were greatly needed⁹³.

From the early part of the British Administration, the government officials advocated immigration into the province in view of the fact that the cultivators of the Assam Valley earn a livelihood with greater ease, and to be free from pecuniary embarrassment to an extent greater than the peasantry of probably any other province in India. In Land Revenue Report, 1897-98 stating about Assamese people wrote:

“They might be exceedingly prosperous but for their disinclination to undergo more exertion than is necessary to satisfy their personal requirements. Because there is abundance of fertile land available to them which yield the maximum of crops for the minimum of labour. They do not know famine or serious scarcity is, they are free from indebtedness to the *mahajan*. The farmers of Assam used to keep their invested crops in *bhoral* and used it not only for their yearly food but

⁸⁸ Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, Op.cit.*, p.254.

⁸⁹H.A. Antrobus, *Op.cit.* p.375.

⁹⁰ Barpujari, *Assam in the Days of the Company, Op.cit.*, p.254.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

also invest it for their important festivals. There is no pressure of competition; every cultivator has probably a little hoard laid by to be drawn upon for weddings or other big occasions; and the way in which they recovered from the earthquake and floods shows that they have reserve resources to fall back upon. They get all they want according to their modest standard of living and have no desire to work for more”⁹⁴.

Mr. P.G. Melitus, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam, while speaking on the matter of immigration of the people from outside stated that:

“though there is an unlimited demand for labour of all kinds in the province for the tea gardens, nearly all the labour, skilled and unskilled, required for this division of the province has to be imported and rice has to be brought from Bengal for the tea-garden population”⁹⁵.

Notwithstanding its scanty population, the province of Assam is dependent on the importation of food for its support. The force of this statement will be appreciated when it is realized that the population per square mile of the five fertile districts of the Brahmaputra Valley according to the census of 1891 is Kamrup 173.2, Darrang 90.0, Nowgong 105.6, Sibsagar 160.1, and Lakhimpur only 68.2. It has own consumption. But they cultivate very little more, and the large immigrant population employed on the tea gardens has to be fed, for the most part, on imported rice. The following figure shows the amount of rice importation into the province:

⁹⁴ *The Land Revenue Report of Assam, 1897-98*, p.22.

⁹⁵ Opinion of Mr. Melitus, *Ibid.*

Table No. 2.4

Importation of Rice from Bengal to Brahmaputra valley, 1876-77 to 1897-98⁹⁶

Year	Maunds.
1876-77	411,431
1881-82	442,219
1885-86	421,437
1895-96	714,703
1896-97	963,947
1897-98	694,725

Source: Revenue-A, November 1898, File No. 128-138.

The above table shows clearly that the importation of rice constitutes large drainage of wealth from Assam to feed the increased immigration in the tea industry. In Assam, there was where suitable lands for rice cultivation was practically unlimited, even then Assam was an importing and not an exporting province as large area of such lands were remained uncultivated. In the circumstances, it is not surprising to find that the *bazaar* price of rice in Assam was normally higher than in Bengal. The official quotations of the price of common rice in the five districts of the Brahmaputra Valley during August 1898 were as follows:- Gauhati 11 seers for a rupee, Tezpur 9, Nowgong 8, Sibsagar 10, and Dibrugarh 9⁹⁷.

But the high rate of food prices did not effect in their moral and material condition of the people. Writing about the condition of Assamese people of the district Lakhimpur Mr. A.C. Campbell said-

“the Assamese *raiya*s still hold good in this district in so far as they can provide themselves with two cooked meals a day...there is absence of Assamese beggars both in the towns and the *mufassil*...the meals, however, consist only of boiled rice and vegetables in most

⁹⁶ File- Revenue-A, 128-138, November 1898.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

cases...they have not to grow but only to gather from wild herbs and leaves of wild plants. What fish they can catch in the small streams and *nullas* they eat. A majority of the Assamese *rai-yats* do not use salt at all, much less oil or any other condiment”⁹⁸.

However, the prosperity in the Assamese family was generally observed in the case of a joint family consisting of a number of able-bodied members with a well organized household. Small families rarely prosper⁹⁹. Increase of population and extension of cultivation were the best criterion of the prosperity of the agricultural classes. But there was very little improvement under these two heads so far as indigenous population was concerned.

At the same time British officials were searching answers how to compel the Assamese people to be wage earner labourers. Accordingly Lieutenant Philips, the Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon, remarked that the idleness of the Assamese people because “easy independence have a fertile soil, and almost nominal land tax raised them.....they are perhaps as indolent and at the same time as litigious a people as it would be easy to meet with”¹⁰⁰. Therefore he suggested

“the increased rates of land assessment which have now been introduced may tend in some measure to cure both these feelings, by compelling them to have recourse on a much larger scale than formerly to healthy labour, and thus giving them at the same time less leisure for bringing their petty private squabbles into the court of justice”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁸ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, April, 1903, p.19.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Proceedings*, Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, August, 1868, General Department, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Office, pp.35-36.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

The following compilation from official sources, showing the total area of culturable waste, the area under cultivation of the five districts in Assam which were under Raiyatwari settlement over a period of the following years¹⁰²:

Table No. 2.5

Area under cultivation in the Brahmaputra Valley, 1853-1897-98

Name of the District	Total Area of culturable waste	Net area under cultivation				
		1853	1866	1875-76	1895-96	1897-98
Kamrup	Acres. 1,343,007	Acres 359,680	Acres 472,510	Acres 491,738	Acres 553,158	Acres 536,283
Darrang	1,430,951	221,920	1,93,465	192,708	264,152	268,343
Nowgong	1,467,674	176,640	233,117	210,864	257,168	218,502
Sibsagar	940,605	163,946	295,978	277,790	434,076	459,020
Lakhimpur	1,597,741	85,760	129,428	85,177	183,680	202,930
Total	6,779,978	1,007,946	1,324,498	1,258,277	1,692,234	1,685,078

Source: Revenue-A, November 1898, File No. 128-138.

Out of 6,779,978 acres available for cultivation, only about one million of acres were cultivated, and the revenue derived therefrom was undoubtedly very low, amounting to only Rs. 7,41,971 (**Table No. 2.3**). It purports to relate to settled area only, and must exclude a very considerable area of concealed cultivation. The low rates of assessment continued, and both cultivation and revenue gradually but slowly increased, until in 1866 the revenue amounted to about ten lakhs of rupees. In 1868-69 the land revenue was doubled by Colonel Hopkinson with a stroke of the pen and rose to over twenty lakhs of rupees. But the area under cultivation began to wane, and when this Chief Commissionership was formed in 1874-75, although the revenue amounted to Rs. 21,32,008, there were only about a million and a quarter of acres under cultivation.

¹⁰²File- Revenue-A, 128-138, November 1898.

Accordingly as suggested by Hopkinson land revenue was raised in 1868 in three categories, *Basti*, *Rupit* and *Faringati*¹⁰³. In 1889 the Government of India revised the rates of revenue imposed in 1868, and a resettlement of the valley was effected in 1893. The villages were divided into four classes and the rates of revenue per *bigha* raised¹⁰⁴-

Table No. 2.6
Classifications of land and rate of Revenue 1893

From		To									
	Rs.	a.		1 st Class	2 nd Class	3 rd Class	4 th Class				
				Rs.	a.	Rs.	a.	Rs.	a.		
Basti	1	0	Basti	1	6	1	4	1	2	1	0
Rupit	0	10	Rupit	1	0	0	14	0	12	0	10
Faringati	0	8	Faringati	0	12	0	10	0	9	0	8

Source: Proceedings, Revenue and Agricultural Department, April, 1903.

With the result that there was a rise of nearly eleven lakhs in the land revenue demand, which was equivalent to an increase of 33 per cent. The justification of the general enhancement lay in the fact that there have been great increases in the price of the ordinary staples produce by the Assamese and also in the wages of labour since the last settlement. In 1868, 19 seers of common rice could be purchased for 1rupee; in 1892 this amount had fallen to 11, i.e., the price had risen by 73 per cent., there had been a considerable rise in the local prices of mustered and sugar.

¹⁰³ File- Revenue-A, 1890, 9-14, (month unknown) ASA.

¹⁰⁴ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, April, 1903

Table No. 2.7**Revenue derived from the Land Revenue in Assam proper: 1853 to 1897-98¹⁰⁵**

Name of the District	Land revenue realized in					
	1853	1864-65	1874-75	1895-96	1896-97	1897-98
Kamrup	Rs. 2,95,993	Rs. 3,63,032	Rs. 8,01,906	Rs. 13,19,092	Rs. 13,92,129	Rs. 13,54,737
Darrang	1,52,795	1,65,282	3,39,368	6,70,347	6,72,670	6,77,937
Nowgong	1,30,437	1,77,907	3,56,339	6,54,814	5,93,066	5,23,006
Sibsagar	1,19,032	2,10,064	4,80,433	11,59,207	12,47,147	12,32,689
Lakhimpur	43,714	77,157	1,53,962	4,66,790	4,31,608	4,32,511
Total	7,41,971	9,93,442	21,32,008	42,70,250	43,36,620	42,19,880

Source: Revenue-A, November 1898, File No. 128-138.

The enhanced rate of revenue could not make any changes regarding the idleness of the Assamese people. Major Jenkins firmly believed that there could be no solution to the problem unless effective measures were taken to procure labour from areas of surplus population outside the province. He made a suggestion of this nature as early as 1837. W.W. Hunter writes in 1879- “the people are averse to working for daily wages, as they affirm that by doing so they compromise their respectability...”¹⁰⁶. The cause he referred to was, however, ‘their natural indolence’¹⁰⁷. Hence, the depleted population of the province, scarcity of local labour as well as an acute aversion to manual or wage labour, the British officials depend on indentured labour and immigration for their labour supply.

Assamese intelligentsias and middle class also agreed with the British officials from the beginning of the British rule in Assam about the importation of labour outside of the province. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan along with other opinion that- “land revenue in the province could not be enlarged without proper inducement being given to the

¹⁰⁵ File- Revenue-A, 128-138, November 1898, ASA.

¹⁰⁶ Hunter. *Vol. I. Op.cit.*, p.366.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

outsiders to come and settle down permanently in the province”¹⁰⁸. As a matter of fact, government too did not lag behind in their policy and endeavour to encourage immigration into the province. Mr. Johnson, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, made some proposal for encouraging immigration into the province on 8th May 1885, which covered, among other things, a cheaper rate of travel fare to the bonafide immigrants in the railways and the steamer and the settlement of land revenue free for term of a year with such immigrants¹⁰⁹. He further stated that-

“I have now authority, under Rule 35, section 2 of the Settlement Rules, to allow a revenue-free term of three years to encourage immigration. I think we should inform persons interested in tea that they may promise intending immigrants land-revenue-free for three years to all who will settle in the country, when their term of agreement is worked out. And I think we might tell all *tahsildars* and *mauzadars* that I am prepared to give all time-expired coolies land revenue-free for three years”¹¹⁰.

Immigration of Labour

There were many reasons pointed out by the scholars for the labour shortage and unwillingness of the local Assamese people to work as wage earners. R.C. Kalita argues in this regard is that:

‘large number of Assamese labourers were enrolled themselves as manual labour, but it was colonial government who were not in favour to rely completely upon the local source of labour as they had local and solid social base and they had a better bargaining power with the

¹⁰⁸ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, December, 1888.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Note on Immigration to Assam by H.L. Johnson, from C.J.Lyall, Commissioner of Assam Valley District to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, No. 4010, dated Guwahati, the 8th August 1888, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, December, 1888.

management so far as the wages were concerned and resorted to strike in 1848 and again in 1859¹¹¹.

Thus it follows that almost from the beginning of their rule in Assam, the British officials, with the active support of a section of the Assamese middle class, the British encouraged immigration of labourers from outside of the province. As a matter of fact, Government also encouraged immigration into the province by providing cheap rate of transportation and settlement of land revenue free of cost. But it is noteworthy here that even before the adoption of this policy, immigration to Assam of people other than tea garden workers, had increased to a considerable extent. Johnson himself had admitted that “Nepali traders and artisans are coming, in large number every year” into Assam¹¹². They soon emerged as loyal citizens and faithful allies of the British Government creating serious socio-political classification to Assam. It is quite understandable that the migration of Nepalis was not entirely undesirable and that is why the migration could not be stopped and therefore allowed to continue.

Table 2.8
Number of Nepali Population in the Brahmaputra Valley (1872)

District	Number
Goalpara	34
Kamrup	125
Darrang	87
Nowgong	1
Sibsagar	476
Lakhimpur	260
Total	983

Source: Computed from W.W. Hunter, 1879

¹¹¹ Kalita, *Op.cit.*, p.180.

¹¹² From the Ofg. Secretary, to the Commissioner of Assam to the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, No. 3839, dated Shillong the 8th December 1888, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, December, 1888, ASA.

Thus in the colonial period (post 1826) the immigration of the Nepalis to the region increased. This happened as a consequence of British colonial expansion. The colonial Government required labourers to help open up forest lands for lumbering, settlement, tea plantations, coal and oil mines. The Nepali migrants were perfectly fit for the jobs. In course of time the Nepalis were given assistance for their onward journey for opening up of waste lands on favourable terms to the Upper Assam. This journey occurred exclusive of the soldiers in the colonial army. Though the number of population was not much yet Nepali population is concentrated in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Kamrup district.

Table 2.9
Growth of Nepali Population in Assam: 1901 to 1931

Year	No. of Nepali Population in Assam	Percentage
1901	21,347	0.35
1911	47,654	.67
1921	70,344	.94
1931	88,306	1.02

Source: Census Report of the relevant years.

The Nepali migration however continued to grow and according to the Census Reports, increased from 21,347 (.35%) in 1901 to 88,306 (1.02%) in 1931. (Table 2.7) In the early decades of the twentieth century, these migrants besides providing the man-power to the colonial expanding economy also laid the foundations of their own economic base as pastoralists, marginal farmers, ex-soldiers, combining in him the qualities of a good peasant, military discipline, in addition to coolies in the mines and artisans and semi-skilled professionals, very much in demand in the urban and the rural areas.

Conclusion

Assam was considered abundant in its natural resources. British East India Company as a group of traders always concerned about their commercial benefits. Natural prosperity of Assam was also rightly narrated in the reports of the British travellers and officers who visited the province. The Anglo-Burmese war ultimately provided the awaited opportunity to the British government to finally annexed Assam. British high hope of

commercial benefit through the exploration of natural resources was not an easy task. The observation of the British Assam Government regarding the prosperity of natural resources was rightly proved true, when tea, coal and oil were discovered in Assam. But to explore such natural resources need a pliant labour force. But local Assamese people were mostly denied from their part to serve as 'wage earner' under the Company Government. In the initial periods coolies from Bodo-Kachari, Naga and Karbi communities served as main labour force in pre 1860 Assam. But in most of the colonial Government papers and reports, Government tried to highlight the labour scarcity issues. On the one hand British officials along with a few Assamese middle class tried to convince the people and Government of Assam by saying that Assam is a sparse populated country. The devastation caused by Burmese war along with the wake of Kala-azar, Assam lost a considerable portion of its population which left large tract of land became wasted and appealed the Government to lease out such land on favourable terms. On the other, Colonial Government alleged Assamese people as lazy, indolent and opium addicted and mostly unfit for labour. But it was the self sufficient village economy of Assam where people produced every article for their own consumption and hardly compelled by situation to work as 'manual labour' force. Most of the Assamese people believed that engaged themselves in 'lowly works' meant degradation of their social status. Defying indigenous Assamese people to serve as a manual workers along with the popular notions against the Assamese gave the opportunity to the Colonial Government to import cheap labour force from the outside the province.