

Mining Industry and Nepali Labour in Colonial Assam

Discovery of Minerals and colonial exploration

The Treaty of Yandaboo 1826, ultimately Assam came under the British rule. Acquiring the land of Assam, British government made drastic changes in economic field, which witnessed the decadence of earlier rural economy and slowly but steady penetration of commercial capitalism. Production of raw materials and consumption of European manufacturers had been the corner-stone of the policy of colonial ruler. But in a region like Assam where railways were unknown and roads worth the name hardly existed was the main impediment in exploration. Communication was mainly by water as there were innumerable rivers and streams. Amongst other impediments in the way of economical steam navigation, one was the necessity of carrying Bengal coal upstream, not only for the entire uphold voyage but for the return journey as well. A thousand miles of river carriage, in addition to railway charges from Raniganj to Calcutta, raised the cost of fuel at the head of navigation to more than ten times its value at the mines¹. Therefore the British were in search of local source of coal as fuel from the very beginning of their advent in Assam.

Before Assam formally annexed to the British dominion, David Scott, the Agent of the Governor-General, North East Frontier was encouraged by the prospect of having coal locally, which would make the introduction of steam navigation in the Brahmaputra easier. The first recorded notice of the existence of coal in Upper Assam was by Lieutenant Wilcox, the revenue surveyor posted at Sadiya, who in April 1825 accompanied a party of the 46th Regiment up the Disang River to Borhat. In a subsequent expedition up the Dihing River, Wilcox observed a seam of coal in the bed of the Buridihing at Supkong². In 1826, Wilcox informed David Scott about the easy

¹ F.R.Mallet, Memoirs of the G.S.I. 1876, Vol. XII, pt. 2, p.3, in Priyam Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publication, 1999, p.87.

² *Ibid.*

procurability of coal in Upper Assam. In 1828, C.A. Bruce under orders of David Scott the Agent to the Governor-General was reported to have raised about five thousand *maunds* of coal on Safrai, a tributary of Disang. 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’³.

The existence of coal was also noticed by Captain Bordie in 1837 on the bed of the Nambor, an affluent of the river Dhansiri. In the same year Lieutenant Bigge and Mr. Griffith exploring the bank of Namrup a few miles from its junctions with the Buridihing, discovered the most valuable seam on the bank of the same river⁴.

Though the coal was of superior quality, no effective measure was taken and no attempt was made to encourage speculators to invest funds. Due to the meager demand, shortage of labour, transport and communication problem between Assam and rest of India, its coal could not be supplied to Calcutta at a cheaper rate than the Burdwan. A Coal Committee was set up by the administration in 1838 to report on the actual deposit and quality of coal in the region. In 1838, Captain Hannay had reported having found several outcrops of coal in Jaipur and neighbouring areas⁵. In the same year Captain Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor-General in the North East Frontier gained some definite information regarding the coal in Disang. The first seam met with was in the channel of the rivers, about a mile North of Borhat, and was described as being 8ft. thick. Another seam was found a short distance away from the coal in both these beds appeared to be of very good quality. The location was suitable for mining as well as transportation of the coal⁶. By 1847 Captain Hannay had started two quarries in Jaipur.

³ H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V* (Guwahati: Publication Board Assam, 1992), p. 79.

⁴ H. Bigge, “Notice of the Discovery of Coal and Petroleum on the Namrup River”, *JASB*, Vol. VI, No. 12838, (u.d.) p. 243.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁶ H.K. Barpujari, “The Survey and Operation at the Petroleum Springs and Coal Beds in Assam, 1826-58”, *Proceedings of IHRC*, Vol. XXXIV, (1985), pt. II, pp. 69-70.

The introduction of commercial navigation on the Brahmaputra in 1847 and the extension of tea-cultivation in 1860s, there evinced a growing demand for coal. By 1861, the coal mines were opened for private operation. In January 1861, a contractor appeared to have entered into an agreement with the government to work in Tirap field under which he was to keep a store of one thousand *maunds* each at Dikhowmukh, Tezpur and Guwahati; he was to receive 10 *annas* at the first place, 13 *annas* for the second and 14 *annas* for the third. In 1864, Henry Hopkinson newly Commissioner of Assam, opposed to lease existing mines to any single firm or individual as this would give the lessee a practical monopoly and placed the entire market at his command. At the same time he called the Geological Survey of India to conduct a survey of the coal-beds of Upper Assam⁷. Accordingly, towards the close of 1864 H.B. Medlicott, Deputy Superintendent, Geological Survey of India arrived at Dibrugarh. In his report Medlicott divided the coal-beds into groups; Jaipur in the district of Sibsagar and Tirap in vicinity of Makum, both of which extended upto the river Dikhow and even the Dhansiri. Medlicott also suggested to be leased out coal lands on six *annas* per acre and a rupee for hundred *maunds* of outturn.

No much progress in the exploitation of the coal deposits and recruitment of miners were made until the formation of the Assam Railways and Trading Company in 1881. Soon the construction work on the Dibru-Sadiya Railway was undertaken for exploration of resources. In 1882 the first railway line was opened from Dibrugarh steamer *ghat* to Jaipur Road. Two years later, the coalfields of Upper Assam were connected by railway lines⁸. In 1882 the Makum (Ledo) field in Upper Assam was taken over by the Company on lease, which according to Medlicott was the most important coal field in Assam⁹. The extension of Railway work in the Tikak, Upper Ledo and Ledo Valley, mines had also begun in 1882, and Tirap and the Namdang were granted in 1897-98. To meet the growing demand number of colliers followed to the coal areas like- Tikak, Namdang, Tirap, New West Ledo, New East Ledo, and Borgolai etc. As a result the output of coal

⁷ Assam Commissioner, 1863-64, File No. 630, Agnew, 1st June 1863; Bayley 14th April, 1864.

⁸ W.R. Gawthrop, *The Story of the AR&T Company 1881-1950* (London, Harley Publishing Company Ltd. 1951), pp.26-32.

⁹ Cyril Fox, *The Economic Mineral Resources of Assam* (Shillong: Assam Government Press, 1942), p.14.

had risen steadily, in 1889-90- 118,000 tons, 1898-99- 207,000 tons, 1900-01- 243,000 tons and capital invested in the collieries was about Rs. 360,000¹⁰.

Table: 3.1

The output of Coal in Assam from 1891-92 to 1895-96:

Year	Outturn	Revenue
1891-92	<i>Tons</i> 162,212	<i>Rs.</i> 29,158
1892-93	160,295	30,312
1893-94	164,686	31,133
1894-95	169,597	31,800
1895-96	171,095	32,076

The quantity of coal extracted by the Assam Railways and Trading Company amounted to 171,095 tons, against 169,597 tons in 1894-95. Royalty was paid on this coal at the rate of 3 *annas* per ton, with the exception of 22 tons obtained from the Namdang and Tirap coal grants, where, in place of royalty, a surface rent of Rs. 362 per annum was charged. There was an increase in revenue of Rs. 276¹¹.

Table: 3.2 Production of Coal at each mine in the province:

Assam	District	Name of the owner	1917	1918	1919
Burra-Gulai	Lakhimpur	Assam Railway and Trading Company			38
Ledo valley (east and west)			108,561	95619	86911
Tirap			43,558	34485	35980
Namdang			47,190	46502	49737
Tikak			91,900	89345	83835
Hapjan		Hapjan Coal Company Ltd.	275	1798	3151
Suffry	Sibasagar	Singlo Tea Company Ltd.	915	1827	1541
Borjan	Naga Hills	Nazira Coal Company	8,906	24299	29941
Khasi & Jaintia Hills			175	609	600
Total			301,480	294484	291734

Source: Report on the Production and Consumption of Coal in India, 1919, part I, p. 14.

¹⁰B.C. Allen, *District Gazetteer of Assam* (Lakhimpur, Assam Secretariat, 1905), pp. 186-193.

¹¹ *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam 1895-96.*

Scarcity of Labour and Recruitment of Nepali coolies in Coal Mines

At the beginning it was difficult to work in the mines, which were away from the crowd, surrounded by dense forest. The communication difficulties had to be confronted in the exploration. Mr. George Turner, a mining engineer from South Staffordshire, recorded his view that on his arrival in the Patkai Hills, he saw nothing but 'jungle and outcrop'¹². Communication was extremely difficult to Makum and Jaypur coal fields, no direct road could be made without crossing the Tipam hills, and the only river route to it was by Buridihing was a rocky bank and strong rapids naturally impassable for steamer or even large country boats. But the steamer service was also an expensive as there was no coal produced locally and had to depend on the coal of Bengal. It was only in 1881 when Assam Railways and Trading Company was formed and in 1882 the first railway line was opened from Dibrugarh Ghat to Jaipur Road. A lease of thirty square miles south of the Buridihing of the Makum and Jaypur coal fields was granted to the Assam Railways and Trading Company for twenty years in 1880 to facilitate extension of the railways from Dibrugarh to Makum. In 1884 the coal fields of Upper Assam were connected by railway communication¹³.

Labour for such an area was another difficulty. Indigenous Assamese people were not keen on working as wage earners. Medicotts's high hopes, that the Nagas and Singphoes in the vicinity could be induced to work in the mines, were belied. 'Nagas are renowned for their power of cutting down timbers and clearing jungles; they appear to take kindly to the cutting of coal on the surface of the hills, but... afraid of tunneling or mining'¹⁴. Hence, they had to depend on the imported labour. Initially people from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and the Central Provinces, Peshwaris, Makranis and few Chinese were recruited in the coal mines of Assam.

¹²Gawthrop. *Op.cit.*, pp. 26-32.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28, also Barpujari, *Vol. V, Op.cit.*, p.83.

Unhealthy Condition at Coal Mines

In the coal mines of Assam, the basic needs like pure drinking water, food, shelter and sanitation were in pathetic condition. In such situation, it was very difficult to attract and motivate labourers and migrate and work. The unhealthiness of the mining estates and high death rate in the mines were pointed out in the inspection note of a medical officer¹⁵. He mentioned that unhealthy condition, impure drinking water and very high underground working hours were the principal causes of the high death rate in the mines of Assam. Accordingly a committee was appointed to look into the matter. The following recommendations were made by the Committee¹⁶:

- i. Stricter supervision in recruiting. Full powers should be given to the local manager and medical officers to reject and return unsuitable coolies.
- ii. Improved quarantine arrangements and measures for the prevention of Cholera.
- iii. Reduction of hours of labour.
- iv. Supply of blankets to labourers.
- v. Filtration of water supply.
- vi. Proper sanitation facilities to be provided
- vii. At least one clean hospital with qualified hospital assistants at each colliery should be set up.

The following table shows the death rate in the labour force of the Assam Railways and Trading Company for the year of 1886-1890.

¹⁵ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings Revenue*, A, August 1894. ASA.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 1. August 1894, 4C327/3849 Engn. R., also P. Goswami, *Op.cit.*, p. 102.

Table: 3.3

Mortality Rates of the Labour Force of the A. R. and T. C.

	1886		1887		1888		1889		1890	
	Death	Death Rate	Death	Death Rate	Death	Death Rate	Death	Death Rate	Death	Death Rate
Act	107	10.90	80	7.60	81	8.30	104	9.10	265	17.80
Non-Act	30	5.10	52	6.80	37	4.30	44	5.30	58	6.60
Total	137	8.70	132	7.30	118	6.50	148	7.50	323	13.60

Source: A.S.R. Revenue and Agriculture, August 1894, Prog. No. 156.

Justifying their stand on the high mortality of the coolies in the coal mines, the Board of Control of the Assam Railways and Trading Company wrote to the Deputy Commissioner that:

“It is not as if the coolies were taken from districts which enjoy a high standard of health. It should be remembered that the recruiting districts are subject to frequent tornadoes of pestilence reinforced by periodical famines which sweep away the inhabitants in thousands... If the Imperial government, with all its resources, money and scientific skill at its disposal failed to prevent such excessive sickness among British troops at old and long established institution, it should surely not excite surprise, however much it is to be regretted, that in this settlement excessive sickness prevails”¹⁷.

Along with the unhealthy condition caused high mortality, numbers of accidents occurred in each year in the mines tolled a number of deaths. The following figure shows the mortality in the mines of Assam.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, August, 1894, No. 141, letter No. 214G, dated 10th February 1894.

Table: 3.4
Fatal and Serious Accidents in the Coal Mines, 1923.

District and Mineral field Assam	Number of coolies	Fatal Accidents Deaths	Serious Injured	Death rate per 1000 person employed		
				Below ground	Above ground	Below and Above ground
Lakhimpur	3302	13	28	5.83	.80	3.94
Naga Hills	599	1
Total	3901	13	29	4.91	.68	3.33

Source: Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India, 1923, p.91.

Therefore it was decided to recruit healthy labour from the ranks of the aboriginal group of Gorkha martial community. Initially, the Assam Railways and Trading Company recruited Nepali labourers for the coal mines from Darjeeling¹⁸. But in 1907, the Bengal Government prohibited the importation of labourers from Darjeeling officially¹⁹. Though in a large numbers of these Nepali labourers were recruited for the coal mines of Assam, they were not placed under any contracts. The Company took the responsibility to pay the cost of home journey after about 300 days' work in the coal mines of Assam. From 1912 the Nepali coolies were recruited by the Company through the Tea District Labour Association, Gorakhpur in the United Provinces²⁰. The recruitment of Nepalis as coolies was preferred over any other class of men such as the Makranis (from Makran and Peshwar in present Pakistan) and Bengali labours. As G.C. Webster, the Colliery Superintendent, remarked in 1903-

‘they (Nepali) are far more tractable to reasons and will work better for one than even the time-expired coolie as the latter is getting far too

¹⁸ Extract from Agent and General Manager, Assam Railways and Trading Company, letter No. N-5-3830, dated the 12th September 1912, to Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, March, 1924.

¹⁹ Vide Government Notification No. 3293-Tc of 1st November, 1907.

²⁰ Letter No. 292, dated the 20th January 1913, from G.C. Webster, Colliery Superintendent, to the Agent and General Manager, in *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, March 1924, p. 54.

independent...make most trustworthy and capable men inside the colliery and will do any kind of work they are put on to do²¹.

For the reason British Officer tried to enlist maximum number of Nepali coolies in the coal mines of Assam. In 1912 the number of Nepali coolies was 870²² for the Assam and more than 3000 Nepali coolies were employed in the coal mines in the Abor and Mishmi countries²³. During the year 1922 at the Margherita colliery in Upper Assam there were 968 Nepali were recruited²⁴. The number rose to 2000 souls in the Assam colliery in 1923²⁵.

As the workings get deeper, the need of a mining population which specializes in mining will became greater. Therefore Coal companies were in favour of the so-called “family system” by which the miner mined and collected coal, and his wife and children could carry the collected coal into the tub, while the latter learnt at their parent’s knees how to become miners and carriers themselves²⁶. Below mentioned table shows the total number of men, women and children employed in the coal mines of Assam²⁷.

Table; 3.5
The average daily attendance of Labourers in the Coal Mines Assam in 1919.

Province	Men	Women	Children	Total	Total no. of employee in India	Percentage of total
Assam	2735	418	77	3230	203752	1.59

Source: Report on the Production and Consumption of Coal in India, 1919, part I.

²¹ No. 170F., dated the 8th June 1903, From Mr. G.C.Webster, Colliery Superintendent, to the Agent and General Manager, the Assam Railways and Trading Company, *Ibid.* pp. 56-57.

²² *Ibid.*, p.57.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India under the Indian Mines Act (VII of 1901) for the year ending 31st December 1922.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.31

²⁶ *Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India under the Indian Mines Act (VII of 1901) for the year ending 31st December 1923,* p. 4

²⁷ *Report on the Production and Consumption of Coal in India 1919,* p. 4

British government officials were very much appreciate the bravery and courage of the Gurkha people and for which they enlisted a large number in the British Indian Army. The British Officials were also very keen observed regarding the recruitment in the other fields, so that the flow of the good Gurkha soldiers will not be closed²⁸. Restriction had also tried to impose in the Recruiting Depot of Gorakhpur where Nepali coolies were recruited. To prevent recruitment of the military caste in the coal mines, each recruited coolie had to put before the Gurkha Recruiting Officer since 1916. During the First World War the recruitment of Nepalese for other than military purposes was stopped. In 1918, the Gorakhpur depot was temporarily closed²⁹. In 1919 Gorakhpur Depot was re-opened and under the agreement made by the government of India with the Government of Nepal, the recruitment of Nepalis was permitted for temporary employment during the dry and winter month in tea gardens, forests and coal mines³⁰. The recruiting of Nepalese subjects for temporary employment during the dry or winter month in tea-gardens, forests, and coal mines may be resumed provided that no attempt is made to recruit inside Nepal territory. The Government of India also considers it advisable that the employment of Nepalese of the fighting classes who are military age should be discouraged as far as possible³¹. Reacting on the issue ‘discourage the fighting classes of Nepalis’ it was said that such action however could not affect the large number of Nepali subjects who enter Assam otherwise than through regular recruiting agencies and many of whom offer themselves for employment to employees in Assam, because private

²⁸ Letter No. 5484 dated Shillong, 25th August 1890, from J.J.S. Dr. Berg, Inspector General of Police of Assam, to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, appeal to the Govt. to permit him to recruit Gurung and Magar Thapas to Military Police, but his appeal was rejected on the ground that it will be difficult to get good Gurkha for Army, in Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Home Department, 1890, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Home A, October 1890.

²⁹ Govt. of India, Commerce and Industry, Letter No. 2119, dated 22nd April 1918, to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, Under Secretary to the Chief Commissioner’s letter No. 3329-34, dated the 17th May 1918, to Agent, Assam Railway and Trading Company, and Agents letter No. L-20-764G, dated the 8th April 1918, to the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, May 1918.

³⁰ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political A, March 1924, p.7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.8.

employment on more lucrative terms than can be given in the Assam Rifles³². Mr. Milligan has suggested to the British Envoy a compromise to which the Agent of the Assam Railways and Trading Company is prepared to agree viz., that if the latter undertakes to do his best to prevent Nepali subjects of the fighting classes obtained employment at the Mines, the Government of Nepal should agree to withdraw the restriction of the employment of Nepalis of the non-fighting classes to “temporary employment during the dry or winter months”³³. Again the orders did not define what period was intended by the ‘dry and winter months.’ If the term is only for six months, Mr. E.A. Joseph, General Manager, Assam Railways and Trading Company Ltd., said ‘we never had recruited for the winter only and could not afford to do so.’ Because a coolie being of little or no use in a mine in the first few months of his engagement³⁴. In 1919 the Gorakhpur depot was reopened for recruiting the Nepali coolies³⁵. Large numbers of them were recruited and contracts were entered into with Nepali coolies on terms inconsistent with the conditions agreed upon by the Government of India and the Nepal Government.

Table: 3.6
Output of Coal in the Province, 1923.

Province Assam	Coal							
	Opening Stock (Tons)	Raising (Tons)	Total (Tons)	Despatches (Tons)	Colliery Consumption (Tons)	Coal Delivered to Coking(Tons)	Coal Despatched to Factories (Tons)	Closing Stock (Tons)
Lakhimpur	32	270343	270375	258638	9956	1226	-----	555
Naga Hills	412	55606	56018	55405	420	----	-----	193
Total	444	325949	326393	314043	10376	1226	-----	748

Source: Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India, 1923, p.42.

³² *Ibid.*, p.50.

³³ Letter No. 1701, dated the 20th December 1923, From the Chairman of the Assam Labour Board, *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Op.cit.* p. 13.

³⁵ Vide Government of India Letter No. 1687, dated the 9th April 1919, To the Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political A, March 1924.

Mode of Recruitment

The usual method was to send European up-country, attended with a *babu* and *sardars*, who by means of advances prevailed on a large batch of labourers to come down with him. There were different methods of labour recruitment prevailed in coal mines. The persons involved in such recruitment of labour were the *sardars*, company's *chaprasis*, contractors, recruiting *babus*, and unspecified recruiters. Two distinct methods of labour recruitment were followed in Assam. Either the colliery itself would send its own selected employees to the villages or as a *thikadars* to obtain coolies. In the first case, full or part-time salaried *jamadars* and *chaprasis* were given sums of money and told to visit those areas of the country-side they were most familiar with. Naturally, the preference was for the ancestral village. The recruiters were comprised mostly of their relatives' acquaintances and co-villagers. These were ignorant persons recruited in distant districts and for the most part, without any previous knowledge of the conditions of the estate on which they contract to labour. They were compelled to remain in the estates to serve as long as possible.

The system which followed in recruiting Nepali coolies is known as the 'short term' contract system. Under this system the labourers were recruited temporarily for a period not exceeding one year within which they were to be repatriated at their employer's expenses³⁶. In the Indo-Nepal border, Gorakhpur, a depot was opened for the recruitment of the Gurkha labourers. It was made for the collieries for which they were then transported to the mines of Upper Assam. The European employers under British India Government were given strict instructions to scrupulously follow the system. The District Labour Association was given the instruction that the coolies were required for a year and they had been told that they would be employed for ten months and then repatriated. The other two months were kept as a period for their journey time between Nepal and India. In 1919 the Gorakhpur depot was reopened. The recruitment was only open for temporary employment during the 'dry or winter' months. The Nepali coolies have been sent back to their homes at the beginning of the rains.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The *Sardars*, *Chowkidars* and Contractors of Nepali origin, recruited the Nepali coolies for the coal mines in the mining company like the Assam Railways and Trading Company. A Nepali *Sardar*, when required for recruiting purposes, was given a “license” in Ledo Labour Office by the Assistant Labour Superintendent. A “Questionsheet” was also filled in for the *sardar* in the Ledo Labour office. The *Sardar* took his license in triplicate to the Dibrugarh Court and paid 4 *annas* cess, and the license was countersigned by the District Magistrate, one copy was kept in the Courts at Dibrugarh. The *Sardar* then proceeded to Gorakhpur. Arriving Gorakhpur, he goes to the Tea District Labour Association Depot (the ‘Question-sheet’ having already been forwarded by post to the Local Agent) and from there he was sent to District magistrate, who lent approval of his license and retained a copy³⁷. The *Sardar* recruited and brought the recruited labours to Gorakhpur Tea Districts Labour Association Depot. They were examined by the Civil Surgeon and those who were found medically fit were selected for the coal mines coolies, the Civil Surgeon was paid 8 *annas* per head. The recruited persons were again had to present before the Military Recruiting Officer, who after examination considered the fitted were recruited for the army and rest were for the coal mines. The officer issued a certificate stating that he had examined the recruitees and explained to them that they were going to the Coal Mines and ascertained that they were willing to proceed there. The Tea Districts Labour Association’s local agent at Gorakhpur then forwarded them and made them understood where they were sent and the rate of pay to be given. They were inoculated and vaccinated and were fed on the journey. Arriving Ledo they were again medically examined. A full week’s ration was supplied to them, and then they were *chalaned* to their respective *sardars*³⁸.

But recruiting from Gorakhpur was not suitable for the company as they were permitted to recruit coolies for a period from only January and March, whereas there were great demands of labours in June and July. Thus they tried to recruit labours illegally to fulfill their requirement in June and July. In December 1913 the Company was able to recruit

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp.6-7

only 284 through the sub-agency at *Basti*, 50 kilometers from Gorakhpur³⁹. In Gorakhpur there were also two large depots, one was Military and the other was Police, and a very large number of coolies were brought in to these depots, and many of them were rejected as unfit for military or police. Though the majority of these men were also physically unfit for work in the collieries but a certain number of coolies were also recruited from them. Before being dispatched of these recruited coolies, they had been brought to an agent, and their names were entered in a register book. Earlier recruitment was done through the Assam Tea Districts Labour Supply Association. There was a sub-agency at Basti, about 50 miles from Gorakhpur, which was not far from the Nepalese frontier and a large numbers of Nepalese came to down searching employment. Many of these were recruited by the Military depot whilst very large number were recruited for the work on the Sara-Bridge and the Dooars Tea Gardens, who had their own agents up in the district. In Gorakhpur there were large number of coolie ‘pimps’, who also tried to sneak other agent’s coolies- and many of these pimps were active at Gorakhpur Railway station on the arrival of any trains going east⁴⁰. At Gorakhpur and *Basti* there was headquarter of the Emigration Department and a considerable number of coolies were recruited from here. They employed Jews and *Arakati* recruiters in large numbers to recruit coolies. The Emigration Agent sent out his *Arakati Sirdars* who brought the coolies from their *basti*, the Agent rejected a certain number of these who were found unfit, the residue examined by a Doctor who probably persuaded to enhance the list of rejected coolies. All these rejected coolies were are handed back to the *Arakati Sirdar* who was given money to send them back to their villages. Instead of sending them back, the *Arakati Sirdar* sold the coolies in Calcutta. Many of the coolies were ‘professional bolters’ and they were treated collies as salable commodity and sold them for about Rs. 60 or Rs. 70 per coolie. In some cases it was happened that they flee from Asanole where they professed unwillingly to go back to the *Arakati Sirdar* who again sold them to

³⁹ Letter No. 292, dated the 20th January, 1913 from G.C. Webster, Colliery Superintendent, to Agent and General Manager, *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54

someone else⁴¹. To recruit Nepali coolies for coal mines of Assam, a *Sardar* who dispatched with advances into the surrounding districts adjoining the Nepal Border, made the following arrangements⁴²:

1. *Sirdars* to report themselves on arrival at the depot at *Basti* where they would be registered and receive necessary advances.
2. Coolies to be brought in from the surrounding districts in batches not less than 20 at a time- this to do away with necessity of their having to remain in the depot, a proceeding the Nepalese would object to.
3. On arrival each coolie to receive two blankets and a brass plate for eating from.
4. Coolies to be sent in charge of a peon right up to Margherita and this peon to be paid a sum of money to enable him to pay each coolie 6 *annas* day *khorakie en route*.
5. Advances to be given to the *Sirdars* as required in reason by the Sub-Agent.

To attract labours favourable terms were offered. The recruitment was on 'short term' agreements not exceeding 12 months and the company undertook to repatriate the men at the end of the term for which they were recruited.

Method of Mining

Unlike the popular conception of coal mining where the coal seam is approached from the surface by a deep vertical shaft, in Assam the approach to mines was through a horizontal tunnel or more precisely one which sloped imperceptibly upwards from the pit's mouth. A tunnel was driven into the hill until the seam was reached, at which point, underground roadways, known as main roads, were driven horizontally along the seam

⁴¹ Letter No. 292F., dated the 20th January 1913, and enclosures from Mr. G.C. Webster, Colliery Superintendent, to Agent and General Manager, *Ibid*.

⁴² *Ibid*.

for a distance upto two miles. The seam itself being at an inclination varying from 30⁰ to 60⁰, inclined roadways, known as ‘*chauris*’ were then driven up the seam. At various points in the *chauris*, further roads were driven horizontally. Coal was brought from the working faces along these horizontal roads and lowered down the *chauris* by means of gravity-operated tramways, known as “*jigs*”, to the main roads and then to the mouth of the pit. Owing to the uncertain nature of the strata, the roofs of the underground roadways were usually supported by steel arches and girders, timber and masonry. Wherever convenient, metre gauge railway sidings were constructed as near the pit head as possible. Where this was not possible, two-foot gauge tracks were constructed over difficult terrain to carry the coal from the mouth of the pit to the railhead⁴³.

Labour and Wages

The labours were imported to the coal mines of Assam from the province of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Central Provinces, Makranis, Peshwaris and even Nepalis and Chinese. Labours were imported not only because there was scarcity of labours in the province but also they were cheap in costing. These labour force in the coal mines of Assam compelled the coolies to work at least 9 ½ hours daily, without any rest whatsoever. Besides this, there was even official break in which the coolies could return to homes and eat a warm, comfortable and well cooked meal⁴⁴. The hours of work were normally starts from 7 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. high even by Indian standards limit of working shift in all other collieries did not exceed eight hours⁴⁵. Till 1923 there had been no statutory inference with labour conditions in Indian mines. On 23rd February 1923, the Governor General gave his assent to a new mines Act with effect from the 1st July 1924, under which restriction was imposed on underground work for not more than 54 hours in a week. Under the same rule put a ban on the employment of child labour below the age of 13⁴⁶.

⁴³ Gawthrop. *Op.cit.*, pp. 30-31, also in P. Goswami, *Op.cit.*, p. 106.

⁴⁴ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Revenue A, August, 1894, Prog. No. 110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Prog. No. 130

⁴⁶ *Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India under the Indian Mines Act for the year ending 31st December 1923*, p. 3.

Method of Payment

Coal cutting in Assam was either on *ticca* or day work. To manage the recruited Nepali coolies in the coal mines, a staff consisting of Nepalis was also recruited. Except fitters, all colliery labours were paid a day's wage and receive their wages fortnightly on a fixed day. Most of the Coal filling was done on *ticca* rate and this was the chief work on which the Nepalis are employed. To ensure that the labours were paid properly and individually who were engaged for underground work, the contract was taken by a head *sardar*. In case of a contract for tub-filling, the Company paid each person Re. 1 per day out of the contractor's money. The contractor then paid his people the extra they had earned above Re. 1 per day. The contractors were paid a commission on the number of tubs filled, or on the number of *hazrees* worked when his people were on days work. It was mandatory for all coolies to work a 9 hours shift except *ticca* coal cutter, who usually had average 6 hours shift. The coolies, in case of any special work in the mine necessitating overtime work, were paid overtime along with his ordinary rate of pay⁴⁷.

Table: 3.7 Hours worked and wages paid in mining field of Assam.

Mining Field	Miners		Underground Miners other than Miners		Underground Females		Surface Males		Surface Females	
	Hours Worked	Weekly Earning	Hours Worked	Weekly Earning	Hours Worked	Weekly Earning	Hours Worked	Weekly Earning	Hours Worked	Weekly Earning
Assam	48	Rs.As.P. 7- 8- 0	48	Rs. As. P. 6- 0- 0	---	Rs. As. P. -----	48	Rs.As. P. 4- 8- 0	48	Rs. As.P. 2- 10- 0

Source: Report of the Chief Inspector of Mines in India, 1923, p.3.

Nepali coolies were so good in colliery work that to attract them, British officials in Assam suggested enhanced rate of wages 12 *annas* a day. But the great counterattraction has been the survey shows in the Abor and Mishimi countries. There have been something like 3,000 Nepalese employed in these works and the pay they received is

⁴⁷ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political A, March 1924.

equal to Rs. 22-8-0 a month plus clothes, boot and blankets, together with a return pass after 6 months. Mr. G.C. Webster, Colliery Superintendent said:

“of course we cannot compete with these terms and our men have left us like flies to go up there”⁴⁸.

Further he added-

“unfortunately we have no hold on these people and however well they are treated at the mines we cannot keep them once they make up their minds to go, and go...”⁴⁹.

British officials were very much anxious to keep the Nepalese in the coal mines. But Nepali by nature is a raving class and like to see different places but do not stay long anywhere. They like to leave Nepal for 6 months each year, go to a different places each year but return to their own hills for the hot weather⁵⁰. That was the reason for which when Nepali coolies granted leave to return their country for the *Poojah* (Durga Puja) holiday, they were sent under the charge of a head *sirdar* so that he can taken them back to the coal mines⁵¹.

To keep the Nepali coolies in the coal mines various beneficiary measures also were suggested. Provision was made for a good coolie, if he wishes, obtained promotion to a *sardar* or a head *sardar* which carries much higher rate of pay. In the event of a being incapacitated injury in the mines he was paid compensation for the period of incapacitation at his full rate of payment⁵². Provident fund for the coolies was also suggested. Deducting a certain small sum each week from their wages and adding a

⁴⁸ Letter No. 170F; dated the 8th June 1903, From Mr. G.C. Webster, Colliery Superintendent to the Agent and General Manager, the Assam Railways and Trading Company, *Ibid*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁰ Gurung, Tejimala (2009). “Gurkhas as Colliers: Labour Recruitment and Racial Discourse in the Coal Mines of Assam”, in *Indian Nepalis: Issues and perspectives*, Eds. T.B. Subba *et al.*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 259-276.

⁵¹ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political A, March 1924. p.53.

⁵² *Ibid*.

contribution of the Company to this when they had worked 300 days. Anyone left before the assigned period, was entitled only to get his actual subscriptions. This would assist in two ways-

1. If a man had made up his mind to clear up he would not apply for the money due him and so this would be a saving.
2. In the cases of men thinking they had a grievance and having money in hand in this fund they would come down to the officer-in-charge for it and the officer then have a chance of talking them round and persuading them to stay on⁵³.

Treatment in the Coal mines and Nepali Coolies

In the exploration operation of coal in Assam, Nepali coolies were recruited for a period of a full year. But restrictions were imposed on such recruitment when the World War I was broken out in 1914. Large numbers of Nepalis were recruited in the British army. The Gorakhpur depot was closed for Nepali recruitment other than military purposes. But the demand and quality of Nepali coolies were not out of the mind of the British officers. Therefore, after the World War I, the British officials again appealed the Government of India to reopen the Gorakhpur depot. In 1919, Gorakhpur depot was reopened for recruiting for Nepali coolies for the “temporary employment during the dry or winter months in tea gardens, forest and coal mines”⁵⁴. But restriction was imposed to recruit inside Nepali territory⁵⁵.

Nepali coolies in the coal mines were recruited mostly through the agents, *sardars*, *thikadars* and were brought to the coal mines of Assam. In the mines areas they were isolated from local labours and housed separately. They were not allowed to take their families with them. They were provided with dormitory type of housing measuring 10' x 10' room where 12/13 workers were huddled together in low-roofed barrack with a

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁵⁴ Letter No. 1687, dated the 9th April 1919, Department of Commerce and Industries, *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

single enclosure, which was locked from outside and in well guarded⁵⁶. *Chowkidars* were also deployed at the Margherita Bridge, Ledo and Margherita Railway stations, so that no coolie ever dares to flee from the coal mines⁵⁷. The labourers were compelled to work 12 hours a day⁵⁸. They were not got any kind of leave except weekly holiday on Sunday. They were compelled to work even he suffered seriously in fever. If anyone dined to work due to his illness, *sardar* beaten them severely and forced to work. Again the *sardar* and supervisor were continuously monitored them and any kind of lazyness in work they were punished. According to Kumar Chetry, the head Sardar instructed the supervisor to full use of sticks upon the coolies which was supplied to them daily. And after the day works, the *Sardar* checked the sticks which were supplied to the supervisors, and if the *sardar* found the sticks were unused, the supervisor gets the punishment⁵⁹.

Martial Race and Hard working Labour: Debates on Nepali Recruitment

There was a growing demand for labourers in the emergent coal industry in Assam since 1847⁶⁰. Initially the British Officers sought to engage the local Assamese and Naga tribes in the coal mines as labourers, but both were not interested to work in the coal mines. The coal mines in Assam were located in remote jungle like areas and local people were not ready to apart from their homes and family to work in such remote areas. The fertile land and the prosperous nature of agriculture along with the self-sufficient village economy, Assamese people were not compelled by situation to search for employment. The Nagas on the other hand, were particularly afraid of tunneling or mining⁶¹. Therefore the British officials selected certain castes and races that were not only had martial characteristics but also were easily adjusted in different climatic conditions.

⁵⁶ *Aja Bholi*, Nepali Daily, Siliguri, dated 7th June, Wednesday, 1995, interviewed with Tutu Thapa, Margherita, reknown Nepali labour leader in the coal mines at Tikak in Upper Assam.

⁵⁷ Kumar Chetry interviewed at his residence, Margherita on 06/12/2015.

⁵⁸ *Aaja Bholi*, *Op.cit.*

⁵⁹ Kumar Chetry, *Op.Cit.*

⁶⁰ By 1847, Major Hannay had started two coal quarries in Jaipur in Upper Assam.

⁶¹ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, 1924.

The important aspects on the recruitment of the Gorkhas in police and military as well as labour in tea, coal and oil mines in India and Assam from the late 19th Century was based on the colonial thinking or representation on ‘race’ and ‘martial castes’⁶². Lord Roberts, one of the originators of the martial race theory and its chief exponent wrote:

“...the superiority of one regiments over another is mainly a matter of training....but no comparison can be made between the material value of a regiment recruited amongst the Gorkhas of Nepal or the warlike races of northern India and one recruited from the effeminate races of the south....I was in despair at not being able to get people to see the matter with my eyes”⁶³.

Nepal is a hilly country. The geographical location and environment of a country attributed which also constructed the structure of the people tough, healthy and strong⁶⁴. It was the observation and prejudices of the company Government that Gorkhas as ‘tough’ people. Gorkhas who attained the honour of ‘martial race’, along with the qualities like propriety, honesty and loyalty, attributed great demand in colonial British India⁶⁵. Biological factor along with the martial race not only owned the honour of tough people, other characteristics like propriety, honesty, bravery and loyalty which added high demand of Nepalis in military and industrial sectors in colonial Assam⁶⁶. T. Gurung argues that the recruitment process of the Gorkhas in the coal mines of Assam was also based on the ‘racial discourse’. The colonial states and European private entrepreneurs as Nepalis were found not only to be members of ‘martial race’ were also industrious and

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Imdad Hussain, “Soldiers and Settlers: The Recruitment of Gorkhas”, in *The Nepalis in North-East India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, eds., Sinha, A.C. & T. B. Subba, (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 2007), p.80.

⁶⁴ Gurung, Tejimala (2009). “Gurkhas as Colliers: Labour Recruitment and Racial Discourse in the Coal Mines of Assam”, in *Indian Nepalis: Issues and perspectives*, Eds. T.B. Subba *et al.*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, pp. 259-276.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

loyal and hence suitable for the hard work which required in the mining of coal⁶⁷. On the basis of ‘martial’ and ‘race’ theory large numbers of Gorkhas were recruited in the collieries of Assam.

There was a political mobilization against the recruitment of Gorkhas in the collieries of Assam. The Nepal Durbar was extreme reluctant to allow its subjects to serve under the British. But against the wishes of the Nepal Government, Gorakhpur depot was opened in 1880 for recruiting Gorkhas for military or other areas of employment⁶⁸. By 1923 Captain Lal Dhwoj, an officer in the Army of His Majesty the King of Nepal visited Kamakhya temple, Guwahati happen to see a large number of Gurkhas in the Railway train going through Guwahati to some station in the upper districts of Assam. On enquiry from Nepali residents of Guwahati he came to learn that they were being taken to the coal mines at Ledo and neighbouring places, where they would have to work as ordinary coolies. After a trip to Ledo where he made private enquiries incognito, he submitted a petition in March 1923, to the Governor of Assam which highlighted that many Nepalis including ex-sepoys and military castes were working in the coal mines of Makum viz., Ledo, Tikak, Golai, Rangring (Namdang), Lekhapani and Margherita in very harsh conditions. Many of these coolies had been lured by false inducements and forcibly kept.

Nepalis as a *kshatriya* class, considered that working in lowly works like coolies in the coal mines, would lose their social status. The report submitted by Lal Dhwoj to the Nepal Government not only mentioned the employment of *Kshatriyas* as coolies, but also that in many instances people were recruited under circumstances of misrepresentation and fraud. The opposition of the Nepali officer against such recruitment was the inherent notion of superiority as “*kshatriya*” class. There was a substantial coherent mobilization against such employment which they believed that to engage in a lowly works might lose their social status. He therefore, tried to convince the Company authority to repatriate all Nepali coolies from the coal mines. The point

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Political-A, 1924.*

emphasized was that the Nepali labour was not doing well in the coal-mines and was anxious to get back to their homes.

Nepal Durbar also strongly reacted on the issue of employment of his subject on such lowly works. Nepal seriously worried about her manpower being depleted by the employment of her subjects in India in non-military situation⁶⁹. Lal Dhwoj report resulted in a representation on the subject from the Government of Nepal to the Government of India, who ordered an enquiry. This was because the Nepali Durbar considers it derogatory to the state and to the Gurkha for a Nepali to serve as a coolie in the tea-gardens or in the mines. Because in Nepal the occupation of miner was followed by certain *Sudra* castes and for a *Kshatriya* of a fighting caste to do the work of a miner underground does in fact involve loss of caste. The rumours had been spread among the Nepali coolies that any Nepali who remained in the mines would be liable to be outcaste. The rumour was very much in focus at the time when two envoy's of the Nepal Darbar Captain Lal Dhwoj and Ganesh Bahadur was in the Upper Assam. Lieutenant Ganesh Bahadur even refused to take a cup of tea from Bahadur Sing Rai, contractor at Tikak Colliery, saying "*Koilakhat ka coolie pani band hai*" (the coolies of the collieries are outcasted)⁷⁰.

Opposition to Gurkha Recruitment in Coalmines

There was continuous opposition to the recruitment of Gurkhas in the collieries of Assam from the very beginning. It was not just from the Royal Government of Nepal which protested the ill-treatment of its subjects in the coal mines by European miners but the inflow of Gorkha migration became steady certain influential sections within the colonial state began to question the pernicious effect of such recruitment. Few British Army officers felt that such recruitment of martial Gurkhas in trivial jobs like the coal mines was wasteful of human resources. It was felt that the exploitation of martial race was desired to limit such recruitment or stop it totally if this was possible⁷¹.

⁶⁹ Hussain, *Op.cit.*, p.86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The colonial state was also seriously concerned about the matter of the recruitment of Nepali 'martial race' to industrial services. The employment of Nepali 'martial races' in the coal mines of Assam was seriously affected in the Assam Rifles as more lucrative terms were offered by the private enterprises. There was growing demand from the army and police officials that recruitment of Gorkhas in military pursuits should be stopped forthwith. In this connection, one of the British officers wrote to the Government of Assam,

I am finding it extraordinarily difficult to obtain recruits of the proper stamp in Assam and if nothing is done to prevent the enticement of Gorkhas into easy and more lucrative menial employments, the efficiency of the Assam Rifle battalions will be seriously impaired. As matters stand the competition in obtaining suitable recruits is most unfair to me: I am restricted to recruiting in Assam, where as the coal mines may obtain recruits both through Darjeeling and Gorakhpur. However careful the Recruiting Officers at these places may be, the presence of recruiters there, unconnected with regiments is dangerous because there are ways of getting good men away without the knowledge of the Recruiting Officers⁷².

The continuous opposition of the employment of martial classes other than military purposes could not stop the recruitment of the Gorkhas in the coal mines of Assam. On the other hand due to the high demand of the Nepalis both in military and industrial purposes, a distinction was made between fighting and non-fighting castes of the Nepalis. Restrictions was imposed to recruit of Nepali 'martial-classes' other than military purposes. On the other hand there was no objection of recruitment of Nepalis of non-martial classes into any other pursuits. However, the Nepalis of 'martial-classes' were continued be recruited by ARTC for the coal mines of Assam. The government of Assam also expressed its difficulty in preventing the recruitment of martial Nepalis as

⁷² *Ibid.*

the private companies were not its direct jurisdiction. The Government however, promised to use its influence to pressurize the companies to prevent such recruitment⁷³.

The issue was reopened in December 1922 when in a demi-official letter to the British envoy at the Court of Nepal, the recruiting officer for the Gurkhas, Gorakhpur, Major Brook Northey informed that the Tea District Labour Association was busy recruiting 2000 coolies for the coal mines in Assam. The classes comprised all best fighting castes like Magar, Gurung, Thakur, Chhetri etc.⁷⁴. Lal Dhwoj's memorandum highlighted for the first time the fraudulent practices in Gurkha recruitment as well as their plight in the coal mines in Assam. In his memorandum he wrote-

“I went to Ledo coal mine and there to my great surprise found even pensioned soldiers working as ordinary coolies. I heard from them and other Nepalis working in the coal mines that they were persuaded to come there on the assurances given by Nepali contractors working under the company that they would be employed as Commissariat Officers, soldiers and policemen etc. on handsome salaries with free clothing and good ration and that they would have never come to coal mines had they known it before hand. I also found several persons of position and means having their homes in Nepal actually working as coolies. I found a Brahmin gentleman who had come with his servant to offer oblations and funeral cakes at Gaya, working as a coolie. As he was a new corner and did not know much about Railway travelling some contractor's men got hold of him telling him that he will be taken to Gaya where they were also going brought him to Ledo. There are several instances like this...I also heard long stories of cruelty and ill treatment which shocked me very much.... the condition which I found the Nepalis was indeed very miserable- they were poorly clad and they all seemed to be in very poor health. I also understand that

⁷³ Gurung *Op.Cit.*, p.271.

⁷⁴ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, 1924, p. 6.

being unable to endure their lot, large numbers escape from the coal mines from time to time”⁷⁵.

A considerable number of people migrated from Nepal to the bordering Assam because of poverty, were brought to Assam by false inducement of the coolie recruiting agents for Assam by saying that they would get higher wages, hygienic working condition and the *Babu* (owner) is an open-hearted men and will look after all his workers as his children⁷⁶. They were told that two blankets and a dhoti and a *chadar*, free rail return ticket would be supplied to them and the time of service would according to the wishes of the workers. The sardars/ contractors lured these poor Nepalis saying that they were recruited for *chowkidar* or *Darwans*. But when they came to Assam they were forced to sign an agreement to work as coolies⁷⁷.

The fraudulent recruitment of poor Nepali people in Assam had been practicing from the year 1900. The recruitment of Nepali coolies in the coal mines of Assam was done by few of the Nepali *sardars*. From the 1900 Nepali coolies were brought to Assam (Ledo) to work in the coal mines, under the *sardari* of Bahadur Lama. He brought Nepali coolies mostly from Darjeeling and bordering areas of Indo-Nepal. As the demand of Nepali coolies in the coal mines grew on day by day, the sphere of work of Bahadur Lama was also extended. In 1910, Khamsung Lama, a relative of Bahadur Lama also joined him in ‘*thikadari*’ business and imported Nepalis to the coal mines of Assam⁷⁸. In 1928, T.B. Pradhan (Tez Bahadur Pradhan) and in 1939 N.B. Lama got the *sardari* at the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p.1.

⁷⁶ File- Immg. B, March, 1930, 1-46.

⁷⁷ In 1928, 26 Nepalis including a woman and three children were recruited in two batches by coolie agent S.K. Lama, saying that they were recruited for the *chowkidar* or *Darwans* and household work in Assam newly started industry. But when they came to Assam they came to know that they were actually recruited for the Mr. C.K. Bezbaruah’s owned Bolona Tea Estates in Sibsagar Districts. They were compelled to sign an agreement to work as coolies in the tea estates. Latter they refused to work as a tea garden coolies and went for strikes, which forced the Government to repatriated these coolies and coolie agent S.K. Lama was arrested. Immg. B, March, 1930, 1-46.

⁷⁸ Tika Bhattarai, “Swargiya T.B. Pradhan: Ek Sansmaran”, in *Sabha Patrika*, A Nepali Journal, (ed.), Dambar Dahal, (Golia, Sonitpur: Assam Nepali Sahitya Sabha, 2011), pp.160-161.

coal mines of Tikak, Ledo, Borgolai, Tipong and engaged in supplying Nepali coolies in the coal mines upto 1975⁷⁹. Along with these *sardars* of coal mines, person like S.K. Lama was engaged in recruiting Nepalis in the tea gardens and other areas of employment as coolies⁸⁰.

A memorandum of charges made by the Nepal Durbar regarding the treatment of Nepalese coolies employed in the Assam Coal fields, created a stir in the British Government. It was because British Government was bound by an agreement with the Government of Nepal on this issue. Because in the World War I Nepal sent 7,500 troops to India at the request of the British Government also encouraged individuals to join the Gurkha Regiment⁸¹. As a reward of the help, British recognised Nepal's full sovereignty in 1923. A friendship treaty was also signed at Kathmandu. According to the Treaty all restrictions on trade between Nepal and India was removed. It was Captain Lal Dhwoj and Ganesh Bahadur who visited the coal mines and raised innumerable objections to recruiting Nepalis for coal mines. They complained to the Nepal Government that Nepalis were getting much trouble in coal mines. Accordingly Nepal Government reacted strongly and stopped the recruiting Nepalis for coal mines of Assam. British Government on the other hand did not lose the friendship of Nepal as the Company, after the treaty of 1923 enjoyed 'practically unrestricted import of British goods to Nepal'⁸². It therefore, His Excellency the Governor of Assam had ordered Mr. Barnes, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, to hold an enquiry into them at Margherita. The charges made by the Nepal Durbar were:-

1. That the Nepali coolies have been induced by fraudulent representations of Labour Agents to accept service in the mines under conditions entirely different from what they were led to expect.

⁷⁹ *Aja Bholi*, Nepali Daily, Siliguri, dated 7th June, Wednesday, 1995, interviewed with Tutu Thapa, Margherita, reknown Nepali labour leader in the coal mines at Tikak in Upper Assam.

⁸⁰ File- Immg. B, March, 1930, 1-46.

⁸¹ David Seddon, *Nepal: A State of Poverty*, (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1993), p.32.

⁸² *Ibid.*

2. That the Nepali coolies having been induced to go to the mines are determined by force and various tricks and are made to work under very bad conditions.
3. That escape is rendered impossible by a cordon of guards posted by the mine owners, while those who attempt to escape are made to undergo severe corporal punishment or are otherwise cruelly treated.
4. Heavy death rate among the coolies.
5. Inability of the coolies to find anyone to whom they can make complaints.
6. Employment of Gurkhas of fighting classes coolies in the coal fields.
7. Enticement of boys for employment as coolies in the mines.

According to the order of His Excellency the Governor of Assam, Mr. H.C. Barnes, Commissioner, Assam Valley Division, entrusted to make an enquiry into the allegation made by Lal Dhwoj. On the basis of the complaints of the Nepal Government of fraudulent recruitment and ill-treatment, the enquiry was based. The enquiry brought into light several aspects relating to the process and terms of recruitment of Nepali labour to the coal mines as well as the condition of labour therein.

The enquiry revealed that the recruitment procedure of the Assam Bengal and Railway and Trading Company was in contravention of the provision laid down in 1919 and highlighted the forcible condition under which the labour was retained at collieries. The Labour had been recruited on false pretences and large number of Gurkhas of fighting castes and ex-sepoys was also employed in the mines. The enquiry revealed that the terms of recruitments of Nepali coolies were not in accordance with the condition under which the resumption of the recruitment of Gurkhas for industrial purposes was permitted in 1919. Accordingly recruiting depot was reopened in 1919 for recruiting for Nepali coolies for the “temporary employment during the dry or winter months in tea gardens, forest, and coal mines... provided that no attempt is made to recruit inside

Nepali territory”⁸³. But the Assam railways and trading company understood this to mean that they could resume their former system of recruitment for a term of one year. It has been ascertained from the District Magistrate of Gorkhpur, United Provinces, that in fact Nepali coolies recruited for the Assam Railways and Trading Company have not been engaged for any specific period, but have been given to understand that they are at liberty should they wish to return, to apply for repatriation at any time. The District Magistrate of Gorkhpur, on the authority of the superintendent, United Province Agencies, Tea District Labour Association, goes on to explain that ‘no specific period is given because some of these coolies may work for three months and others the whole of the dry and winter months as specified by Government’⁸⁴.

The coolies though recruited on the express condition of repatriation within the period of contract, were not repatriated, even though they wish to leave. The coolies, though technically free, were in reality treated as indentured labour. The mines are very much shut off from the outer World. Most of them are situated in the remote places. There is no public highway in the area along which a man can pass without question. The Dehing River, which bounds the colliery area on the North, is unaffordable except in the cold weather. There are few boats on it and hitherto there has been no public ferry. The ordinary means of crossing is the Railway Bridge at Margharita, which is passable for foot traffic. *Chowkidars* are maintained on the bridge, and absconders intercepted here before the expiry of their term are taken before the Assistant Labour Superintendent. Those who try to abscond had been brought back and beaten.

The total Nepali Labour force in the mines in 1921, 1922 and 1923 numbered were 1357, 1368 and 1906 respectively⁸⁵. The company’s books showed that in this first two years the numbers of coolies running away from the mines were 305 and 247 respectively. The

⁸³ Letter No. 1687, dated the 9th April 1919, Department of Commerce and Industries, *Ibid*.

⁸⁴ Letter No. Pol.1445-3044 A.P., Dated Shillong the 14th July 1923, from –A.W. Botham, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Secretary to the Govt. of India Foreign And Political Department, *Ibid*.

⁸⁵ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, 1924.

Company had repatriated Nepali Coolies 166 in 1921, 164 in 1922 and 598 in 1923⁸⁶. The coolies generally had real grievances in that they could not, except with difficulty walk out and leave the place. This fact naturally gave the Nepali *Sardars* a very great hold over them. The conditions of labour in force made it very greatly to the interest of the *Sardars* to turn out to work as many men as possible and to exact from them the greatest possible amount of work. They were even forced to work when they were sick or unwell.

An enquiry was conducted by the Commissioner of the Assam Valley division accompanied by the Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur District. The outcome of the enquiry was that about half of the Nepali coolies of the Assam Railways and Trading Company, Limited, are under orders to leave for their home while the rest are left with the choice to leave if they like and whenever they like. From the enquiry it has been established-

1. that Nepali coolies were recruited from Gorakhpur in a manner at variance with the agreement between the Government of India and the Nepal Government;
2. that coolies recruited for a year on the express condition of repatriation within the period of contract were not repatriated, though anxious to leave the mines;
3. that *ex-sipahis* and men of the fighting castes had been recruited in considerable numbers in the face of orders that this was to be discouraged;
4. that the coolies, though technically free, were really treated as indentured labour and as liable to arrest without warrant by the employer.

The recruitment of Nepalese by the Assam Railways and Trading Company through the Tea District Labour Association (Gorakhpur Branch) has been for a number of years. It

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.35.

has always been on “short term” agreements, which are defined on page 12 of the Tea District Labour Association Handbook as engagements “for a definite term not exceeding 12 months.” In point of fact the period for which the Company recruited these Nepali coolies prior to 1918 was always 12 months, and still they followed the same procedure as they felt that a coolie being of little or no use in a mine in the first few months of his engagement. Moreover there is an obligation on the Company’s part to repatriate men at the end of their period had not been repatriated. There are number of Nepali coolies who have stayed 3, 5, 7, 12 years or more⁸⁷. Though restrictions were imposed in 1919 on the yearly recruitment of the Nepali coolies, but it was not followed even in 1923. All these Nepali coolies were recruited with the assurance that he was free to go when he wanted. But it was disappointed to note that, the Company did not do this until they were faced with the possibility of an outbreak⁸⁸. When it was proved beyond doubt that these yearly contracts were contrary to the conditions under which Nepali recruiting was permitted and when moreover it appeared that the year’s contract included a definite pledge that the coolie would be repatriated within that year and when it was obvious that men, who loudly proclaimed their desire to return to Nepal, had been detained beyond the year contracted for.

The outcome of the enquiry was that about half of the Nepali coolies of the Assam Railways and Trading Company, Limited, are under orders to leave for their homes while the rest are left with the choice to leave if they like and whenever they like⁸⁹. The Agent of the Company admitted that the tea industry, oil industry, shipping, Guwahati waterworks, mills and mining industries of the province would be ruined at least for the season⁹⁰. The Agent of the Company Mr. E.A.A. Joseph, agreed to repatriate at the Company’s expense all who wish to go. Between the 9th and the 31st May 1923, 598

⁸⁷ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political-A, March 1924, p.34.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁸⁹ Extract from *The Times of Assam*, dated the 19th May 1923.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Nepali coolies had been repatriated⁹¹. The Times of India, in its issue dated 19th May 1923, gave vent to the fears that⁹²:

“Nepalis formed the bulk of the labour force of the Company at their mines and this sudden exodus of so large number of men must not only mean a heavy loss in the form of the cost of their repatriation, but directly entail a reduction in the output of coal, which forms the principal head of the Company receipts. Moreover, it might lead to a rise in the price of coal and effect all factories and mills depending upon Assam Coal.”

Reacting on the restriction that was imposed on recruiting Nepalese in the coal mines of Ledo, Mr. F.W. Lewer stated-

“the very large emigration of Nepalese must be a cause of grave alarm to the Government of Nepal. Scattered through Assam, Northern Bengal, Bhutan, Bihar and the United Provinces there must be some hundreds of thousands of Nepali subjects of whom all trace has been lost. If it were possible to repatriate all the Nepalese graziers, I know that everyone in Assam and Northern Bengal would gladly cooperate...comparatively negligible community at Ledo- composed of Nepalese regularly recruited and registered, well-paid and generally well looked after, entitled to repatriated and, leaving aside the recent controversy, regularly repatriated, a community which is in close touch with Nepal unlike the wandering herds of its subjects elsewhere-

⁹¹ Letter No. Pol. 1445-3044A.P., dated Shillong, the 14th July 1923, From- A.W. Botham, Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign and Political Department, *Ibid.*

⁹² *The Times of India, Op.cit.*

might more fairly and more profitably have been directed to other colonies of Nepalese”⁹³.

It was great impediment to the ARTC as most of the coolies had to repatriated. But the colonial Assam Government tried to convince the Nepal Government that:

“there are many Gurkhas who for one reason or another, are not inclined in return to Nepal and that some men of this category are among those who find the way to Assam in search of temporary employment. If such employment is lucrative and agreeable to them it influences them, if not to settle in Assam, at least not to return to Nepal”⁹⁴.

Large number of Nepali coolies were also employed ARTC on the broad-gauge formation of Eastern Bengal Railways and Santahar to Siliguri. According to General Manager, ARTC “a considerable number of them are men who were working at this Company’s mines until the disturbance caused by Captain Lal Dhwoj in 1923”⁹⁵. The demand of Nepali labours in sparsely populated country like Assam was always high. And Nepali Royal agents were always scrupulous and were always bargain the Government by arising the ‘martial-class’ issues. The two Nepali Royal officers whose visited to the Ledo in 1923 revealed the Nepali labour in the coal mines were also alleged that they were bribed by the Company. People who lived in the colliery and surrounding areas of Digboi, Ledo and Margherita, came to meet two Nepali Royal Government officials (Captain Lal Dhwoj and Ganesh Bahudur) when they heard that they were in Ledo, when it was asked why they came here? They replied that hearing

⁹³ Letter No. 16-A.R., From F.W. Lewer, the Superintendent, United Provinces Agencies, Ghazipur Agency, to the Labour Superintendent, Assam Railways and Trading Company, Limited, Ledo, the 12th January, 1921, *Ibid*.

⁹⁴ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Home Political A, January, 1922, NAI, New Delhi, H.W. Craix to Chief Secretary, Assam, 30 January 1922.

⁹⁵ Letter No.- L/5/2/1922 G.M., dated the 14th September 1926, From the Agent and General Manager, ARTC Ltd. To, The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur District. File- Immg. B, Dec. 1926, 56-59.

“two sardars of the Nepalese Army” were here they had all come to do “*darshan*”⁹⁶. All these people came to share their problems and with a hope of its satisfactory solutions. But the officers of the Royal Kingdom did not meet them, their main target was the coal mines of Assam. Therefore people were suspicious and alleged that Captain Lal Dhwoj and Lieutenant Ganesh Bahadur had been bribed by the Company.

Even after the strong objection from the Nepal Government to recruit Nepalis in the coal mines, British Officials were always anxious to increase the number of Nepali coolies⁹⁷. On the other hand, Nepali officers like Dharma Jung Bahadur Rana, who claims to be a nephew of His Highness Maharaja Chandra Samsher Jung Bahadur Rana approached ART&C and assure them that he would supply labour for coal mines, provided the Company will give them a free ticket at the end of six month of their service to Gorakhpur or any other side to which the coolie might wish to travel. He also assured them that he would obtain permission from Nepal Government for the same⁹⁸. When further communication were made it was proved that though he was belong to the Royal family of Nepal, but his main target was to make easy money by bargaining to the Company⁹⁹.

Conclusion

British East India Company's appearance in political scene of Assam was a transformatory one in both social and economy field. British entered India as a trader and trade and commerce had been the prime concern of the company. The prospect of natural resources and deposit of valuable mineral resources in the land of Assam had well depicted in the notes of Captain Welsh, David Scott. Early exploration operations of oil and coal in Assam by Lieutenant Wilcox in 1825, C.A. Bruce in 1828, Captain Bordie in 1837, Lieutenant Bigge and Mr. Griffiths in 1837 confirmed the good amount of coal

⁹⁶ *Assam Secretariat Proceedings*, Political A, March, 1924, p.15.

⁹⁷ File- Immg. B, September 1926, 61-65.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Letter No. L/5/2/1270 GM, Agent & General Manager's Office, Margherita, 10th June, 1926, To the Second Secretary to the Government of Assam, Shillong.

⁹⁹ File- Immg. B, September 1926, 61-65.

and oil deposits. But the main impediment in the exploration was the scarcity of labour. British expectation to procure labourers locally was turned down by the self sufficient village economy of Assam. Again working in coal mines was not an easy matter at the time. The coal mines were generally in the midst of jungle. Therefore to work in such unhealthy areas British needed labourers who were not only 'hardy' but also cheap in wages. British with the martial valour considered Nepalis as 'tough' people and suitable for the coal mines work. British therefore opened a depot at Gorakhpur to recruit Nepalis for the coal mines. They also engaged recruiting agents for this purpose. But most of the Nepalis were lured by false promises. They were imported to the coal mines and compelled to serve as bonded labourers. A dormitory room was provided to them with a single enclosure, where more than 12-13 labourers were huddled together, which was locked and well guarded. Severe punishment was given if any labourer tried to flee or any kind of laziness in work. But it was against the social system that a military class of people served as a coal cutter. In 1923 when Captain Lal Dhwoj and Ganesh Bahadur visited the coal mines they found more than 2000 Nepali workers worked in an inhuman working conditions. He firmly appealed his Government to put a restriction on such recruitment. Soon Nepal Durbar reacted on this issue and restriction was imposed to recruit Nepalis except short time employment (January-March). Large numbers of Nepalis were repatriated. But recruitment was not stopped altogether. *Sardars* like Bahadur Lama, S.K. Lama, T.B. Pradhan were aptly engaged themselves to recruit their fellow Nepalis in the coal mines of Assam till the date of Nationalisation of coal mines of India 1973.