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‘Coolie’ to ‘Mazdoor’:

Tea Garden Workers and the New Nation State, 1941-1960

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‘Coolie’ to ‘Mazdoor’: Tea Garden Workers and the New Nation State, 1941-1960*

Abstract:

Most historians working on the decades of the 1940s and 1950s have written extensively on the theme of decolonisation, partition and independence. So far, their emphasis has been on the declining hegemony of the colonial state, and the interventions, competitiveness as well as ascendancy to power of several political parties. In this exercise of prioritising the imperial and the national players, the stories of how these developments shaped the lives of the subaltern groups have taken a backseat. How did these decades shape the history of the tea plantation workers of Assam—has been one such aspect, which awaits a detailed enquiry. To extract the history of the workers out of this time-frame, the author has relied on the files and reports available in the national and state archives, institutional papers, newspapers, and the parliamentary and legislative assembly debates. This article sheds some light on the relationship between the state, planters, and the tea plantation workers of Assam. Simultaneously, it is also an exercise in evaluating the choices that were made by the new nation and how these choices shaped the course of history.

Keywords: Coolie, Mazdoor, Assam, India, Tea Plantation, Worker, Colonial State, Nation-State, Independence, Welfare

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Introduction

How is the decade of the 1940s etched in our memory? As soon as we start to think, the Second World War, the Quit India Movement, Cripps Mission, the formation of the Indian National Army, the Naval Mutiny, the Cabinet Mission Plan, the negotiations that took place between the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the British Government, Constituent Assembly Debates, partition, and independence come to our mind. Thus, one can argue that 1940s is etched in our memory as a decade with many momentous events. However, one needs to note that beneath these events, many other micro-histories remain buried. Out of the many micro-histories, there is also a story of tea garden workers. We shall discuss how these decades shaped the lives of these workers employed in the tea industry of Assam.

Historians have written extensively on the labour history during the colonial period along with the experiences of the workers employed in the plantations both in the subcontinent and overseas.¹ However, the literature on the world of plantation workers in the decade that saw independence is scarce. We do not know how the national and the regional political elites perceived the tea plantation workers of Assam and how the eventful decade of the 1940s and 1950s impacted the workers employed in the tea industry of Assam. A few historians, very briefly, have hinted that independence was accompanied by ‘absence of any real social and

¹Some significant works worth engaging on the world of the tea plantation workers of Assam include the following: Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam, 1826-1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 1977); Rana Partap Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014); Nitin Varma, *Coolies of Capitalism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, Oldenbourg, 2017); Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire's Garden* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011); Samita Sen, ed. *Passage to Bondage* (Kolkata: Samya Publications, 2016); Kaushik Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, eds., Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8-48. For a polemical account on the world of the indentured labourers across different countries and continents see the following: David Northrup, *Indentured Labour in the Age of Imperialism, 1934-1922*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Crispin Bates, “Some Thoughts on the Representation and Misrepresentation of the Colonial South Asian Labour Diaspora,” *South Asian Studies* 33, no. 1 (January 2017): 7-22.

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economic change.’² They have also pointed out that independence was accompanied by ‘hopes’, ‘fears’, ‘facilities’, ‘strains’, ‘promises’, and ‘cautious administrative measures’.³ But these observations have not been validated by evidence. The impact of decolonisation and independence on the tea plantation workers of Assam awaits a detailed analysis. This paper attempts to address some aspects of this research gap by asking and answering the following questions: What did independence signify for the tea plantation workers of Assam? Was independence translated into a reality by the different nodes of administration, or did it end as rhetoric? How did the new nation-state perceive the plantation workers? Did the new nation state come up with specific policies for the workers? These questions and their answers will be dealt with in a thematic arrangement. Simultaneously, we shall also evaluate the choices that were made by the new nation and how these choices shaped the future of the tea garden workers of Assam. To do so, we shall delve into the nuances of these two decades.

Nation and the ‘Coolies’

Amidst the momentous events of the 1940s, the foundations of the labour policies were laid. To begin with, in 1943, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), a trade union body of the Communist Party of India (CPI) demanded a detailed enquiry on the labour conditions in Assam.⁴ It also pointed out that the government of India was ‘handicapped’ by the absence of any machinery by which ‘reliable facts’ regarding the condition of labour could be ‘collected, compiled, and analysed.’⁵ As a result, a tripartite labour conference was held in September 1943. The conference recommended that it was necessary to set up an investigative machinery to enquire questions of wages and earnings, employment and housing, and social conditions. The findings of the investigation committee were to be utilised for initiating a policy of social security for labour.⁶ Following this, the government of India appointed a Labour Investigation Committee on 12th February 1944 to carry out a detailed investigation

²Jayeeta Sharma, “‘Lazy’ Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (November 2009), 1321

³Guha, *Planter Raj*, 269.

⁴Setting up an investigation committee was one of the major demands raised by All India Trade Union Congress in its session that was held in Nagpur in 1943. *Report of the All India Trade Union Congress* (Nagpur, 1943) 36.

⁵*Report of Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, Volume XII, Part I-A (1951), 256.

⁶D. V. Rege, *Report on an Enquiry into Conditions of Labour in Plantations in India* (Shimla: Government of India Press, 1946), vi.

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which was headed by D. V. Rege.⁷ The Committee submitted its findings in 1946 and observed that even as late as the 1940s, the plantation labour industry was not protected by any labour legislation. Seeing the need for legislation, the Committee advocated for a *Plantation Labour Code*.⁸

Before the appointment of the Labour Investigation Committee, the government of India, in November 1941, had established an office of the Labour Commissioner in Assam. The new office started with one part-time Labour Commissioner and one Assistant Labour Commissioner.⁹ This continued to function as such, till 1947.¹⁰ Seeing the state of affairs of this department, the Labour Investigation Committee recommended that the government employ at least three labour welfare officers.¹¹ The central government was entrusted with the responsibility to select and train these officers. The officers were to be entrusted with inspection of plantations, engage with the labourers and redress their grievances, and facilitate trade unions.¹² A year after these observations, a full-time Labour Commissioner was appointed. In 1947, two officers of the Assam Civil Service went to England for training on labour matters. After their return, they were allotted labour offices at Dibrugarh and Gauhati. In 1951, the labour department in Assam consisted of one labour commissioner, one assistant labour commissioner, five labour officers, eleven labour inspectors, and three labour investigators.¹³

The suggestion put forward by the Labour Investigation Committee for a 'Plantation Labour Code' was also adhered to by the government of India. A year later, it set up the Industrial Committee on plantations which deliberated on the framing of a 'labour code' for regulating the working conditions in the plantations.¹⁴ In January 1947, a tripartite tea

⁷D. V. Rege was the Chairman, Teja Singh Sahni was the Secretary, and there were three additional members, namely: B. P. Adarkar, Ahmad Mukhtar, and S. R. Deshpande. Rege submitted the report on 20th October 1945, and Government of India published this report in 1946.

⁸Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 181; "Plantations Labour Bill," *Parliamentary Debates, Part II- Proceedings Other than Questions and Answers*, Volume XVI (1951) 24th September 1951 to 16th October 1951, 3302-3303.

⁹*Report of Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, Volume XII, Part I-A (1951), 256.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 180-181.

¹³*Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, Vol. XII, Part I-A (1951), 256.

¹⁴S. Regaswamy, *Encyclopedia of Social Work in India*, Vol. III, 280, accessed January 4, 2019,

https://issuu.com/rengasamy/docs/encyclopedia_of_social_work_volume_/281.

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plantations conference was held in Delhi. In the conference, the dearness allowances and maternity benefits were increased.¹⁵ The increase in allowances was also an outcome of the demands raised by AITUC in the Nagpur session of 1943.¹⁶ In the tripartite conference, the participants agreed that there should be separate legislation to regulate the conditions of plantation workers. A memorandum which set out the outlines of plantation legislation was prepared and placed before the second session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations held in March-April 1948. Some proposals were accepted, and the rest were discussed at the first session of the Standing Plantation Committee held in September 1949. Subsequently, in the third session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations in November 1950, the rest of the proposals were discussed.¹⁷

A year later, the *Plantation Labour Bill* was introduced in the Parliament by the Minister of Labour, Jagjivan Ram. He argued that although the tea plantations were ‘one of the biggest organised industries in India,’ yet, there was ‘no legislation except a few to regulate the conditions of labour in the Industry.’¹⁸ Jagjivan Ram went on to highlight the salient features of the Bill. He dealt on issues related to the appointment of inspecting officers, surgeons, providing maternity benefits, provisions of creches, supply of drinking water, housing accommodation, and measures such as regulating the working hours and prohibition of children below twelve years to work in the tea plantations.¹⁹ The Parliament of India adopted the motion of the Bill after some revisions on 15th October 1951. The Bill is known as the Plantation Labour Act. Till date, this Act regulates the contract between the employers and the employees in the tea plantation industry in Assam. Thus, one can see that in the vision of Independent India, the recommendations of Rege Committee served as the foundation on which the edifices of the labour legislation were laid.

These developments bring us to another important question. How were the workers of the tea plantation industry perceived by the new nation? During the colonial period, the official

¹⁵“Labour in Assam Tea Estates: Controller’s Report,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, September 22, 1948, 9, accessed January 11, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/751341109/7171039D52EC4578PQ/1?accountid=142596>.

¹⁶*Report of the All India Trade Union Congress* (Nagpur, 1943), 36.

¹⁷Regaswamy, *Encyclopedia*, 280; “Plantations Labour Bill,” 3303; S. R. Deshpande, *Plantation Labour in Assam Valley* (New Delhi: Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1951), 1-2.

¹⁸“Plantations Labour Bill,” 3302.

¹⁹“Plantations Labour Bill,” 3304-3305.

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term used for the indentured labourers was ‘coolies’. Contrary to this, in the nationalist imagination, the experiences of the coolies were seen akin to slaves. Since the 1870s, articles, stories, plays, dramas, poems, and books were written around the world of the tea plantation workers of Assam which highlighted the oppressive and exploitative conditions under which the workers lived and worked.²⁰ Thus in the nationalist imagination, by the first half of the twentieth century, the word coolie was seen as a derogatory term that had acquired a pejorative meaning. Simultaneously, most of the trade unions, especially, the one led by the CPI held the view that the workers would be the harbingers of revolution. Therefore, they advocated for working-class unity. In its pursuit of uniting the workers from all sectors, it had introduced ‘mazdoor’ as a new political term to designate the workers. In Assam too, some of the major trade unions, namely: the AITUC and the Assam branch of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) expressed their reservations on the usage of the term coolie. As a result, in 1949, the government of Assam discontinued the usage of the term coolie. It was replaced by the word ‘mazdoor’ and labour and the same year, the government of Assam created a labour department. Simultaneously, in 1949, a memorandum was received by the government of India from D. G. Baran of Durban, South Africa, who was in the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations. He requested the government of India to abolish the term coolie and replace it with either ‘bhai’ or ‘porter’. He wrote:

No responsible person today likes to be called as coolie, why then should India keep the word coolie and call her people coolies. No matter which part of the world you go and how much respect you own (sic), you will be called a coolie since you have not deleted the word in your country.²¹

²⁰A detailed discussion is carried out by Sanat Kumar Bose, “Indian Labour and its Historiography in Pre-Independence Period,” *Social Scientist* 3, no. 4 (April 1985): 3-10. Also see, Behal, *One Hundred Years*, 6-11.

²¹“Extract from Memorandum from D. G. Baran” of 85, Victoria Street, Durban, South Africa, File no. 64/87/49- A. N, 1949, Ministry of Home Affairs, A and N Section, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI); “Labour Conditions in Plantations: Proposed Bill,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, September 9, 1949, 5,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/502070656/174CB2F571834EF8PQ/3?accountid=142596>. Accessed on 10th January 2019.

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He also emphasised that the abolishment of the word coolie in India would ‘help the prestige of Indians living abroad.’²² Taking due note of the above representation, in June 1950, the Government of India released a press note. It stated:

...the term should no longer be used in the official correspondence and should be replaced by the term mazdoor...private industrial undertakings are also requested to follow a similar policy and encourage the use of the term mazdoor to represent the same class of workers now termed coolies.²³

This change in the temperament of the Indian state in renaming the coolies as mazdoors, indicates that the newly constituted Indian state was guided by a sentiment of equality and dignity of labour. Now, in the perception of the nation, the workers were seen as independent citizens who through their sweat and blood would toil for a new and industrialised India.

While the above step ensured dignity to the workers, there were other interventions too that went on to shape the future of the plantation workers. In the *Census of 1951*, the government of Assam meddled with the lives of the tea and ex-tea garden workers by enumerating and placing them in the category of Other Backward Classes.²⁴ Three decades ago, that is, in the *Census of 1921*, the tea and ex- tea garden workers numbering around 9,22,000 were categorised as ‘Depressed Class’.²⁵ A decade later, in the Census Report of 1931, they were separated from Depressed Class and were categorised as a single caste, i.e., ‘tea garden cooly caste.’ As a result of this step, the Scheduled Caste population in Assam, which was twelve lakhs in 1921 came down to six and a half lakhs in 1931.²⁶ While enumerating the tea garden coolies as tea garden cooly caste, the Census Commissioner of Assam, C. S. Mullan, in 1931 observed:

...Coolies in Assam form, however a separate class of the population no matter what caste or tribe they belong to and hence it seems best to treat all

²²“Extract from Memorandum from D. G. Baran.”

²³File no. 51/121/50-Public, 1950, Ministry of Home Affairs, Public Section, NAI.

²⁴*Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, Vol. XII, Part I – A (1951), 417-418.

²⁵*Constituent Assembly Debates* (Hereafter *CAD*), 9, August 24, 1949, Document No. 123, Paragraph, 7, accessed January 10, 2019,

http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/9/1949-08-24.

²⁶*CAD*, 9, August 24, 1949, Document No. 123, Paragraph, 5, accessed January 10, 2019,

http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/9/1949-08-24.

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cooly castes and tribes under one heading, for all have one common characteristics, and that is that, in Assam, a cooly is always a cooly and whether he works on a garden or whether he has left the garden and settled down as an ordinary agriculturist, his social position is nil. From the point of view of Assamese society, a person belonging to any cooly caste or tribe is a complete outsider and is as exterior as any of the indigenous castes I have classed as exterior. Indeed from many points of view, the social position of coolies and ex-coolies is worse than any class in the province; they are educationally terribly backward; they have no recognised leaders or associations to press their claims or to work for their social advancement, they are foreigners to the country.²⁷

A decade later, in 1941, there was another development. The tea garden cooly castes of 1931 were enumerated as ‘garden tribes’. Now, they were included in the category of Scheduled Tribe. This step increased the population of Scheduled Tribes: while in 1931 the Scheduled Tribe population numbered around sixteen lakhs, in 1941 they increased to twenty-eight lakhs. The continuous meddling with the population of depressed classes in Assam and the reshuffling of the tea garden workers between the categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe created confusion during the Constituent Assembly Debates. It also shows the complexities of enumeration and categorisations. The complexities came to surface during the *Constituent Assembly Debates*. Nibaran Chandra Laskarre presented the Scheduled Caste population of Assam during the *Constituent Assembly Debates*. He argued that in the Census of 1941, eighty percent of the people enumerated as Scheduled Tribe were Hindus, and, therefore, he stressed that they should be enumerated as Scheduled Caste.²⁸ In the *Constituent Assembly Debates*, Kuladhar Chaliha, the representative of Indian National Congress from Assam agreed that there were ‘discrepancies’ in the Census of 1941. He assured the members that ‘in the next census, such sort of things will not occur, and that things will be just and equitable.’²⁹ However, the assurance ended in rhetoric. In the census of 1951, the tea and ex-tea garden workers were excluded from the category of depressed class. Now, the government enumerated them as ‘Tea Gardens Tribe’. It included the following

²⁷ *Report on the Census of India: Assam*, Vol. III, Part I (1931), 222.

²⁸ CAD, 9, August 23, 1949, Document No. 122, Paragraph, 203, accessed January 10, 2019, http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/9/1949-08-23.

²⁹ CAD, 9, August 24, 1949, Document No. 123, Paragraph, 78, accessed January 15, 2019, http://cadindia.clpr.org.in/constitution_assembly_debates/volume/9/1949-08-24.

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communities, namely: Gonds, Mundas, Khonds, Oraons, Santhals, Savaras, and Pans. All these communities were placed in the category of Other Backward Class.³⁰ This reordering was done on the ground that it would ‘not disturb the local political structure.’³¹ The above step also shows that in the broader visions of the elected representatives of Assam, tea garden workers were outsiders. Most politicians in Assam felt that the inclusion of the tea garden workers in the category of either Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe would disturb the local political arithmetic. The above step taken by the Government of Assam proved to be of far reaching consequences. The youths, the political representatives and intelligentsia of the tea and ex-tea garden workers saw this as a ‘betrayal’.³² This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that even in contemporary times the tea and ex-tea garden workers have been demanding to be recognised as Scheduled Tribes.³³ The meddling and the reshuffling with the workers population also shows that despite certain distinct traits, there were many overlaps between the categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which made it difficult for the enumerators to fix them into a category. Moreover, given the lack of political will—as there was no one to argue for the case of the workers and build political pressure for their inclusion into a category, and given the tensions of local arithmetic of politics which meant that if the tea and ex-tea garden workers were enumerated as Scheduled Caste/Tribe—the ‘indigenous’ population of the reserved categories would have to compete for opportunities with the tea garden workers. Under the given circumstances, the political class of Assam failed to

³⁰*Report of the Census of India: Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, Vol. XII, Part I – A (1951), 417-418.

³¹*Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission, Government of India* (Delhi: 1961), cited in Dhruva Pratim Sharma, “Demand of Tea Tribes for Scheduled Tribe Status in Assam: A Review,” in *Troubled Diversity: The Political Process in Northeast India*, ed. Sandhya Goswami (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 114.

³²Research on the contemporary world of the plantation workers has shown that both the tea and ex-tea garden workers have been consistently demanding for their recognition as Scheduled Tribes. Most social scientists agree to the fact that because of the dilly-dallying tactics of the political parties as well as the government, the tea and ex-tea garden workers feel betrayed. For a detailed overview see, Ashmita Sharma and Saqib Khan, “The Paradox of Indigeneity: Adivasi Struggle for ST Status in Assam,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 52, no. 2 (2018): 186-211; Sharma, “Demand of Tea Tribes,”; Hiren Gohain, “A Question of Identity: Adivasi Militancy in Assam”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 49 (December, 2007): 13-16; Biswajeet Saikia, “Development of Tea Garden Community and Adivasi Identity Politics in Assam,” *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 51, no. 2 (2008): 307-322; Indrajit Sharma, “Tea Tribes of Assam: Identity Politics and Search for Liberation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 9 (March, 2018): 74-78.

³³*Ibid.*

deliberate on the socio-cultural-political and economic status of the workers and enumerated the workers as Other Backward Class.

Simultaneously, the Constitution of India abolished the provision of recognising the ‘interest groups’³⁴ as a political category. As per the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935, four seats were assured to the tea garden workers in the legislature, which were known as labour constituencies. The provincial elections in 1937 and 1946 saw the election of four labour leaders from these reserved labour constituencies.³⁵ But in the first Assembly election (1952) held in Assam after independence, the tea garden labourers were denied representation as labourers and were required to fight elections from general constituencies. Based on their networks and affiliations with big political parties (principally, the Indian National Congress), some representatives from the tea gardens were elected. However, for most of the workers—the road to politics was closed. It was the disenfranchisement of a particular kind. During the colonial period the Census Commissioners had time and again brought to light the backwardness of the tea garden workers. But during the constituent Assembly Debates, these observations were not taken into consideration, and as a result, the tea garden workers were excluded from political representation. Time and again, the intelligentsia among both the tea and ex-tea garden workers have accused the government of India and the makers of the constitution of depriving the people the right to communal representation. But these representations and accusations keep echoing without any substantial gain.³⁶

³⁴For interest groups see, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Colonial State: Theory and Practice* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016).

³⁵In 1937, they were elected from four different labour constituencies. Srijit Bhairab Chandra Das was elected from Jorhat constituency (Sibsagar District), Srijut Bideshi Pan Tanti was elected from Doom Dooma (Lakhimpur district), Srijut Binod Kumar J. Sarwan was elected from Thakurbari (Darrang district) and Mr. P. Parida was elected from the constituency of Silchar (Cachar district). See Raj Kumar Thakur, “Rethinking Planter Raj: Stories of Conflict between the State and Planters in Assam, 1860s-1950s,” (PhD Thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2019), 258.

³⁶The intelligentsia of the tea and ex-tea garden workers have accused the Indian National Congress the party that won the elections after independence of depriving the people the right to communal representation which meant that people who were illiterate and people with small capital had little chance to compete in the political field. They could do so only with the organisational strength of big political parties. Devabrata Sharma ed., *Asomor Pratham Adibasi tatha Chah Shramik Neta Adhyapak Prabhudan Kumar Meyrick Sarwan* (Jorhat: Ekalabya Prakashan, 2015), 23; Sharma, “Demand of “Tea Tribes,”” 114.

Legislating for the Workers

Amidst these setbacks, the government of Assam launched a few social security measures in the 1950s. One of them was the Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund and Pension Scheme introduced in 1955 and the other was the Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act of 1959. In June 1952, the government of Assam submitted the Assam Tea Plantations Compulsory Savings Fund Scheme Bill for the approval of the President of India.³⁷ Before the approval of the above Bill by the state legislature, the Government of Assam had appointed a Minimum Wages Committee which submitted its report in 1951. The state government accepted the recommendations of the committee, and the plantation labourers started drawing higher wages with effect from 30th March 1952.³⁸ The state government was also of the view that the workers ‘will simply spend the increased income and will not attempt to save anything for their hard days, with the result that the added income may result in inflation’.³⁹ Therefore, the state government felt that it was ‘necessary’ to ‘create a savings fund compulsorily’ for the workers, so that it could ‘foster the habit of saving’ in them and would ‘help them to fall back upon in difficult days’.⁴⁰ The Bill was designed to ‘educate’ the ‘labourers in the art of thrift’ and ‘to prevent them from abusing the increased cash wages.’⁴¹

However, the Ministry of Law held the position that clause 5 of the Bill was *ultra vires* of the state legislature because the provision made in that clause dealt with income-tax. For the above clause, only the Parliament had the power to make laws.⁴² Therefore, after due consultation, this Bill was returned to the state legislature. The president of India instructed the state government to delete the clause.

³⁷ File no. 17/15/54-Judicial, 1954, Ministry of Home Affairs, Judicial Section, NAI.

³⁸“The Assam Tea Plantations Compulsory Savings Fund Scheme Bill, 1952,” in File no. 17/34/52-Judicial, 1952, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Judicial Section, NAI, 1.

³⁹“The Assam Tea Plantations Compulsory Savings Fund Scheme Bill, 1952,” 1.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹File no. 17/15/54-Judicial, 1954, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Judicial Section, NAI.

⁴²Clause V of The Assam Tea Plantations Compulsory Savings Fund Scheme Bill, 1952 stated that ‘for the purpose of the Indian Income Tax Act, 1922, the Fund shall be deemed to be a recognised provident fund within the meaning of Chapter IX A of that Act. The details about the above clause and bill are available in, File no. 17/15/54-Judicial, 1954, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Judicial Section, NAI.

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A revised draft of the Assam Tea Plantations Provident Fund Scheme Bill, 1955 was introduced in the Assam Legislative Assembly on 17th March 1955. In the Assembly, the Bill was debated by Hareshwar Goswami who was an elected representative from the Palashbari constituency. He argued, ‘the accusation that labourers spend a lot on drink and it must be stopped was not borne by facts.’⁴³ According to him, ‘the whole blame was given to the labourers.’ He also stressed that this accusation on labourers as ‘drunkards’ also created an impression that the labourers were getting ‘more money’ and were, therefore, ‘spending on liquor.’ Opposing these sentiments, he requested the Minister-in-charge to change the ‘Statement of Objects and Reasons’ and suggested:

We want a Provident Fund Scheme because in these days when the labour has secured an honourable status in our society, when they are entitled to the benefits that other employees are entitled to, they are also entitled to have the benefit of the Fund on which they can fall back upon in the days of their distress and misery.⁴⁴

The House gave assent to the Bill. On 16th April 1955, the motion was adopted by Omeo Kumar Das, the labour minister of Assam. On 5th June 1955, the Bill gained approval from the President of India on 5th June 1955 with the following revised object:

The habit of saving is not common among tea garden labourers and artisans. In order to foster this habit among them and to help them to fall back upon their savings during difficult days, the state government have drawn up this Bill for creating a contributory Provident Fund on a compulsory basis for labourers in tea estates in the state.⁴⁵

While laying the foundation of The Assam Tea Plantations Provident Fund Scheme, on 12th September 1955, the Chief Minister of Assam, Bishnuram Medhi stated that ‘our policy now

⁴³“Extracts from the Proceedings of Assam Legislative Assembly at a Meeting held on March 15, 1955,” 4-5, File no. 17/58/55-Judl, 1955, Home Ministry, Judicial I, NAI.

⁴⁴“Extracts from the Proceedings,” 4-5.

⁴⁵Ministry of Home Affairs to the Secretary to the Government of Assam, Legislative and Judicial Department, Shillong, June 9, 1955, File no. 17/58/55-Judl, 1955, Home Ministry, Judicial I, NAI.

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is to shape things that labourers may enjoy a status in keeping with their dignity as free citizens in a democratic country.’⁴⁶

The Assam Tea Plantation Provident Fund Scheme came into force with effect from 12th September 1955. Under the above scheme, all resident workers of more than sixteen years of age and connected with the cultivation and management of tea and employed in tea estates with more than 25 acres under cultivation or employing twenty or more labourers were required to ‘compulsorily subscribe to the fund.’⁴⁷ They had to contribute at the rate of one *anna* of basic wage, dearness allowance and cash value of foodstuffs earned during a wage period. The scheme was also applicable to the employers, who were also required to contribute one *anna* to the fund.⁴⁸

Coming to the Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act, 1959, it received the assent of the President of India on 27th April 1960. This act was enacted to ‘provide for the constitution of a fund for the financing of activities to promote the welfare of tea plantation employees in the state of Assam and for conducting such activities.’⁴⁹ These funds consisted of the following: fines realised from the employees, unpaid accumulations, grants from the state and central government or the tea board, any voluntary donations, and any sum unclaimed or forfeited in the provident fund account of the employees.⁵⁰ Over the years, this Welfare Fund Act has ensured several measures for the improvement in the conditions of the tea plantations workers. Some of the measures are: training students in nursing, construction of lodges and giving stipends to the college students of tea garden tribes, guest houses, medical aid, community welfare centres, organizing sports activities in tea gardens, etc.⁵¹ Despite these initiatives, the scale and outreach of this scheme has yet to reach all.

Another welfare measure that deserves some discussion is the housing scheme for the workers. As early as 1946, the Rege Committee pointed out that most of the plantation

⁴⁶*Souvenir of the Assam Tea Plantations Provident Fund and Pension Fund Scheme on the Occasion of its Silver Jubilee* (1980), 27.

⁴⁷*Annual Report on the Working of Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1955), 15.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Assam Tea Plantations Employees Welfare Fund Act*(1959), 1.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*,2-3.

⁵¹“Government of Assam: Tea Tribes Directorate for Welfare,” accessed January 15, 2019, <https://ttwd.assam.gov.in/about-us/what-we-do-0>.

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workers lived in *kutchra* (houses built with bamboo, thatch and mud) houses, and also the housing condition for the workers was unsatisfactory.⁵² In the third session of the Industrial Committee on plantations held in November 1950, it was agreed that better houses would be provided for the workers. The government now requested the planters to implement the Housing Scheme. As per the housing scheme, the programme of building houses was to be completed within twelve to thirteen years, i.e., every year houses of a standard type were to be constructed for at least eight per cent of the resident workers.⁵³

The *Plantation Labour Act of 1951* had also imposed a statutory obligation on employers to provide houses for resident workers and their families. However, in 1954 the planters wrote to the government that because of financial difficulties, they could not implement the housing programme. The government took due note of their representations. At the sixth session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations held between 19th and 20th July 1954, it was decided that the standards and specifications for workers' houses were to be prescribed by the individual state governments. As a result, the rules of the *Plantation Labour Act of 1951* that specified for the construction of *pucca* houses for workers, was amended. Now, the housing scheme had to conform to standards and specifications approved by the state government on the recommendation of the Advisory Board.⁵⁴ Facilities were provided for the grant of loans to needy planters, on interest, under the *Plantation Labour Housing Scheme* that came into effect from 1st April 1956. Despite these efforts, there was a shortfall between houses required and the number of houses constructed.⁵⁵

Keeping in view the significant contributions of tea, coffee and rubber plantations towards the national economy, the government of India appointed the Plantation Inquiry Commission on 17th April 1954 to make a 'comprehensive enquiry into the economic conditions and problems of these industries.'⁵⁶ This was the first commission constituted by the government of independent India to understand the nature of the plantation industry. The commission suggested several measures to increase the productivity of labour, such as the necessity for proper training, need for labour-saving equipment and devices, regulating surplus-labour by

⁵²Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 57.

⁵³*Report of Working Group on Plantations Labour Housing* (Delhi: Government of India Press, 1964), 1.

⁵⁴*Report of Working Group*, 47.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 61.

⁵⁶*Report of the Plantation Enquiry Commission*, 1. The Commission was headed by P. Madhava Menon.

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family planning, repatriating the surplus-labour, fixing retirement age of the workers, etc.⁵⁷ The Commission also emphasised that ‘a better way of addressing the question of increasing the productivity of labour would not be ‘how to make labour productive’ but ‘how to make labour more willing’.⁵⁸

The above measures were suggested with the objective of decreasing the cost of production, boost production, and strengthen the national economy. In the larger vision of a robust industrialised nation, workers had to be made ‘enthusiastic’, ‘loyal’, and ‘skilled’. It was to be a new age industry where the ‘surplus labour’ would be repatriated and the ‘old’ worker would retire ‘making room for the young.’⁵⁹ Thus one can see that in the years after independence, the government was eager to develop and expand the tea industry and the principles of utilitarianism (which is evident from the discussion above)⁶⁰ applied. Utilitarianism meant that for the ‘greater good’ of the nation, it was essential to introduce measures to increase industrial production. It also meant that the flow, mobility, and productivity of labour would be determined not just by the demands of the industry, but also by the grammar of regional politics.

Politics of Labour

The debates on who constituted ‘surplus labour’, who would stay in Assam, and who would be repatriated to their home districts were shaped by the rising tide of regional nationalism in the 1940s and the 50s. In the utilitarian visions of the Indian state, the people were either treated as resources or as a liability. The regional power dynamics in the state of Assam, and the growing regional nationalism also facilitated in creating these binaries. With increasing unemployment, and with the crisis in the tea industry looming large, the unemployed workers were seen as liabilities. Prior to the 1950s, the recruiting of labour for the tea industry from outside the province of Assam was not seen as a liability. As a result, in the years from 1873

⁵⁷ *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, 106-120.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁰ A detailed discussion on the influence of utilitarian ideas on the colonial state has been explained in my thesis. See, Thakur, “Rethinking Planter Raj”. To understand the nuances of utilitarianism, see Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, first published in 1789, and also see, John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, first published in 1863. These works were republished as an anthology titled: *The Utilitarians* (New York: Dolphin Books, 1961).

to 1947, more than three million ‘coolies’ were recruited and transported to Assam.⁶¹ The flow of labour from outside the province of Assam continued until 1960. However, after 1930, the numbers of imported labourers showed a considerable reduction.

Table. 1.1 gives an overview of the labourers recruited between 1930 and 1950. Between 1930 to 1950, six lakh fifteen thousand labourers were imported from outside the state of Assam. During the same period, thirteen lakh fifty-nine thousand local labourers were recruited. It meant that the overall share of local labourers increased to 54.74 per cent as compared to the labourers recruited from outside the state. This rise in the share of local labourers was the result of a hundred years of migration—most of the labourers who came decided to stay back in Assam and made efforts to make it their home.⁶² The labourers whose contracts expired were known as time-expired labourers.⁶³ While some labourers chose to pursue other vocations, there were many others who chose to settle down in *bastis* (villages) around tea gardens. Some labourers re-engaged with the tea industry after receiving bonus.⁶⁴ The increasing share of time-expired labourers ensured the tea industry of a seasonal flow of labour. During the plucking season, which was generally the busy season, some of the time-expired labourers worked as temporary labourers.

However, in the years after independence, the Assam government saw the settlement of labour as a ‘problem’ because it felt that it resulted in ‘surplus labour’. In the 1950s, the government of Assam was anxious about relieving the ‘problem of ‘surplus labour’. In 1953, discussions were held by the Assam government to look into the possibilities of banning the recruitment of immigrant labour to Assam. It made efforts to persuade the workers to migrate from gardens with ‘surplus labour’ to those gardens, which were labour deficient.⁶⁵ ‘The

⁶¹Rana Partap Behal, “Coolies, Recruiters and Planters: Migration of Indian Labour to the Southeast Asian and Assam Plantations During Colonial Rule,” in *Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series*, no. 9, (Bonn: 2013), 8. In the four decades between 1860 to 1900, about 7,50,000 labourers were brought to Assam, in Dharma Kumar, ed., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, 2, c. 1757 to c. 1970 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 513.

⁶²Thakur, “Rethinking Planter Raj,” 353-369.

⁶³Keya Dasgupta, “Wastelands Colonization Policy and the Settlement of Ex-Plantation Labour in the Brahmaputra Valley: A Study in Historical Perspective,” *Occasional Paper*, 82, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1986, 1-24.

⁶⁴Thakur, “Rethinking Planter Raj,” 346-347.

⁶⁵“Assam May Ban Immigrant labour,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February 2, 1953, 14, accessed January 11, 2019,

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problem of surplus labour was tackled by the Assam government by restricting the entry of immigrant labour and thus forcing the estates to employ the surplus labour in the estates and villages.⁶⁶

In August 1957, some of the local forwarding stations (there were many stations working for other destinations) of the Tea District Labour Association stopped recruiting labour for Assam on the ground that the demand had reduced.⁶⁷ The government of Assam repeatedly emphasised that the recruitment of labour from outside Assam should be stopped. As a result, in the ninth session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations held in August 1960, the policy of recruitment of labour for Assam plantations was reviewed. The committee decided against fresh recruitment of labourers from outside Assam. Thereafter, the Tea Districts Labour Association, which was the principal recruiting and forwarding organisation stopped its activities from 1st September 1960. With this, the recruitment of labourers from outside the territory of Assam formally came to an end.⁶⁸

Prior to the liquidation of the Tea Districts Labour Association, the nodal agency, one needs to note that it was the principal supervisory body that forwarded the emigrant labour to Assam. In 1955, 19,840 adult workers were recruited from outside the province along with 8,457 minors and other dependents.⁶⁹ Till the late 1950s, the recruitment of labour continued to be on the basis of a whole family where each member constituted labour.⁷⁰ In 1959, the

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/501198375/EB621CF1C9AF4851PQ/1?accountid=142596>.

⁶⁶ *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, 117-118.

⁶⁷ *Lok Sabha Debates*, vol. vi, 1957, August 26, 1957, to September 5, 1957, Question asked on August 28, 1957, 10421-10422.

⁶⁸ *Indian Labour Year Book, 1962* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1963), 210.

⁶⁹ Recruitment along with provinces break-up is given below:

<u>State</u>	<u>Adult</u>	<u>Minor Dependents</u>
Andhra Pradesh	319	220
Bihar	9021	4008
Bombay	1164	613
Madhya Pradesh	4249	1269
Orissa	4489	2089
<u>Uttar Pradesh</u>	<u>598</u>	<u>231</u>
Total	19840	8457

Source: *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (1955)*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (1959)*, 6.

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TDLA forwarded seven thousand and sixty-seven persons to Assam.⁷¹ Recruitment of the labourers was conducted through three categories of recruiters, namely: the garden *sardars*, the resident *sardars*, and the local recruiters.⁷² The garden *sardars* were selected by the employers from among the labourers employed on tea estates who were sent to their home districts to bring labour for their gardens.⁷³ The resident *sardars* were also labourers from tea estates sent down by the employers to recruit in the same manner as the garden *sardars*. But the difference was that these *sardars* had ‘no intention of returning to their gardens and this is known to and accepted by their employers.’⁷⁴ To make the resident *sardars* more accountable, a *sardar’s* diary, or a history sheet was opened in their names. The third category consisted of recruiters who were appointed locally, within their own districts from where recruiting was done by the Local Forwarding Agent. These local recruiters were employed on a commission. Thus labour recruited contributed to a pool that was established in each district in order to provide a labour pool for those gardens which had no district recruitment channel with districts from where these gardens wanted to bring labour.⁷⁵

Generally, the recruitment was carried on by a deputation of tea garden *sardars*. In 1958, it was reported that about forty-five adult workers along with seventeen minors and other dependants were recruited through channels other than the *sardari* system. In 1958, the recruitment per *sardar* was 19.69 as against 11.71 in the previous year.⁷⁶

⁷¹State-Wise Distribution of Workers Emigrating into Assam in 1958-59:

<u>State</u>	<u>Adult Workers</u>	<u>Minors and Other Dependants</u>
Bihar	4019	1728
Madhya Pradesh	934	336
Orissa	31	19
Total	4984	2083

Source: *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1959), 5.

⁷²Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 24.

⁷³These men as well as some women sent up two or three batches of recruits before returning to their gardens at the end of the recruiting season, generally June. Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 24.

⁷⁴Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, 24.

⁷⁵ The labourers recruited by local recruiters were allotted to the pool for distribution in accordance with a ballot drawn under the direction of the Executive Committee of the Association. Pool recruiting, however was not very extensive. Rege, *Report of an Enquiry*, 24.

⁷⁶*Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1958), 6.

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The cost of recruiting labour was however a fluctuating business.⁷⁷ In 1952, the average cost of recruiting one adult labour was 143 rupees. In 1953, it came down to 136 rupees, in 1954 it again increased to 291 rupees, and in 1955, it decreased to 130 rupees.⁷⁸ In the following years, the average showed an annual variation. In 1956, the average cost was 139 rupees, in 1957, it increased to 141 rupees, in 1958, it decreased to 124 rupees, and in 1959 it increased to 126 rupees.⁷⁹

Another trend that one notices in the years after the 1930s is the increase in the share of those labourers who were repatriated to their home districts. Table 1.2 gives detailed statistics of the number of labourers who were repatriated to their home districts. The inclusion of the clause of repatriation in the *Tea District Labour Emigration Act of 1932* had ensured that in the years between 1934 to 1950, 2,90,000 labourers, i.e., 56.8 per cent of the labourers recruited from outside the state of Assam were repatriated to their home districts, after the completion of their contract.⁸⁰ Several enquiry committee reports have also attested to this fact.

In 1938, about 26,000 emigrant labourers and members of their families were repatriated by their employers.⁸¹ While in the latter half of the nineteenth century the coolies were signing contracts for a longer period (three to five years), after the 1920s, the labourers were recruited for shorter terms.⁸² In the years after independence because of the policies of the Assam government of sending back ‘surplus labour’, the number of repatriated labourers

⁷⁷The main elements involved in the costs were the following: sardar’s commission, the rail expenses of the recruit and the cost of the maintenance of the recruits until they reached the garden, the maintenance of the organisation of the TDLA and the cost of repatriation, Rege, *Report on an Enquiry*, 25.

⁷⁸*Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1955), 5.

⁷⁹*Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1959), 6.

⁸⁰Thakur, “*Rethinking Planter Raj*,” 384. In the years between 1934 to 1950, around 510,000 labourers were imported into Assam to work in the tea gardens, out of which, 290000 labourers were repatriated to their home districts. The total number of labourers recruited has been derived from the *Census of India, 1951, Vol. XII, Part I-A, Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, 69.

⁸¹“Emigrant Labour in Assam: Conditions of Work in Tea Gardens,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, November 5, 1938, 21, accessed July 10, 2018,

<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.jnu.ac.in/hnptimesofindia/docview/325606768/7AB8A329A9144A9EPQ/1?accountid=142596>.

⁸²*Royal Commission of Labour* (1930), 23; Gail Omvedt, “Migration in Colonial India: The Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 7, no. 2, (January 1980), 188.

continued to grow. Despite these tendencies of repatriation, some labourers gave up their rights of repatriation after the expiry of their contracts. They did so, by citing that their home districts had little to offer in terms of opportunities and therefore, they wanted to settle down in Assam. From 1938 to 1950, about 1,16,020 workers had given up their right to repatriation.⁸³

Growth of Unions

In the 1940s, one also gets to see the activities and interventions of the trade unions in the tea plantations. Prior to the start of the Second World War, there were only five plantation labour unions in Assam formed in 1939.⁸⁴ Out of these unions, one, i.e., Sylhet Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union survived, which was functional even during the Second World War. The Chairman of Sylhet Cachar Cha Bagan Mazdoor Union was A. K. Chanda who was the Member of Legislative Assembly and the Vice-Chairman was Sanat Kumar Ahir (who also worked as a mechanic in a tea factory). P. M. Sarwan, a Munda Christian from Jorhat formed the Chota nagpur Association in 1938, but this did not garner enough membership.⁸⁵ However, seven years later, in May 1945, the Assam Tea Labourers Federation which consisted of five individual garden unions, was formed in the Sibsagar district by the efforts of P. M. Sarwan.⁸⁶

Simultaneously, the provincial branch of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) also made advances in Assam. In its twentieth session held in Nagpur in 1943, the AITUC put forward four demands, which were as follows: (a) the right of the workers to hold meetings and form unions; (b) increase in basic wages and dearness allowance; (c) cheap supply of food; (d) appoint a committee to inquire into conditions of life and work in plantations.⁸⁷ The government of India recognised the need of looking into these issues

⁸³The postponement of the right was done by the workers probably because of food shortages in the village district and also because as the tea industry employed families therefore most the workers had their entire family in the tea districts which meant that they had gradually lost contact with their villages. *Plantation Labour in Assam Valley* (New Delhi: Labour Bureau, Ministry of Labour, Government of India, 1951), 18.

⁸⁴Guha, *Planter Raj*, 196.

⁸⁵The prime reason for the lack of support was that the Bishop of Assam requested the missionaries to distance themselves from this organisation, in Guha, *Planter Raj*, 239.

⁸⁶*Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, 71.

⁸⁷*Report of the All India Trade Union Congress* (Nagpur: 1943), 36.

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immediately. As already discussed, it increased the dearness allowance, fixed a minimum wage, and appointed the Rege Committee to enquire into labour conditions.

In the meanwhile the Assam branch of the Congress known as the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) was making continuous efforts to gain a foothold among the plantation workers. In 1938, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee formed a sub-committee to enquire into the condition of labour in tea gardens and other industries and to suggest means to organise them.⁸⁸ From the war years that continued in the later years, the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee made rigorous efforts to build trade unions and organisational base in the tea gardens of Assam. In 1940, Babu Sanat Ahir, a Congress candidate won in a by-election and was elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly from Silchar, which was a reserved constituency.⁸⁹

In 1945, the working committee of the APCC resolved to take immediate steps to organise tea garden labour in Assam. This work was entrusted to the Department of Minorities and Labour, and Bijoy Chandra Bhagwati, a Congress functionary was appointed a member of this department.⁹⁰ In 1946, a few others such as Shankar Chandra Barua was entrusted with the responsibility to organise ex-tea garden labour in the districts of Golaghat, Jorhat, Sibsagar, and Dibrugarh, and Mahendranath Hazarika of Nowgong was entrusted with the responsibility of organising the ex-tea garden labour in Nowgong.⁹¹

In 1947, the Assam Mazdoor Sangha came into existence through the efforts of B. C. Bhagwati. The members of the APCC also formed a few labour unions and opened offices at Tinsukia, Gauhati and Tezpur.⁹² On 3rd May 1947, three months before independence,

⁸⁸The members of the sub-committee included the following people: Rajendranath Barua was the secretary, Debeswar Sarma, Mahendranath Barua, Krishnanath Sarma, and Dhirendranath Datta. *Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Proceedings*, (hereafter *APCC*)1937-1955, R-3599, no. 1, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 24.

⁸⁹“A meeting of the working committee held at Congress House,” at 2 P.M on 24th August 1940, in *Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Proceedings, 1937-1955*.

⁹⁰“Proceedings of the working committee, APCC,” at 8.15 P. M, Nowgong on 8th August 1945, in *Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Proceedings*, 23.

⁹¹“Proceedings of the Adjourned Meeting of the Working Committee of APCC,” at 3.30 P. M, Gauhati on 26th May 1946, in *APCC Proceedings*, 145.

⁹²“Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC,” at 2 P. M, on 5th February 1947, in *APCC Proceedings*.

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INTUC was formed and on 3rd September 1947, the Assam Branch of INTUC also came into existence.⁹³ As a result of the efforts of INTUC, several district branches of the Cha Mazdoor Sangh were opened in Assam, namely: Jorhat Zilla Chah Mazdoor Sangha, the Naharkatiya Circle Chah Mazdoor Sangha, the North Lakhimpur Zilla Chah Mazdoor Sangha, the Moran Circle Chah Mazdoor Sangha, and the Tingria Circle Chah Mazdoor Sangha.⁹⁴ These Sanghas were reported to have been running night schools in different tea gardens, welfare centres like several sports clubs, libraries, horticulture, weaving, poultry, fishery, cultural shows, and several such activities.⁹⁵ The above mentioned Mazdoor Sanghas along with several others were amalgamated into one on 9th August 1958. This amalgamated body came to be known as Assam Cha Mazdoor Sangha (ACMS).⁹⁶ In the later years, the influence of this labour union in the larger polity of Assam became significant. Several leaders of the ACMS fought and won both the Legislative Assembly elections as well as the Lok Sabha elections. They have also served as ministers in both the state and the union. In contemporary times, ACMS has emerged as the largest union which boasts of 22 branches across the state of Assam with approximately around 350,000 members affiliated to it.⁹⁷

‘Sacrifice’ and Resistance

To the question of what did independence signify for the workers of the tea plantations, the context needs to be located within the visions of the nation for the workers and simultaneously the financial crisis of the tea industry. While the nation expected workers to be ‘skilled’, ‘robust’, ‘fit’ and ‘hard-working’, the crisis of the tea industry denied even the basic necessities to the workers. For many of the tea garden workers, independence was accompanied by ‘starvation’ and work without wages.⁹⁸ In December 1952, as many as 12 tea gardens were reported to have been closed, which rendered around sixteen thousand workers

⁹³Guha, *Planter Raj*, 242.

⁹⁴*Review of the Working of the Indian Trade Unions Act, 1926, During 1953-54*, 11-12; *Annual Report on the Working of the Indian Trade Unions Act* (1956), 2.

⁹⁵In Naharkatiya, the Sangha opened five night schools; in Moran, the Sangha opened eight night schools. *Annual Report on the Working of the Indian Trade Unions Act* (1956), 2.

⁹⁶‘Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangha,’ accessed January 17, 2019, <http://www.assamchahmazdoorsangha.org/aboutus.html>.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸‘Proceedings of the Working Committee of the APCC,’ at 8 A. M, Gauhati, held on July 2, 1951, in *APCC Proceedings*.

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jobless.⁹⁹ In the next few months, around 72 gardens in Cachar district alone closed, leaving 42,000 workers jobless out of which only six re-opened.¹⁰⁰ As per an official enquiry conducted in 1954, 96 percent of tea garden labourers in Cachar district, and 88 percent in Assam Valley were found to be ‘irretrievably lost in debt.’¹⁰¹

During this period of crisis, the Government of Assam requested the workers to ‘accept cheerfully its decision to cut their minimum wages given the difficulties facing the industry.’¹⁰² In the press note release, the government stated that ‘the provision was purely temporary and should the prices of tea look up the government would be most happy to restore immediately the first sacrifices made by labour.’¹⁰³ Furthermore, it added that the ‘industry would appreciate the generous sacrifice of the workers and make every endeavour to re-open immediately the gardens which had closed.’¹⁰⁴ As a result of this crisis, the food that was supplied to the workers on a concessional price was stopped.¹⁰⁵ The labour leaders criticised this decision. They blamed the government for crisis and requested it to ‘appoint a tripartite commission to investigate into the working of the tea industry.’¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹“Twelve Tea Estates in Assam Closed,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspaper*, December 5, 1952, 5, accessed January 18, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/501185097/88252D04BE21436CPQ/11?accountid=142596>.

¹⁰⁰“6 Tea Gardens Reopen,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspaper*, February 19, 1953, 4, accessed January 18, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/502318828/88252D04BE21436CPQ/41?accountid=142596>,

¹⁰¹“Tea Workers in Debt: Official Enquiry,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspaper*, 2nd June 1954, 5, accessed January 18, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/501912928/fulltextPDF/88252D04BE21436CPQ/5?accountid=142596>.

¹⁰²“Tea Workers Cut in Wages Explained: Assam Governments Assurance,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February 16, 1953, 5, accessed January 18, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/502625718/88252D04BE21436CPQ/54?accountid=142596>.

¹⁰³“Tea Workers Cut in Wages Explained,” 5.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶“Labour Leaders Blame Government for Crisis,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February 22, 1953, 14, accessed January 18, 2019,

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/501200863/88252D04BE21436CPQ/56?accountid=142596>.

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The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also urged upon the government to take immediate steps to resolve the crisis. It adopted a resolution on 2nd July 1951 to express concern over the decision of the Assam government to take over unutilised lands in the tea gardens. The APCC found out that in many of the tea gardens of Cachar, there was a problem of ‘surplus labour’. It suggested that this problem could be resolved by ‘distribution of surplus lands to the labourers so that they can earn their livelihoods by cultivating land.’¹⁰⁷ Therefore, it urged upon the government of Assam ‘not to requisition lands of tea gardens’, but to ‘initiate a policy of settling such lands with surplus labour in tea gardens of Cachar’.¹⁰⁸

But since 1951 onwards, the questions of labour were linked to the questions of resources in the state. On 2nd July 1951, the APCC decided to ask the government to stop recruitment from outside Assam because it felt that with increase in recruitment the ‘pressure on land would increase.’¹⁰⁹ A year later, on 30th May 1952, the APCC reversed its earlier held position of distributing lands to the ‘surplus labour’. Now, it suggested that the government should not allot land to ‘anybody except the bonafide agriculturists.’ It was also of the opinion that the ‘protection of the interest of the labour could easily be given by fixation of minimum wages, sharing of profits, etc.’¹¹⁰ In the later years, the APCC raised the demand of employing the ‘children of the soil’ as managers and other higher grade services in industries such as tea, oil, coal, and river transport.¹¹¹

For the labour force, the 1950s was a painful period. Around 60,000 workers of both Assam and Bengal tea gardens were thrown out of employment and around six and a half lakhs of the total labour population were ‘semi-starved or were underemployed.’¹¹² The trade

¹⁰⁷ “Resolution No. 8,” adopted by the Working Committee of the APCC on July 2, 1951, in *APCC, Proceedings*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ “Resolution No. 9,” in ‘Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC’, held on May 30, 1952, in *APCC Proceedings*.

¹¹⁰ “Resolution No. 10,” in ‘Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC’, held on May 30, 1952, in *APCC Proceedings*.

¹¹¹ “Resolution No. 1,” in ‘Proceedings of the Meeting of the Working Committee of the APCC’, held on September 6, 1953, in *APCC Proceedings*.

¹¹² “Inquiry into Tea Industry Urged: Labour Leaders Blame Government for Crisis,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February 22, 1953, 14, accessed January 10, 2019,

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unions argued that this large-scale unemployment was due to the closure of 105 gardens. They also blamed the government for withdrawing labour grain concessions without compensating the workers with cash increases.¹¹³

Unemployment, wage-less work, and hunger forced workers to come out in the streets and raise their demands. Thus resistance became a tool for negotiations. In 1955, there were 48 instances of strikes led by the workers in the tea gardens of Assam out of which 46 were in the Assam Valley which involved 41,060 workers.¹¹⁴ In Surma Valley, there were two instances of strikes. A total of 363 workers took part in these two strikes in Surma Valley.¹¹⁵ In 1957, there were 18 strikes in the tea gardens of Assam in which a total of 7809 workers participated.¹¹⁶ There was a further upsurge in the number of strikes particularly, in the months from August to December of 1957. On 6th August 1957, about 250 tea garden labourers of Deha tea estate in Sibsagar district, led by the Cha Mazdoor Union and Communist Party of India, went on strike. The labourers demanded a bonus for the year 1955 as well as compensation for the cuts in ration. They resumed their duty after the district magistrate assured them that their legitimate demands would be fulfilled after a due enquiry by a government labour officer. On 11th August 1957, the dispute was reported to be amicably settled by the labour officer and Cha Mazdoor Union.¹¹⁷

On 17th August 1957, the labourers of Barfalong and Daria tea estates in Sibsagar district resorted to a strike for non-receipt of cash allowance in lieu of rice concession, and double wage for working on Sundays. However, because of the intervention of the trade unions, the

<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.jnu.ac.in/hnptimesofindia/docview/501200863/pageviewPDF/4258603EF47F4ACAPQ/1?accountid=142596>.

¹¹³ “Steady Deterioration in Labour Situation: I.N.T.U.C Warns Government against Complacency,” *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, May 20, 1953, 5, accessed January 10, 2019,

<https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.jnu.ac.in/hnptimesofindia/docview/517197165/EE48C313A9894ADDPO/1?accountid=142596>.

¹¹⁴ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1955), 15.

¹¹⁵ The loss in wage as a result of strikes in Surma Valley was calculated as nine hundred and fifty-nine rupees, in *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1957), 14.

¹¹⁷ “Fortnightly Report for the First Half of August, Assam, 1957,” 2, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, Nos. 1-21, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

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labourers called off their strike and returned to work on 24th August. Simultaneously, on 20th August 1957, about 200 workers of Durgapur tea estate in the Dibrugarh district struck work primarily because they were not paid the arrears of bonus.¹¹⁸ On 18th and 19th September 1957, around 500 labourers of Dikhu Hengera tea estate in Sibsagar district resorted to strike for two days and demanded supply of better quality of ration.¹¹⁹ On 22nd September 1957, about 400 labourers of Anandabag tea estate, in Lakhimpur district, surrounded the garden office and assaulted the manager, agent, and some assistants. They did so, because on the previous day, the manager of the garden had detained the labourers for plucking till late hours and man-handled some of the factory labourers. It was also reported that the manager sustained injuries because of the assault by the workers. Three days later, on 25th September 1957, about 250 women labourers of Bihubor tea estate in Sibsagar district surrounded the manager's bungalow and demanded to be paid bonus arrears. It was also reported that at the instigation of some Communist leaders, the labourers of Jingia tea estate in Darrang district refused to accept the National Savings Certificates given to them in lieu of the bonus for the year 1955.¹²⁰ During the first half of October 1957, the labourers of Hatigarh-Bagjan tea estate in Sibsagar district abstained from work for a day as a protest against the indifference of the management in fulfilling certain agreed terms. They reported for duties the next day at the intervention of the Labour Officer who assured them that their grievances would be looked into.¹²¹

Seeing the growing resistance in the tea gardens, the government of Assam declared it as a 'growing' signs of 'lawlessness'.¹²² To check this 'lawlessness', the government constituted a twelve-member committee to find out the reasons behind this. In the meanwhile, the labourers of the Beheating tea estate in Lakhimpur district struck work from 23rd October 1957 to demand an increase in their wages. Simultaneously, the labourers of Santhalie tea estate in Cachar district 'threatened to sell the garden properties for realisation of their wages' which were not paid to them since 31st August 1957, this despite the fact that they had been

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁹ "Fortnightly Report for the Both Halves of September, Assam, 1957," 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, nos. 1-21, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²¹ "Fortnightly Report for the First Half of October 1957," 4, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political - II Section, NAI.

¹²² *Ibid.*

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working regularly.¹²³ The strike in Beheating tea estate continued till the first half of November. To continue production and not be pressurised by the estate workers, the garden authorities engaged about 130 labourers from outside to work in the garden. But despite their efforts, they were obstructed by about two hundred strikers, both male and female who were reported to be ‘squatting on the public road with red flags.’ These workers ‘obstructed the police who tried to remove them from the road.’ Even the magistrate of the district failed to ‘persuade’ them to clear the road. This resulted in violence and force was applied on the protestors. The assembly was declared ‘unlawful’, and 35 persons, including fourteen women, were arrested on the spot and others fled away¹²⁴. The labour strike launched at the Beheating tea estate (Lakhimpur) on 23rd October was finally called off on 22nd November 1957.¹²⁵ In the second half of November, it was reported that the labourers of Kalachura tea estate in Cachar district remained without work since 24th October 1957.¹²⁶

Towards the first half of December, the ‘conditions in the Coolikoosie tea estate in Naga on district became deplorable as the payment of wages to the labourers and the staff had not been made.’¹²⁷ The labourers had stopped working in the garden from the 4th December 1957. Seeing the situation, the government of Assam directed the management to pay the arrear wages immediately.¹²⁸ However, the situation in the Cooliekoosie tea estate continued even towards the second half of December. Payment of wages was still due to the labourers and the staff, and no reply had been received from the management.¹²⁹ On 5th December 1957, the labourers of Maha Lakhi tea estate in Darrang district also launched a strike as a mark of

¹²³ “Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of October 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹²⁴ “Fortnightly Report for the First Half of November 1957,” 2, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹²⁵ “Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of November 1957,” 2, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ “Fortnightly Report for the First Half of December 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ “Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of December 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

protest against non-fulfilment of their grievances by the garden authority.¹³⁰ They called off the strike on 18th December 1957 at the intervention of the government labour officer.¹³¹

As already discussed, in October 1957, a committee had been formed by the government of Assam to look into the lawlessness in the tea gardens. The committee held its first meeting on 9th December 1957, at Shillong. This committee was formed to enquire into the ‘growing lawlessness’ in tea gardens and to ‘suggest measures to stop it’, but instead of mediating and offering an immediate solution, the committee decided to form a ‘sub-committee’ that would ‘formulate a questionnaire to be issued to the different organisations and individuals concerned.’¹³²

In 1958, there were 13 strikes involving 4994 workers directly. The matters in dispute were wages, bonus, task, and high handedness on the part of the staff and several others. All these strikes were reported to be of short duration. They were settled either by direct negotiations or through the mediation of the government labour officer.¹³³ In 1959, there were 13 strikes involving 7365 workers.¹³⁴ After a decade of “sacrifice” and resistance by the workers, the government of Assam in 1959 decided to increase the wages of the workers by twenty *annas* for adults, and ten *annas* for minors per day. This decision was taken unanimously in a meeting presided by the labour minister of the state, K. P. Tripathi. It also saw the participation of Assam Tea Association, the Assam Tea Planters Association, the Bharatiya Cha Parishad, while the workers were represented by INTUC.¹³⁵ In February 1959, the government of India discussed the proposal of giving loans to uneconomic tea estates in

¹³⁰ “Fortnightly Report for the First Half of December, 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, nos. 1-21, 1957, NAI.

¹³¹ “Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of December, 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, nos. 1-21, 1957, NAI.

¹³² “Fortnightly Report for the First Half of December 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, nos. 1-21, 1957, NAI.

¹³³ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1958), 13.

¹³⁴ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* (1959), 12.

¹³⁵ “Wage Increase for Assam Tea Garden Labour,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, November 19, 1959, 12, accessed January 18, 2018.

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/740008563/88252D04BE21436CPQ/8?accountid=142596>.

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Assam so that they would be able to rebuild themselves and provide employment to the workers.¹³⁶

Conclusion

From the above discussions, one can conclude that the two decades beginning from the 1940s to the 1960s were long and tiring for the workers, and the seed of independence awaited nourishment. Rather than mitigating the grievances of the workers, the Indian state prioritised the nation and nation building. In the utilitarian visions of the state, the workers were conceptualised either as resources or as liabilities. The elevation of ‘coolie’ to ‘mazdoor’ was a reflection that rhetorically the workers were cherished as resources. They were entrusted with the responsibility of toiling hard and building an industrialised nation. However, the local power dynamics and the regional nationalism linked to the politics of the ‘sons of the soil’ ensured that both the tea and ex-tea garden workers had to continuously negotiate for their survival, dignity, and political representation in the state of Assam. Moreover, the deployment of the term such as ‘surplus labour’ and ‘lawless elements’, and with the gaining currency of the terms such as repatriation and ban of recruitment meant that the workers were forced to assert their own rights. Now, they were required to think: how to transform from being perceived as a liability to being cherished as a resource.

Nominally, the term coolie had been abolished from official discourses, and the term mazdoor had gained ground. However, discrimination in the public sphere was still present. For some students who were from the tea garden tribes 1947 brought tearful experience. In this context the experience of Santosh Kumar Topno is worth recounting. In 1947, while pursuing higher studies in J. B. College, Jorhat, he was denied participation in a conference held by Assam Chatra Sammilan in Calcutta.¹³⁷ After this humiliation, Santosh Kumar Topno resolved to build an organisation that would represent the youths of the tea garden community. He held discussions with Simon Singh Horo, Rakhil Nag, and Christoprasad Sangma—all his colleagues. The discussions resulted in a two-day conference from 27th to 28th December 1947, at Dighaliya Gaon English School in Dibrugarh district. At the

¹³⁶ “Aid to Assam’s Tea Industry: Assurance by Minister,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February, 2, 1959, 1, accessed January 18, 2019.

<https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/346602017/88252D04BE21436CPQ/60?accountid=142596>.

¹³⁷ Assam Chatra Sammilan was a student organisation formed by the Assamese students in 1916.

conference, several students, sons and daughters of tea and ex-tea garden workers participated. In the course of the discussion, it was found that the education status among the students hailing from the tea gardens was dismal. Only four students were pursuing higher studies in universities, four students were enrolled in colleges, and only one hundred and seventy-two students were pursuing education at the senior secondary level. This conference gave birth to an organisation which was named Assam Chotanagpuri Chatra Sammilan, formed on 28 December 1947.¹³⁸ Thus began the quest of the youth for a dignified existence. Over time, this student body underwent several changes. A few years after its formation, its name changed to Chotanagpur Students Union. In 1974, it got crystallised into All Assam Tea Tribes Student Association (AATTSA).

This paper also tells us that in the vision of the new nation state, it was the national economy that was prioritised. To achieve this goal, the nation took several decisions to strengthen and boost the various sectors of the economy—agriculture, industry, transport, service, education and several others. However, by doing away with the provision of labour constituency, the nation not only deprived the mazdoors of political participation, but also changed the course of history by placing the mazdoors in the category of Other Backward Class. Social scientists have pointed out that ‘immediately after independence and during the framing of the Constitution, the future ruling alliance was still in the process of formation.’¹³⁹ The efforts made by the Indian National Congress since the 1930s to build their organisational base among the workers was intended towards the objective of seeking a hegemonic presence among the workers. Thus in this process, the politics of the labourers, their hopes and aspirations and their leadership were subsumed within the larger narrative of nation-building. In the process, in the Constituent Assembly Debates, the labourers went unrepresented. The denial of any protective legislation in the Constitution, and enumerating the workers as Other Backward Class in the census created grounds for political tensions and contentions in the following decades. The nation did not have to wait for long. Towards the end of December 1957, the President of the Assam Cha Shramik Sabha was seen persuading the tea garden and ex-tea garden labourers to agitate and ‘demand representation for the ‘tea

¹³⁸Dineswar Tasha, *An Elaborate History of Assam Tea Tribes Students Association (ATTSA)*, (Jorhat: Central Committee, AATTSA, 2009), 18-19.

¹³⁹Partha Chatterjee and Arup Mallik, “Indian Democracy and Bourgeois Reaction,” in *A Possible India: Essays in Political Criticism*, Partha Chatterjee, ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 42.

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garden tribes’ in the legislature—by reserving seats for them in the Assam Assembly and as well as in the Parliament.’¹⁴⁰

We also discussed that the government of Assam initiated several welfare schemes. But this was done with a degree of paternalism. In the official discourses, the workers were still being described as ignorant, drunkard and unskilled. Moreover, the welfare schemes were yet to yield result in the decade that was ridden with ‘crisis’. The assurance of providing housing, improving health and sanitation, increased wages, and supply of ration on concession rates which were guaranteed to the workers by the *Plantation Labour Act*, were yet to be implemented. The preceding discussions also reveal that the nation demanded sacrifices from the newly constituted mazdoors. The appeal made by the Government of Assam to the mazdoors to work on meagre wage meant that this was the period when social rights and economic benefits were almost suspended. The mazdoors were required to make ‘sacrifice’. When unemployment and starvation forced them to show resistance, the state chose to club them as lawless elements and used force. Thus despite their resistance, they were compelled to contribute to increasing the output of tea.

In 1954, India exported 446 million lbs of tea to the world, which meant that India contributed almost 38.9 percent of the total tea exports of the world.¹⁴¹ Despite these contributions, there was a huge disparity in the wages earned by workers employed in the tea industry in Assam. The monthly wage of men employed in tea plantation as varied from rupees seventeen to rupees twenty-three. For women, it ranged from rupees eleven to rupees twenty-one, and children earned between rupees six to rupees fourteen per month.¹⁴²

Literacy rates continued to be dismal. As late as 1957, there were only five hundred and thirty-two primary schools. The government managed nine of these schools, 48 schools were jointly managed by the government and the planters, and 475 schools were managed by the planters. In 1957, the total enrolment in these schools was reported to be only 27,423 pupils.¹⁴³ The only progressive change initiated by the government of Assam was the award

¹⁴⁰ “Fortnightly Report for the Second Half of December 1957,” 3, File nos. 4/17/57-Poll. II, 1957, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political-II Section, NAI.

¹⁴¹ The total export of tea by all the countries of the world was 1146 million lbs. *Report of the Plantation Inquiry Commission*, 10.

¹⁴² *Plantation Labour in Assam Valley*, 32.

¹⁴³ *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act (1957)*, 13.

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of scholarships for the children of the tea and ex-tea garden workers. In 1957, twelve students studying in primary schools received rupees five: five students studying in middle vernacular received rupees six: and six students studying in middle English classes received rupees seven.¹⁴⁴ These scholarships had little impact as their meagre number was highly disproportionate to the size of the population of the children of the workers.

India had inherited an industry that was in crisis. In this hour of crisis, on 1st February 1959, the Union Minister of State and Industry, Lal Bahadur Shastri, while addressing the Congress workers in Dibrugarh warned them against ‘going about with the ruling class mentality.’ Instead, he said to them that in the hours of crisis, this ‘would be a handicap in guiding and helping the masses, who should be approached with a spirit of service only’.¹⁴⁵ Whether the tiring time of the workers employed in the tea industry ended after the 1950s, and whether the ‘congress workers started living in villages to help the backward rural masses’¹⁴⁶ are questions that demand an independent inquiry.

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¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ “Aid to Assam’s Tea Industry: Assurance by Minister,” in *The Times of India, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers*, February 2, 1959, 1, accessed January 18, 2019, <https://search.proquest.com/news/docview/346602017/88252D04BE21436CPQ/60?accountid=142596>.

¹⁴⁶ Lal Bahadur Shastri had appealed the workers of the Indian National Congress to live with the rural masses and solve their problems, in “Aid to Assam’s Tea Industry,” 1.

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Table 1.1.

Labour Recruited and Added Locally in Assam (000 omitted):

<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Labourers Imported</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No of labourers added locally</u>
1930-31	52	1930-31	77
1931-32	51	1931-32	70
1932-33	39	1932-33	75
1933-34	48	1933-34	73
1934-35	20	1934-35	71
1935-36	23	1935-36	71
1936-37	28	1936-37	67
1937-38	32	1937-38	68
1938-39	30	1938-39	67
1939-40	24	1939-40	68
1940-41	18	1940-41	73
1941-42	14	1941-42	61
1942-43	56	1942-43	60
1943-44	40	1943-44	51
1944-45	43	1944-45	52
1945-46	42	1945-46	68
1946-47	43	1946-47	66
1947-48	37	1947-48	75
1948-49	32	1948-49	72
1949-50	28	1949-50	74

Source: *Report of the Census of India, Assam, Manipur and Tripura*, vol. xii, part I-A (1951), 69.

Table 1.2¹⁴⁷

Repatriation of Labourers to their Home Districts

<u>Year</u>	<u>No of Labourers (000 omitted)</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Labourers (000 omitted)</u>
1934-35	1	1946-47	21
1935-36	2	1947-48	22
1936-37	26	1948-49	27
1937-38	15	1949-50	30
1938-39	14	1950-51	33
1939-40	19	1951-52	27
1940-41	21	1952-53	27
1941-42	18	1953-54	31
1942-43	17	1954-55	18
1943-44	17	1955-56	15
1944-45	13	1956-57	18
1945-46	27	1957-58	28
		1958-59	28

¹⁴⁷ The Table has been compiled from the statistics available in the *Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act* for the respective years and the 'Annexure XLVI' available in the *Report on Plantation Enquiry Commission* (1956).