

Indentured Labour Migration in the Tea Garden of Assam: A Historical Perspectives

Introduction:

The discovery of tea plantations and the migration of indentured labourers worldwide and within India has a long and exciting history. Tea was first discovered in China around 2737 BC, and its historical development spread to various countries across the globe after 1652, leading to a worldwide fascination with this beverage (Baruah, 2011; Revolution, 1880; Sarma, 2013). In India, British army commander Robert Bruce discovered tea in the wild step forest of Upper Assam in 1823. Consequently, for the expansion of tea plantations, Assam Tea Company was founded in India in 1839 under the Waste Land Grant Rules (Baishya, 2016; Rajkumar, 2014; Sagar, 2016). Several global, national, and British-era geo-political events strongly influenced the growth of Indian tea production in the international market.

The “Indenture” is a historical structure that governs the labour-capital relationship. It has historical interest as an agreement wherein impoverished individuals work for someone else until they repay their debt (Varma, 2005). The concepts of indentured labourers have changed over time; in the nineteenth century, these were explained as labourers were provided wages along with free housing, medical care, clothing and full ration in many cases, Whereas according to Hugh Tinker’s this indentured system is a ‘new form of slavery’ (HUGH TINKER, 1974; Northrup, 1995; Varma, 2005). In contrast, migrants are individuals or groups who move from one place to another often crossing geographical or political boundaries. This can be permanent or temporary, influencing various factors such as opportunities in place of destination, political instability, environmental changes, etc. (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Lee, 1966; Ravenstein, 1889). The indentured labour migration system prevailed during the 17th and 18th centuries when many Europeans were brought to American colonies. Similarly, Indian indentured labourers such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, and South Africa were sent to the British colonies during the 19th and 20th centuries (Behal, 2010; Northrup, 1995; RANA, 2014).

However, the tremendous speculative boom in the tea business worldwide is known as “Tea Mania” (Behal, 2010; RANA, 2014). As the increasing demand of Indian tea in the world market the planter was unable to produce higher amounts due to a shortage of labour; on the other side, British colonizers failed to involve the ordinary native Assamese farmer within the capitalistic labour world. So, the British planter wanted to recruit labour beyond the territory of Assam, those who could survive in the harsh climatic conditions of the Assam jungle and also they can work for a cheap wage with a smaller amount of kindness (Bordoloi, 2015; BOSE, 1954). Thus, the British government introduced different types of indentured labour contract Acts to import labour from different parts of the provincial states in British India and neighbouring countries. Those labourers were called as ‘Coolies’ (Presently called as “Tea Tribes”), and the major ‘Coolies’ catching areas were Berhampur Waltair of Madras, Waltair and Pithapuram of Ceded Districts, Cuttack of East Coast, Ranchi, Palamau, Singhbhum, Hazaribag, Purulia of Chota Nagpur, Bilaspore and Reipore of Lower Provinces, Sambalpur of Orissa, Santal Pargana of Bihar and West Bengal, Buxar of Patna Division, Ghazipore and Subangencies of United Provinces (Pathak, 1984).

Globally and nationally, different eminent scholars in history and migration studies have covered the related literature on indentured labour migration. A study conducted at the global level on Infant Mortality and Fiji’s Indian Migrants, 1879-1919, illustrated that the Indian

community that migrated to Fiji during the late 19th and early 20th century to work as indentured labourers in sugar plantations. The findings show that Indian migrants' Infant mortality rate was more critical than the overall population. The factor contributing the high mortality rate among Indian infant due to the poor living condition, malnutrition, and prevalent diseases (Shlomowitz, 1986). Nationally a study on Mortality and migrant labour in Assam, 1865-1921. The article examines the historical dynamic of the mortality rate among migrant labour in the Indian states of Assam in the 19th and 20th centuries (Shlomowitz & Brennan, 1990). Several other important studies covered the indentured labour migration within the country (India), such as the 2,272 labourers who were imported in 1853s-1859s under the Labour Contract Act into the tea estates of Assam from that population 250 died during the transportation on the way. Between May 1863 and May 1866, around 84,915 labourers were brought to Assam from different provinces and regions in British India. However, the report shows that among the 84,915 labourers, only 49,750 worked in the tea garden, and the rest of the 35,165 labourers died or were deserted (Saikia, 2020; Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021). So, the primary focus of this study is to explore the historical migration of indentured labour from different parts of Indian provinces to tea gardens of Assam during colonial periods, 1877-1932-33. It also explores the three perspectives of migration such as historical perspectives of migration, geographical perspectives of migration, demographical perspectives of migration in broadly concepts.

Data and Methods:

The study data were based on Annual reports on labour immigration into Assam, 1877-1932-33, and Census of India, Assam districts census handbook, 1891-1931. The Annual report on labour immigration into Assam was a district-level individual survey conducted by the Department of Revenue, Agriculture, and Commerce, Shillong. The survey covers eight districts of Assam and topics regarding immigration, labour force, contract and wages, offences including desertions, vital statistics and health of the garden population, inspection, and working of the generally (RIDSDALE, 1877). Meanwhile, the Census of India, Assam districts census handbook was an individual-level survey conducted by the superintendent of census operation in Assam, Shillong (Gait, 1891).

The statistical analysis was applied to explain the study result, such as the decadal net migration flow, the relationship between migrants' inflow vs. desertions vs. deaths, province's wise out-migration and tea districts wise in-migration, and demographic characteristics of migrants, which was examined by descriptive statistics.

Result of the Study:

Historical Perspectives of Migration

The result shows the change in the decadal migration flow of indentured tea labour migrants within the tea estates of Assam between 1891-1931. The following findings are noticeable: the proportion percentage share of in-migration of the tea garden population to the total population of Assam persistently increased from the census years of 1891 to 1921, indicating a rising influx of in-migration in the Assam tea estates and its decline in the years of 1931. Meanwhile, the decadal share of in-migration was higher from the census years of 1891 to 1901, implying that there was more in-migration than desertion and death within the tea estates of Assam.

Conversely, for the census years 1911 to 1931, the migrants' desertion and death rates were higher than the in-migration rates among tea garden labourers of Assam.

The result illustrates the relationship between annual in-migration vs. desertion vs. death within the tea estates of Assam, 1877-1931-32. The comparative result shows that the trends of in-migration were higher than the desertion and death from 1879 to 1901; it indicates that the percentage of migrants' inflow was higher during these annual years than the desertion and deaths within the tea estates of Assam. However, the trend line shifted between 1902-03 to 1912-13, showing a higher percentage of tea labour desertion than in-migration and deaths; this implies that during this period, a higher number of tea labourers abandoned the garden than those who are in-migrated and passing away. Between the years 1913-14 to 1917-18, results indicate that in-migration was higher than desertion and deaths. Conversely, again the percentage of desertion of labour was higher than the in-migrants and deaths from 1918-19.

Geographical Perspectives of Migration

The result illustrates a critical insight into the dynamics of in-migration to Assam from different India Colonial Provinces between 1877-1918-19. A study of data reveals the dominance of the Bengal Presidency out-migration to Assam, which accounts for more than 60% of the entire in-migration into Assam. On the other hand, certain provinces like the North Western Provinces during 1877-1896, the Central Provinces during 1897-1909-10 and 1913-14-1918-19, and the Madras Presidency during 1910-11-1912-13 witnessed higher out-migration rates compared to the rest of India, except Bengal Presidency. A substantial population exodus occurred in these areas, which a variety of factors, such as colonial policy, agricultural instability, and economic constraints, may have caused.

The result presents a comprehensive overview of trends and patterns in-migration in the districts Assam, from 1877 to 1932-33. The data reveals specific times periods when in-migration rates were very high in some districts and relatively low in others. Lakhimpur continuously stood out with a much higher rate of in-migration than the rest of Assam throughout 1880-82, 1885-93, 1897-17-18, and 1919-20-1932-33. Similar in-migration in Sibsagar was seen higher between 1878-79, 1884, 1894, and 1918-19. While Cachar witnessed higher rates in 1877, Sylhet received higher rates in 1883 and 1895-1896. Conversely, districts like Goalpara, Nowgaong, Darrang, and Kamrup consistently recorded the lowest percentages of in-migration than the other districts of Assam throughout the period of 1877-1932-33.

Demographical Perspectives of Migration

The result shows the trend and patterns of men and women In-migration to Assam from different provinces of colonial India between 1877-1918-19. The results reveal a striking pattern: in every Indian province, male labour out-migration was much greater than female migration, accounting for more than 50% of the overall movement of both sexes. In contrast, women represented an average of over 30% of India's out-migration, which was a significant part. This gender-specific difference in migration patterns highlights both the predominance of

male-dominated migration flows and the large presence of women migrants throughout the provinces throughout this time.

The result provides valuable insights into the distribution of children in-migration across various districts of Assam from 1877 to 1932-33. Notably, districts like Kamrup 1877-1881, 1884, 1886-88, 1892, 1898, 1906-07-1910-11, 1927-28 and 1929-30, Sibsagar 1905-06, 1911-12-1912-13, 1914, Sylhet 1882-83, 1885, 1889-91, 1893-96, and 1903-04 showing the dominating number of years for percentage share of children in-migration into Assam in comparison to the other. Whereas districts like Goalpara, Lakhimpur, Nowgaong, Darrang, and Cachar showed fewer instances of children in-migration during these specified periods, indicating a lower influx of child migrants in comparison to other districts in Assam.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The indentured tea labour migration was considered one of the oldest labour transportation processes after slave trade (Northrup, 1995). The whole study illustrates the three different broad aspects of indentured tea labour migration during colonial periods, such as historical, geographical, and demographical perspectives. The historical perspectives analyse the decadal flow of in-migration, desertion, and death. The trends of in-migration of labour was in four main phase, in the early phase, high in-migration are insightfully shown, which was mainly due to the rapid expansion of tea garden area and shortage of labour, implementation of Waste Land grant Rules in 1839 in Assam for the expansion of tea garden area and increasing of mass production (Baishya, 2016; Rajkumar, 2014; Sagar, 2016), implementation of Workmen's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859 (Varma, 2005), free immigration law and implementation of "Sardari System" under Inland Emigration Act-I of 1882 (E. STACK, 1882). In the second phase, the result shows high desertion of in-migrant labourers from the tea garden. This is may be due to the abolition of labour contracts, labour have right to return to their native place after the ending of the contract (KING, 1915), and the outbreak of cholera in Assam due to the highly affected by flood and migrants used to left the garden area and flew in nearby districts (McSWINEY, 1911). In the third phase again in-migration was higher than the desertion and deaths within the tea garden of Assam. This may be the reasons of the newly constructed railway line to connect Bengal and Assam which helps the planter to imported labour from different regions, and the Chinese are sail to have come over to escape oppression from the chief in their own country to in-migrated to Assam (LLOYD, 1921). In the last phase again the desertion of migrants was higher than the in-migration and deaths. This may be reason of short terms recruitments of labour (limited to one year) and after the ending of contract labour may left the garden or send them their native place under the rules of Workmen's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859, as modified by Act XII of 1920 (EDWARDS, 1921). The Geographical perspectives show the Bengal Presidency out-migration to Assam, which accounts for more than 60% of the entire in-migration into Assam. A substantial population exodus occurred in these areas, which a variety of factors such as colonial policy, agricultural instability, and economic constraints, may have caused. The demographical perspectives illustrate that male labour out-migration was much greater than female migration, accounting for more than 50% of the overall movement of both sexes. This gender-specific difference in migration patterns highlights both the predominance of male-dominated migration flows and the large presence

of women migrants throughout the provinces throughout this time. The districts like Kamrup and Sibsagar show the dominating number of years for percentage share of children in migration into Assam compared to the others. In conclusion, it provides insights into the complicated procedures of labour migration during the colonial era, illuminating historical patterns, geographic origins, and demographic differences in the indentured labour movement to Assam's tea estates.

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