

INDIGENOUS LABOUR AND TEA PLANTATION: MICRO HISTORIES OF DISEASES AND HEALTH CONCERNS

¹Sanhita Kundu

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar

¹Centre for Tribal Studies, Department of History

¹Assam University, Diphu Campus, Karbi Anglong, Assam, India

Abstract: In the history of plantation labour throughout the globe, since its inception, capitalist ventures have always found it fruitful and easier to import labour forces from other regions. The long history of slavery bears witness to this large demographic movement, leading to oppression and exploitation. Already in Assam the tea venture had faced labour issues. There were two concerns which required a large labour force-to work in the plantation and to clear the jungles. Therefore indigenous communities like the ‘Kacharis’ were recruited to meet these requirements.

IndexTerms - Labour, indigenous, plantation, disease, forest.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Kachari are described as the aboriginals of the Brahmaputra valley. The Kachari called themselves Bodo or Bodo fisa (descendants of the Bodos). The term ‘Bodo’ means an ethnic group speaking the Sino-Tibetan Bodo language. They belong to the Mongoloid race that are described to be living in a country north of the Himalayas and west of China. The land was known as Bod [1]. The word Bod denotes homeland. The Bodos-Kacharis were an organised and important tribe with their kingdom beside the Dikhou river [2]. The earliest ethnography references on the Bodos of Assam were mentioned by Rev. Endle in 1911 they were referred to as Kachari [3].

The British East India Company, upon annexing Assam after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, discovered tea plantation as an economic opportunity for them, and thus the Assam tea plantation was established. Up until the 1860s, the Boro-Kacharis were the source of labour for the tea company but the fast-growing economy and the demand for cheaper labourers require a change [4].

The Assam Tea Company had always faced a shortage of labourers. Anthrobus, in his book, writes when the company was expanding towards the northern, eastern and southern divisions in Assam, it had insufficient labour force. And even after expansion, cultivable land in these areas remained rather small, as it was surrounded by acres of jungle. To encourage the Kachari the company had also increased their wages which brought them 4 rupees a month in 1858 [5].

George barker, a garden manager in his book, the life of a planter, states, upon discussing the question of the labourers, that the company had to bear the cost of importing labourers, as the Assamese caste Hindu population would not work unless there was a season of failed rice crops, and when they did work in the garden, they would work until they earned enough to sustain themselves until the next harvest season [6]. In the light of these issues, it was only the Kachari that the British planters relied on when the question of local labourers arose.

Barker writes that the Kachari would travel in groups of ten to twenty, from one garden to another and would only work under the condition that they would be allowed to do two days’ load of work in a single day. And after they were done with the job and the garden had gotten to a better condition, they would move on to the next garden [7]. The history, in a general sense, remembers them as the one that cleared up the forest for the development of the tea estate, but there were Kachari who stayed behind and worked in the tea estates. This paper is an attempt to highlight the conditions and circumstances through which they lived in the garden.

This paper uses archival materials as its primary source and also delves into secondary materials such as books, articles, theses and is empirical in nature. The basic objective of this paper is to look into the hidden aspect of local labour history, a population which was later stereotyped by the colonial state as ‘lazy natives’.

II. CASE STUDIES OF HEALTH, DISEASES AND MEASURES INITIATED

The Cacharees (Kacharis) are believed to have been responsible for clearing the jungle for the empire’s garden, where they sometimes used to work in the garden as well. To understand the living condition of these people and how they differed from those of the immigrant labourers, a case study of the Outenga tea garden in the Golaghat sub-division of Assam can help explain the conditions to which they were subjected too.

In September 1871, the Assistant Commissioner of Golaghat reported an outbreak of cholera that had occurred at the Outenga Garden in the Golaghat subdivision among the Kacharis, the indigenous labourers. In this outbreak, 41 individuals were affected, and 15 of them died. The report confirmed that the infection had spread due to the consumption of water contaminated with excreta [8].

Furthermore, in a report from Captain Blathwayt, the Assistant Commissioner of Golaghat, dated 9 September 1871, addressed to the Chief Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, it was stated that on the 9th and 10th of August, a crewman on an iron

boat belonging to the Outenga Tea Estate had fallen ill. He was a Kachari named Rajon, but upon his arrival on the 12th of August, he was seen to be recovering [9].

It was observed that on the 15th, 16th, and 17th, seven men became ill, but the manager of the tea estate did not suspect them of having cholera until the 20th of August, when a man named Soklo fell severely ill and died on the 18th. On the 21st of August, three more men contracted the same disease, one of whom died the same day. The managers then instructed that all the Kacharis be moved to another location, but they refused to take any medicine or to move until the 26th of August. After five deaths, fear spread among them, and they finally obliged to the orders [10].

On the 27th, all the Kachari were moved and placed in temporary lines at the end of the garden. Subsequently, eight more cases appeared, all of which recovered. On the 27th of August, Rajon again fell ill and died on the 28th. The last case occurred on the 30th of August, after which the disease seemed to have disappeared.

In total, there were 41 cases, of which 26 recovered and 15 died. The doctor in charge of the garden reported that if the patients had been admitted to the hospital in time, many more lives could have been saved, and the mortality rate would have been much lower. The Kacharis, whenever possible, tried to conceal their illness and did not come forward voluntarily. Only two men who were treated in the early stages died; two others died before the doctor arrived at the garden, and the remaining eleven were brought to him when they were already in a state of collapse. It was noticed that Rajon might have suffered from diarrhoea initially, but under unfavourable circumstances, he might have developed cholera [11].

In the report, the cause of the outbreak was reasoned that it was observed that the Kacharis did not use the water from the tanks and wells used by the Bengali labourers, as they had a separate tank at the foot of the rising ground for their own use. Between their houses and the tank, they had made a garden, but they were not particularly mindful of cleanliness. They often defecated among the vegetation in these gardens instead of going to the jungles [12].

It would not have been an issue, but towards the end of August of that year, there was heavy rainfall. The manager noted that for nearly three weeks he did not see the sun, as the downpour was so continuous and so intense that it washed away a large portion of the surface soil of the coolie gardens down the slope into the tank at the bottom. This soil contained human excreta, which contaminated the water the men were drinking. The men who contracted cholera were found to have been using that water. A deep trench was therefore dug around the tank to prevent further contamination, and the use of the water for drinking was strictly prohibited. The disease spread only among the Kacharis, as they were the ones who used the water from that source [13].

Oating, an isolated garden that passes through Golaghat and the only tea factories, was inspected by Dr. Gray, who reported that upon his arrival at Oating on the 23rd of August, he found four Kacharis in the last stage of cholera. In addition, sixteen had previously contracted the disease, of who three had died, while the remaining thirteen were in different stages of illness. It was believed that the heavy rain, which had fallen continuously for many weeks, had caused the mud and filth well-paddled by pigs to overflow into the tanks. The Kacharis not only drank from these tanks but also bathed in them [14].

The area where the Kacharis resided was extremely inadequate, housing about 140 to 150 people. The houses were overcrowded and closely packed together, preventing proper air circulation. It was observed that a Kachari on board an iron boat at Kompati Ghat on the Dhanshiri River was vomiting and purging. He was immediately taken to Oating, where he gradually recovered. Upon the doctor's arrival, he noticed that the manager of the Oating factory had already taken measures to improve the sanitary conditions. A deep drain had been constructed along the lines and around the tank to intercept the flow of filthy water from the former area. The tank had been partially emptied, and the lines were well-drained [15].

The doctor advised that further precautions should be taken to prevent the spread of the disease to the Bengali line. All Kacharis who had not been affected were to be relocated to another part of the garden. The sick were to be moved to the hospital, and the office was to be converted into a hospital. The condition of the Kachari lines was declared unfit, and there was to be no communication whatsoever between the Bengalis and the Kacharis. The one that were fit were to be assigned to work in separate parts of the garden.

The doctor also observed that the Kacharis refused to take their sick to the hospital. Instead, they would confine them inside their house. He found one elderly man in his house, deserted by his friends, who had left a vessel of water and some unhusked rice beside him. The man was extremely cold and lay rolling in his own excreta. Such cases were difficult to treat once the patients were finally admitted to the hospital.

Measures were taken in the Kachari lines to improve sanitation. Many old and filthy houses were demolished, and the debris was burned. The roads, lanes, and surrounding grounds were drained and sloped so that no water could accumulate. Stables for the pigs were also built in a well-dunged, but suitably isolated, area [16].

In 1872, A report prepared by the Principal Medical Officer and Sanitary Commissioner of Assam, dated 18 January 1894, laid down the instructions and rules for the investigating and reporting the outbreaks of epidemic diseases. The investigation of such outbreaks should include their origin, and their course was to be conducted based on complete facts and reliable evidence. It was to be recorded how long the outbreak lasted. The enquiries were expected to be practical in nature, and conclusions had to be drawn only from verified facts, while speculative or provable claims were to be avoided. No delay was to occur in beginning the investigation once an outbreak was reported. These instructions were to be issued in English, Assamese, and Bengali. Officers responsible for these duties were instructed to report any cases of cholera or other epidemic diseases promptly so that all necessary information could be gathered without delay [17].

The history of cholera in particular localities, districts, and provinces was to be included in these reports. They were also expected to note details of tea gardens, mills, and steamers carrying labourers that had been affected during recent years. Each report was to mention the date when the first case appeared, the circumstances that contributed to the spread of the disease, the number of towns, villages, and tea gardens affected, and those that remained unaffected.

Reports were also to describe the factors responsible for the rise and disappearance of diseases in any given area, focusing on the sanitary and local conditions of the affected population. Particular attention was to be paid to those who suffered the most, with details on drainage, water supply, food, clothing, and overcrowding included. In cases of severe outbreaks, unsanitary areas were to be clearly marked, and their condition compared with those that suffered less, noting the differences. Furthermore, yearly reports were required to record when such outbreaks occurred and under what circumstances [18].

Later, a letter from the Secretariat to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, dated 3 March 1903, stated that weekly epidemic reports were being forwarded by the Deputy Commissioner, who submitted provincial summaries to the Secretariat for circulation. This practice was to continue, as it served the best interests of both the tea garden population and the general public. It was emphasized that the administration should always be prepared to take immediate action to prevent the spread of such diseases.

The Chief Commissioner instructed all officials of the Revenue and Police Establishments to be held responsible in the future for the immediate reporting of any outbreak of cholera or other epidemic diseases occurring within their jurisdiction. The Managers and Medical Officers of tea gardens, as well as the Medical Officers of the River Steam Boards, were also directed to follow these procedures. The Chief Commissioner required that they communicate any outbreak of epidemics to the District Officer without delay. The report was to be forwarded to the Civil Surgeon immediately upon receipt and used in the preparation of the weekly epidemic report. In the case of a serious outbreak, the matter was to be reported by telegram to the Principal Medical Officer, the Sanitary Commissioner, and the Secretary. The Civil Surgeon was also expected to visit the site of any serious outbreak and to organize the necessary measures to control the disease [19].

III. CONCLUSION

The jungle in the tea estate was a major concern for the Assam tea company and adding to this was the fact that there was a lack of local labourers willing to work on these estates to pluck tea leaves. The company in their earlier attempts to get labourers from elsewhere, was facing issues as when the labourers would see the jungle they would desert the garden or run away. It was only the Kachari labourers that were willing to work on these gardens and willing to clear out the jungle. But the history is rather silent about their struggles in the tea garden and what happened to them when an epidemic struck their area. This paper highlights their issues and the mentality of how they dealt with disaster when it struck. The history of Assam tea plantation is hyper-focused on the immigrants, but this paper wants to highlight the issues and behavior of the Kacharis in the garden. The Kacharis suffered as much as the immigrants did in the garden, this paper highlights the incidents and how they coped when disaster struck the garden.

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