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Prem Kumar Sharma

Research Scholar, Department
of History, Rajiv Gandhi
University, Itanagar,
Arunachal Pradesh, India

Baganiyas, servitude and survival: A case study of the Northern Bank of the Brahmaputra

Prem Kumar Sharma

Abstract

The British during their rule over Assam had introduced many modern industries. The tea industry was the precursor of all these industries in Assam and it had affected the economic and demographic structure of Assam in its entirety, right from its inception to the present day. During the colonial times an entire shift in the socio-cultural and demographic change was witnessed owing to the large influx of the labourers required for the tea plantation as it is a highly labour-intensive industry. These labourers were largely recruited from the central India and were called by different names such as: Coolies, Baganiyas, Chalans and many more. The present paper is an analysis of how these migrants were treated, what were their socio-economic conditions? Their stance in the society? Their struggles for survival and the rights that they were denied.

Keywords: British, tea plantation, Assam, labour, coolies, Chalan, Baganiya north Lakhimpur, Darrang

Introduction

Captain Welsh's expedition of 1792 and the consequent Anglo-Ahom Commercial Treaty had opened up new economic vistas for the British in the North East India in the eighteenth century. Then they realized the economic potentialities of the region. The most important of all these was the discovery of indigenous tea plant in 1823; and, the proof that tea could successfully be cultivated in Assam convinced the authorities about the prospects of the commercial cultivation of the tea in the region. Amalendu Guha also believes that the intention of the raj, at this point of time, was to convert "Assam into an agricultural estate of the tea drinking Britons"^[1]. However, this was not just a matter of circumstances that led to the occupation of Assam and the development of tea industry there. In 1833, when the monopoly of East India Company of the British trade with China came to an end, the chief item of which was tea^[2], the company was anxious to obtain an alternative source of supply. And thus, the Company looked towards Assam as tea was reportedly found wildly grown in this region. The lucrative prospects of tea and its plantation had considerably accelerated the precipitation of the events that led the British into Assam.

The development of tea plantations in Assam resulted in an increased demand for labour. Tea plantation being a large agro-based and labour-intensive industry is highly dependent on human workforce in every stage of agricultural operations right from cultivation (plucking, manuring, irrigation, weed control, pest control, transportation of green leaves) and manufacture (withering, rolling, fermenting, drying, weighing, packaging) labour is an essential factor. But the planters, from the initiation, had to face problem of the dearth of labour for employment in the plantations. The plant is indigenous to Assam and the native tribes *viz.* the Singphos and the Khamptis used to make drink of tea leaves, locally known as 'finap'^[3], for medicinal purpose and were also known to use it for making tea by the Burmese method, but the English did not know the process of manufacture. Therefore, when the commercial plantation of tea began by 1840s, they had to import Chinese expert and labour, both for the cultivation and the manufacture of tea. In the early years, tribes of China and Burma used a simple indigenous process of making tea. The early Chinese steamed the leaves, then dried it over fire and pressed it into cakes and crushed it into powder. In the experimental days, when Captain Bruce took charge of the Government plantation, he had only two Chinese black tea makers with twelve native assistants. Percival Griffiths points at one place, "Bruce found himself much hampered by the lack of satisfactorily local labour^[4]." The industry tried the Chinese tea growers from Singapore, Penang and Batavia.

Corresponding Author:**Prem Kumar Sharma**

Research Scholar, Department
of History, Rajiv Gandhi
University, Itanagar,
Arunachal Pradesh

But the extremely high cost of recruitment and difficulties in managing the Chinese labourers compelled the planters to look elsewhere for labour ^[5]. The indigenous population of Assam were not available for the tea labour, there was scarcity as Assam was depopulated at that time. The Government faced an acute problem of the expert labour for the tea plantations that had yet to be established in the region.

Area of Study

This study is focused on the conditions of the tea plantation labourers (who were also known as chalans) during the colonial period with special reference to the areas of the British Empire on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra. The area of study is the part of the land comprising of the districts of Assam under the British administration, i.e., Darrang and North Lakhimpur. Most of the nomenclature of these districts has been changed, altered and basically divided to create more districts in present-day Assam. The Darrang district, as stands today, has been divided into the districts of Sonitpur, Udalguri and Biswanath. And, on the other hand, North Lakhimpur today exists consisting of the districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. These present-day districts served as the area of study for the research work taken on the background of the districts during the colonial times.

The Demand for Labour

However, it was not that Assam was empty in manpower. Of course, the Moamoria rebellion (1770-1795), in the later part of the 18th century, resulted in tremendous casualties of lives, the Burmese invasions and its continued reign of terror for almost five years (1817-1826) and natural calamities like earthquakes, kala-azar and malaria epidemics had decimated the Assamese population. No less than thirty thousand Assamese had been taken away as slaves, and Anandiram Dhekial Phukan ^[6] was of the opinion that the invaders, by their barbarous and inhuman conduct, had destroyed more than one-half of the population which had already been thinned by intestine commotions and repeated civil wars. Those who survived had been so harassed by the long-continued wars and repeated acts of oppression that they had almost given up cultivation and lived chiefly on jungle roots and plants; and famine and pestilence carried off thousands that had escaped the sword and captivity ^[7]. But “emptiness” was not the case. The existing population, being self-sufficient did not come into the market to sell its labour. Land was available to an unlimited extent at very moderate rates, and the great mass of the indigenous population were able to support themselves in comfort by their cultivation ^[8]. But the colonial officials accused the Assamese of indolence because they were not willing to work to the desired extent ^[9] and condemned them as the epitome of the ‘lazy native’.

According to the administrators, opium consumption and the subsistence farming were considered to be the major cause of lethargy and lack of industriousness among the people of Assam. It was recommended to prohibit the cultivation of opium to discourage its consumption. The planters, moreover, were unable to induce the local ryots (farmers) to work in the plantations. It was reported that the duffadars, local recruiters, were sent to their respective villages to recruit ryots for the tea plantations was causing alarm to the mauzadars in Darrang. The mauzadars did not

allowed the duffadars to enter their villages because they were seducing the villagers, especially the young ones, with drinks and advances to take them away to the plantations ^[10]. The hill-tribes initially did work in the plantations but only periodically. One local community, the Kacharis, were at first recruited for clearing forests and opening plantations but proved to be troublesome. They were not willing to be disciplined resident labour working under the control of plantation masters ^[11]. Further, E. A. Gait commented that “there are very few landless labourers in Assam, and people who have land naturally prefer the independence and ease of their position as cultivators to the discipline and regular labour of the tea plantations. It was thus found necessary, at a very early stage, to seek for tea plantation coolies elsewhere ^[12].” The tea plantations, however, needed a steady flow of labour who could be made permanent settlers in the tea estates. Major Jenkins firmly believed that there could be no solution to the problem unless effective measures were taken to procure labour from areas of surplus population ^[13]. Importation of labour was the only solution that was found to be effective to solve the problem of labour requirement.

Under the prevailing situation and heavy demand of the labour, the planters had to resort to the expensive task of importing labour from those areas where ‘the population is denser and the land is insufficient to support everybody’ ^[14] viz. Bihar, Orissa and Chota Nagpur. The Assam Company recruited the first batch of labourers from Chota Nagpur division in Bihar in 1841. But diseases enroute had completely wiped out the first batch of imported labour. The disaster did not put a stop to the attempts of labour recruitment and individual tea plantations imported labour sporadically up to 1859. It was only after the advice of the Government, the planters adopted a somewhat uniform recruitment procedure ^[15]. But, only devising the recruitment process was not enough to attract the working people from other districts, it even did not suffice the requirement. The Government had to look for other possible alternatives to force the recruitment in a satisfactory scale. In 1859, the Government equalized the revenue of all the districts of Assam with that of Kamrup, which was then the highest, in an attempt to recruit local labour. Captain Comber, the Collector of Darrang, recommended the raising of land revenues ‘as a means of throwing the labour into the hands of the planters by compelling the ryots to seek for employment in order to pay their revenue’ ^[6]. By 1872-73 there was 100 percent increase in the total revenue demand of the Brahmaputra valley. Yet the industry was not successful at all in attracting local labour. Perhaps the main reason was that for the ryots, cultivating their own land, even if at subsistence level, was probably more lucrative, both from the social and economic point of view, than taking up jobs in plantations ^[17]. The planters, then, had to resort to other means of recruitment other than trying to lure or force the local population. This had led to a large influx of a labour class of people in the tea districts of Darrang and North Lakhimpur from the areas which was geographically very different. From here onwards, the immigration continued till the end of the nineteenth century.

The Chalan and the Bagan

When the chalans arrived at the tea plantations, they found the local climate and environment utterly strange. Initially, they were conveyed with little arrangements for

accommodating them, and no medical aid was available at that time. It was much later on, that careful provision was made for the welfare of the chalangans. According to the planters, they were housed in a neat and comfortable lines, and when falls sick they were cared for in a medical by a native doctor who was probably working under the supervision of a European medical man. Though from the study it is very difficult to substantiate the claims made by some of the chalangans in the tea estate as it was very inconsistent with the factual information. One ex-tea garden labourer from North Lakhimpur had said that “as the chalangans reached the bagan, there were chowkidars ^[18] to show them their quarters. Also, they give them household utensils for free, rations and clothes too.” On the other hand, the provision of all these comforts and the importation of the labourers themselves cost large sums of money, which the planters would not be willing to expend without some guarantee that the chalangans, when imported, would consent to remain on the plantation. This protection is afforded by the law in 1901 by the Act VI of 1901 which lay down that a chalangang, provided that he is well-treated, must not leave the plantation to which he is indentured before the expiry of his contract, unless he chooses to redeem it by a money payment ^[19]. Upon closely inspecting the Act laid down for the safety and safeguard of the immigrant labourers it seemed quite welfare intensive towards the labourers. But, during the research it was found that though there were several provisions made for the beneficiaries, the chalangans were subjected to various kinds of exploitation, may be, mainly because they were illiterate and lacked proper representation in colonial times.

After the recruitment, a new chalangang was put under probation for six months even if he was depressed physically and psychologically after the long and tedious river and rail journey. After this six-month probation, most of the labourers adjusted to the new life of the plantation. Those who were not used to field labour, were often punished by forfeiting their pay and rations. However, in the district of North Lakhimpur, there were a smaller number of such cases of punishment in the tea estates as compared to the other estates of the time as the estate’s location is vulnerable to escape for the chalangans who came here. But, when compared to Darrang, it had a different policy and a very different outlook towards the punishment system. Also, a lesser number of chalangans recruited by the tea companies for the estate makes the estates responsible to take well care of the recruited chalangans. “The chalangans were given half pants and half shirts. If they wear full pants and good clothes, they were called from the office asking “how much do you earned that you are living in so much luxury?” Chalangans can’t wear luxurious clothes at that time. Only half pant and half shirt were allowed to be worn by the chalangans. Even if they go to other places, that will also bear a problem. Even, the chalangans had to take permission of the chowkidars or the boga-sahibs ^[20] to walk to the daily markets to buy foods. However, the boga-sahibs were very strict about the medical check-ups of the workers. If someone is not feeling well, they were given rest for the day and were sent to the medical. A medical was established for the health care of the chalangans after few years of its establishment. The workers were given quinine before going to the work to not allow any kind of viral infections. The doctors make it sure that the medicine is given to everyone. But the chalangans,

besides the availability of a medical, prefer not to go to there. They thought that diseases occurred because of bad spirits, and thus, they do the jhar-phuk or the traditional customary rituals to cure the diseases. Then, if not cured, they brought them to the medicals. They get just enrolled in the plantation medicals for preliminary check-ups and then, if the case was serious, were sent to the more equipped hospitals ^[21].” This statement by a medical doctor of the tea plantation is an evident example that though the chalangans were given some kind of provisions they lacked the freedom and individuality to assert their identity. They had to take permission even to go the hats to buy even their basic amenities. They were made to wear a certain kind of clothing which would distinguish from the other people of the community. Thus, the tag of being a chalangang was always branded onto them, making them a culturally dependent group of people.

Later on, in order to maintain the inflow of the migrant labourers the companies started giving lands to the labourers for settlement at the vicinity of the estates. Moreover, the Act of 1863 provided that the labourers could be legally bound under contracts for a period of five years, which was through subsequent amendments reduced to three years. So, the contract made for the chalangans recruited for the tea plantations will expire early. Also, when chalangans became free after serving a term as tea plantation labourers some of them did not like to remain as bonded labour again and becomes the ex-tea garden labourer. They got settled in the vicinity of the tea estates, so that they could at times earn by employing themselves as casual labourers in the tea plantation and at the same time lead an independent life of their own by cultivating land. On the other hand, the planters needed extra labour much more than their normal requirements during the peak tea plucking season. If the planters maintain a regular labour force at that peak level of requirements their financial obligations became greater. As long as labours reside under their control in the plantations, the planters were in certain legal obligations such as to supply of rice at concession rates, housing facilities and others. Thus, they favoured the settlement of the time expired labourers near the tea plantations, so that they could have a reserve supply of labourers for meeting the extra requirements during peak plucking season ^[22]. Without spending much, the tea companies were getting the required amount of inflow of labourers. Moreover, encouraging the ex-tea garden labourers to clear the forest around the tea estates for their settlement. Also, simultaneously expanding the tea acreage without paying for the direct cost of it.

Hazira, Nirikh and Ticca

The tea planters are of the belief that the material conditions of the chalangans were largely the comfort and wellbeing that they were getting in the plantations. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in 1906 stated that “on the whole the wages paid to the labourers are sufficient to keep them in comfort, and even to enable them with the practice of a little thrift to save money ^[23].” Further, Percival Griffith pointed out that cash wage was not the actual total earning of the labourers and it also includes the grants of cultivable land, either free or for nominal payment and cheap subsidized rice during certain periods ^[24]. The list goes further to include the medical comforts, sickness allowance, free diet for the sick, free housing, firewood, etc.^[25] The ticca (the overtime work) earnings were also considered to be a supplementary

income for them because the standard daily wage, *hazira*, was fixed with regard to the daily task, *nirikh*, which could be completed within four to five hours. And, moreover, the *chalans* had the liberty to undertake the *ticca* work after the completion of *nirikh* ^[26]. A general understanding of the planters was that the work in the plantations was based on task and the wages were determined on the basis of piecework. Accordingly, the Act of 1882 legitimized the payment of task-wage of the *chalans* to the completion of a daily task which were basically varied across different plantations and remained outside any regulatory system. In 1883, Captain Williams, Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, described the Chief Commissioner that “it is a perfect waste of time to make managers put up a schedule of work. On a large plantation the tasks vary very much according to the season of the year and the quality of the coolie.” A similar expression of the district officials in 1891 suggests “in no garden is the task schedule book prescribed by section 115 properly kept up, and in my mind it appears a most difficult thing to do ^[27].” Such kind of regulatory provisions allowed the planters to make the *chalans* work more at a less than minimum wage by allocating heavy tasks for the *nirikh* which was hard to complete in a day.

The *chalans* who were recruited in the plantations were indentured labour and were bound to the plantations for a period of three to five years on a fixed but differential payment rates. A man gets Rupees 5, woman Rupees 4 and the children Rupees 3 per month. Even after the termination of the indenture penal contract in 1926, this arrangement of the wage structure continued. However, in theory, the *chalan* was at liberty to accept or decline a *ticca* offered to him, but in practice, due to the shortage of the labours in the tea estate, considerable pressure was exerted on them to undertake it. The women generally earned one rupee less. In 1946, Dattaraya Varman Rege, reported that “*ticca* earnings constitute a very small proportion of the total cash earnings of workers. It was found that such earnings were more in Indian-owned plantations which are generally short of labour and therefore offer more *ticca* to their labourers ^[28].” This can be observed in the plantations of North Lakhimpur as there were a smaller number of recruitments in the district. Later, a modified version of this system was introduced which was called the unit system under which the payment was made for each unit of work done ^[29]. In 1901 the Act VI stipulated that the planter would pay his workers regularly on a fixed day through the managers. When the labourer was not required full time for the plantation, he was permitted to pursue some other work for extra income, for example, rearing of livestock ^[30]. Also, the managers of the tea plantations could announce the increment whenever they felt that it was acceptable to the company or the company’s profit was high.

However, the wage system that was followed in the plantations had problems in them. First, that the *hazira* was accordingly arranged to the *nirikh* but at the same time it was the managers who decides the volume of work per *nirikh* or per unit. Further, it was managers who decides whether the *nirikh* had been completed or not for the day. Third, the wages of the *chalans* were largely based on the sexual discrimination as the hours of work for women and children were same as those of men but were paid less than men. Fourth, the land given to the *chalans* for private cultivation was considered a concession to supplement their earnings, but these were rent-free and carried conditions like the

chalans had no occupancy right over such land and could be taken back on disciplinary grounds. The land grants to the *chalans* were not for all of them. Even the size of such holdings varies and small. In North Lakhimpur only one-third of an acre was given to an adult *chalan* whereas in Darrang it was only one-half of an acre per adult *chalan*. Moreover, the *chalans* did not get the wages when they were engaged in their private cultivation ^[31]. This shows that the *chalans* were given very less wages whereas the women and children were paid even lesser than the men, which was barely minimum for them. On top of it they were assigned to such tasks which was very difficult for them to complete in a day thus, hindering their chance of earning any extra money.

The concessions that were given to the *chalans* can be seen as an instrument of labour control in the bagan. The land grant for the private cultivation checked the mobility of the *chalans* through the conditionality of continuing service attached to the land grants ^[32]. The bonus which was given to the *chalans* were actually the advances to be later deducted from their *haziras*. Gradually, the bonus became one of the mechanisms of indebting the *chalans* to the planters. For example, these advances were given for medical treatment of the *chalans* to keep them physically fit for the plantation work. And therefore, these *chalans* came under the debt obligation because of which they were bound to the plantations and continued to work even after the contract had ended. The inspection reports of the local officials in 1901 further revealed more abuses in the management of the tea plantations. In 1901, Captain Cole, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, reported that “although the labour force appeared on the whole well nourished, it is clear that a very large proportion of them are unable to earn a living wage, and that they would inevitably starve if the management did not provide sufficient rations and enter the cost of the same as an advance against the coolie ^[33].” Sometimes, these labourers were not able to complete the *nirikh* and thereby bound to take outstanding advances.

The planters objected the issue of wage increase on the ground that the *chalans* did not respond favourably to the higher wages. James Buckingham, the representative of the tea interests in the Central Legislative Council pointed out that “an increased rate of payment leads to a lesser task instead of an augmented task, the coolies taking out the balance, so to speak, in the only form of luxury which appeals to an Asiatic *viz.*, the luxury of sitting still and doing nothing ^[34].” However, the Royal Commission on Labour rejected such kinds of assertion that the *chalans* were not responsive to the offer of higher wages and that they were content to work less to earn their subsistence ^[35]. Wage structure of the *chalans* had remained one of the important issues for the *chalans* as at one hand, the planters claimed to have given a lot of concessions and aid to them; but, at the other, the *chalans* were found to be economically deprived in the society.

While analyzing the wage structure of the *chalans*, they were needed to be differentially categorized. First category of the *chalans* were the Act labourers who worked in the plantations for a fixed period of four to five years and were subjected to the terms of the penal laws. Most of these *chalans* were re-employed as non-Act labour after the expiry of their contract. The fixed minimum wage of the Act Labourer was an average minimum of rupees 5.50 for a man

and rupees 4.50 for a woman. The nominal wages mostly remained stagnant for the chalangans with some periods with declining tendencies in between 1883 to 1900. However, there was an exception regarding this trend in Darrang, especially with regards to the women workers. While the common trend that was practiced was a man chalan earning usually a rupee more than their female counterpart, however in Darrang in the year 1893 to 1898, women chalangans were earning more than a male chalan and after the year 1909 the wage of a women chalan saw a constant uprise, earning even more than their male counterparts. Meanwhile, in North Lakhimpur the wage of a woman chalan never saw any increment rather it was often subjected to deduction.³⁶ Though, on papers the wage structure of the chalangans may show a different story altogether, but it is also to be noted that the concessions and *ticca* earnings were mostly included in the cash earnings of the workers. Whereas, concessions and *ticca* earnings were part of their extra earnings and could not have been included in the overall payment structure. In spite of all this the overall increase was inconsequential.

For the non-Act labour, the nominal wage trend was varied and the wage rates were relatively higher than the Act labour. In the district of North Lakhimpur, particularly for men, the wage figures were higher as compared to Darrang. This was largely because of the remoteness of the district and the lesser availability of land for cultivation by the labour force so as to make them concentrate on plantations work, earning *hazira* and *ticca*. There was stagnant tendency with some, a marginal increase of nominal wages till the beginning of the First World War in both the districts. Later, in the post war period, their wages showed upward movement with an increase of 44% in North Lakhimpur and 24 percent in Darrang. But, the late 1920s again registered a sharp decline which continued till 1930s^[37]. The decrease of wages was mainly because of the fine plucking and the economy on the part of the employers^[38]. Moreover, the *ticca* earnings were included in the wage figures of the chalangans in the annual official reports^[39]. This clearly indicates that even after working extra in the form of *ticca* and *hazira* they were able to get about 4 to 5 rupees and that too remained stagnant throughout the decades, sometimes with a tendency of decline. The wages that the labourers were able to earn was too less in comparison to the inflation during the times of crisis and both the world war.

Another category of the labourer working in the tea plantations were the settled labourer. The term settled referred to permanently employed labourers in the tea plantations, these labours are those who are subjected to work in the tea plantations to a certain age, after which one of their family members had to continue their work or else, they had to leave the tea estate and subsequently leave their home as well. Their wages remained stagnant for most of the early decades but with a tendency to decline in some years. The women of the settled labourers had seen a slight increase in the wages in North Lakhimpur but there was no change in the district of Darrang. By the year 1947, there was the increase in the average wages for the settled labourers. In the district of Darrang, for a man it was 24 percent, for woman 28%, and for children 41 percent. The figures for North Lakhimpur stands for a man it was 14%, for woman 26%, and for children 27%^[40]. Hence, this data indicates that the settled labourers were under obligation to remain in the tea estates in the form of chalangans, till they

could work it would be them and after their retirement it would be one of their family members or else, they had to leave their home in the tea estate. They were given no right to property; their settlement was to continue as a chalan throughout the generations.

From 1934 onwards there were the reports of employment of *basti* or *faltu* labour who were basically the ex-tea garden labourers who left their employment after the end of the contract and settled down in the vicinity of the tea plantations. The ex-tea garden labourers were there from the last decade of nineteenth century and were referred as temporary labourer. But it was only in 1934 that these labourers were acknowledged officially. Many of them took employment for short periods and mostly during the peak seasons, particularly during the time of plucking leaves. That is why they were paid less wages than that of the settled labourers. The officials explained these low earnings of the ex-tea garden labourers were because of the absence of *ticca* earnings^[41]. Even though the ex-tea garden labourers were performing the same work as the other chalangans, they were not provided any kind of concessions from the estate. The reasons could be that there was the availability of working labourers for the tea plantations in these two districts; and, moreover, the lack of any other economic opportunities led them to the seasonal employment in the plantations at lower wages at the same time.

The report of the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 investigated the individual and family budgets of the chalangans and the consumption level of them. It calculated the cost of an adult chalangans diet at rupees 5.49 in 1922^[42]. As per the report, it was an 81% increase in the cost of monthly diet of the chalan. For the district of North Lakhimpur, there was 50% increase and for Darrang, 75% in the cost of monthly diet between the period 1913 to 1920. The European accountant of the Empire of India Company in Tezpur reported the cost of living in between the years 1913 to 1920 had risen to 100%. And, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang believed that the 75 percent increase shown in the report of the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 was a fairer figure. The Committee also reported that the price of rice, as reported in the Assam Gazette for the years 1912 to 1921, increased by 91% in Tezpur, 111% in Mangaldai, and 59% in North Lakhimpur; and, simultaneously, the nominal wages of the chalangans had increased by 21% in North Lakhimpur and 33% in the district of Darrang^[43]. The period from 1905-06 to the end of the World War I was one of the high dividends, rising prices and relatively low wages^[44]. The average monthly wage earnings of Rupees 5-6 per man and Rupees 4 per woman, including diet rations, subsistence allowance and bonus, showed a slight improvement, but in real terms much of it was eroded by the rising prices. Besides the edible items that were grown in the different villages and were taken to the hats for sale, the price of other commodities and product like clothes and edible items rose which further got escalated because of the economic strains resulting of the First World War.

The post war era showed a drastic rise in inflation where the cost of living shoots up to 100%. However, the wage of the chalangans were more or less stagnant through most part of the decade, it was noted that a slight increase in the wage was seen during the period of 1912 to 1921 but, that increase is negligible as the cost of living was doubled by then. The conditions of the chalangans throughout the post war period

were that of survival at the bare minimum.

A major portion of the chalan's earnings was largely spent on the food consumption by them. In 1868, the commissioners of both the district reported that rice was one of the major items of consumption of the chalan's diet. They further emphasized that other basic food item like oil, dal, ghee, fish etc., were beyond their means of purchase ^[45]. The report of the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 also shows that the annual budget of a chalan's family consisted of one man, two women (all working), and two children (one working) and their expenses on food consumption was nearly 70% of their total expenditure.⁴⁶ In the tea plantations of North Lakhimpur, a male and a female chalan spent about 86% and 74% respectively on food which consisted of rice, mustard oil, dal, salt, spices and onion, out of their total annual expenditure.⁴⁷ This shows that the expenditure on food was a major expense of the chalans in these two districts.

A further decline in the wages of the chalans can be observed while examining a comparison of the prices of food products and their wages in between 1900 and 1920. The overall wages for the chalans increased in the two decades of the twentieth century. For the Act labourers in both the districts, men and women combined, the increased wages were 11% in between 1900 and 1905, 6% in between 1915 and 1916, and 25% in 1919 to 1920; and, for the non-Act labourers, including men, women and children combined, the increased wages were 41% in between 1900 and 1905, 30% in between 1915 and 1916, and 43% in 1919 to 1920. In comparison to that, the combined increase in the prices of the food articles for the same period was 57% in the district of North Lakhimpur and 59% on an average in the district of Darrang.⁴⁸ It is observed that the nominal wages of the chalan was increasing but the real wages decline in between 1900 and 1920. Further, K. L. Datta in 1914 reported a 5% decline in real wages of the chalans and they appear to be in the worst position.⁴⁹ This trend of nominal wages of the chalans and the price of food products remained same throughout the 1920s and the 1930s with slight increase and decrease at times. But it was the depression of the late 1930s which affected both the prices and wages and there was a sharp decline in both. This was also affected by the increasing employment of the ex-tea garden labourers who worked at lower wages than the chalans.

Living Conditions of the Chalans

The chalans were largely recruited from Chota Nagpur, Santhal Pargana, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, and Central Provinces majority of whom were the tribals and the aboriginals. Among these communities, a large section of the chalans were coming from the aboriginals like Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Santhals, Bhumij, Kurmis, and etc. These communities together constituted the largest group among the chalans. It was 61 and 58% in 1911, and 60 and 59% in 1921, of the total plantation labour population in the districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang respectively. Some low caste Hindu communities also occupied the population forming the second largest group among the chalans constituting 27 and 30% in 1911, and 28 and 32% in 1921, in the districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang respectively. The overall social composition of the chalans together accounted 88 and 88% in 1911, and 88 and 69% in 1921, of the total plantation labour population in the

districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang respectively ^[50]. The Census of 1911 reported that the employers mostly preferred these communities because of their capability of withstanding hard work in the jungle and the effects of the climate ^[51]. Similarly in 1921, the Census reported that the 'Jungly Coolies', as the chalans were called, were best for the tea plantation work ^[52]. With the expansion of the tea plantations in the districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang, the chalans were settled down in clusters called 'coolie lines' within the tea plantations for their easy availability and mobilization. These communities which build up a major portion of the population in the districts then became a generational employee over a period spanning more than decades in the tea plantations.

The expansion of the tea plantations, on the other hand, took its toll on the chalans life. The Assam Labour Reports of 1875-78 reported that immigration continued to record high mortality among the chalans and desertions in the tea plantations. In 1875, the percentage of desertions in tea plantations was 9.78 which also included the women deserters who accounted for 4.02%. Also, the mortality rate in the Brahmaputra valley during 1876-77 was reported as 8.1%. In the same year, 1877, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, reported the mortality rate of 9.17% and desertion rate of 6.22% in the district ^[53]. Later in 1878, the Chief Commissioner described the mortality among the chalans as one of the serious issues faced by the planters as the death rate in the district of North Lakhimpur was 7.35 and Darrang was 9.64% ^[54]. Even the local officers and the tea planters in the district had attributed to high mortality rates on the arrival of the chalans because of the sickly and the unfit conditions.

This toll on the chalans of the high mortality pattern was associated with the rigours of the penal contract system of the 1882 Act. The Government of India reported in 1889 that many unhealthy plantations owe their unhealthiness, in a great measure, to the insufficiency of labour force and to the fact that the greatest pressure on the coolies to work is exercised during the rains, which is also the unhealthiest time of the year ^[55]. Further it stated that because of the labour shortages in the tea plantations, the enforcement of the penal sanctions in these unhealthy plantations coincided with the strict working conditions under which the mortality rate mounted when the chalans were not allowed sick leave ^[56]. In 1888, a civil surgeon of Lakhimpur reported that a large number of deaths in the district was attributed to ancylostomiasis ^[57] because the 'number of coolies palpably suffering from it are allowed to go on work, until it develops into an incurable stage ^[58].' The mortality rate reached as high as 6.4% among the Act labourers in 1889 when only 5% of total working days was granted as leave on account of health issues to the chalans. When the 1882 Act was proposed to be repealed in 1897, the planters opposed the decision noting that "without the penal contract, the labour required for starting new ventures cannot be obtained ^[59]." The penal contract, combined with the unhealthy living conditions, undernourishment of the chalans and overwork in the tea plantations were the most common causes of high mortality rate in the district of North Lakhimpur and Darrang.

Another important feature that is witnessed with the expansion of the tea plantations in the districts was of the incidents of the ill treatments and physical coercion of the chalans by the planters. Sir John Ware Edgar, a civil servant

and Deputy Commissioner of Cachar observed that:

The miseries of the early immigrant were in too many instances cruelly aggravated by the ill-treatment of their employers. At one time the feelings of the planters as a body towards their labourers was most deplorable. The best men looked on them as a thankless, discontented lot, for whose good it was almost useless to do anything, and whom it was impossible not to dislike; while among the worst sort of planters this feeling of aversion deepened into a mingling of hatred and contempt that led in some instances to acts of revolting cruelty, and in far more cases than has ever been publicly known to systematic and gross ill-treatment ^[60].

Edgar further reported that there were instances of chalang being tied and flogged by the planters as punishment for not able to complete the *nirikh*. He reported that, "I have reasons to believe that this practice was almost universal in Cachar when I went there in 1863, and I had on excellent authority that it was at least equally common in Assam ^[61]." This had been explained with reasons that the planters had invested on the recruitment and transportation of the immigrants who were to work in the plantations; and, after their arrival, finding the work unfit for themselves the immigrants deserting in large numbers threatened the tea enterprise. Edgar further argued that the planters who were themselves suffering the miserable weather and consequent sickness there wanted the recruited labourers not to run away; and, were going to extract the work by any means ^[62]. This led to the practice of tying up and flogging of chalang who were physically unfit for any kind of work in the plantations or the *nirikh* did not come up to what the planters considered the chalang ought to do.

The desertion was seen as worst crime for the chalang and serious efforts were made to prevent it. Edgar had reported that the hill tribes were employed to track down the absconders on a reward of rupees 5 per head. If the absconded chalang had failed to do so or caught, he was tied up and flogged, and the reward paid to his capturer was deducted from the chalang's future earnings ^[63]. In March, 1866, Captain T. Lamb, Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, reported horrific incidents of flogging of the chalang by Mr. Dunne, the assistant manager of Seerajooli tea plantation of Assam Tea Company. R. Donald, the senior manager of the plantation had ordered Dunne "to give a jolly good welting to the ringleaders" who had deserted and brought back to the plantations. Lamb recorded in his *Mofussil Diary* about the extreme physical cruelty by Dunne who was already drawn in a case of flogging a young chalang who died the next day from the effects of the flogging. Lamb recorded that "the unfortunate men had had their backs cut to pieces with a cane, oil and salt had been rubbed into the wounds ^[64]." Such cases of desertions and punishments however, remained unreported most of the time, because of the isolated existence of the chalang in such districts. This practice then became a form of disciplining and taming the chalang in the districts.

The planters then started to offer land to make the chalang stay on the tea plantations while declaring the land granted as the incentive to supplement their income. The planters had vast unutilized acreage of land under them in which they allowed the chalang to settle. The Government, at same time, encouraged the colonization of the wastelands while helping the planters to retain their labour force by such settlements ^[65]. However, a rent had to be paid by the chalang without any occupancy rights and on condition of

their continued work in the plantation. Further, the planters were empowered to evict the chalang for non-compliance ^[66], and, they can even take back the land on disciplinary grounds ^[67]. These small holdings hardly supplement the chalang with their low *hazira* and often bound the chalang to plantation employment for longer span of time, sometime for generations.

The chalang were bound to the plantation because of other forms of dependency too. The planters give partial payment of wages in kind to the chalang in the form of rice at subsidized rates. The cash wage was supplemented by the subsidized rates of the food for the chalang which actually was the total earning of the chalang.⁶⁸ But, because the *hazira* was inadequate for the chalang, they were totally depended on the planters for subsidized rations given to them.⁶⁹ Another strategy of making the chalang more depended was the payment of advances or bonus for renewal of contracts with the chalang whose contract had completed under the Workman's Breach Contract Act XIII of 1859. The advances and the bonus were to be recover from the chalang's wages which simultaneously became the source of indebtedness and bondage for them. The Royal Commission of 1931 described that "before the abolition of the Act XIII of 1859 an outstanding advance, whatever its nature, was no doubt used as an argument against the grant of a discharge certificate, and to that extent the indebtedness of labourer may be said to have affected his freedom ^[70]." These strategies had helped the planters to keep the chalang under their control for generations and further sustained an isolation of the chalang.

The chalang were always under close surveillance and their freedom of movement is controlled in the plantations. This control over the plantation life was perceived by most as a *phatak*, which literally means jail. In 1891, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur had noted at this that "every form of punishment however mild and whether really done for the coolie's good or not is designated as *phatak* ^[71]. This plantation *phatak* were used to keep the captured runaways chalang disobedient ones. F. A. Hetherington, a young planter from Lakhimpur, recorded in his diary that one of his chalang returned from Tezpur, having been flogged by manager and kept in *phatak* on the plantations for a week ^[72]. For the planters, such control and immobilization was to protect these ignorant and illiterate chalang from the influence and exploitation by the outsiders. On the other hand, the *phatak* was a kind of once existing indenture regime based on the penal system for the chalang.

However, such developments did not stop the influx of chalang to the districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang. Many siblings were born to these immigrant chalang, and they had also entered the labour force in the estate. At first instance, it seems like that the chalang had drawn in to the custom of hereditary labourship. But such was not the case. The absence of education and the restrictions that the tea companies put on their movement out of the estate created them as an efficient manpower for the plantations immediately from the childhood. However, this does not solve the problem of manpower and they were still in need of imported labour for new extensions of the plantations. Moreover, chalang were constantly moving out of plantations to settle in the villages as ex-tea garden labourers. The Royal Commission on Labour of 1931 had indicated that there were little chances of the time-expired labour returning home without the assistance of the

employer. Therefore, only a few labourers went back to their desh. This resulted in passing of the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act of 1932 which provided for the first-time statutory rights to all immigrant labour to be repatriated from Assam, with their families, at the expenses of the employer. Labour was entitled to be repatriated after 3 years. As a result of the Act of 1932 the Tea District Labour Association was formed for the purpose of the recruitment of labour. The association recruited labour from six recruiting provinces of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces, United Provinces and Madras. A new agency with a Controller of Emigration as the head was appointed to supervise the recruitment of labour. The local authorities were also empowered to supervise the recruitment, forwarding and employment of labourers in the tea plantations^[73]. Thus, substantial change was affected in the essential process of recruitment after a totally inhumane way of recruitment which lasted for more than 80 years. Nevertheless, the exploitation of the chalangans never really stopped but rather the exploitation found new facets to control the labourers as best they could to supply the continuous inflow of labourers for the existing and newly extended tea estates.

The growth of tea plantations and the increasing population in these tea districts facilitated the establishment of the periodical markets (hat) selling inexpensive and good food. At first, the hats were not at tea plantations, but was generally located within a short distance from the bagans^[74]. The market was usually a smaller one, made of huts and held once in a week. This was basically established for the chalangans, and they were given first preference to visit the market in the morning i.e., from 7 am to 11 am, and thereafter, the villagers nearby would generally prefer to visit. The labour could go out only with the permission of the planter or his men. An ex-tea garden labourer commented that "at that time, if you have 5 rupees, you will have to take one more person with you to carry all the buys^[75]." The price of all items in the market were almost at the same rate. This may be because the cultivators of the districts produced enough grain to feed the immigrant population or the price of edible items depends on the price at which it can be imported from outside. During the last forty years (from 1906), it has shown a general tendency to appreciation, but this tendency is not so marked as in other districts, for the simple reason that even forty years ago rice in both the district of North Lakhimpur and Darrang was far from cheaper^[76]. For the same reason the market kept extremely steady, and during that period there was only a little difference in the prices of seers of products as compared with the other districts. Salt has been fairly steady at 8 seers for the rupee, which is considerably cheaper than it was in the sixties, when only 6 seers could be purchased for that sum, but in 1903 the price fell to 10 seers for the rupee^[77]. This further indicates that the chalangans were provided ample opportunities to buy their food and other amenities at a low price in the nearby weekly hats.

On the other hand, price of rice and the amount of work required, was understated to the chalangans by the sardars during the recruitment. The difficulty arising from the debt or village crimes were taken advantage of by the sardars to convince the victims that emigration was a good way of escape then. Further, the indenture system compelled the labourer to work at a lower wage than he could get in the free market. He was reduced to condition of semi-slavery

and his labour and time were not his own but of his employers. It was supposed that these handicaps were compensated by the improvement in their material condition. Thus, there were made some improvements in the condition of the chalangans, a reduction on mortality and an extension in the permanent settlement of immigrants in plantations. Further, the 1901 Act made the chaprasi responsible to detain and send back any chalan to his own district through an escort together with his dependents and might recover the whole or part of the expenses incurred on him^[78]. Though the Act clearly laid out the norms that a chaprasi could allow a chalan to go back to his native place but the stakes were too high, the price was extreme, as they could only go back after the full payment of expenses spent on him.

So long as the labourers were well looked after, they would not desert a plantation, but they sometimes slipped away from the hard masters and the jungly plantation, where living conditions were utterly different. But the desertion was less in this part of land as the law was invoked almost every day to force the labourers to accept the indenture system^[79]. Some chalangans were always planning to escape and the boga-sahibs did everything to prevent their desertion. Also, the hillmen were recruited on special requests by the planters to track down the absconders and further, cases were also found of the recruiting dogs by the planters to capture them.⁸⁰ At every possible outlet in the coolie lines chowkidar were posted and the labourers were not allowed to go out free at night. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang in 1902-03 reported that the Steamer Agent's staff were further instructed to report and to prevent absconders from leaving by boats.⁸¹ A labourer's life in the tea plantation was governed by the laws or their managers and proprietors. The 'watch-dogs' - the protector of the labour and the magistrate - instead of ensuring the implementation of the laws, were themselves a part of the system and showed a partisan attitude.⁸² The chalangans, when get caught were punished by imprisonment, fines and by both the ways in times. Another cruel punishment was observed in the plantations where when the absconders get caught, they were tied up and flogged, and the reward to his capturer was deducted from the future hazira of the absconder as a fine. Flogging, as commonly found in most of the estates, was not common as a punishment for the labourers in the estates of the northern bank. But when caught, a reward of some amount of money was subsequently deducted from the wage of that runaway labour. Moreover, to ease the problems of the planters there was the Act VI of 1865. Under the Act VI of 1865, the employer could arrest if he suspected any chalan of being on the run from any estate. Such a deserter could be imprisoned time and again arbitrarily for successive breaches^[83]. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang in 1875 reported 6.22% of desertion rate among chalangans, in the next year it declined to 6.16%, and in 1877 the rate was 4.48%.⁸⁴ However, by this time, some favourable conditions have been laid down by the successive Acts regarding the chalangans, that they find the plantation a better place than their homes. Most of them seemed to be satisfied with the provisions regarding accommodation, food, medical aid, and a steady source of income seemed enough to retain the labourers even after the strict rules that were enforced.

Twentieth Century Diaspora in these Tea Districts

The migrant population increased by more than one-half in the tea districts and in 1901 exceeded three quarters of a million. This had also led to the Assam Labour Enquiry Report of 1906 to put some recommendations in regard to certain changes in the legal position of the chalans. As a result, the planter's private power to arrest his workers was abolished in 1908. A time-expired labour while still in Assam, could no longer be asked to sign another periodic contract under the Act of 1901. But this could not put a stop to the practice of enticing time-expired labourers to a fresh contract under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, 1859. Penal labour contracts therefore continued very much as before. It was not until 1920 that the 1859 Act was modified to eliminate the penal provision^[85]. Moreover, a chalan's exploitation might happen because of the innocence that they carried in themselves. Most of the chalans of the tea estate were tribal people and they had migrated from the regions which had been devastated and had seen no prosperity at all. These peoples were connected with their lands for their survival and need not to occupy any formal position in the society as their primal instinct was to survive and not seek after any position in the social hierarchy. So, they think that the knowledge of their lands, crops and livelihood is enough for their survival. But the conditions in the plantations were different. They were put into the position of serfs and their condition were as similar to that of a slave^[86], there the only difference was that they were told and made to believe otherwise.

Chalans all came from different tribal groups, but what they had in common were their self-sustaining economy and an egalitarian society, even if not in the case of Hinduised culture but in case of most of them. After coming to the plantation estates, what they are having is a complex society consisting of multi-caste, multi-tribe and multi-lingual in origin and a complex process of social and cultural interactions generating among them. They were housed in a line, colonies made for the chalans in perpendicular order in the estate, indiscriminately of all the castes that they had come from. They work under a similar condition. This helps to generate a society which had an undifferentiated class structure. There was the amalgamation of the different group of tribes of people which resulted in the emergence of the culture of the baganiya. They very soon acquired a set of dialect came out of the mixture of Assamese, Hindi and Bengali known as baganiya and it is seldom necessary for the manager to speak any other tongue than this lingua franca. Later on, the chalans were unanimously called as baganiyas, for they work in the bagans and their dialect was called baganiya.

One of the important features of the society of baganiyas was that there were distinctions between jatis but the implementation of hierarchical virtues was not that evident. The jati compositions of this society were not identical as many jatis resides in a single line. The population of chalans did not settle on the basis of the castes or as noted there was no re-grouping of the villages on the basis of the castes or tribe. But in exceptional cases, the people of same original district usually settled in the same village as per their suitability and comfort. This, however, does not mean that there was a complete absence of lower or higher jatis among them. The higher jatis did not show their dominance in the society but took pride in calling themselves to be of higher jatis. Moreover, the boga-sahibs did not interfere in the

social life of the baganiyas until and unless it was associated in any case with the welfare of the tea plantation. The traditions and customs that the baganiyas practice in their desh, they did continue that in the bagans. It is found that the boga-sahibs never forced or tried to impose their religious views into the society of the baganiyas, nor did they ever try upon any kind of forced religious transformation of the baganiyas. They were left to their own means when it came to religion and cultural practice. But, a new religion unknown to the baganiyas, emerged as a new way of establishing the baganiyas in this new social order. This religion called Christianity was seen as a very different religion where there were no economic or social distinction. All the members of this religion were speculatively taken to be same in all the aspects of their life. This prospect lured the baganiyas who were mostly seen as a group of alienated individuals in their desh. This religion gave them a platform to assert their existence in the equal social order, allowing them to streamline their own socio-cultural norms.

While considering the economic position of the chalans of tea plantations, it seems to be that they, by and large, belonged to the lowest class in the general society as the rural society in general consists of the lowest class comprised of the tenants, the agricultural labourers and the like. In the initial years, there was a very little population of the local Assamese people. The other people who came and settled here were the kyahs, the Marwari trader or merchants from Rajasthan, who established their business in the region with the development of the tea plantations. But, as the area developed, communication got bettered, and the hats got established, the local Assamese population started to come to the now very populous areas and settled down. With the growth of Assamese population, the community of baganiya gradually seen to be considered as inferior to them both economically and socially. Even cases were found of the ill-treatment of the baganiya community by the local Assamese people. Baganiyas were considered inferior to the rank of untouchables and were not invited to the Assamese houses. Even if invited, they were served outside the houses.⁸⁷ So, besides the little good effect that the plantation economy had brought to the baganiya community, it can be seen that simultaneously it had also changed their social status in terms with the local population a lot in the two districts of North Lakhimpur and Darrang as found in the study.

Emergence of Labour Unrest in the Bagans

After the First World War, the enquiry committees were formed to look into the living conditions of the labour class. But the committees, with regard to some particular commercial production like the tea plantation sector never paid any attention towards the sufferings of the labour class, resulting to which the enquiries were almost non-existent. Further with the abolition of the indentured labour and the repeal of the provisions of Act VI of 1901, 'the District Officers as Inspectors of Labour have less legal power than before and any instructions, they issue have generally only the force of advice.'⁸⁸ Because of the lack of inspection on the tea estates, there was no such improvement in the provision of necessary remunerations to the labourers. It can be observed with examples on two aspects regarding the sickness insurance and maternity benefits of the tea plantation labourers. The Royal Commission on Labour gave their opinion that:

Sickness Insurance: This Government were recently asked by the Government of India to advise on the International Labour Convention and they can only say now what they said in reply to the Government of India in March last. No compulsory sickness insurance scheme would be practicable in Assam at present. The tea and the mining industries already provide free for their employees all the benefits that could be obtained by any compulsory insurance to which the employees must contribute would be greatly resented by the labour force, the labour employed in these industries is illiterate and excitable. The labourers would not understand the merits of such insurance. They were certainly regard this contribution levied from them as an impost by their employers and their resentment might lead to serious trouble and violence... The Government of Assam see no chance of success in Assam for any compulsory sickness insurance on a contributory basis, until the spread of education and general uplift of the labour population have changed the conditions now prevailing.

Maternity benefits: This Government agreed with Government of India that the scheme outlined in the convention was unsuitable for India and that the introduction of any compulsory benefit scheme was impracticable. Moreover, any such scheme could be applied only to organized industries and in such industries in Assam maternity benefits were already conceded by the employers [89].

As the economic conditions of the labouring people tended to worsen, they were spontaneously drawn into partial struggles from time to time. There are, out of 210 reported disputes between planters and their workers during the period from 1904-05 to 1920-21, as many as 141 cases of 'rioting' and 'unlawful assembly' in whole of Assam. According to Amalendu Guha, the basic cause behind this was the failure of wages to respond to the enormous wartime rise in prices and profits. Working conditions were still inhuman and primitive. The monthly rates of wages remained basically unchanged for about quarter of a century till 1920. In course of the year ending September 1920, there was a decline in the average earnings to the tune of Rs. 2 in the case of men and Rs. 4 in the case of woman. Monthly cash wages Rs. 5 per man, Rs. 4 per woman and Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 per working child in the month of October [90]. The post war period posed as a great challenge for the tea estate labourers as this was the time when they realized that the wage, they were getting was nothing in comparison to the inflation in the market. They were looking at an uncertain future with no security and no prospect. This is arguably the main reason why the chalangans united themselves in whichever way they could to protest in unison for their long forgotten and always curtailed rights.

Those strikes in the plantations occurred simultaneous to the Non-Cooperation movement and thus, the Government reacted in the same manner as they did towards the movement in the mainland. Strenuous efforts were made to secure the boycotting of hats, particularly where this would tend to unsettle the tea plantation labour force or to cause inconvenience to Europeans and Government servants [91]. With the development of the national movement, the All India Trade Union Congress reached Assam to organize the tea plantation labour. The stoppage of work as a means to better working conditions came into prominence in 1926-27 when tea plantation workers gained concessions through

organizing strikes. However, the political upheaval of the 1930s failed to rouse the workers of Assam into action. Not that they did not suffer from economic depression but their resentment took the usual path of sporadic and self-contained strikes on economic demands. There were no meeting points between these economic struggles and the contemporaneous political movement. They were clearly ebullient all along, although they had neither a trade union organization of their own nor any contacts with the politics outside [92]. Hence, this resulted in a two-dimensional way of the national struggle; one was for the general independence of India and the other was for the rights of the marginalized group of chalangans.

Conclusion

In the wake of the national movement in the last two decades of the Colonial Government, there was no major development regarding the condition of the chalangans in the districts. However, the chalangans were found in some places coming out on the streets to record their protest and resentment against the unwarranted action against the British planters. Arrests, collective fines, looting, assault, terrorizing, etc. at last succeeded in suppressing the outward manifestations of the people's movement to win freedom. [93] The chalangans unrest were largely because of the exploitation that they faced in and outside the plantations, low wages that they were receiving almost from the inception of the tea plantations till the quest for the Indian independence, brutal assaults in the form of punishments even for the petty issues irrespective of sex and age, no social security, and the reasons are countless because of all these reasons the protests were very frequent yet unorganized and not long enough to bring the desirable change. For the chalangans, these protests meant their fight for the freedom from general factotum, for their social and economic rights which had been curtailed from the initiation of their arrival and existence as chalangans. This was a struggle which could not stand up to the standards of the national upheaval but it was no less worthy of discussion as, this was a fight for their identity and rights.

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