

Aspects of
Indentured Inland
Emigration to
North-East India
1859-1918

J.C. JHA

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H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lecture, Jorhat
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Abbreviations

Agr.	— Agriculture
Beng.	— Bengal
Cal.	— Calcutta
Commr.	— Commissioner
Dec.	— December
Dep.	— Department
Ed. (Edn.)	— Edition
Emig.	— Emigration
Gen.	— General
Govt.	— Government
Offg.	— Officiating
PP	— Parliamentary papers
Rev.	— Revenue
Supdt.	— Superintendent
Secy.	— Secretary

Glossary

Anna	— Sixteenth part of a rupee
Basi	— Stale
Bazar	— Daily market
Bhuinhar	— Original clearers of land among the Oraons
Chakbands	— Holding a particular plot in perpetuity
Chamar	— Harijan engaged in leather work
Chapati	— Indian bread
Chatank	— Almost a sixteenth part of a kilo
Chura	— Flattened rice
Dal	— Lentils
Dusadh	— A depressed class Hindu, mostly employed as a watchman
Hat	— Periodic village fair or market
Khuntkattidar	— Original clearers of land among the Mundas
Kudali	— Spade
Larai	— Battle
Mahajan	— Moneylender
Manjhi	— Boatman; Santhal headman
Machan	— Big bench made of bamboos
Munda	— A village headman among the Mundas
Naukari	— Service
Nirukh	— Overtime work
Nunia	— A low caste Hindu engaged in making salt
Pargana	— A fiscal division
Pie (pyce)	— 1/192nd part of an India rupee
Raiyat (Ryot)	— Tenant on land
Roti	— Indian bread
Sadr, Sadar	— Principal
Sardar	— Leader
Sardari	— Engaged by a Sardar
Thana	— A police station

Preface

Of late colonial emigration and settlement of indentured labour from the Indian subcontinent in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been attracting attention in India and abroad.¹ However, inland emigration of indentured labour to North-East India during the same period has not yet been studied in depth. P. Saha² and Hugh Tinker³ have touched upon inland emigration in their studies but their main thrust is on colonial emigration. The reports of B. Foley⁴ and E.A.W Hall⁶ just describe some features of indentured inland emigration for a limited period.

My interest in both colonial and inland indentured emigration goes back to the early 1950s when as a young lecturer I started working on the tribal history of the Chotanagpur plateau in Bihar. I was surprised to see that in both the schemes of emigration the tribals of Chotanagpur, called 'hill coolies', 'Kols' and some of them Dhangar (Oraon), dominated. Later while doing my doctorate in the University of London I came across a mass of material on this theme in the India Office Library. And during my long sojourn in the West Indies in the 1970s I collected more material from Trinidad, Guyana and Jamaica Archives as well as in the Public Record Office, London in microfilms. Since then I have participated in many national and international seminars on Indians abroad.

In a seminar in the history department of the North-Eastern Hill University in 1977, I lectured on the emigration of labour to North-East India and one of the participants refused to believe that the 'hill coolies' from Chotanagpur had come to these parts in large numbers. Later in the Burdwan session of the Indian History Congress, I presented a paper on Emigration of Non-Assamese Labour to Assam and this was published by the Bihar Puravid Parishad at

Patna in its research journal. Recently one of my research students worked successfully on this theme for her doctorate under my supervision.

This work is a modest attempt to focus attention on some important features of indentured migration to North-East India from 1859 to 1918. First the terms 'indenture' and 'migration' are explained and then both the 'push' and 'pull' factors are examined. The process of recruitment, transport through road, rail and river and the working of the emigration laws and the glimpses of plantation life are presented.

A couple of years back when I was working on a book on the migration of Maithila Pandits⁶ I got the invitation from Professor J.B. Bhattacharjee of NEHU to give the H.K. Barpujari Lecture and I decided to tackle the theme of inland emigration of unskilled labour to North-East India. I thank the authorities of the North-East India History Association for giving me the opportunity of delivering this lecture.

At a time when historians are trying to present 'history from below' and the 'subalterns', the oppressed and depressed people, are attracting their attention, it may be worthwhile to highlight the indentured inland emigration system under which the poor labourers of the Gangetic plains, Central Provinces (M.P.), Orissa, Madras, etc. were lured to the tea gardens of North-East India and consequently they suffered terribly. They were uprooted from their own surroundings and transported to a strange climate with unfamiliar people who had a different language and customs, nay, the whole life style. All this was done for the benefit of the British capitalists who invested money in tea, a new commercial agricultural adventure.

Even though the Bengal Government passed laws from time to time to regulate this traffic, the emigrants suffered much from the time they were recruited to the end of their indenture in the tea gardens. Many could not even survive the rigours of work and climate, nor could they be properly repatriated.

Ultimately there was vigorous protest against the system by the nationalist leadership of India and the whole system—both colonial and inland—was scrapped at the end of the first world war.

The main primary sources for this study have been found in the

Bihar State Archives, Patna, the National Archives, New Delhi and some general aspects of colonial emigration for the sake of comparison and contrast were found in the archival material available abroad.

I thank the authorities of these Archives and of the main libraries of Patna.

I also thank Mr M.L. Gidwani of Indus Publishing Company for sincerely looking the book through the press.

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1

Introduction

Indentured Inland Emigration

It is natural for living beings to go out in search of greener pastures. They are particularly keen to better their environment. No wonder migration has greatly influenced world history, transforming the political, social and economic milieu of many societies.¹

Migrants may be pushed by circumstances in their region of origin or may be pulled by better prospects.² Sometimes only 'push' factors suffice to cause emigration, for example, famine, earthquake, epidemics, etc. Similarly, a 'pull' factor may be strong enough like the gold rush or discovery of oil in some areas. There are examples of Europeans rushing to South America or to India to shake the proverbial pagoda tree. Social and political oppressions also led to migration.

The nineteenth century saw mass migrations in many parts of the world; hundreds of thousands of men, women and children were uprooted and transported into strange surroundings. Indeed, international migration was dramatic, but "for people from a traditional agricultural background migration from village to city, or from one province to another within the same country, might be an equally radical change."³

The Indian sub-continent had a long tradition of migration: the Indians in ancient times emigrated to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Java, Cambodia and Thailand. A study of landgrants shows that the Brahmans of Kanauj and other areas of the Gangetic plains migrated in large numbers to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. At the turn of the last century East Bengalis and Marwaris began to emigrate to

Assam in search of employment or trading business.

However, the migration we are concerned with here was a special type of colonial government sponsored system. Its guiding principle was indenture—one of the devices through which the government or the business concerns transported labour from one area to the other.

We have evidence of indentured servants in the West Indies (specially in Barbados)⁴ in the 17th century. The servants were bound for a period of three or seven years and got the return passage. They also hoped to get land after the expiry of the indenture. In the eighteenth century some Englishmen used to take indentured servants from India to England or to Mauritius. In the early nineteenth century this process continued. In 1829 a few artisans emigrated to the French colony of Bourbon.

Organised indentured emigration from India to Mauritius began in 1834⁵ and since it came immediately after the emancipation of African slaves, it retained some features of slavery. Indenture has therefore been called semi-slavery or camouflaged slavery. Indenture, however, was for a limited period and not for life as in slavery. The indentured servant might be compelled to carry out his/her agreement by specific performance of the work.

This system was introduced with regard to the West Indies in 1838 only for British Guiana (Guyana). It became a regular feature for the West Indies (Trinidad, Jamaica, etc.) from 1845. It was here a short-term industrial immigration.⁶ Like in Mauritius, the 'hill coolies' (Dhangars) formed the majority of the first batch to Guyana.

Under the colonial indentured emigration the contract provided for five years engagement at Rs. 5 a month. Food and clothing were to be provided according to a fixed scale. A return passage was also promised.

Almost the same was introduced for emigration to North-East India. As the Indian labourers saved the sugar industry in Mauritius, Trinidad,⁷ Guyana, Fiji, etc., the non-Assamese indentured labourers saved the tea industry by providing the necessary field workers. The planters, like Oliver Twist, were always asking for more labourers.⁸ In the last four decades of the nineteenth century and more than a decade of the twentieth century, British capital dominated this system in the West Indies and in North-East India.

The main features of the system in the context of colonial emigration were: five years of state regulated labour, denial of the right to change the employer or employment, recruitment of labour units, gross disproportion of men to women emigrants, payment of emigration charges by the employer, the denial of increased wages in spite of increased prices and profit, the entitlement of the labourer to fixed wages, free housing, medicine, etc.

Indian labourers were treated as one of the component parts of the commodity production. The colonial government treated indentured emigration as a commodity transaction. The Indian interest was ignored; the interest of the empire was uppermost in the minds of officials.

The tea planters were pressing the government through the Landholders and Commercial Association before 1860 to get cheap labour from outside Assam. Therefore the tea planters of Assam and Cachar were asked to devise an inland emigration like that of colonial emigration.

The story of indentured inland emigration from the Bengal Presidency, U.P., M.P. and Madras Presidency is indeed sad but instructive. It is concerned with the exploitation of the manpower of an undeveloped and inward looking country by an industrialised colonial country.

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2

Causes of Migration

Origin and Growth of Tea Industry

The drift of population from subsistence agriculture to the areas of commercial agriculture was a special feature of nineteenth century migration. Even so, migration was a 'drift', representing family and other decisions rather than only a transportation under government supervision or by a transport company.¹

The inland emigration was to the labour districts of the Assam valley, Sylhet, Cachar and Chittagong (Chatgaon) where there was a demand for labourers in the tea industry.² For the British capitalists it was profitable to grow tea in North-East India; it was productive and capital-creating, but for the main actors in the emigration drama—the labourers—it was a tragedy of great dimension.

Assam was administratively a part of the Bengal Presidency.³ Therefore the decisions about emigration had to be taken at Calcutta. This facilitated the work of coordination among different agencies.

The tea plant was indigenous to Assam. C.A. Bruce who later commanded a division of gunboats in the first Anglo-Burmese war (1826-40), is said to have discovered wild tea plants in Upper Assam in 1821. Another military officer found it in 1832. In 1834 India's Governor-General William Bentinck mentioned this discovery in a minute and a tea committee was appointed to report on the prospect of tea cultivation in India.

It was in 1835 that the first attempt was made by the government to grow tea. China was approached for fresh plants and better seeds and a deputation consisting of botanical experts was sent to Assam. A few experts skilled in the cultivation and manufacture of

black tea, were brought and they proved useful. Under Governor-General Auckland more Chinese cultivators and manufacturers of tea were brought.

The first tea company was formed around 1839 and the government handed over to it two-thirds of its tea gardens and nurseries. In 1846 the company sold its shares and in 1849 the government withdrew its active participation in the tea industry and sold its estates to a Chinese.⁴

By 1852 tea industry had a better prospect when Colonel Hannay organized the first private garden in the Dibrugarh district at Lakhimpur. Between 1856 and 1859 the real foundations of the tea industry were laid. By 1858 there were fifty private tea gardens. From 1859 onwards several tea companies were formed.

Between 1863 and 1865 there was a rush to secure wasteland to bring it under nominal cultivation and then sell it at huge profits to newly formed companies.

Then came a period of decline for two years in the value of tea property and in 1868 the government had to set up a commission to enquire into the causes of this disaster. Its valuable report (1869) brought a favourable turn to the tea affairs and for the next three decades there was a steady growth.⁵

The tenures on which the land for tea plantation was held in Cachar was of three types—the Assam rule tenure, free-simple and *mirashdari*. In the first category land was secured for 99 years at different rates. In the second group land was sold by auction at an upset price of Rs. 2 and 8 annas per acre.

In May 1868 the grantees under the Assam rules were allowed to apply within two years, for the redemption of revenue of their grants if there was a real tea garden on the land. The uncleared area would not have a larger proportion than nine-tenths to the cleared area. The system of allotting land to the speculators through 'pen-and-ink sketches' by the government officials was stopped.⁶

In 1871-72 in all 71 grants covering 201, 385 acres, were resumed for non-compliance with the conditions. Revision survey was done according to the rules 12 B4 and 4A, sections V and VI of the wasteland rule.

According to the wasteland rules of 1854 all leases of wasteland were to run for a uniform period of 99 years. Three-fourths of

such land were to be held on rent-free tenure for fifteen years.⁷

Now tea planting continued to make satisfactory progress, finding its way into almost all the districts of Assam. Lakhimpur, the pioneer district of private tea enterprise had ten gardens, Sibsagar had 15, Darrang had 3 and the remaining gardens were located in Kamrup and Nowgong.

There were 295 proprietors of tea estates in 1870 with 31,303 acres under cultivation, producing 6,251,143 lbs. of tea. In 1872-73 the tea planters owned 8,04,582 acres of which about 75,000 acres were under cultivation, producing 14,670,171 lbs. of tea—an average of 208 lbs. per acre. It was quite profitable.⁸

In 1874 the land taken for tea was 6,26,000 acres of which about 1,00,000 acres were actually covered by tea plants. The total production of tea was 19,000,000 lbs. By 1880 there were 2,07,600 acres of land under tea, producing a total of 40,000,000 lbs. of tea annually. According to the Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (1906), in 1885 the acreage came down to 1,08,000 only. However, in five years' time the acreage rose to 5,25,000 employing 7,19,000 labourers, mostly from outside.⁹

Table 1. Export of Tea

Year	Quantity (million lbs)	Value (Rs. million)
1870-71	12.7	10.8
1880-81	38.4	30.7
1890-91	110.2	55.0
1900-01	192.0	96.8
1910-11	255.1	124.6
1920-21	285.1	121.5

Source: Dharma Kumar (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 855.

In 1872 Cachar stood at the top with an outturn of 4,831,883 lbs. The average outturn per acre, however, was less than that of Sibsagar and Darrang. Sylhet came sixth in the list of districts with an yield of 412,986 lbs and a cultivated area of 3662 acres. The next came Nowgong. The Sylhet district by 1875 produced 470,000 lbs. of tea. By 1882 it rose to 4,660,000 lbs.—only a third of the yield in Cachar or Sibsagar.

J.W. Edgar's Report on tea plantation (11 September 1873, Parliamentary Papers, 1874-III) pointed out that attempts to import labour failed because very little surplus food was produced in the tea districts. So the food for the immigrants had also to be imported. Thousands of immigrant labourers died of diseases brought by them and aggravated by the lack of proper food. Others succumbed to the rigours of plantation work.

By 1900 the supply of tea was more than the demand. Therefore a system of finer plucking system was introduced. Even so, in 1903 the demand exceeded 145,000,000 pounds. The capital value of the gardens in Assam was about 10¼ million sterling. About four-fifths of the capital employed by the companies was owned by those whose headquarters were located in England.¹⁰

In the first decade of the twentieth century the best virgin land for tea production was located in the dense forests of the Brahmaputra valley at the foothills where the climate was hot and moist. In the Surma valley the most fertile gardens were those grown on the two ranges of hills in the south of Sylhet district or on the reclaimed marshland. The cost of tea production and the price obtained for the manufactured tea were lower in both the areas, but the yield in the Surma valley was higher than in Assam. Initially the local seed gave the best results but eventually a hybrid of indigenous and Chinese seed proved useful.

The most important tea districts and the area under the plan in 1903 were Sibsagar (78,500 acres), Sylhet (73,500 acres), Lakhimpur (69,300 acres) and Cachar (60,000 acres).

Around 1909 tea was cultivated in the Jalpaiguri district of the Rajshahi division on 121 square miles or 9% of the area under cultivation. This cultivation had been started in 1874 mainly by the Europeans with foreign capital. In 1876 there had been thirteen gardens with an area of 818 acres, yielding 29,520 lbs. of tea. By 1901 the number of gardens increased to 235, with a planted area of 109 square miles and production of over 31,000,000 lbs.

Strangely enough, the number of gardens decreased to 207, the gross yield still being 37,000,000 lbs. One of the advantages of Jalpaiguri over Assam was the free availability of labour. Therefore the cost was less and no special law was needed to enforce indenture.

This was an exception, but in other areas rather reckless expenditure was incurred in the hiring of labour and purchase of seed. The local labour on which the planters depended in the beginning, was completely diverted to general agriculture and other pursuits.

In the Gauhati (Guwahati) region of Assam (the Kamrup district) the area under tea fell from 6302 acres in 1882 to 3659 acres in 1904 when 19 gardens yielded 735,000 lbs. of tea, employing 7 Europeans and 2416 labourers, mostly imported. The local people were allergic to commercial agriculture as the African slaves were to agriculture after their emancipation in 1833 in the West Indies.

There were 43 gardens in the Nowgong district (Assam valley division) in 1904 with 11,857 acres of land under tea plantation, yielding more than 4½ million pounds of ready tea and employing 23 Europeans and 12,461 labourers imported from other parts of India.¹¹

The tea industry made great progress in the Darrang district in the last two decades of the nineteenth century: in 1882 cultivated area was 14,300 acres, but by 1896 it rose to 31,900 acres. By the turn of the century the industry prospered: some private owners sold their estates to the companies and utilised the money in extending the area under plantation. The acreage rose to 41,500 only in three years. However, the acreage fell to 39,941 with 87 gardens with a produce of 16,000,000 lbs. of tea by 1904, employing 99 Europeans and 52,085 labourers, nearly all of whom had been brought at a great expense from other parts of India.

The well-known tea companies were the Empire of India Company with its headquarters at Barjuli and the Bishnath Company at Pratapgarh.¹² The capital mostly flowed from Britain.¹³ In fact, tea plantation required a much larger capital input than any other cash crop.

The abundant rainfall and fertile soil gave a large measure of prosperity to upper Assam tea gardens at the turn of the century. This was evident from the acreage of 19,700 under tea in 1880. The area rose to 48,200 acres. In the next five years there was further increase of 20,000 acres. By 1904 there were 143 gardens with 70,591 acres under tea, producing more than 30,000,000 lbs. of manufactured tea and employing 199 Europeans and 1,00,849 labourers from various parts of the subcontinent.

The Duma Duma Company with its headquarters at Dum Duma, the Joki Company with its headquarters at Paritola, the Assam Frontier Tea Company with its headquarters at Talap and the Dihang Company with its headquarters at Khuvang were the leading tea concerns in the first decade of the present century.¹⁴

The Sibsagar district had 159 gardens in 1904 with 79,251 acres under cultivation, producing over 30,000,000 lbs. of finished tea, employing 182 Europeans and 94,061 labourers from different parts of the subcontinent. The Assam Company with headquarters at Nazira, about 9 miles to the south-east of Sibsagar, the Jorhat Company with its headquarters at Cinnawara, 4 miles away from Jorhat, and the Brahmaputra Company with its headquarters at Neghereting, the port of Golaghat¹⁵, were the important concerns.

For such flourishing commercial agriculture sufficient labour was necessary. Unlike sugar and coffee, tea industry was an all-the-year labour-intensive exercise.

The craze for enlarging the tea plantation was one of the consequences of the Revolt of 1857. Due to a deep anti-white feeling in the countryside of North and South India, Europeans from outside Assam found it safe to settle and invest in the North-East India in spite of the shortage of labour. Already after the emancipation of the slaves in many British colonies European capitalists had come over to invest in indigo in the Gangetic plains in the 1830s and 1840s. Now many of them preferred to shift to the north-east. They wanted free-holdings of land to increase its market value, making the borrowing in the London market easier.

The Push Factor: Social and Economic Condition of the Recruiting Districts

A large work force was required for the tea estates. The female labourers plucked the leaves; if the tea factory was located on the plantation they also dried the leaves and chopped and sorted them into grades for packaging. No wonder Assam which produced about half of India's tea, employed 1,07,847 labourers in 1885.

Unfortunately there was a dearth of local labour. The growth of population had been stopped in Assam during the Ahom rule. The Burmese rule caused a steep fall, about 75 per cent, by 1835. Cholera in an epidemic form in 1839, 1847 and 1852 and small pox

further reduced the population. Moreover, due to a high rate of opium consumption the common Assamese did not want to undertake hard labour.

With the exception of Cacharis the Assamese were too indolent or too well off to accept regular employment. Since the local people did not want to work on these plantations, immigration of labour became imperative. Even before 1860 when tea industry had not stabilised, thousands of labourers had been imported.¹⁶

The colonial government knew that the meek and docile tribals of Chotanagpur and the plains people of Bihar and United Provinces (U.P.) had proved very successful in the sugar plantations of Mauritius and the West Indies. Therefore they started importing labourers to North-East India from the same area.

It was also known that the tribals had suffered much in the recurrent unrest in the Chotanagpur plateau.¹⁷ Even in the second half of the nineteenth century the *Sardari Larai*, Birsa Movement and the Tana Bhagat Movement in the Chotanagpur division¹⁸ and the Kharwar movement in Santhal Parganas¹⁹ left these areas in turmoil for a longtime. Some of these were bloody uprisings and left a trail of destruction of men and crops and the miseries of the people were increased manifold by the military operations against the rebels. The rebellion of 1857 left not only this area devastated but also the Gangetic plains and the neighbouring areas in general.

Moreover, it was easy for the tribals to go to the Duars on the Bengal-Bhutan border in gangs under their own leaders (Munda, Manjhi, Manki, Parganait, etc.) for a season or longer to work on the tea plantations and then return home. Assam, Cachar and Sylhet were too far, but even to these they were taken by the recruiters, because the jungle areas were suitable for them to work in. Besides, the Santals were well known for clearing the forests. In fact, in the plantations of North-East India 'hill coolies' were not only more suitable to withstand the jungle climate but were also capable of harder work than the people of the plains.²⁰

The real push factor for the tribals of Chotanagpur was spelled out by the administrator-ethnologist E.T. Dalton, the Commissioner of the Chotanagpur Division in 1872: "The unfortunate simple tribal races were neglected by their new masters, oppressed by aliens and deprived of the means they had formerly possessed of obtaining

redress through their own chief."²¹ According to the Deputy Commissioner of old Lohardaga district, the authority of the old Munda or Oraon chiefs had been entirely effaced by that of immigrant farmers. In some villages the tribals had completely lost their proprietary rights.²² Under the Kamiauti (*Kamia*) system they almost became slaves for life. Sometimes even their children had to serve for the debt they had not cleared. In such a deplorable situation emigration was a good way of escape from the claws of the *mahajan* (moneylender).

Initially the Biharis feared the climate of the north-eastern districts of Assam for it was not suitable for their constitution. An officiating magistrate predicted in January 1862: the Assam and Sylhet Tea Company would never succeed in getting labourers from central Bihar unless they paid them handsomely so as to enable them to return home after an absence of a few years.²³ The Biharis of Patna and the adjoining areas preferred colonial emigration in the beginning but later they also emigrated to North-East India.

Moreover, Assam was unpopular among labourers of several areas because the journey from the recruiting districts to the tea districts was troublesome and expensive and the climate of Assam was damp. No wonder the demands of the planters could not be met completely.

Another problem was the competition from colonial emigration department and the jute and mining industries. All the same, since the tribals died in large numbers during their voyage to the colonies they preferred the tea gardens when their gates were opened.

Moreover, the recurrent floods, epidemics and scarcity conditions in the Gangetic plains compelled them to escape as emigrants. The social oppressions of the lower castes at the hands of the higher castes also led to emigration.

The decline of the cottage industry and large scale unemployment among the artisans and others and the oppressions and rack-renting by the zamindars under the Permanent Settlement (1793) led the *raiya*s (tenants) to escape. And those who did not want the risk of sea voyage, preferred inland emigration.

According to a report of the revenue department of the North-West Provinces (U.P) in the eastern districts like Balia, Gazipur, etc., from which many labourers emigrated to the colonies as well

as to North-East India, there was hardly any industry to absorb local labour.

Peasant unrest in Bihar and Bengal also might have led to large scale emigration. The failure of the Rent Act of 1859 and the Bengal Tenancy Act (1885) made the life of the peasants miserable. The period 1860-80 was a period of unrest in many parts of Bihar and Bengal.²⁴ British indifference to the tenants' right often led to agrarian tensions in rural areas and frequent agrarian uprisings might have led to emigration.

According to a settlement officer of Muzaffarpur, in Bihar unlike the lower-caste *raiya*s (Dusadhs and Kurmis) the higher caste *raiya*s resisted eviction and other forms of oppression. Around 1872 in the predominantly tribal areas of South Munger and South Bhagalpur (formerly Jungle Tarai or Jungleterry) old Santhal leaders of new settlements known as *Chakbands* were replaced by strangers called *mustajirs* (*thikadars*), leading to the resumption of old low rates of rent which had been fixed at the time of land reclamation.²⁵ Such harassed tribals would naturally be emigrating to the tea gardens.

In the Gangetic plains declining productivity of land near the decadent river system, the recurrent ravages of malaria, cholera, small pox, etc. emigration of rich people who could help the down-trodden, or at least console them, to the towns and thus depriving agriculture of the necessary capital, diminishing scope for new cultivation in the context of increasing population and disorganised agriculture opened the flood gates of emigration.

A magistrate of Tirhut found during the Bihar famine of 1866 that in north Bihar wages of day labourers had undergone little change during 1855-65 in spite of the increase in the price of food. The wages in kind also remained the same.²⁶

In Bihar the scope of new cultivation became negligible in the 1880s and the 1890s, increasing the volume of emigration to the tea gardens.²⁷ An enquiry in some villages in the Patna district (Bihar) in 1888 revealed that the minimum size of 'subsistence holding' for a family of five was 7 *bighas* and 40 per cent of the peasant families owned less than 4 *bighas*. Around 1888 in the Gaya district 48 percent of the families did not even own 5 *bighas*. This, one can well imagine, could not support his family. The survey and settlement reports in some north Bihar districts in the 1890s revealed that

more than 45 per cent of the families owned less than subsistence holdings.²⁸

Hamilton Buchanan had found in the early 19th century widespread bonded labour system in the districts of Gaya, Patna, Purnea and Bhagalpur. Even in the early twentieth century a large part of the agricultural labourers in the Gaya district were still *Kamia*. Similar was the situation in the Patna district.

In fact, the case of one Bhinak Bhuiya of Hazaribagh district shows that the bonded labourer's son could be sued if he did not own the liability of his father.

The Bengal government as well as the colonial government of India tried to justify the emigration to North-East India on the ground that the labour districts were densely populated.²⁹ The Governor-General Dufferin publicly subscribed to this view.

However, scholars like Panchanan Saha³⁰ and B. Choudhury do not agree with this view. If the alien government would have set up industries in the Gangetic plains the local labour would have been easily absorbed locally.

Even though there were recurrent famines in Bihar—in 1866, 1874 and 1896—the British policy remained “stubbornly subordinate to the development ethos.”³¹ Even the Famine Commission's code in the 1880s proved ineffective in tackling the food crisis. The desperate poverty of some areas paved the way for emigration to Assam.³²

The Biharis and others were usually left to their own fate, as during the famine of 1896, in the Saran district. Naturally, hundreds of labourers migrated to Bengal and Assam—some of them first went to Bengal and then to Assam—to tide over the crisis. Migration, Vinita Damodaran rightly says, was “a common means of survival for the poor peasantry, both men and women, and was not confined only to famine years.”³³ No wonder at one time almost ten per cent of the adult population of Siwan and Gopalganj migrated.

Even the traditional rights of the Bihar peasants to forests, pasture and irrigation—so crucial for survival during the famine—were encroached upon by the zamindars. Access to wood for fuel or building timber, forest fruits, honey, fodder for their pet animals—all these were denied to the tenants (*raiyats*) in many parts of Bihar. For example, in Nabinagar and Aurangabad in the old Gaya district

the common man suffered on account of their harsh measures. In the eastern district of Purnia traditional free grazing rights were denied and the poor peasants had to take their cattle to the Nepal *tarai*, popularly called Morang.

The ravages of the Kosi, Kamla-Balan, Burhi Gandak and other rivers in North Bihar every year and the shifting course of some of these rivers made the life of the labourers and peasants miserable. Many of them found no alternative to emigration.

In the Saran district, Sonepur, famous for its big annual fair, became "a great emigrating centre." Those who could not go to the army, joined the bandwagon of the habitual or seasonal emigrants. Usually the emigrants belonged to the lower castes: Tanti, Ahir, Kurmi, Kahar, Kalwar, Bhar, Dusadh, Nuniya, Bind and Chamar. According to an estimate of 1903, only 64 per cent of Saran's population lived above the minimum subsistence level of 2.5 acres per family of five. Many of this category had to supplement their income through emigration. For those who were landless and unemployed, emigration was the only remedy. No wonder Saran was 'a major district of emigrants' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁴ Specially backward classes had "little inducement to stay at home" because the agricultural wages were very low.³⁵ Around 1911 an unskilled labourer got only two annas to three annas and 3 pies in the Saran district, while he would get eight annas in Dacca (East Bengal) and five annas and one pie in the 24-Parganas (West Bengal).

In fact, the families left behind in Saran received during 1889 from the members who had emigrated Rs. 65,548 from Darjeeling, Rs. 46,507 from Jalpaiguri and Rs. 23,182 from Dacca. The psychic trauma of the women left behind was later portrayed in the folk love songs of the region like *Bidesia* and *Batohia*.

Sometimes rumours were circulated: those who emigrated would be hung upside down and oil would be extracted from their head.³⁶ There were other impediments to emigration: the recruiters' efforts were sometimes thwarted by the local zamindars' hold over the labourers³⁷ and some high caste Hindus were not supposed to emigrate to unknown places.

But there were desperate labourers who wanted to emigrate any how. Previously they used to go on foot, crossing the Gandak river

at Lalganj. In the later part of the nineteenth century, around 1885 when north Bihar was linked to Bengal and eventually to Assam by rail it was much easier to emigrate to the North-East.³⁸

One of the two sons of a labourer in the Manjhi thana in the Saran district would go once or twice a year to East Bengal or Assam to earn money. However, those afflicted by malaria or Kala-azar could not travel and the number of emigrants sometimes decreased during such epidemics.

On the other hand, when the floods destroyed the main crops in 1890-91 the number of emigrants from Saran increased. However, when the job opportunity at home or nearer home was bright, as in the 1880s with the railway construction in north Bihar in full swing, the number of emigrants fell sharply. Thus the 'push' factors acted in peculiar ways.³⁹

In fact, one has to move beyond the 'push' and 'pull' factors to understand the historical process of migration 'as a calculus of complex choice' to realise the dynamic manifestation of the migratory process in India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ However, even though the 'push' and 'pull' factors largely determined the patterns of migratory movements, the final plunge was based on personal considerations.⁴¹

The famous linguist-administrator, G.A. Grierson's investigation on Bihar emigration in 1881 (the report was published in 1883) revealed that only one-third of the emigrants were of a low social position. Every emigrant on his return became an apostle of migration. The emigrants to the north-eastern part of India usually followed some friend or relative. An inhabitant of Saran even ran an emigration agency to guide the prospective emigrants on the routes, coordinated travel groups and even advanced money. And for these services he charged only one rupee and on the loan 25 per cent interest.⁴² Those who returned from North-East India with a different life style fascinated the prospective emigrants. In 1872, 1879 and 1902-03 there were cases of 'forced migration': the oppressed people of Hathwa raj deserted their villages for greener pastures and safety.

The Bhojpuri speaking people of the old Saran and Shahabad districts, as of eastern U.P., were sturdy people with a spirit of adventure and seriousness at work. The people of Shahabad were the readiest recruits.⁴³

Tripura had 1705 labourers from Saran in 1881; 1968 in 1891 and 1961 in 1901. Dacca had 748 labourers in 1881; 3508 labourers in 1891 and 2937 in 1901. Darjeeling had 771 labourers in 1881; 3463 in 1891 and 2851 in 1901.

The Midnapur district officer pointed out in 1907 that the local Santals were partly 'nomadic' people and liked migration. In fact, they had been brought from Birbhum to Dumka in the late eighteenth century to clear the jungles and from there many of them had migrated to north Bihar to work in the indigo factories. Now in the first decade of the twentieth century they faced scarcity of foodgrains in the Midnapur district and were ever willing to emigrate for better facilities.⁴⁴

The push factor for emigration to Assam in the Raipur and Bilaspur districts in the Central Provinces (M.P.) in the first decade of the twentieth century was monoculture (only rice grew there) and part of the year the labourers were unemployed. In North-East India they got the good opportunity to be engaged during the off season.⁴⁵

The decrease in emigration in 1906-07 was due to a 'good winter rice harvest' in most parts of Santhal Parganas and the high prices of foodgrains.⁴⁶ Therefore there was no need of emigration.

Similarly, in 1909-10 there was a marked decrease in the number of emigrants in the Chotanagpur division because of the favourable agricultural condition.⁴⁷ There was thus no 'push' factor for leaving their home.

The newly created province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (1905-11) had a good water communication and in the later part of the nineteenth century it developed a good railway system from the sea at Chittagong to the eastern end of the Surma valley. To the west of Silchar the main rail line crossed the North Cachar Hills and connected with the Dibru-Sadiya Railway at the eastern end of the Brahmaputra valley. Some branch lines also ran from Laksham junction to Chandpur. From here a steam service was available upto Goalundo, and from Lumding to Gauhati. The northern and western parts of the new province were served by the Eastern Bengal State Railway.⁴⁸

According to the Census Report of India (1911)⁴⁹ the tribals of Chotanagpur plateau emigrated readily because of the following reasons: they multiplied rapidly; they retained an uneconomic sys-

tem of cultivation (sometimes *jhoom*) and they had extravagant habits. J. Reid did not agree with the view that the Mundas and the Oraons were not attached to their home. In fact, both the Mundas and the Oraons (Dhangars) were deeply attached to their hearth and home and the village *sarna* (a cluster of sacred trees) on which the spirits like Sing Bonga were supposed to dwell. The Bhuinhars and the Khuntkattidars (the original clearers of the land) among them and their descendents had special interest in the land.

Even so, due to their political, economic and social problems, as pointed out earlier, these tribals emigrated to Assam and the neighbouring areas. When they had some savings they would come back to recover their lost land or buy some other land.

According to the Census report of 1911 the people of Bihar and Orissa were adventurous people, but the Bengalis did not want to emigrate to distant places. The Bhojpuris, as noted above, were alert and active and capable of hard work.⁵⁰

From certain areas in Chotanagpur and Orissa emigration remained steady, yet less than 10 per cent of the district population⁵¹: From Manbhum 7.50 and from Palamu 5.50. It varied from 10 to 17 per cent in Angul (10.6), Hazaribagh (11), Singhbhum (15) and the Santhal Parganas (17). Ranchi and Sambalpur crossed the figure of Santhal Parganas: 22 and 23 per cent respectively.

Assam was one of the four main areas to which these labourers emigrated. In some districts the tide of emigration was ebbing in the first decade of the twentieth century, but from Singhbhum and Santhal Parganas the exodus increased. Many emigrants after repatriation returned to the district of birth, Lohardaga, the old Ranchi district, of which it was a subdivision until 1891.

Table. 2⁵²

District	Number of emigrants	
	Year 1911	Year 1901
Ranchi	91,000	92,000
Hazaribagh	56,000	69,000
Manbhum	55,000	70,000
Santhal Parganas	35,000	31,000
Singhbhum	22,000	13,000
Palamu	5,000	7,000

Many of these labourers might have gone to the coalfields or jute mills. Due to this local demand emigration to the tea districts decreased. Some labourers also emigrated to Burma and many to other colonies.

It is difficult to examine the psychological aspect of the rural labourers who emigrated under the indenture system. Even the formulation of 'push' and 'pull' factors is not always true. To identify the one or the other would be similar to identifying the blade of a pair of scissors which did the actual cutting.⁵³ Even a landless labourer, one can imagine, would have thought many times before deciding to emigrate. The economic factor was decidedly very important. As Yang points out, in the case of the Saran district of north Bihar 'the compelling factor was the condition at home, the seasonal migration being precipitated primarily by the 'push' factor.'⁵⁴

The case of Orissa division during the famine of 1866 is peculiar. On an average 4 per cent of the estimated population of 1865 emigrated, but it was too difficult to pinpoint who really emigrated or died. Surely the agricultural labourers (*kandara*) and the professional beggars saved themselves by emigration.⁵⁵ This could be true of the famine periods in Bihar and other recruiting areas.

According to a report of January 1874, the Dhangars were the most liked coolies by the estates. The Begg, Dunlop and Co. avoided 'up-countrymen' from the Gangetic plains (from Shahabad in Bihar and Gazipur, Lucknow, etc. in U.P.) because only the tribals could stand the rigours of jungle life. In fact, the change in the climate, mode of living and diet and deviation from their familiar milieu, had a depressing influence on their psyche.⁵⁶

However, if the tea garden was located in the open parts of the district and near the bazar, the labourers from the Gangetic plains were accepted with open arms for they proved as good as the tribals.

All the same, the planters and their agents would not sometimes employ the labourers from the districts beyond Bhagalpur and preferred the Santhals and other tribals as "more contented and industrious without caste prejudices and less liable to disease".⁵⁷

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2. G.A. Grierson (Compiled), *The Administration of the Lower Provinces of Bengal (A Supplement to the Annual Administration Reports for 1885-86, 1882-83 to 1886-87)*, Calcutta, 1887, p. 13.
3. Under the Charter Act (1853), Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam came under the administrative control of Lt. Governor in 1854. Later in 1874 Assam came under the Chief Commissioner and still later in 1905 a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was formed—an arrangement which continued upto 1912.
4. J.W. Edgar, Report on Tea cultivation, 11 Sept. 1873, "East India Trade in Bengal, Statistical Abstract of India, France, Accounts, Railways, etc.," British Parliamentary Papers (Henceforth PP), 1874-III.
5. *Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India during 1872-73*, p. 44.
6. Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal, 1873, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1874-III.
7. Ibid.
8. In 1871-72 Assam tea gardens (31,303 acres) produced 6,257,643 lbs. of tea; Cachar (23,081 acres) 5,406,400 lbs. and Sylhet (21,408 acres) 4,641,659 lbs.
9. Home, Revenue, Agriculture (Emig.), Dept., June 1880, No. 21. Also, *Assam Administration Report*, 1894-99, 1950.
10. *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Calcutta, 1909, p. 70.
11. Ibid. p. 566.
12. Ibid. p. 553.
13. Ibid. p. 249: At the outset stock jobbers and bubble companies had a firm grip over the tea industry.
14. *Imperial Gazetteer of India, Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Calcutta, 1909, p. 554.
15. Ibid. p. 577. By 1914 the area under tea in Assam was 3,76,000 acres. By 1891 the labour force of Sylhet increased about tenfold in three decades and fourfold since the Act of 1882 came into force. E.C. Buck, Secy., Govt. of India, Rev. & Agr. Dept. to Secy., Govt. of Bengal, Gen. dept., 5 Oct. 1891, No. 2059/19, Proceedings, Lt. Governor, Bengal, Gen. (Emig.), January 1893.
16. J.C. Jha, "Aspects of Emigration of Non-Assamese Labour to the Assam Tea Gardens in the late 19th century", *Journal of Bihar Puravid Parishad*, Vols. VII & VIII, 1983-84, p. 459.
17. See J.C. Jha, *The Kol Insurrection of Chota-Nagpur*, Calcutta, 1964 for the Tamar uprising of 1819-20 and the Kol revolt of 1831-32. Also see

32 *Indentured Inland Emigration to N-E India*

- J.C. Jha, *The Bhumij Revolt of 1832-33*, Delhi, 1967 and K.K. Datta, *The Santal Insurrection*, Calcutta, 1940.
18. J.C. Jha, "Chuars and other Tribal Movements", P.N. Chopra (ed.), *India's Struggle for Freedom: Role of Associated Movements*, Agam Prakashan, Delhi, 1985, Vol. III, pp. 457-507. Also, K.S. Singh, *Birsa Munda and his Movement 1814-1901*, OUP, Calcutta, 1983, pp. 9-147.
 19. J.C. Jha, "Santal Movement", *Ibid.* pp. 395-434.
 20. Saha, *op. cit.* p. 29.
 21. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 169-70.
 22. W. W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal: Hazaribagh and Lohardaga Districts*, p. 254.
 23. E.F. Lautour to G.F. Cockburn, Officiating Commissioner, Patna division, 31 Jan. 1862, No. 72, Proceedings, Lt. Governor, Bengal, Emig. dept., Nov. 1862, No. 37.
 24. R.B. Chaudhary, *The British Agrarian Policy in Eastern India: Bengal and Bihar*, Patna, 1980, p. 172.
 25. Dharma Kumar (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, New Delhi, Vol. II, p. 63.
 26. B. Chaudhury, "Eastern India", Dharma Kumar (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 170.
 27. *Ibid.* p. 145.
 28. B. Chaudhury, "Eastern India", Dharma Kumar (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 163.
 29. *Moral and Material Progress and Condition of India during 1872-73*, p. 131.
 30. Saha, *op. cit.* p. 65, fn. 97. 400 labourers were imported into Cachar from Bihar and Banaras in 1872-73.
 31. Vinita Damodaran, *Broken Promises: Popular Protest, Indian Nationalism and the Congress Party in Bihar, 1935-1946*, Delhi, 1992, p. 80.
 32. S. Moosvi, "De-industrialization, Population change and Migration in the Nineteenth Century", V. Jha (ed.), *The Indian Historical Review*, New Delhi, Vol. XVI, Nos. 1-2 (July 1989-Jan. 1990), p. 161.
 33. Damodaran, *op. cit.* p. 80.
 34. A.A. Yang, *The Limited Raj: Agrarian Relations in Colonial India: Saran District, 1793-1920*, Delhi, 1989, p. 194.
 35. L.S. O 'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer, Saran*, 1912, p. 4.
 36. 'Mimiyai ke tel', G.A. Grierson, *The Bihar Peasant Life*, first published 1885, pp. 1045 and 1458.
This was more often related to colonial emigration than to inland emigration, but it indicates the hostile attitude of the common people to all migrations.
 37. G.A. Grierson found in 1883 that the zamindars deemed every emigrant labourer going to distant places as precious property lost. One prosperous peasant of Saran told the Royal Commission on Labour in India that he disliked Bihari labourer emigrating to Assam or any distant region, but he could go in a lean season (Report, Royal Commission on Labour in India, part II, p. 67)

38. Yang, op. cit. p. 200.
39. Ibid. p. 201.
40. Dharma Kumar (ed.), op. cit. p. 654.
41. Yang, op. cit. p. 201.
42. Ibid. p. 202.
43. Tinker, op. cit. p. 53.
44. J.H. Bernard, Burdwan Commissioner to Secretary, Bengal Govt. Gen. dept., no. 455-TG-140, Proceedings, Lt. Governor, Bengal, Gen. (Emig.), Oct. 1907, XII-2, No. 49.
45. B. Foley, *Report on Labour in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1906, p. 54.
46. D.J. Macpherson to Bengal Govt., 10 Aug. 1907, Proceedings, Lt. Governor, Bengal, Gen. (Emig.), Dec. 1907, Nos. 5-6.
47. Offg. Commissioner, Chotanagpur to Govt. of Bengal, n.d., Proceedings, Lt. Governor, Bengal, Gen. dept. (Emig.), October 1910. Earlier the decrease in the Santhal Parganas was caused by the Kherwar agitators.
48. *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Eastern Bengal and Assam*, Calcutta, 1909, p. i.
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50. Quoted in *The Census of India Report*, 1911, Vol. V, Bengal Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, p. 168.
51. Ibid. p. 183.
52. Ibid.
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54. Yang, op. cit. p. 42.
55. *Economic and political Weekly*, xxviii, Nos. 1 & 2, 2-9 Jan. 1993, p. 57. All missing people were recorded as having emigrated.
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