

Worker's Resistance and the End of Indenture in Assam

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[DRAFT PAPER ONLY: please do not quote]

The historical literature on Indian indentured labour migration has suggested that this exploitative system of labour recruitment came to an end in a manner similar to the abolition of slavery in the British empire a century earlier. Credit is given to G.K. Gokhale and Mohandas K. Gandhi for drawing the issue to public attention and for raising objections on both moral and ethical grounds. The occasion has been depicted as a triumph of moral enlightenment. Indian labourers occupy only a passive role in this narrative as the recipients of beneficent legislation and administrative dictats that quite suddenly ameliorated and improved their condition. The reality is of course far more complicated.

In Assam, an official call for the abolition of indentured labour migration came as early as 1900 in the 'Report on Labour Immigration to Assam' by the Assam Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton (1896-1902), who wrote as follows:

[The] figures, and facts, when they are considered in connection with the annual expenditure of some thirty lakhs of rupees in acquiring workers – an outlay which would have been unnecessary if the wages offered were sufficient to attract labour – leave the Chief Commissioner more and more convinced that the insufficiency of wages is the most serious of the troubles from which the industry in Assam is suffering. He is no longer prepared to advocate half measures, and it is, in his opinion, a serious consideration whether the Legislature ought not now to accept the situation which the Secretary of State has always pointed out would be inevitable when the means of communication were improved and abolish a penal contract altogether, and leave Assam planters to get their labour in the same manner that the Duars and Chittagong and Ceylon planters obtain their supply... There is no labour difficulty in Ceylon, because the labourers are paid a fair market wage: but in Assam the difficulty is always present, and Mr. Cotton's recent experience has led him to the conclusion that it will never cease until it is allowed to solve itself, without the assistance of Government, and without any kind of penal legislation, by the ordinary laws of supply and demand.¹

This reflected a position which the Government of India had been advocating for some time, and was motivated by evidence that the indentured labour system could not supply adequate labour and simply had the effect of depressing wages far below the statutory minimum, making recruitment in the long term more difficult. Wages were thus typically half that earned by ordinary unskilled labour in Assam and lower even than those available in the home districts from which the migrants originated.²

Concerned Churchmen in England had also been debating the issue of indentured migration to Assam. In 1894 J. Buckingham wrote as follows in the 'Indian Churchman':

It will be remembered that [this discussion] began as far back as July last by our calling attention to a statement, which has since been repeated, in *India*

(a monthly periodical published in England, and representing the National Congress party), to the effect that coolie-labour in Assam was nothing better than a thinly-disguised slavery.³

The most articulate Indian critic of Indian indentured labour migration was the barrister and leading member of the Indian National Congress, G.K. Gokhale, who as a member of the Indian Legislative Council in New Delhi (along with Madan Mohan Malaviya), proposed successive motions for the abolition of indentured labour between 1910 and 1916. In his 1912 resolution, Gokhale wrote as follows:

Prohibition of employment at home or in any British colony....[of the] system of indentured labour should now be abolished altogether.....Because it was wrong itself...under this system, those who are recruited bind themselves, first, to go to a distant and unknown land, the language, usages and customs of which they do not know, and where they have no friends or relatives. Secondly, they bind themselves to work there for any employer to whom they may be allotted, whom they do not know and who does not know them, and in whose choice they have no voice, Thirdly, they bind themselves to live there on the estate of the employer, must not go anywhere without a special permit, and must do whatever tasks are assigned to them, no matter however irksome these may be. Fourthly, the binding is for a certain fixed period, usually five years, during which time they cannot voluntarily withdraw from the contract and have no means of escaping from its hardships, however intolerable. Fifthly, they bind themselves to work during the period for a fixed wage, which invariably is lower, and in some cases very much lower, than the wage paid to free labour around them. Sixthly, and lastly, and this to my mind is the worst feature of the system, they are placed under a special law, never explained to them before they left the country, which is in a language which they do not understand and which imposes on them a criminal liability for the most trivial breaches of the contract, in place of the civil liability which usually attaches to such breaches.⁴

Gokhale went on to argue:

But more serious even than these is the heavy mortality that has prevailed in the past in all colonies under the system, a mortality which has been examined from time to time by Commissions of Inquiry and which has been established beyond doubt-a mortality for which indentured emigration was prohibited to Federated Malay States only last year, and which even today is admitted to exist in certain districts of Assam amongst the statute labourers.⁵

G.K. Gokhale never visited Assam, but received his information about the labour system there and its shortcomings from the Government's own inquiries in 1861, 1868, 1881 and 1895 and a note drawn up for him by Mr. Clark, the Member (and GOI Secretary) for Commerce and Industry. Mahatma Gandhi also voiced his concern, but both politicians were pre-occupied with the civil rights of Indians overseas (especially South Africa) rather than the fate of migrant labourers within the subcontinent. When Gandhi finally paid a visit to Assam in 1921, he gave a speech in Dribugarh in which tea workers are mentioned, but only in order to explain why he was never actually able to meet with them: 'I had hoped that before that I should be able to have a heart to heart talk with the workers. The mission on whom I came here has occupied my time so completely that I was not able to go to the tea gardens and speak to the workers. I shall ever regret this.'⁶

Following the report of Henry Cotton in 1900, an Assam Labour Commission was set up in 1906 which made the same recommendation, that indentured labour recruitment should end, and the recruitment of indentured migrants was supposed to have ended in 1909. Assurances to that effect were given to G.K. Gokhale. In practice, however, some cases of indentured labour shipments to upper Assam appeared to have continued until at least 1915. Gokhale complained:

I understand that the Government have decided to stop the system of indenture altogether there from next year. The Hon'ble Sir Charles Bayley started the other day in one of his speeches in East Bengal that, from July 1st of the next year [1913], this system would cease to exist in Assam. As the system will be discontinued from next year in Assam, I do not wish to say anything more about that here. I would, however, like to point out that the committee, appointed in 1906, recommended the complete stoppage of indentured labour in Assam in the course of five years. They would have liked to stop it earlier, but they did not want to inconvenience the planters, and therefore they suggested an interval of five years. According to that, the system should have been discontinued in 1911.⁷

The main change that did come about was the abolition of the penal contract in 1908, which removed the key coercive power of the planters over their labourers. Already by the 1900s, the penal contract itself was losing its popularity amongst the Assam planters, some of whom were finding it easier to recruit outside of the terms of the Emigration Acts: securing their workers merely with a guarantee of the costs of their journey home after a period of service. In 1901, Act VI curtailed *arkati* recruitment, granting a concession instead to the Tea District Labour Supply Association, forcing employers to assume more direct responsibility for recruitment. Act XI of 1908 then abolished the requirement for local contracts and the penal provisions of Act I of 1882 in the Surma valley and the power of private arrest was withdrawn in the Assam valley. Unlicensed recruiting was also entirely abolished. This was a prelude to the ending of the penal contract throughout Assam and the shift to sardari recruitment in 1915, and the abolition of Act XIII of 1859 in 1926.

The agency of 'coolie' tea workers

Through a series of enactments, the key coercive characteristics of the indentured labour system were thus removed in lower Assam in 1908, and indentured recruitment suspended entirely in 1915. However, what part did the workers themselves play in this? Although the system of employment was tilted enormously to the advantage of the planters, there is evidence that the workers were not entirely passive and silent.

Resistance could take many forms, beginning modestly with idleness and shirking of work, about which there are legions of complaints from the planters. Workers could also abscond to work on the railways or on other plantations with the connivance of their owners (a practice known as 'birding'), which was another frequent source of complaint. They could also flee British territories altogether and take up land in a neighbouring princely state, which also happened. Their most potent resource however was strike action, and there is evidence of an increasing resort to such actions and even more violent forms of resistance from the 1890s onwards.

In the years and months leading up to the Cotton report, although glossed over by officials, the plantations were by no means silent. In 1896 the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar described a situation in his district:

The manager of the Borjan tea estate in the Golaghat subdivision was waylaid and severely beaten by eleven of his workers, and eventually had to run for it. The ostensible motive for this assault was the manager having struck a coolie with a cane for disregard of some orders about hoeing. Disaffection had, however, been brewing for a considerable time, as the workers were discontented with the change of management which occurred in December. The conclusion I came to was that a spirit of discontent had become rife, owing to the new manager's attempting to introduce too suddenly stricter methods of work, in ignorance of the independent character of the labour force he had to deal with.⁸

Meanwhile that same year it was reported in the *Hitavadi* newspaper that five workers on the Joyhing estate were sentenced to 4-5 months and one to 9 months of rigorous imprisonment after a riot had occurred when the workers were asked to work on a Sunday, ie for seven days a week, in contravention of their rights under section 116 of Act 1 of 1882.⁹

In 1897, there were as many as fourteen cases of rioting by workers in the Darrang district arising from complaints against the management, and in the Laskarpur tea garden five workers assaulted the estate manager with hoes. This was in revenge for his having given three strokes with a stick to one of the workers in punishment for assaulting a sirdar.¹⁰

In 1898-99 there were 'about a dozen cases' of 'disagreement' resulting in criminal prosecutions. These arose from quarrels over the late payment of wages, insistence that the workers should go out in the fields when they were unwilling, or insults offered by the managers or assistants to one of the workers or a sardar. There were also two serious riots: one in the Kellyden estate in Nowgong and another in the Talap estate in Lakhimpur. In the first instance, this was due to the management insisting on the workers returning to the fields after three days holiday given for the holi festival (which they considered inadequate). An assistant was attacked with sticks and hoe after seizing a woman by the hand in an attempt to induce her to go to work. The force of police sent proved inadequate at first but 12 men were eventually arrested and convicted for their part in this disturbance. At Talap, an experienced sardar was abused by one of the assistant managers, he and his gang of workers then attacked the manager and his three assistants, with the manager suffering a broken arm and other injuries.

In a third case that year, in the Baisahali garden in Sibsagar, the assistant manager, who had assaulted an old sardar, was attacked by the sardar's son, assisted by a large group of workers, and received a severe beating. There was also an incident at the Chapanulla Gardens where a tea worker who had absconded and was brought back, worked for two days, then attacked the hazira muharrir and the cook, wounding them both, before proceeding to the estate bungalow where he killed the (Indian) assistant manager of the estate.¹¹

1900 was a bumper year for disturbances on the tea estates in Assam, which no doubt precipitated Henry Cotton's final overt opposition to the whole indenture scheme. That year there were ten cases of serious rioting, five of them in the district of Lakhimpur. In many cases the riots arose from an assault upon a worker to which the workers reacted in defence of their rights. In the Singrimari estate in Darrang, Mr Wilcox, the assistant manager struck a daffadar with a cane due to shoddy hoeing work at an out-garden. He was then threatened with assault by 30 kachari workers (although no actual assault took place). On Kali pujah day, 24th October 1900, the

Santhal workers of the Halunguri estate in Sibsagar wanted a holiday. When the manager James Beggs went down to the lines on horseback to get them to work, he was pelted with stones and anything else the workers could lay their hands on (a syce and two mohurrirs being slightly hurt). In the Hukanpukri tea estate Mr Hennessy, the assistant manager, was distributing wages and struck a worker who vociferously complained, and would not stop complaining, about the amount he had received. In response, Hennessy was pelted with pieces of brick by the other 300 workers, who then invaded the bungalow, forcing the three Europeans there to escape via the bathroom.

Clearly in all these cases the workers were acting in defiance of a manager or assistant manager in order to redress blatant injustice. Most of these injustices arose from the abuse of the extraordinary powers of private arrest held by the planters to prevent workers from absconding. This encouraged managers to believe that they could use illegal force against their workers with impunity. It also allowed conditions on a plantation to seriously degenerate in breach of the legal codes of practice. When workers attempted to leave they would then be arrested. They would sometimes be arrested simply if they attempted to leave on the expiration of their contracts. Since a contract specified the number of working days, it was easy for the planter to claim a full day's work had not been completed and to endeavour thereby to extend a contract. Workers in the Karimganj subdivision complained especially on this point (which accounted indeed for the majority of complaints in this division).

Assaults upon truculent workers, leading to the prosecution of planters, were becoming a problem for the government. In 1900, Mr Hatch, the manager of the Balicherra tea garden in Sylhet was charged with voluntarily causing hurt to a coolie for the purpose of extorting an agreement and was fined Rs 50 – widely reported as being inadequate, although the High Court declined to interfere. Mr. Cattell, manager of the Eraligul tea estate in Sylhet was charged with the wrongful confinement of the wife and daughter of a chaukidar coolie and with severely assaulting the latter – for which he was fined Rs 150. In the Phulbari garden, a woman who had absconded was brought back and brutally flogged by Mr. T.J. Walker, the manager, in front of all the workers – for which he was prosecuted, convicted and fined Rs 500 (equivalent to £33 at the time or £3,750 in 2017). In the worst case of all, Mr Greig, Superintendent of the Rajmai tea estate in Sibsagar district, receiving information that some of his workers had been stealing firewood in the lines, summoned them to his bungalow and struck one of them on the head with a stick, causing his immediate death. For this he was placed on trial but acquitted by a jury. This outcome, and the afore-mentioned fines, were embarrassing and inadequate. Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton (who was later to serve as President of the Indian National Congress in 1904) wrote:

[T]here is an undoubted tendency among magistrates in Assam to inflict severe sentences in cases where workers are charged with committing offences against their employers and to impose light and sometimes inadequate punishments upon employers when they are convicted of offences against their labourers.

Significantly in every case, the workers had complained fearlessly, the matter had gone to court, and the outcome had become a subject of controversy. By highlighting these cases in a published official report, Cotton generated considerable public debate, as well as personal criticism from the planters, agency houses, their supporters and investors.¹²

In the following year, 1901, collective protests on the tea estates continued. On 28th May at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, according to the *Eastern Herald* (5th June 1901), over 100 workers from the Sessa tea estate of the British India Tea Company Ltd. came into the district headquarters to complain about a severe beating given to one of their number. The Assistant Commissioner sent them to the office of the Company secretary with orders that the man be compensated. It was said that a dispute had arisen when a new manager demanded that the workers do 40 nals of hoeing per days work (hazira), and that if a person failed to do this they would have to make up the amount the next day. The workers struck work claiming that his demands would make it impossible for them to find time for lunch and they could not work on an empty stomach. The man who was beaten had stood up to act as their spokesman.¹³

On this occasion, the Assistant Commissioner did not take any further action in response to their complaint and the Sessa workers eventually returned to work. However, as a result of the concerns being expressed in Delhi, officials became increasingly active and from 1903 an Inspector of Assistant Inspector of Labourers was enjoined to immediately investigate every such case. This was in the hope of being able to resolve disputes without their proceeding to court, and in order to secure an accurate report of what took place in case legal proceedings proved necessary.¹⁴ This was timely, as there followed in July 1903 – at the height of the rainy season – an infamous occasion when again in Lakhimpur district, this time on the Rowmari estate, the workers rose as a body and assaulted the European managers and their Indian subordinate staff, causing them serious injury. They then marched to the magistrate's court in Dibrugarh to express their grievances.¹⁵ The dispute arose over the insistence by the management that the workers should wear the *jhampi*, a broad-rimmed hat, rather than carry umbrellas. This was seen as the latest and final straw in attempts to force the workers to speed up production (as the hat would enable the workers to pluck with two hands). The right to carry an umbrella thus became a form of resistance. In this case, forty-two of the labourers were prosecuted and several sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

The growing frequency of conflicts between planters and their workers, and their worryingly collective nature, provoked the Viceroy Lord Curzon to initiate a special investigation into their causes, with the support of the Assam Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton.¹⁶ The conclusion of the report was that the remoteness of the Assam plantations, immediate supervision by Europeans who were not always familiar with the customs and culture of the workers, and the onerous nature of the penal contract, which made it difficult for them to find any other means of expressing their grievances was especially likely to lead to confrontations.¹⁷

In February 1907 a controversy erupted when Mr Bloomfield, the manager of the Telhara Indigo factory in Purnea, Bihar, was murdered by five of his tenants. The High Court found the five guilty of unlawful assembly and rioting whilst armed with a weapon (lathis in this instance) but refused to charge any of them with murder, being unable to ascertain who struck the fatal blows to Mr. Bloomfield's head and chest. This spread alarm amongst the planters in Assam, and there were heated discussions in the Indian and British Press.¹⁸ In 1908, the penal clause in indenture contracts was ended in lower Assam. This, plus the completion of the Bengal-Assam railway (which made absconding all that much easier) seems to have further emboldened the workers.

The next notable incident recorded in the Government of Assam's Immigration Proceedings was in June 1912, when a planter, Mr. Penny, the Manager of the

Gopshadharu Tea Estate in the Darrang district in Assam was 'badly assaulted' by his workers. On a previous Saturday, Mr Penny had apparently withheld the pay of the tea house workers on the Gopshadharu estate on the grounds that they would immediately spend it on alcohol and then not complete the processing of leaf required at the weekend. He promised instead to pay them on the Monday morning, their day of leave. On that morning he left to visit an out-garden and postponed paying them until the evening. He took a nap after returning and awoke to a 'row' outside. Around 100 workers had gathered, some had apparently been drinking and most were armed with lathis. Mr Penny found one coolie, Sridhar, sitting on the verandah. He ordered him to move and went to take the stick he was holding, shoving him to the ground in the process. Sridhar retaliated, hitting Mr Penny on the head, and the crowd responded with 'beat' 'beat' and joined in, beating him indiscriminately. They chased Mr Penny around his bungalow until he eventually locked himself in his bedroom and then the bathroom, after they began breaking down the windows and doors. His bungalow was ransacked and everything breakable was damaged. He was eventually rescued by the Assistant Manager, Mr Aitken, who dispersed the workers. Mr Penny was expected to need three weeks of medical care to fully recover.¹⁹

By the time the police had arrived, around twenty of the workers had left for Tezpur, but they later returned. Eight 'ringleaders' were eventually arrested, including Sridhar. Their grounds for rioting, although lamented, were not seen as strong enough by the judge to warrant their behaviour. The age of Mr Penny, sixty-eight, was a further mark against them, as was the extensive damage to his property. They were all sentenced to two years imprisonment, apart from one Debru, who was deemed too young (at eighteen or nineteen years old) and only given one year. Sridhar – cast as the leader – was given an extra six months for initiating the assault of Mr Penny. Interestingly, Mr Penny received a small portion of the blame from the Superintendent of Police and the Chief Commissioner of Assam for using workers who were 'pick ups' from other estates in the district, rather than recruiting his own labourers.²⁰

Following the first world war the Assam tea industry suffered from increasing competition from the Dutch East Indies. It became apparent that the abolition of the indenture contract was insufficient in itself to improve the living standards of the workers, whose condition was determined above all by the profitability of the estates on which they worked. The problem became so acute as to provoke an official enquiry into the adequacy of wages in 1922.²¹

Post-war inflation, the resulting inadequacy of wages, and the ending of indentured migration, made recruitment difficult and the planters started searching ever further afield – to places like Bastar, Maharashtra and the tribal areas of Gujarat.²² Despite these efforts, local strikes on the plantations continued. The Annual Report of the General Committee of the Indian Tea Association thus report as many as 20 gardens on strike within the Sibsagar and Jorhat districts alone.²³ This was as nothing, however, compared to the avalanche of unrest that occurred on the tea plantations in the 1930s.

The depression and growing resistance

The confrontations of the depression years were a consequence of the parlous state of the industry as tea and all other commodity prices collapsed on international exchanges. The tea companies found themselves on the brink of bankruptcy. Initially, some plantations tried to recover their costs by increasing the daily tasks of the workers, but there was little surplus value remaining to be extracted by this means. Soon they began to cut back on production altogether. No-one knew how long the

recession would last, so rather than lay off workers, the managers eliminated overtime working. Many plantations then cut the daily *hazira*, leading to furious resentment among the workers. Once again, a notable character of the protests was their collective nature, whereby not only all the workers on a single plantation, but all the plantations within a district might be affected as rumours spread from one to the next.

A summary list of strikes in the 1930s is provided by D.V. Rege in his *Report On An Enquiry Into Conditions Of Labour In Plantations In India* (1946) [see appendix 1]. Each of these strikes are also adverted to briefly in the annual Resolution on Immigrant Labour to Assam. However, the scale of the strike action at the beginning of the depression years, and the general exodus from Assam that developed, provoked the government into producing detailed departmental reports as well. The largest number of these reports are in 1931, detailing twenty-three incidents of strike action and exodus from plantations – no doubt still only a portion of the total that occurred.

The trouble began on the 6th January 1931 in Lakhimpur district, when 150 ‘coolie’ workers went on strike at the Borbam Tea Estate, demanding higher wages. It was recorded in the report of the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur that they were mainly new short-term workers and included “a few badmashes who have been causing trouble and inciting the others to demand higher wages.’ They were persuaded to return to work the same day and the Manager agreed to pay them -/1/- for pruning 20 plants instead of 25 as before.²⁴

On the 11th March 1931, at the Barpatra Tea Estate, Sibsagar district, about 90 workers went on strike, demanding either higher wages at the rate of -/12/- per day, or their railway fares back to Nagpur. Mr Durrant, refused their demands, the latter because they had only served approx. four months out of a one-year agreement. Six of the workers, armed with axes and hoe handles, threatened to assault Mr Durrant. On the 14th, the Police and Subdivisional Officer (SDO) attended, according to the Officiating Deputy Commissioner at Sibsagar (S N Mackenzie). One armed section was deployed but they were not needed. The SDO persuaded the workers to return to work on the following day (15th) and the six were arrested under Section 143. They were later sentenced to 3 months rigorous imprisonment.²⁵

On the 18th May 1931, the small labour force of workers at the Mandakata Tea Garden in Kampur district, numbering 150-200, struck work. Some of them walked to see the Deputy Commissioner at Kamrup. They reported that they had not been paid for nine months and were starving. The Deputy Commissioner already had his suspicions, having come across workers from the estate collecting leaves for food in the jungle a fortnight earlier. The garden was owned by the Western Duar Tea Syndicate Co. Ltd. Of Jalpaiguri. They had stopped remittances last October and instructed the Manager to ‘carry on as best as he could by selling timber and tea.’ The Deputy Commissioner recorded that since then the workers had done work amounting to Rs 4637 (according to the very poor rates of annas 4 and 3 for men and women, respectively), but received only Rs 1833, ‘in what is euphemistically termed [sic] advances’. There was also Rs 1400 due to the officers of the company. The Company had issued the garden with a remittance of Rs 300 as short-term relief. The Deputy Commissioner asked that the Directors of the company requesting a report by the 10th June and if they could not remedy the situation, he would write to another garden and ask them to employ the workers. In the meantime, he advised the workers to continue work and stated that the Manager must do his best to give them enough to live on by selling tea. The Commissioner of the Assam Valley Division commented on the 26th that ‘This has

always been a hand-to-mouth garden: if need be relief works on the Local Board road through the garden could be opened without difficulty.’ However on the 6th/7th June, the workers were paid all arrears due from October 1930-May 1931 and a financial arrangement was made with Messrs Roy & Co. of Calcutta to work as Agents of the company.²⁶

On the 23rd May 1931, the Munda workers on the Dalu estate in Cahcar district also began to complain about the inadequacy of the Hazira rates, especially those for the female workers. Many of the workers struck work. On the following day the compound of the Head Clerk, who was thought to have been withholding ‘the prayers of the workers to the Management’, was attacked but no personal injury took place. The Manager anticipated trouble with the distribution of wages on the 25th and wired the police. When they were present there was no overt violence or disorder. On the 26th, the Mundas still would not work. They prevented labour reaching the water pumps and stopped servants from attending to the bungalows of the Manager and Assistant. The police allowed small deputations to interview the Manager to reach terms. The Manager’s suggestions dampened the situation but did not resolve it. 400 workers are recorded as listening to the deputationists in the bazar, 100 had collected in the Tilla Line and were ‘making noises there’, and 150 were spotted moving about in the jungles near the lines with bows and arrows. ‘There was also some talk about the last strike by the Mundas of the Bhubandar Tea Estate ... with whom many of these Mundas are connected by ties of blood’. The Munda workers eventually returned to work on the 28th. Seven of the ‘rioters’ who attacked the Head Clerk’s compound were arrested and later charged, but Anacha Ghatwar, who had collected for a strike fund (one anna per worker) and had advocated further striking, publically apologised for his ‘indiscretion’ and was let off for fear of arousing further discontent.²⁷

On the 15th June 1931, at the Jaipur Tea Estate in Lakhumpur district, a Uraon coolie, Monga threatened the Kamjari Mohurir over alleged under-payment. The incident was reported to the Manager, Mr T H Rutherford, who summoned Monga to his office that evening. The coolie attended with about 40 other short-term Uraon labourers and he and five others threatened to kill the ‘hazira babu’ (the Kamjari Mohurir) and Sirdars. Police protection was sent for; suggestions of repatriating the ringleaders having been met by threats of departure from the rest of the Uraon workforce. By the 17th it was reported that 200 workers were refusing to work. Two sections of armed police were dispatched and the Superintendent from Lakhimpur scrutinised the books and appeared to disprove the claims of the leaders of the strike concerning underpayment. The repatriation of the seven leaders, including their relatives, was therefore enforced. The rest of the workers were told that the Sirdar would be changed and the European Assistant would appraise their work and the Manager pay them himself. On the 18th, the ‘ringleaders’ having been removed from the garden, the affected portion of the labour force returned to work and the armed police were withdrawn.²⁸

The prophecy of further trouble among the Mundas proved correct as, on the 29th June 1931, 40 Munda workers at the Chungi Tea Estate in the same district went on strike. The number grew steadily and by the time the Police were called in on the 2nd June, 300 were refusing to work. The Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar reported that ‘The workers who started the trouble were short term Munda workers, all single men without any ties on the garden.’ They were demanding higher wages for hoeing alone. Management suggested supplementing the hoeing with plucking, but they could not reach terms. There was no Manager based at the small gardens, they were ‘looked after by the Superintendent East Indian Co. at Duflating some four miles off’. Around

100 workers left the gardens to march to Jorhat on the 2nd. They were eventually persuaded to return and by the 4th all were back at work. The Superintendent of Police, Sibsagar stated that 'earning possibilities on the garden appear to be normal, but the workers did not appear to wish to earn money by plucking.'²⁹

Conclusion

Although the strikes were at their peak in 1931 and again in 1939, incidents of the sort we have described occurred throughout the 1930s, with the peak number of workers involved (5,300) being in 1935. Very often the first sign of trouble would be when reports were heard of a large body of tea workers marching down a road on their way to the nearest town in the hope of making their way home. Not all strikes were over money. Some involved more straightforward conflicts with management or with a sirdar: an example being a strike of 30 workers at the Halmira tea estate, who downed tools and left for the Lokinjan Tea Estate, ostensibly due to complaints of ill-treatment by a garden sirdar.³⁰ Other complaints concerned the conditions on the plantation, such as on the 18th September 1931, when 95 short-term workers, including women and children, arrived in Lakhimpur from the Gillapukri Tea Estate, demanding to be repatriated. Their departure was precipitated by the deaths of eight of their number from malaria and concerns about 'unhealthy' conditions. None had served the full two years for which they had contracted and were therefore entitled to repatriation at the planter's expense, and the government refused to intervene. The matter was finally resolved when the Manager promised to repatriate 'any people who are certified as unfit' at the beginning of the cold weather'.³¹

What is apparent is that the tea workers in Assam were keenly aware of the wages and rights to which they were entitled and they were often willing and able to band together in defence of those rights. This happened in the 1890s and 1900s, even before the abolition of the penal clause – which rendered them vulnerable to imprisonment. When aggrieved they were not shy to march into the office of a district collector to demand an inquiry and the redress of their grievances. Sometimes this resulted in the prosecution of a planter (although they invariably would escape with only a paltry fine), and in the matter of wages compromise was negotiated more often than in the interest of the workers. This militancy, solidarity, and loyalty of the workers to one another, progressively worked to 'civilise' the conditions on plantations in Assam under British rule.

It could thus be argued that the end of indenture in Assam was less a result of political agitation by nationalist politicians, and the actions of concerned administrators, and more an outcome of grassroots struggle and the manifest economic failure of the indenture system of recruitment. The activism of the Assam tea workers went on to pave the way for the later development of organised trade unionism and later still the direct intervention of the state in the plantation industry post-independence, albeit with mixed results.

NOTES

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overseas labour migration in the Indian Ocean, based at Edinburgh and Leeds Universities. www.coolitude.shca.ed.ac.uk

¹ *Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1900* (Shillong, 1901), p.10. In chapter 22 of his memoirs, Henry Cotton describes the obloquy which fell upon his head when he published this report. See Henry Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1911).

² Henry Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, p. 262. Even as early as the 1870s, Sir George Campbell, the Lt. Governor of Bengal, had described the penal provisions of the indenture contract in Assam as 'reducing the coolie to the position of a slave', whilst Sir Bampfylde Fuller was said to have described their position as akin to that of 'beasts in a menagerie'. *Ibid.*, p. 247 and 265. For a detailed analysis of the coercive apparatus upholding the plantation system in Assam see Rana Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014).

³ Assam State Archive [ASA]: *Tea Garden Workers In Assam A Letter By The Hon'ble J. Buckingham Replying To A Communication On The Subject Which Appeared In 'The Indian Churchman* (Thacker, Spink And Co., 1894), p. 62.

⁴ Gokhale's speech on the Prohibition of Indentured Labour from the proceedings of the Council of the Governor General of India for 4 Mar. 1912. *Speeches and Writings of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*, Volume 1 (Asia Publishing House, 1962), pp.349-50

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 356.

⁶ M.K. Gandhi, 'Speech at Dribugarh', *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol, 24*, pp 136-37.

⁷ Gokhale, *op. cit.*, p.358-9.

⁸ *Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1896* (Shillong, 1897), p. 46.

⁹ *Ibid.* This case was omitted from the District Collectors report, and when the Chief Commissioner eventually heard about it he ordered the immediate release of the remaining prisoner in detention.

¹⁰ *Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1897* (Shillong, 1898), p. 51.

¹¹ *Report on Labour Immigration into Assam, 1899-99* (Shillong, 1899), p. 42.

¹² Although it was the Viceroy Lord Curzon who had first raised concerns about the equity of the justice system, Curzon back-pedalled in the face of attacks in the Anglo-Indian press and Cotton bore the brunt of criticism, being ultimately forced into early retirement. Cotton's persistence nonetheless won the admiration of early Indian nationalists. See Henry Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, p. 275-276.

¹³ ASA: 1901-General-21-Disturbance at the Sessa tea garden in Lakhimpur and the complaints made by the workers.

¹⁴ ASA: 1903-General-34-Investigation into Disturbances on Tea Estates: Secretary Chief Commissioners (CC) Assam to District Commissions, 14/3/1908.

¹⁵ See Rana Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude*, p. 284.

¹⁶ See Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 171.

¹⁷ ASA: 1904-Revenue A-77-117. Enquiry into the causes of friction between the Planters and the workers on the tea gardens of Assam (August 1904).

¹⁸ See *Times of India* 'Murder of a Planter' Feb. 19 1907, 'The Bloomfield Murder' April 17, 'Story of the Lathi Assault' June 8, 'Witness to the Assault' June 11, 'The Unrest in India' Aug 24, 'The Bloomfield Case' Aug 27 and Sept 9, 'The Behar Planters' Sept 26, and *The Scotsman* 'Outrage on the Nepal Frontier' Feb. 19 1907,

¹⁹ ASA: 1912 Judicial45-60, Assault on Tea Manager

²⁰ ASA: 1912 Judicial-45-60, Assault upon Mr Penny Manager of the Gopshadharu Tea Estate in the District of Darrang.

²¹ ASA: 1922-Finance12-61, Enquiry into the adequacy of the wages of tea-gardens workers in Assam (October 1922).

²² See ASA: 1927 Gen&Judicial 187-111, Recruitment Of Labourers from Bombay

²³ ASA: Indian Tea Association, *Annual Report of the General Committee for the year ending 30th June 1922*; pp.7.

²⁴ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 19-22, Strike in the Borbam Tea Estate in Lakhimpur district

²⁵ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 108-124, Threatened riot at Barpatra Tea Estate, Sibsagar district

²⁶ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 66-70, Strike in Mandakata Garden, Kamrup District

²⁷ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 1-12, Workers strike in Dalu Tea Estate, Cachar district

²⁸ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos 71-84 -Strike at Jaipur garden in Lakhimpur District

²⁹ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 16-26 -Strike at Choongi/Chungi Tea Estate in Sibsagar district

³⁰ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos 25 -Disturbances at Ikrajan and Halmira Tea Estates in Sibsagar district

³¹ ASA: 1931 General and Judicial Nos. 138-146 -Exodus and repatriation from Gillapukri Tea Estate, Lakhimpur district

Appendix 1. Tea Estate Strikes in Assam 1930-44

Year	No. of strikes	No. of labourers involved	Reasons
1930	3	approx. 1,900	Ill-treatment and condition of work.
1931	12	3,200	Economic grievances including demand for higher wages in 11 cases.
1932	8	3,200	Demand for higher wages in 5 cases and condition of work in others.
1933	11	5,500	Demand for higher wages in 7 cases.
1934	8	4,600	Demand for higher wages in 4 cases and ill-treatment in others.
1935	11	5,300	Economic grievances including demand for more wages and ill-treatment.
1936	8	2,200	Demand for higher wages in 7 cases and ill-treatment in one case.
1937	10	3,700	Economic grievances including demand for higher wages in 7 cases.
1938	7	3,700	Economic grievances in 1 case only and ill-treatment in others.
1939	37	Not known	Mostly economic grievances.
1940	17	Not known	Economic grievances, heavy tasks and leaf weighment, etc.

1941	7	Not known	Economic grievances and dispute about tasks.
1942	1	Not known	Economic grievances.
1943	1	Not known	Stoppage of rice concession. Chronic absentees.
1944	1	Not known	Not known.

Source: ASA: D.V. Rege, *Report On An Enquiry Into Conditions Of Labour In Plantations In India* (1946), p.72.