



Migration and Misery: Tea-Collie from Colonial Bankura District

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ABSTRACT: Being an economically and naturally backward district in colonial Bengal and as part of Jungle Mahal, the Bankura district also became one of the reservoirs of workers. As a result, a significant emigration trend was observed in the district as labourers in tea gardens. This seasonal as well as permanent emigration from the Bankura district is a very important but little-discussed issue in social history. The article's sole objective is to assess the growth and development of the process of labour emigration from Bankura to the major tea districts of Assam, Terai and Dooars. An attempt has been made to highlight the subterfuges resorted to in migration as tea garden coolies in the light of contemporary data.

KEYWORDS: Coolie, Emigration, Bankura, Arkathi, Garden-Sardar, Depot.

I. INTRODUCTION

The tea industry was one of the most influential economic sectors that saw the development of India as a consequence of the company's capitalist economy in the first half of the 19th century. Tea is the oldest industry in the organised manufacturing sector in India. With the development of tea garden centres like Assam, Duars, Cachar and Darjeeling from 19th century onwards, the demand for labour also increased there. The issue of labour was a subject of concern among the planters as well as the state. The workers were supplied by the helpless poor tribals and lower caste Hindu people of Chota Nagpur, Santal Pargana, Jungal Mahal and different parts of India. No less than a million persons (including children) were imported into Assam in the next twenty years under Indenture labour. In Assam, average annual importation was as high as 50,000 per year between 1880-1905. Assam at its highest in 1919, almost 900,000 labourers were employed in the tea industry.¹

Two events mainly contributed to the development of the tea garden industry in the Assam

region, one was the discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam in 1823 and the second was the end of the tea trade monopoly of the British East India Company and trade with China in 1833 AD. The Assam Tea Company started tea production in Assam in 1838. Between 1839 and 1897-98, the number of tea plantations in Assam increased from zero to 27.2 per cent. In 1841, the area under tea cultivation was 2311 acres and in 1859 it reached 8000 acres. Until 1850 the Assam Tea Company was solely involved in the production of tea gardens, by 1859 the number of tea gardens was increased to 51.²

The conditions of work and life prevailing in the plantations were not very attractive to the local inhabitants. They preferred agricultural work rather than the tea plantation. Even the wage rates in tea gardens are much lower than the agricultural work or the railways work. With the increase in demand for workers in tea gardens, plantation owners tried to supply workers from different places. The colonial government fully supported the system and helped to erase the gap between the demands and supply of labour in plantations. Being an economically and naturally backward district in colonial Bengal and as part of Jungle Mahal, the Bankura district also became one of the reservoirs of workers. As a result, a significant emigration trend was observed in the district as labourers in tea gardens.

Bankura, the fourth largest district of West Bengal located in the western part of the state. This district is a part of the Burdwan Division. It is situated between 22° 38' and 23° 38' north latitude and between 86° 36' and 87° 46' east longitude. It has an area of 6,882 square kilometres. On the north and northeast, the district is bounded by the Burdwan district, from which it is separated mostly by the Damodar River. Bankura is a part of Southern Rarh embraces the cross sections of two cultural streams of Indo-Aryan and native aboriginals' elements.³ Bankura district has been described as the "connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and the Chota Nagpur plateau on the west."⁴ The



areas to the east and northeast are low-lying alluvial plains, like predominating rice lands of Bengal. To the west the surface gradually rises, giving way to undulating country, interspersed with rocky hillocks. Much of the district is covered with jungles.

Beside the agricultural work and coal mines of the neighbouring districts, the tea gardens of Assam and Duars also provided the opportunities of employment for the people of Bankura district. From the second half of the 19th century, the practice of collecting labour for the tea gardens of Assam, Cachar, Sri Hata from Bankura was introduced. The agents of the tea planters in Assam were recruiting a large number of lower-class people to work in the tea gardens. In 1886 onwards, Willam Hunter wrote about the tea labour in Bankura that, "A large number of the labouring population of Bankura have proceeded to the tea districts of Assam, Kachar, Silher etc., besides these, there are many who, although unwilling to immigrate to such distant place, leave the district to seek employment on the railway or public works in different parts of the country."⁵

The district commissioner writes as follows in his administrative report on the quinquennium 1900-1901 to 1904-05, "It appears that there was a steady increase of emigration from year to year, but the number represents to a large extent the coolies recruited by garden sardars, who are more successful in securing coolies than the recruiters employed by contractors"⁶. Mc. Alpin wrote in his report in 1909 that, "The Sonthals appear to have given up going to Cachar and Assam, though they to emigrate there. In Basudebpur one Sonthal brought back Rs. 100 from Assam."⁷ F.W. Robertson⁸, the settlement officer of Bankura district observed in the period of 1917-24, that a considerable emigration from the district was taking place to the tea gardens of Assam. But he also points out that this permanent type of emigration has almost disappeared.

This emigration of workers in tea districts from Bankura district was not spontaneous or natural phenomenon but was a largely forced migration process. Tea plantations in Assam were not at all attractive to Bankura agricultural labourers as they were more comfortable in doing agricultural work hereditary. But due to the shortage of labourers in Assam's tea plantations and various deceptions and farces of *Arkathi* and *Sardar* in the region agricultural labourers of Bankura became tea plantation coolies. In the case of plantation labour, the contractor employed brokers to procure labour who were called *Arkathi*. *Arakathi* or the village recruiter has played a crucial role in controlled

emigration. Most of the recruitment under the licensed recruiting system and garden sardari was done by *arkathis*.

II. TEA COOLIE FROM BANKURA DISTRICT

From the second half of 19th century, when labour demand was very high in the plantation districts, many labour collection centres emerged in different parts of Bankura district. Ranchi, Purulia, Raniganj and Calcutta were the main centres of plantation labour contractor. All the emigrants collected from the local areas of different parts of Bankura were gathered together in the following places, the labour catching centres which were called *depots*. The existence of some of depot can be found in different contemporary official records.

According to municipal records, in 1875 there were two coolie depots in Ghatak Mohalla and Rampur Mohalla. These two depots were headed by Srinath Sarkar and Kedarnath Dey. Probably there was also a depot called M/s Durham & Company in Rajganj Mohalla. In all three cases the municipal tax was levied separately.⁹ A part of the city's Lal Bazar Mohalla is still known as 'Depo Gora'. During 1899-1900 AD the number of these depots was 5. In 1905 there were 6 depots and rest houses¹⁰.

Inland Emigration report, 1901 mentioned that there was only one rest-house for free emigrants in this district.¹¹ The same report of 1904 has mentioned that, in Bankura district, four places of accommodation were established during the year 127 emigrants (92 labourers and 35 dependants) were lodged and among them 105 were sent to Assam, 17 to Cachar and 5 to Sylhet.¹² The report of 1905 mentioned that there were seven places of accommodation established in the district. 125 emigrants (115 labourers and 10 dependants) were lodged in them, all of whom were sent to Assam.¹³

There was a coolie depot in the village of Raipur police station in the southern part of the district which was mainly Santhal and Bauri populated area. In Raipur the contractor for this depot was Kar Darpanarayan Sarkar of Birbhum who maintained good relations with the local zamindars and Chowkidars for the collection of coolies. The district commissioner mentioned that there were 12 depots and rest-houses in 1899 to 1900¹⁴. A Coolie depot in Khatra police station is also mentioned in the contemporary Bankura Darpan. It is to be noted that Khatra and Raipur police stations account for the maximum transfer of land among the tribals. These areas became one of the strongholds of coolie workers.



Coolie depot owners employed middlemen to procure labour who were called *Arkathi*. These workers used various tricks to procure workers. These Arkathis and contractors were also active in Bankura to procure labour for the tea gardens of Assam during the colonial period, as the district was an important labour district from its inception. Tea garden Sardars were more successful in this district than coolie collectors employed during the second half of 19th century to the first three decades of twentieth century. For the tea gardens of Assam, coolies were collected from the Adivasis people mainly the Santhals, Mundas and the other lower casts Hindu people like, Bagdi, Dom, Khayrathe and other semi tribal groups in this district. From the various administrative documents of the time, many tea coolies can be found in Assam.

The actual number of emigrating labourers from Bankura to tea-districts of Assam, Sylet, Kachar was not available. The contemporary records focused on mainly the migrating labourer from Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Parganas. Actual data on labour procurement of Bankura district solely cannot be found in most of the documents. It has even been found that labourers from Bankura district have been challenged from the depot in Purulia or some other

districts of Bengal. The district in which the labourers were registered by the labour contractor, are namely 24-Parganas, Burdwan, witnessing the largest number of labour registration almost each year. The labourers from different parts of Bengal came to Calcutta with the hope of employment, and they were easily caught in the trap of labour contractor. They gave assurance of the availability of employment opportunities. Under their control, the labourers were registered for the employment of tea-gardens of Assam.¹⁵

In fact, the actual coolie migration was much higher than that of the documented porter because of the large number of coolies sent from the district bypassing immigration laws. Generally, labourers were sent from the district throughout the year. But during the famine years, the number of coolies increased to a great extent. In that case, the real picture of labour emigration in the district remains incomplete. On the basis of the information available from the census report and the documents of the Assam Labour Board, the accounts of the workers sent from Bankura district to the tea gardens of Assam are available. But in fact, the number of labour migration from the district was much higher than this estimate.

Table No- 1

Recruitment of labourers for the tea district of Assam, Cachar and Sylet from Bankura

Year	No of Labourers registered by licensed labour-contractors.	No. of Labourers registered by labour -contractors.	No. of labourers registered and recruited by Garden Sardars and Sardarnis.	Total number of labours immigrated into Assam, Cachar and Sylet.
1903	42	245	129	374
1904	107	384	180	564
1905	20	140	06	146
1906	25	79	NIL	79
1907	07	74	NIL	74
1908	31	245	38	283
1909	12	300	86	386
1910	10	305	NIL	305
1911	14	363	NIL	363
1912	100	151	18	169
1913	59	77	326	403
1914	--	33	187	220
1915	--	11	162	173

(Source: Chattapadhyay, Haraprasad., *Internal Migration In India: A case study of Bengal*, K.P.Bagchi & Co., Calcutta, 1987, p.201-223.)

Table -2

The Number and Percentage of the emigrants registered in the District of Bankura

Year	District	Total Number of Registered Labour	Native of the Districts	Per cent of the native people registered
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1901	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	1347 107 48	15 9 45	1.11 8.41 93.75
1902	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	476 365 7	18 39 7	3.80 10.68 100
1903	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	1406 883 42	22 100 31	1.56 11.32 73.80
1904	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	2010 1253 107	42 264 97	2.08 21.06 90.65
1905	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	1042 416 20	16 90 17	1.53 21.63 85.00
1906	24- Parganas Burdwan Bankura	666 244 25	6 44 21	.90 18.03 84.00

(Source: Annual Report on Inland Emigration for the year 1901-1906.)

Based on the Annual Report on Inland Emigration, the information available on tea workers from Bankura and its adjoining districts is given in the above-mentioned table. What is particularly noteworthy here is the number of tea workers in 24-Parganas and Burdwan districts. In this case, the number of native or resident migrants in these two districts is significantly less. The low percentage in the 24-Parganas is ascribed to the fact that large numbers of labourers come to Calcutta from the other districts with the hope of getting employments in the mill, dock and elsewhere. But the labour recruiters trapped them to tea plantation of Assam with false promises. There are many examples of such promises and misuses which were found in different documents. On the other hand, workers from Bankura district used to run to the tea gardens as tea coolie through Raniganj, which was the main labour collection centre of the Burdwan district. As Raniganj was located in Burdwan district, it is easy to imagine that most of the coolies were collected from Bankura district.

III. TEMPTATION AND DELUSION

The migration of labourers from Bankura to the tea plantations in the late 19th and early 20th century was driven by a complex interplay of push and pull factors. Factors like colonial agrarian

policy, scarcity and famine and epidemics served as push factor to emigrant labourers of Bankura district while shortage of cheap labour, refusal of local labourer to work in tea plantation, temptation and delusions to the labourers served as pull factors in the large recruitment of labourer into Assam. In Bankura, labour migration in tea gardens was mostly observed in the western south or Sadar subdivision police of the district. Labourers or day labourers in these regions did not get work throughout the year, so they migrated from time to time in search of work.

The contemporary periodical, *Bankura Darpan* (published as a fortnightly paper from 1892, became a weekly paper in 1894. The founding editor was Dr. Ramnath Mukhopadhyay. He edited the paper till 1937.) mentioned on 15th April, 1893, that “innumerable coolies are being daily sent away from the southern and the western part of the district of Bankura. It is said that scarcity of food prevailing in the district is the cause of this sudden increase in the business of coolie recruitment”.¹⁶ Most people migrated because of poverty or shortage of land, but not everyone had migrated because of the shortage of land or poorer conditions. Many of them were trapped by the “knowledgeable agents’ or arkathis. They forced to imagine a dream of better living condition of destination areas, like Assam plantation. Many men and women fell into their trap, and they were sent to all those places. There were



also a strong tendency of the people to go to the destination area where friends or other relatives went before them.

Garden Sardar and Arkatis encouraged the local people by the attraction of tea-garden life and assuring them to settle on independent holdings in Assam. The Sardars described the land of Assam to the Adivasis and kindred people as a 'province where monsoon never failed'.¹⁷ The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 reported that, "Contractors collected coolies by the hundreds of false promises of high pay and light work and despatched them to the tea districts without taking any sanitary precautions for their welfare on the journey; the result was shocking morality on the voyage up, while many of the immigrants were of cast or constitution which precluded all hopes of their serving many months in the jungles of Assam."¹⁸

The *Bankura Darpan*, reported that the condition of the villages kept deteriorating continually with the passing of days. Poor people, under starved conditions, migrated elsewhere every year. Over time, many stories of the illegal practices of the *arkathis* were published. The issue of coolie supply in Bankura district was protested from the very beginning. *Bankura Darpan*, the first newspaper of the Bankura district, protested coolie trafficking in the tea garden from 1892. In 1905 AD, the newspaper boldly questioned the English administration for slavery and human trafficking. The issue of coolie supply in Bankura district was protested from the very beginning.

The *Bankura Darpan* on 16th June 1885 had complained that coolie recruiting abuses were growing in Bankura. In a recent case, several coolie recruiters of Raipur were charged with the offence of decoying two men, beating them severely, and forcing them to sign a contract.¹⁹ The *Bankura Darpan* on 16th December 1895 reported that the business of coolie recruitment had struck terror into the hearts of the people, and the Press had been repeatedly urging Government to amend the coolie law. No heed has been paid either to the complaints of the oppressed or to the just representations of the Press, simply because the tea industry brings large profits to the Europeans engaged in it. But it is high time that the Government should adopt measures to check the abuses attending the business of recruitment. They can be to a great extent put down by inserting a provision in the law making it punishable for an employer of labour to purchase coolies from any unlicensed *arkat*, and making such an *arkati*, too, liable to punishment. Fraudulent recruitment has become so common only because

employers do not hesitate to purchase coolies from anybody and everybody who brings them for sale.²⁰

The contemporary periodical *Hitavadi* of the 28th July, 1899 reported that, the present system of recruiting coolies may be advantageous to the tea planters, but it is ruinous to the coolies. Before they go to Assam, the coolies were led to entertain high hopes about their future; but once in the tea-gardens, they only got disappointment. We do not know when the coolies will be free from the provisions of the Labour Contract Act. The coolies are ignorant and illiterate. They do not understand the force or meaning of the contract into which they enter before going to Assam. There are, it is true, remedies in the case of a real grievance; but the coolies are ignorant of these and are quite helpless.²¹

Here are several specimens of coolie collection in Bankura district from contemporary newspaper reports, which highlight the helplessness, poverty and situation of the contemporaries.

1. Mokunda Bid, an inhabitant of Kulkuti in Saltara thana of the Bankura district, went to make purchases in Raniganj. After having made the purchases, he sent the things home by a coolie, but himself went into a coolie depot and has not been heard of since.²²

2. One Durgacharan Majhi and his wife, residents of some village near Raipur in the Bankura district, were, on the 8th of October last, enticed away into a coolie depot at Khatra. The man and his wife, on being brought, near the depot, realised their position and refused to enter it but were forced to do so by two darwans belonging to the depot, named Ramsebak Dobay and Gokulprasad Chobay. They were confined during the night in a room. On the following morning Durgacharan requesting to be released that he might answer a call of nature, was taken under proper guard to the bank of a khal, when, availing himself of the opportunity he effected his escape and took shelter with some kind-hearted Sonthals.²³

4. Kinu Hari, *chaukidar* of Hatgram in the Bankura district, had been missing for some time. On some previous occasions he, in collusion with an *arkathi*, registered himself as a coolie, and then fled away, and participated in the profits of the recruiter. Probably this time he could not make his escape and had been sent up to Assam. At any rate, the authorities should order an enquiry into Kinu's fate.²⁴

5. Sibū Mehta, who was not a licensed *arkat*, enticed away one named Giris Mandal of village Narar and sold him for forty rupees at the Lalbazar Coolie Depot in this district. Giris being an adult, the depot men had no hesitation in purchasing him, and they had sent him up to the tea-gardens.²⁵



6. Kungal Chakravarti of Bhulin within the jurisdiction of the Gangajalghati thana, in the Bankura district, had lately opened a coolie-depot in Bankura town, The principal recruiter under him was his prostitute, named Kulada. This woman was on very intimate terms with one Subhan (Subhadra), the daughter of one of her neighbours. On the 20th of December last, Kulada went to Subhadra's husband's house at gees where Subhadra had been staying for the first time, and told her that her uncle was about to die, and that she should come along with her if she wished to have a last look at him. Subhadra was permitted to go with Kulada, as none in Subhadra's husband's family knew of Kulada's character or occupation or suspected foul play. But Subhadra, Kulada, and the latter's paramour, Kungal Chakravarti, have not been heard of since, and can nowhere be found.²⁶

7. Asananda, a dome by caste, belonging to Brajarajpur, a village in the Bankura district, had a wife, who was for some reason outcasted. Nistarini, a female coolie-recruiter of the same village, induced Asananda to let her send his wife as a coolie to a tea-garden in consideration of some pass to be paid to him, and with which he might marry again. Asananda and his wife accompanied Nistarini, but none of them returned. It is evident that she had sent both of them to a tea-garden as coolies. Asananda was the only earning member in the family.²⁷

8. Chandra Mohan Pal of Bankura went to a relative's family and was on his way back decoyed by a coolie recruiter and sent to Assam. Chandra Mohan is somewhat crack-brained and has a young wife at home, who is trying her best to rescue her husband, but in vain.²⁸

Most of the emigrants embarked soon after their arrival by train. Goalundo and Jatrapur were the two ports of embarkation for emigrants to the labour district of Assam. Emigrants were conveyed from Goalundo to the Brahmaputra Valley districts in steamers belonging to the India General Navigation and Railway Company, Limited, and the River Steam Navigation Company, Limited, either direct, or as far as Gauhati and thence by rail, and to the Surma valley districts either in such steamers or by rail. In 1902 a new rail route from Gitaldaha to Dhubri was started and the emigrants traveling to Assam from north of the Ganges would necessarily no longer take steamer at Jatrapur.²⁹

From Sri Jogeshchandra Chattopadhyay's book "Cha-Kulir Attma Kahini", ("Self-Story of a Tea Cooler") a detailed account of the dispatch of tea coolies from Bankura via Arkathi to Assam is available in the account of a contemporary Coolie Girishchandra Dutta. Girishchandra Dutt was a

resident of Ambikanagar village in Khatra police station, who was succumbed to temptation and went to Assam along with three women. Through Sachindra Nath Pal, a licensee of Arkathi of Vinod Bihari Dutt's coolie depot in Purulia, a hundred coolies including him went to Assam. He described the detail of the journey and the experience of tea gardens in this book. He went from Bankura to Raniganj via Purulia and from there to Dhubri by rail. There the coolies were registered, and agreements were made. Once the agreement was made, the Arkathi would hold his own idols. The torture of coolies like animals with canes started from here. Coolies were taken to Dibrugarh by steamers from Dhubri.³⁰

The migration to tea plantations had a significant gender dimension. The arrival and participation of women and children in large numbers in the tea gardens was an important phenomenon of labour emigration in the tea districts of Assam. Among the labourers from Chota Nagpur region, women were almost equal to men. It is believed that women are more efficient than men in plucking tea leaves, that is 'two buds one leaf'. In the tea plantations, the planters encouraged emigrants to come with families rather than individuals to minimize the recruitment costs. Samita Sen points out that, Women had been particularly targeted by the British planters and their recruiters. They were paid lower wage compared to men and used to do the intensive task of plucking tea. (Samita Sen, 2012)

Some cases of women decoying or forcible recruiting in the tea garden have been published in local newspapers. Like, The Makhan, a women Bankura district has sent to Assam as coolie. Beni Das Baishnab, a coolie recruiter one day come to Makhan and asked her to escort the wife of one Kungal Chakravarti from Hooghly. She agreed to do so at a daily remuneration of four annas. Makhan took leave of her master and followed Beni to Raniganj. Five or Six days after they were joined by Kungal Chakravarti, who seems to be the owner of the depot, and who sent Beni and Makhan to Hooghly. On reaching Naihati, Beni and Makhan that Kungal Chakravarti's wife, who lived at Goalpara brought her down. Both Makhan and Beni accordingly left Dhubri. On reaching Dhubri, a woman gave Makhan a blanket, a cloth, a *kurti*, a *thala* made of tin, and a tumber, and told her that these would be required for her use. Beni then gave Makhan a paper, saying it was her steamer pass, and took leave of her on board the steamer on the plea of marketing. Not finding Beni in the steamer when it started, Makhan tried to jump into the river and was



prevented from doing so by the Doctor attached to the steamer, who also told her that she could not leave the steamer at Goalpara, as she had been booked as a coolie for the Dhanasiri tea-garden in Golaghat. She now came to know she had been decoyed to Assam by Beni.³¹

On the other case like Barada Dasi, who has been decoyed by two collie recruiters, Surya and Mahesh. They forcibly carried Barada Dasi, the daughter of Bhavani Sardar, to the local coolie depot. But the accused were Prosecuted and sentenced to three months imprisonment.³² A pathetic case of Kamini was found in the Bankura Darpan. She was the wife of Nader Chand Khasia, of Chuamasina, in the Bankura district She was fraudulently sent up as a coolie. In her home, her one child died of grief for his mother, and one more of the boys was very upstate and likely to share the same fate.³³

Brinda, a girl of thirteen or fourteen, sister of one Rakhali Tanti of Dubrakon in the Bankura district, who was employed as a servant in the house of Madhav Goswami, has not been heard of since the 23rd of August last. The people of the village at first said that she had been enticed away by Radhagovinda, her master's son. But since Radhagovinda's return home four days after, it is rumoured that the girl has been sent away as a coolie.³⁴ Janani Dasi of Birsinga, in the Bishanpur subdivision of the Bankura district, who was fraudulently recruited as a coolie and sent up to an Assam tea-garden but has now been ordered to be

released by the Subdivisional Officer of Bishanpur.³⁵ A young girl, aged 22, of the Tamli caste, Suradhuni by name. She resided in her father-in-law's home at Bikna village near Bankura town. Her husband kept a shop at the Chakbazar at Bankura.³⁶

IV. CONCLUSION

The process of sending coolies to Assam's tea gardens throughout the district in the 19th century was entirely problematic. Due to scarcity, tribals and lower caste landless people could not find alternative livelihood and they were forced to go to the tea gardens of Assam in the trap of Arkathi. Greed had the greatest effect on migration to the tea gardens of Assam. Many common men and women were lured away by the Arkathis with the lure of money and a better life. In the case of labour migration to Assam tea gardens, many labourers would return. However, this stream of migration was more durable. Most of the labourers from the district are forced to stay permanently in Assam's gardens in this migration. The sending of coolie to Assam tea gardens in the colonial Bankura district created a panic among men and women of all classes and castes. The social status of the women who returned from Assam was damaged. As a result, women have been moved away from living a normal life.

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