

Why *Chalans* Resistance? Protests by the Tea Plantation Labourers against the Britishers in the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

The occupation of Assam by the British in the first half of the nineteenth century led Assam to be connected with the rest of India. Assam under the Company's rule had seen its political consolidation by the British and economic expansion with new industries. The Company did not waste time to look into the economic prospects of the region and initiated explorations to search for new possibilities, tea industry being one of them. The success of the experiments with the tea plantations largely depended on the quality of labour which is employed. The tea companies had to brought labourers from outside as Assam was highly depopulated at that time. This with other developments in the region had transformed the economy and society of Assam and in course of time the people of Assam developed a feeling of being exploited by the colonial rule. The tea plantation labourers were not the one to be left alone by this consciousness of anti-imperialism. There emerged a strong anti-colonial and political awareness amongst the plantation labourers which culminated into a series of protests by them in the nineteenth century.

Keywords: british, colonial rule, tea plantations, assam, chalans, labourers, coolies

I. INTRODUCTION

The most important reason behind the uncontested success of the tea industry in Assam was mainly because of the labourers who worked in the tea estates, and came to be known as *chalans*, *baganiyas*, coolies, adivasis and even *kala admi* in some cases, these were the people from the less fortunate strata of the Indian society who came to the plantations in hopes to be able to reconstruct their fate and social standing. Throughout the nineteenth century there was a large number of immigrations for the labours in the tea plantations in Assam. It also opened new avenues for the businessmen class from Rajasthan and within a few decades they replaced the local traders. Other immigrants included cobblers from Bihar and United Provinces, carpenters from Punjab, and graziers from Nepal. Amongst them, the one immigrant group who were very important for the British were the Bengalis, who were educated and served the Government as *mohurirs* in the tea gardens and *omlahs* replacing the existing aristocracy of Assam. The Government never thought about the adverse effects that the migration of such large population from outside will have in Assam. They only wanted the enhancement of the revenue from tea crops by increasing the acreage under cultivation. Moreover, the policy to a large extent was influenced by the tea planters. The Tea Association of London had warned the Government against any proposals for the extension of cultivation which might lead to an exodus of the tea garden labour force. Similar concerns had also been expressed by the Assam Branch of Indian Tea Association in its memorandum to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in 1897.[1] But the Government went on to expanding the cultivation while not at the expense of the tea industry.

The present study tries to explore the protests by the tea garden labourers of Darrang and North Lakhimpur districts of Assam against the colonial planters. The districts have changed, altered and basically divided to create more districts in present-day Assam. Darrang as stands today, has been divided into the districts of Sonitpur, Udalguri and Biswanath. And North Lakhimpur has been divided into the districts of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. These present-day districts served as the area of study for the research work taken on the background of the districts during the colonial times.

II. THE *CHALANS*' PROTESTS

The earlier struggle for liberation waged by the people in northern Assam from 1828 to 1857 had not recorded history of the participation by the *chalans*. But, with the spread of western education during the last part of nineteenth century a new awakening surcharged the patriots of the district. It can also be observed that the *chalans*, who were considered to be ignorant and helpless by the colonial planters, showed a sense of awareness of their rights as many times they went to the offices of the Deputy Commissioner to complain against the ill-treatment and extraction of extra work by the planters in the estates. At times they were found to demand redressal of their grievances, even though in many

occasions they went unsuccessful of their efforts. In 1866, Captain Lamb, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang reported that the *chalans* were prevented from approaching to the office of the Deputy Commissioner for complaining against the Manager and the Assistant Manager of Serajoolie Tea Estate. These *chalans* were there to file a case against the Manager and the Assistant Manager of Serajoolie Tea Estate of Assam Company of flogging of the *chalans* on the charge of desertion.[2] A similar case was reported from Lakhimpur in 1888, when the *chalans* went to the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur to complain about the ill-treatment by the Manager and his assistant in the Mesaijan Tea Estate. Three women named Panoo, Khumti, and Shukni were flogged for desertion and short work by the Managers in which they were tied to a post near the Manager's house, their clothes lifted to their waist and were beaten on the bare buttocks with leather belts on the orders of the Assistant Manager. An enquiry was set and the Assistant Manager, Anding was convicted by the court for rigorous imprisonment of ten months and a fine of rupees 450.[3] This is the only case in which the *chalans* were successful as documented officially where they succeeded in getting justice.

A history of the labour protests since 1880s against misbehaviors of the managers or his subordinates and in consequence harsh punishments were meted out to the *chalans* in the district of Darrang and North Lakhimpur. The Government started to look into the deteriorating relationship between the *chalans* and the management. In a letter to the secretary to the Government of India, F. J. Monahan, who was the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, wrote that there is more friction between Managers and their labour forces than there used to be and this was because of two reasons. The first is the severity of the sentences that were imposed in cases in which the *chalans* convicted of assault, unlawful assembly or rioting cases; and, secondly the relationship in between the planting and the official communities in close sympathy with one another.[4] In 1892, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur reported that the tendency for *chalans* to come to complain in court increased and employers urged that there should be a penalty for coolies leaving the garden when the procedure of section 134 was complied with.[5] By the end of the nineteenth century, the *chalans* were becoming more familiar to the provisions of the labour laws and their rights. The Labour Immigration Resolution of 1902-03 observed that the *chalans* were aware that the conditions of their employment were regulated by the rules which were unfavourable to them in some respects and favourable in others; and, further, they resented any attempt to exact more labour than these rules warrant.[6] The Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur, Major H. W. Cole, observed that there was an increasing tendency of unlawful assemblies amongst the *chalans* and their attitude towards the planters was deteriorated.[7] A similar observation was there by the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, D. H. Lees, that there was the deterioration in the relationship between the *chalans* and the planters and this was largely because of the strict discipline enforced on the tea gardens and also, because of the fact that in order to secure more profits, the planters extracted excessive works by the *chalans*. [8] Even if the *chalans* were not aware of their rights, it is certain that they were aware of the certain practices of the tea plantations and must have developed a sense of favourable and unfavourable norms through their experiences of working in the tea gardens.

On the other hand, to empower the planters against this, the Government had provided the right to private arrest of the *chalans* under the penal system which was originated under the Act of 1865 and continued to strengthen the hands of planters till 1908 under the Act I of 1882 as well as Act VI of 1901. This enabled the planters to capture the runaway *chalans* and arrest the disobedient one, and keep them in the *phatak* (a private prison within the plantation).[9] The planters referred the deserters as 'absconders' which was declared as a criminal offence under the laws. Prior to 1865, a deserter when caught was punished under the Section 492 of the Indian Penal Code with a sentence of one month's imprisonment. Later, the Act VI of 1865 empowered the planters to arrest the absconders without any warrant; and, imprisonment was the punishment for refusal to work. It was further modified with the Act I of 1882 which regulate and control the expanding labour force of the tea plantations.[10] It seemed that the Government had never failed in assisting the planters in any way possible, empowering them to control and supervised over the *chalans*. The Government and its rules for the *chalans* seemed to be godsent for the planters of these districts.

Till 1904, the relation between the *chalans* and the planters was highly unstable on many grounds. The act of violence in which the *chalans* were mostly involved were mostly retaliatory in nature. It was mostly seen that the resistance of the *chalans* were largely focused against the injustice that they were facing almost on a daily basis, all of these resistances were either retaliatory or collective in nature or in solidarity with their fellow *chalans* who were likewise; subjected to public indignity and physical cruelty such as; beating, confinement, insults, denial of leave or coercion to work, sexual violence faced by the women *chalans*, public canning of male and female *chalans*, and sometimes even of children causing injuries and occasional death.[11] All of these injustices that the *chalans* were facing also had some repercussion in the forms of violence against the Managers and the Assistant Managers in the various tea gardens.

Following incidents were recorded in the official reports and documents of the Government from time to time. One such incident reported in Darrang showed the Managers of Kalakuchi and Ghoiralla tea estates were assaulted by the *chalans*. In one of these cases, the *chalans* attacked the manager on the ground of abuse and assault faced by a wife of *chalan*. On the contrary, it was the *chalans* who were punished and not the manager who was the abuser in this case. The husband was sentenced to five years of rigorous imprisonment, one *chalan* to rigorous imprisonment for six months, and five others to five months.[12] Sometimes, the denial of leave during festivals and coercion to work during the social-cultural activities were resented by the *chalans* and led to confrontations. Another case was reported in the district of Darrang when in 1891, the *chalans* were forced by the Assistant Manager of Barjuli Tea Estate to go out to work. This made the *chalans* very angry as it was right after their festival of *Karam Puja* and they were reluctant to go out to work.

This further escalated and the issue led to confrontation between the *sardar* and other *chalans*. When the Assistant Manager intervened, he was assaulted by several *chalans*. As a consequence of which, one *chalan* was sentenced to eighteen months rigorous imprisonment, two other *chalans* to one year each and five others to five months.[13] In this string of cases the other reason for the *chalans* to rebel was sometimes out of the ordinary. It was seen in one of these cases in 1896, in the Joyhing Tea Estate in North Lakhimpur, where the *chalans* were provoked to rioting because of the fact that they were asked to work on a Sunday. Apparently, several of the *chalans* were sentenced to long terms of rigorous imprisonment. Such incidents mark a record that the *chalans* sometimes contested and even defied the strict laws implemented by the managers in the tea estates.[14] However, it was always the *chalans* who were to face the consequence, and it seemed that hardly any justice was being done to them.

Equally important were the problems related to wage on which the labourers mostly contested and challenged the managers and their subordinates on various occasions. It was the stagnant wage structure that further provoked the *chalans* to fight for their rights, time and again. In the year 1890, the Manager of Balipara tea garden was assaulted by seven *chalans* who were later caught and convicted and sentenced to one-month rigorous imprisonment. The *chalans* had complained regarding less payment for a full month's work. A similar incident regarding the less payment by the management is recorded in 1897, at Adabari tea garden where the Assistant Manager was attacked and later thrown into a ditch by several women *chalans* regarding the issues related to their *ticca* (overtime work). Later, many of the women *chalans* were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment of six months.[15] Another case of injustice was reported in 1901, and it was observed by the Chief Commissioner, Henry Cotton that there was a considerable increase in general criminality amongst the *chalans*. In Darrang, serious riots occurred in April in the same year in the Bindukuri and Balipara tea gardens, where it was reported that the *hats* were looted by the *chalans* because of the inflation in the markets, and the traders demanding very high prices for the basic commodities. This further resulted in fourteen cases of theft and five cases of rioting. Resulting in the conviction of twenty-eight person and twenty-four persons for the later. Meanwhile, the *chalans* reported sixty complaints against the garden managers, charging them that they were trying to procure the renewal of contracts by labeling the *chalans* as thieves and looters. The *chalans* also reported that the managers of the tea gardens were using force and intimidation to force the labourers to continue to make them stay in the gardens.[16] In Darrang district, the Manager of the Kolakuchi tea garden was attacked by a *chalan* as a result of which he sustained serious injuries on his head while trying to protect a *sardar* from these *chalans*. The *chalan* who attacked the Manager was sentenced to eighteen months rigorous imprisonment, and another *chalan* who assisted him was given six months rigorous imprisonment. In the Ghoirally tea garden in the same district, the Manager was severely injured and beaten by five *chalans* whom he had abused in the course of time. The Manager even assaulted the wife of one of them, resulting in the beatings. Here also, it was the husband who was sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment, two others received six months, and the rest two to three months rigorous imprisonment.[17] These forms of *chalan's* resistance and confrontations against the planters continued to be reported by the district officials even after the abolition of the penal system. In another instance that took place in the Hathigarh tea garden in Darrang, the Assistant Manager, Noad, registered a complaint against Bidu, a *chalan*, who hit him with the handle of the broom on his hand for admonishment on disrespectful behaviour. Subsequently, Bidu was sentenced to six months rigorous imprisonment.[18] As it is observed in most of these cases of *chalan's* resistance against the management of the tea gardens were basically a form of retaliation of abuse and exploitation. However, it is also noted that in almost all of these cases, it was the *chalans* who were punished at the end and the abusers were let go off.

It is observed during the research that in most of these cases, the judicial measures were far more unjust towards these *chalans* than the planters, the *chalans* were persecuted and awarded serious punishments even in relation to very mild offences. They were sentenced to several years and months of rigorous imprisonment, hard labour and were even fined on several occasions. While the punishment given to the planters, managers and assistant managers were scandalously temperate, even for the charges of extreme violence, sometimes even resulting to rapes and deaths.

In 1890, in North Lakhimpur a *chalan* was beaten to death by the Manager of a garden but the sessions court did not give any punishment to the Manager but just a fine of rupees 100 was levied on him.[19] In May 1905, another case of a murder by beating was reported in the Dhendai tea garden in Darrang, where the Manager and the Assistant Manager, Thom and Reid, beat up a boy *chalan* so much so that the boy lost his life. The beating was a result on suspicion that the boy *chalan* was stealing from the Manager's bungalow. In this case as well, the sessions court charged both the men on the grounds of simple assault and fined them rupees 150 and rupees 5 respectively. The case was reported in the newspaper *Englishman* which resulted this case to be taken seriously and was later even raised in the British Parliament. However, nothing concrete resulted out of this, it was later added by the Chief Commissioner of Assam, J. B. Fuller who did not believe that "Thom and Reid, (the Manager and the Assistant Manager) were actively or intentionally in the murder of the boy." [20] Such cases of judicial discrimination were numerous and were not hidden from the judicial officials. Yet, nothing has seemed to be done to safeguard the lives and rights of these *chalans*, who were the ultimate sufferers. Both the districts of Darrang and North Lakhimpur had witnessed conflicts in between the *chalans* and the planters or their managers, but, at the same time, it was also found that most of the cases went unnoticed.

III. WHY CHALANS RESISTANCE?

During the whole period of the nineteenth century, the penal contract remained an absolute weapon to keep the *chalans* in the estate. Further, the labour legislations like the Act XIII and Act VI were promulgated to push the *chalans* into the capitalist exploitation by the planters by giving them rights to hold the *chalans*. [21] Besides the abolition of these Acts and its criticism by Henry Cotton, the abrogation of penal contract system was opposed by the tea planters.

These Acts empowered the capitalist planters and were severely applied in the tea districts by them. Even the criminal litigation by the planters rose against the violations of the term of the Act in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in 1922 observed that having regard to the tea garden population, the number of the cases instituted in Tezpur (Darrang Sadr Subdivision) indicates that the assistance of the courts is invoked to a far greater extent than in other tea districts. [22] The planters fully implemented the terms of the contract and those *chalans* who tried to abscond were rigorously punished. One such case is from the district of Darrang, where a woman from Mijikijan Tea Estate applied for a discharge certificate in 1920. The manager filed a complaint against the absconding and the woman was arrested. On 24 July 1919, she had been given agreement for 313 days with a rupees 10 in advance. She left the estate on 26 July 1920 with 27 more days to work under the contract. The Deputy Commissioner ordered her to return to the estate. The woman refused to do so and she was sentenced for six weeks hard labour. [23] Further the Act VI of 1901 and the authorization which allowed the managers to arrest the *chalans* without warrant placed the liberty of the *chalans* at the hands of the managers, simultaneously, the resistance from the *chalans* against the planters control over their life became more apparent by the end of the nineteenth century.

The Government of Assam pointed out that the figures showed of the *chalans* resistance that though the cases of collisions between the employers and the *chalans* were not numerous. But they had shown a steady increase. [24] When asked by the Government of India about the deteriorated relationship in the tea plantations, the Chief Commissioner of Assam explained that there was the increase in the collisions between the planters and the *chalans* since 1899 and this was mainly because of three reasons: First, the importation of the *chalans* under chapter III of Act VI of 1901 by the contractors, subcontractors and the recruiters were responsible for the rising collisions. There had been a change in the class of coolies with the addition of the new tribes, of whom many of them were of lower castes, to the labour force. Second, the lack of suitable organization for the tea garden *chalans*. Third, the powers that be given to the managers to arrest the *chalans* without warrant under sections 195 of Act. [25] The brutalities and penalties upon the *chalans* who were caught for riots, assaults or absconding was another reason for the occurrences of the collisions in between the planters and the *chalans*.

Moreover, some of the capitalist planters tried to maintain a caste hierarchy among the newly recruited *chalans* as they observed that the *chalans* from northern India were very particular about preserving their caste identities. The plantation authorities were seeming to be very careful while dealing with the *chalans* brought in from United Provinces. These *chalans* were allowed to travel with the *sirdars* during the migration, they were allowed to have their own *basties* in the estates to prevent their mixing up with other aboriginals. [26] Such caste-prejudices had provoked the early *chalans* to take-up the violent measures against such social changes, as they were already dealing with the mental and economic depression in the tea estates and with the new social hierarchical order established, they felt more deprived and agitated.

Violence and indecency were the part of the daily life of the *chalans*. And the women were the constant sufferers of the indecency at the hands of the planters to which the male *chalans* became offended. The flogging of women in public and sexual violence were common in the estate. In 1888, the Deputy Commissioner of Lakhimpur reported that:

“A large body of coolies left the garden and came to the station complaining of ill-treatment. They stated that both men and women had been flogged; in the case of women that they had been tie to a post in the porch of the manager’s house, their clothes lifted up to their waists, and that they had beaten on the bare buttocks with a stirrup leather by the orders of Assistant Manager, Mr. Anding, the District Superintendent of the Police went out and enquired, and found that the two women, Panoo and Khumti, had been assaulted in the way described. I myself also went out and on further enquiring ascertained that a woman named Sukni had also been beaten some three or four times. The woman Panoo and Khumti had been flogged for desertion and Sukni for short work.” [27]

The ill-treatment was harsher for the runaway woman labourers. In one case, an absconded woman *chalan* from Phulbari Tea Estate in Darrang district, was recaptured and brought back to the estate; and, on the order of the manager, she was flogged in most barbarous manner by three of the estate employees in front of all the *chalans*. In another incident, in the district of Lakhimpur, a boy had been beaten by the manager for stealing, and consequently he died from the effects of the beating. [28] Such violence and indecency by the planters led the *chalans* to revolt in the gardens which were actually violent in nature. Most of these revolts were especially against the estate managers. In one instance, in the district of Darrang, when the manager found some fault with bad hoeing in the plantation, reprimanded the two *daffadars* in charge and hit one of them with a cane. As a result of this, about 30 Cachari *chalans* threatened the manager to assault with their hoes. However, no assault was actually committed by the *chalans*, but the accused *chalans* were sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment. [29] The *chalans* were fighting for their rights in their own way of protest, agitation, and

resistance to the planters. There was no such organization or prominent leader who could lead them against the *boga sahibs* (British Planters).

IV. CONCLUSION

It can be noted that the *chalans* protests were largely triggered as the result of the social and economic discrimination by the planters towards them. They had worked out a separate identity of themselves and further created divisions among the ruler and the ruled. In the tea plantations, there was the authority of the *burra sahibs*, also called as *boga sahibs*, who were highly prejudiced towards the *chalans*. Moreover, the *chalans* had to face lot of humiliations by the *burra sahibs*. They, further, differentiated the *chalans* as primitive and uncivilized. They also believed that the *chalans* were living a better life in the plantations than their villages. And that is why their protests were nothing but crime by the uncivilized, spontaneous and blind people.[30] The theory of primitive and uncivilized may have caught the capitalist planter's eyes, but on the other hand, these protests from the *chalans* were a significant step in the mainstream nationalist movement for freedom.

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