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CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND LABOUR MIGRATION  
TO ASSAM TEA GARDENS IN COLONIAL TIMES

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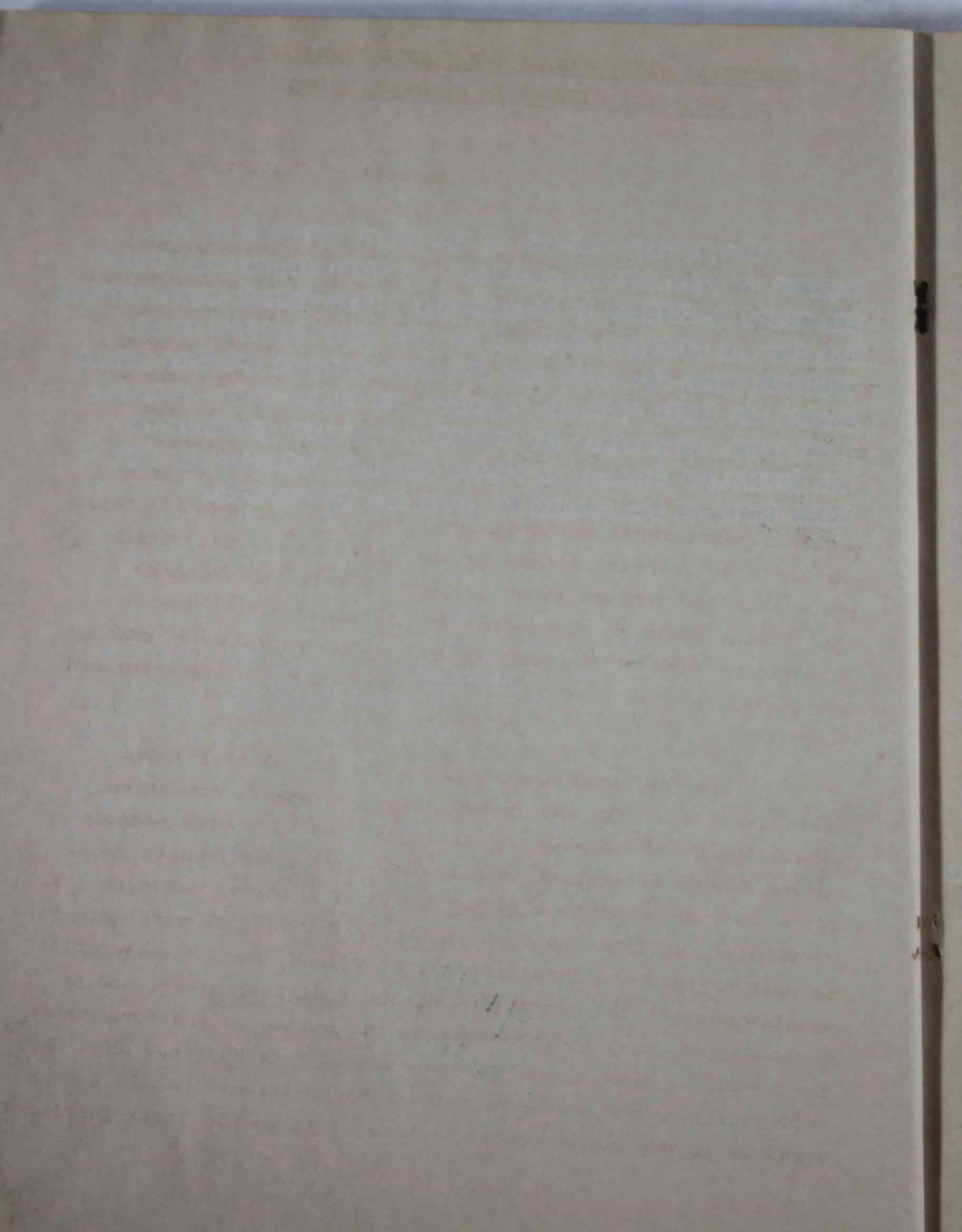


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Ramkrishna Chatterjee

The legislative method of labour control sponsored by the colonial government apart, the planters of Assam had to build up their own extra-legal mechanism of control in the matter of labour recruitment and settlement in their estates. Though contradiction was apparent between the two methods - legal and extra-legal - they were not antithetical to each other. In fact, search by Assam planters for a suitable control mechanism finally culminated in establishing their personal patriarchal authority over their labour force. This was based on coercion backed by the state apparatus. Still the search for various other devices as well continued so that labour could be drawn into and retained within the plantations without too many fetter on the recruitment process. And it was in this context that the Christian missionaries had a certain limited role to play.

That the christian missionaries in colonial India were associated with the introduction of Western education, establishment of schools and colleges, and also with various reform movements against social taboos, is a well known fact. If we turn our attention to the world of peasants and tribes in particular, we find the same picture. But what is more important to note is that the missionaries, sometimes, even roused public opinion against the oppression of the Indigo planters; and in Chota-Nagpur, they even brought to the notice of the Government the lawful aspirations of the peasants. This happened when they supported peasants in their refusal to contribute unpaid labour services or pay compensation in lieu of it to the local landlords



In fact, the christian missionaries could not usually remain indifferent to the problem of the toiling people. We find in the global context that this was, to a considerable extent, due to the zeal of the christian missionaries that slavery had to be abolished in England and several other countries. Not only that, in certain cases, they showed exemplary radicalism in order to stand by the cause of the English working class.<sup>2</sup> Even in the colonies, their works had spread effects. In South Rhodesian mines, for examples, the missionary organisations like "Watch Tower" or "Seventh Day Adventists" posed a threat to the industry when they criticised the way the mine-owners recruited and exploited their labour for almost continual production. There were, of course, contrary examples within the same South Rhodesian mines, where the management sought the patronage of the missionaries for disciplining labourers.<sup>3</sup> Whatever may be their role, it is hard to deny their involvement.

Hence it is very unlikely that the missionaries would remain indifferent to one of the much talked about problems of nineteenth century colonial India i.e., the problem of labour migration. But no attempt has so far been made to understand the role of the Christian missionaries in this particular context. The present paper is an attempt to initiate such an understanding in the matter of labour-migration to Assam tea gardens during the colonial period.

Emphasising the significance of the missionary activities vis-a-vis Assam tea plantations, F.S. Downs, the noted church historian writes :-



"the development of the tea industry in Assam relates to the history of Christianity in two ways. Bruce and his wife were Evangelicals who persuaded Jenkins to invite missionaries to establish a school at Sadiya for the benefit of the tribals ..... Hence Bruce was responsible for having brought the largest Protestant mission into the region. The second way in which the tea industry influenced the Christian movement was the fact that the great majority of the some 350,000 christians now resident in the Brahmaputra Valley are either tea garden labourers who have settled in the area".<sup>4</sup>

### Problem of Sources

Even though Downs felt the importance of the role of the missionaries in the tea gardens of Assam, he devoted only a few lines on this theme. His work was followed by Mathew Muttamana which also dealt only with the spiritual aspects of the tea garden labourers.<sup>5</sup> Of course, contemporary missionary publication by Christopher Becker (1923) gave more detailed information.<sup>6</sup> But none of these studies dealt with the attitude of the missionaries towards the temporal life of the tea garden labourers.

Actually for this kind of investigation the problem is one of scarcity of source materials. As mentioned by an author, the role of the missionaries behind migration was not mentioned anywhere in the official reports on migration "perhaps because the government, which was a foreign colonial government, did not want to cause embarrassment to the church".<sup>7</sup>



There are, however, stray references to the missionary activities in the government records. Sometimes, missionaries came forward to give evidence before different government enquiry committees. For the present paper, firstly I have relied mostly on those government records and the depositions of the missionaries. Besides these government reports and the evidences of the missionaries thereupon, I have also relied on the articles and letters written by some missionaries in the Englishman, the Indian Churchman, the Planters' Gazette, The Times (London) etc. When protests about the issue of indentured labour migration to Assam had been seriously raised by the Indian national press,<sup>8</sup> the planters' lobby projected their views through news paper representing the European interest in India. The missionaries also joined on those debates and expressed their views. One short coming of this paper is the inaccessibility to private papers of relevant Christian Missions, which are known to exist in the U.K., U.S.A., etc. In the absence of any systematic and more comprehensive enquiry in the archives of the Christian Missions, any observation, on this issue, is bound to be somewhat tentative and is subject to further modification in the light of new documents.

#### Labour Migration and the Christian Missionaries :

The Christian missionaries could not restrict their activities to the field of conversion to christianity and spread of their faith only. As we have seen, in Chota-Nagpur the missionaries got themselves involved with the agrarian discontent of the Mundas. Whether this sort of involvement was "ambiguous" or a "sign of collaboration with the oppressed peasants against the raj" is a different issue that needs adequate explanation. But this much can be said that the Mundas were



Not only did the missionaries support migration, they also often allured them to go to the gardens. Rev. Mr. Heberlet, a Baptist Missionary, personally brought up a party of Christian people from Orissa to Sylhet in 1887.<sup>15</sup> Rev. K.S. Macdonald of the Presbyterian Free Church of Scotland, Calcutta, had observed that "the Colony of the Uriya Christians on the Tea gardens of Sylhet have sent their Christian preacher and deacon back to their native country to induce many more of their co-religionists and countrymen to accompany them back to Sylhet to work on the gardens".<sup>16</sup>

There is further evidence to show that there was elaborate correspondence between the garden manager and the Father-in-charge of a Catholic Mission station. The garden manager come down several times and after he got back, correspondence went on between him and one of the mission underlings. The result was that the underling appeared with forty people whom he offered to the manager.<sup>17</sup> It had also been told by a government official before the Royal Commission on Labour "you may get a missionery doing recruiting himself, and in a certain number of cases we suspected that was happenings".<sup>18</sup> It has been observed that recruitment was made by the missionaries even without giving due regard to the availability of a priest at the place where their flock were sent. Some of the missionaries had conducted regular propaganda for recruitment.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, not specifically known whether the missionaries who encouraged migration to Assam had formed any labour bureau similar to that of the Catholic Labour Bureau formed for the purpose of recruiting labourers for the Dooars Plantations.<sup>20</sup> Still "a good many of the cases in Ranchi are connected with what we call mission recruitment".<sup>21</sup>



compelled to emigrate mainly to Assam tea gardens when they could not obtain justices from the government and could not bear to stay on in their newly transformed status as tenants.<sup>9</sup> For our point of view it is relevant to ask what was then the attitude of the missionaries regarding this migration? Did they support such migration or not?

Christopher Becker led us believe that "in the sermons and in the catechetical instructions they were repeatedly told not to emigrate to Assam. The missionaries recommended to them to earn an honest living at home".<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to accept this statement of Becker. There are numerous instances to show that the missionaries of Chota-Nagpur, the Santhal Parganas, Orissa and various other missions of India considered migration as one of the means to release the tensions of poverty - stricken rural India, arising out of the oppression of the land-lords and money-lenders in the given colonial framework. Rev. Isaac Row, Secretary to the Anglo-Indian Evangelization Society, wrote in the Englishman "these are tens of thousands half-starved in over crowded districts in Bengal and elsewhere who should be encouraged and helped to emigrate to Assam, where they might find lucrative and easy employment."<sup>11</sup> Rev. Nottrot of the German Evangelical Lutheran Mission, Ranchi while deposing before the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906, stated "our Mission has about 60,000 adherents in this district. I should be willing to see more of our people going to Assam."<sup>12</sup> The Royal Commission on Labour in India in 1930 also admitted that the missionaries told their people to go to other places for employment rather than to starve in their own place.<sup>13</sup> In order to encourage migration, the missionaries propagated that those who would immigrate to Assam would have the opportunities to settle in government waste lands. Besides, they would not have to pay betbegari or suffer harrassment of law suits; nor would they have to face oppression of the Zamindars, etc., etc.<sup>14</sup>



For taking up the task of recruitment by themselves, the missionaries took the plea that it was necessary to save the labourers from the clutches of the arkatis. Scandals of arkati system were taken up by them seriously in fact, all the missionaries who had deposed before the Enquiry Committee of 1906, unequivocally criticised the abuses of the arkati system. Rev. E. Wueste of the German Evangelical Lutheran Mission started his deposition with the words that the only sound system would be to abolish arkati recruiting altogether.<sup>22</sup> Rev. Hoffmann sent a long note to the government detailing the unscrupulous dealings of the arkatis. In Encyclopaediae of Mundarica, he devoted several pages listing instances where deceit and trickery were used by the arkatis.<sup>23</sup> But this opinion of the missionaries regarding the arkatis was paradoxical in the sense that similar deceits can be seen to have been used by the missionaries themselves while recruiting labour. To attract the people of the labour catchment areas, Rev. Nottrott wrote in the Mission's Hindi newspaper the Gharbandhu :

"It appeared to me that they were as well treated and well taken care of by their European managers and that they had nothing to murmur nor any one to complain against..... The coolies are not overworked, they get a certain amount of work to do in a day. I have seen some coolies return home after finishing their work by 10 or 11 A.M., and then they stay at home for the rest of the day to do their private work. Earnings of a family amount to 15 annas per day".<sup>24</sup>



A simple glance into any of the contemporary government reports, even if we leave aside the results of recent research work on the material condition of the Assam tea garden labourers, would prompt us to say that this was far from the reality. In fact, their concern for attack upon the arkati system was, to some extent, to build up their own recruiting agency in the place of the arkati system. Rev. Nottrott proposed "to make an arrangement with a manager and send him coolies from among my Christians on terms approved by me outside the Act."<sup>25</sup>

The most glaring part of the total approach of the missionaries in the matter of labour-management relations in Assam plantation was that they were not seen to be much vocal in opposing the most obnoxious features of the plantation legislations framed by the colonial government. These laws contained penal clauses to cover breach of contract of service, desertion and absence from work and even alleged negligence of duty of any kind - making all such cases punishable with rigorous imprisonment. Under those laws, planters were legally authorised to arrest without warrant. Rev. L.O. Skrafsrud posed a bit liberal when he said "I would not allow the manager to retain power of arrest, but I would appoint selected planters honorary magistrates and empower them to issue warrants".<sup>26</sup> Rev. Hoffmann tried to justify the presence of penal clauses in the Act in a round about way by saying that if there were no penal contract of any kind in Assam, very few labourers would be going to Assam.<sup>27</sup> Rev. Wueste, however, blatantly stated that the "private arrest should not be abolished"



Criticism of the Plantation System by a Missionary :

But it should be kept in mind that all the missionaries did not necessarily hold the same view. We have on record an exceptional personality in the recruiting district, who did not hesitate to call attention to the extreme injustice done to the tea garden labourers. He was Rev. A. Logsdail of the Society for propagation of Gospel Missionary, Chaibasa, Rev. Logsdail, from the very beginning was critical of the recruitment policy of the government as well as of the managerial behaviour of the planters towards their recruits. Rev. Logsdail despatched several letters to the editors of the Statesman and The Times, exposing the evils connected with labour recruitment and other such abuses. But the editors declined to publish them. Out of his sheer zeal, Rev. Logsdail himself brought out a pamphlet, depicting with simple illustrations the complexities of the plantation legislation. He termed the whole system of plantation as 'Chains and Slavery',<sup>29</sup> He wrote:

"It is absolutely impossible for a man, or woman, or a family to get rid, of, or get free from the effects of an act of ignorant simplicity otherwise than by desertion, or repeated fines and imprisonments, and Government made the Act with the aid of veteran planters, and enforces the Act which makes it so".



He rightly detected the vicious chain of the labour control method in the plantation. He asked "What are the poor coolies to do ? Complain ! It is no use. Fight ! They dare not - Government is at the back of it all. Then what ? Many work on. Thousands yearly desert, and Government, the planters and the police hunt them back".

In his writings Logsdail also highlighted the specific problem of women labour. "For", he found that the poor woman was of equal value "apparently in the eyes of the planter and of Government, though not equally paid with men". He had also shown that "Women can less easily desert than men, so about three men to one woman desert. Poor women again -!"

In spite of his severe criticism of the collusion of the planters and the government in the matter of inducing labourers to a coercive labour market, Rev. Logsdail did not, however, oppose extension of tea cultivation. "Let cultivation be extended by all means", he said "..... but Government should see that it is not done at the expense of the labourers' health, life or moral, and untill conditions allow of this, a halt should be called".

But one particular feature of his outlook was that even in the prevailing situation of 'Chains and Slavery', he expressed his confidence that engagement by the christian missions would protect the labourers. At the end he thus said that he would like to see a system "by which a missionary could be allowed to make his own arrangements with a garden, as to sending up any native Christian member of his flock independent of the Act".<sup>30</sup>



### MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE IN PLANTATION :

The missionaries did not restrict their activities only with sending labourers to gardens. There is an example that a mission had purchased two tea gardens in Goalpara and at the same time managed o-zamindari in a recruiting district. Problem of labour recruitment in those gardens were settled by sending christian people from that Zamindari area.<sup>31</sup> Though we do not have any detailed information about the material conditions of labourers of those gardens, there is a government observation on a different tea garden managed by another Christian mission. The Government official reported that Rev. Father Baretta of the Jesuit Mission owned some of the plantations. "He probably cares more for the souls than for the bodies of his employees".<sup>32</sup>

### MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN TEA GARDENS :

Now let us examine whether and how far the missionaries could have extended their activities into tea gardens and what were their view on the temporal life of those garden labourers.

From the account of Eyre Chatterton it is found that it was almost impossible to depute clergymen to volunteer for work in the tea garden areas. Christopher Becker was also of opinion that the development of missionary activities in the tea gardens of Assam was full of impediments of all kinds.<sup>34</sup> The time table and programme of church services had to be changed according to the work rhythm of the gardens. The planters proposed to shift the religious service in the evening hours. Accordingly the padres had to organise church services in the evening, though it went against the rituals particularly of the catholic missions whose "devotional service can never be



a substitute for the Holy Mass and the administration of the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion". The difficulty in this change of time-table of church service had been painfully experienced by the missionaries. Let us see what the missionary himself writes about the difficulties.

"It was difficult to meet the grown-up people for they had to go to pluck the whole day and in the evening they were too tired. They could still beat drums, but to imediate on abstract truths was too difficult for them. Besides, there was no proper place in the village for them to gather. So I sat under a big tree and a crowd of children gathered there around me and I could not even hear myself speak. And the mosquitos did not leave us in peace, either : Twenty-five to thirty people sit together and each one kills two mosquitoes per minute. You can imagine what clapping is going on all the time".<sup>36</sup>

However, the first missionaries who worked among the tea garden labourers were from the American Baptist Churches. The main centre of their work was sibsagar. The Baptists had opened some important stations in areas surrounded by the tea gardens. For example, they opened the station in Dibrugarh in 1879, in North Lakhimpur in 1893 and in Golaghat in 1898. Apart from the Baptists, the Churches were established in the tea garden areas by the Catholic. Anglican and the Lutherans.<sup>37</sup>



The missionaries who made trips to gardens mostly confined their activities within the limits of spiritual affairs. The diaries of their visits spoke little about the temporal life of the garden labourers. However, in the Brahmaputra Valley, at Tezpur, Rev. S. Endle who had been labouring with intensive devotion for thirty years, left some impression on the life and conditions of the labourers. His observation appeared in the Indian Churchman. His letter in the said news-paper reflected the attitude of one of the leading missionaries of Assam regarding the material conditions of garden labourers. He wrote :

"Two questions to be dealt with : (i) The system of recruiting labourers, (ii) the condition of labourers when domiciled on the Tea Estate here. .... As to the second question, I can fairly claim to speak with more freedom as well as with some little authority. Their condition is far better than their original one in the country of their birth. I have indeed known cases where the mortality has been great; but the ailments are, as a rule, generated on the Assam Tea Factory but brought up by the immigrant himself from his own home. Wages are invariably high .....

On the whole, then, I think, that it would not be well for the church to take any part in a crusade against an evil which is, to a great extent, an imaginary one".



Rev. Endle even went so far as to suggest that the conditions of life to the garden labourers seemed to be far lighter and brighter than those of the labouring classes in England !<sup>38</sup>

VIEWS DIFFERED :

Rev. Endle's views were not however shared by all those concerned with missionary activities. His assessment was immediately challenged by one Chaplain of Dibrugarh - Rev. Charles Dowding. When in the 1890s articles were appearing in various news papers, both European and nationalist, with regard to the inequities of the contempor<sup>rarer</sup> system of labour recruitment and labouring conditions in Assam. Rev. Dowding joined the debate. He sent numerous letters to the editor. Indian Churchman focussing his views on the issue. A greater portion of his letter was suppressed as 'illegible' by the editor. But even the published portion suggests that the problem of the misery of the plantation workers arose out of the collusion between the government and the tea industry. He wrote that the "tie between the Government and the industry was based not on mutual affection, but avowedly on mutual convenience". He exposed the various ways the tea industry had been subsidised by the Government. The industry, according to him, "has enjoyed that most vicious of all forms of protection, namely, exceptional legislation, enabling it to obtain labour at less than its value in the open market".<sup>40</sup> A look into the writings of Rev. Dowding would show that he was perhaps one of those few who had visualised the future problem of ex-tea garden labour and blamed both government and the industry for not forestalling such a problem and he warned them for their short-sightedness.<sup>41</sup> He was also critical of the Inland Emigration Act of 1882 - the Act which was branded by the Indian nationalists



as a 'Slave Act'. Analysing the various provisions of the Act, he commented "it is only playing with words to call it anything else than the thinly disguised slavery and that nothing but the colossal British hypocrisy".<sup>42</sup>

Such writing led the leading spokesman of the missionaries, the Indian Churchman, in its editorial, branded him as an "agitator lost to all sense of honour and truth" and advised him not to exceed his duty.<sup>43</sup> And there ended the debate.

#### MISSIONARIES IN A CHANGED LABOURING WORLD :

There was a change in the labouring world immediately after the First World War. This was accompanied by a country-wide outburst of labour unrest. In the midst of such a situation, during the non-co-operation days, labourers started leaving tea gardens in their thousands in both the Valleys of Assam. According to one historian, in the Surma Valley "..... Sporadic strikes culminated into a mass political action in the form of a collective escape from the bonded labour system. The exodus was an open revolt, a primitive rebel action against the legitimised conditions of serfdom. It was the product of an inter-action between the Gandhian impact of the primitive minds and the incipient class militancy".<sup>44</sup>

Responding to the situation, certain christian missions had also shown the sign of radicalism. On March 21st, 1921 a very large number of the labourers of Halem Tea Garden in Darrang District assembled near the estate office in the afternoon and announced their intention of handing in their tools and ceasing work. They then beat the garden Jamadar and



Mohurri mercilessly. Later on, the manager of Halem and the manager of a neighbouring garden, on arrival at the scene, were attacked and severely beaten.

The labour force of the Halem Tea Estate consisted of a very large element of native Christians. There were three churches there built and maintained by the garden authority respectively for the church of England, the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran Communities. The Christian labourers of the garden were mainly Mundas from Ranchi and its neighbourhood. In dealing with the cause of the disturbance, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang reported as follows :-

"The Lutheran denomination was before the war supervised by a German pastor and it is not impossible that their present attitude is partly the outcome of his teaching. Many of these native christians are literate and their religious interests are looked after by pasorts and Pundits of their own caste. Sometimes before the riot the Chief resident Pundit, by name Christoson, obtain leave to go to his country from which he returned shortly before the riot. Since his return the Manager had noticed a gradual growth of a feeling of sullenness and discontent amongst the coolies for which no apparent cause could be assigned. No grievances were formulated but a spirit of 'Ca' 'canny' began to pervade all form of garden work. The manager was at first inclined to blame his Jamadar and Mohurries for this attitude but the riot showed that the



manager's suspicious was unfounded as these men were the first to be attacked by the rioters".<sup>45</sup>

These feelings of discontent had come to a head some two days before the occurrence when the labourers who had been sent out to do specific work deliberately scamped the work. "It is, I believe, beyond doubt", concluded the Deputy Commissioner,

"that these Munda Christians have been influenced by the social and semi-political propaganda which appears to be now pervading the Munda country. The Manager had noticed that for sometime before the riot correspondence between the coolies and their own countrymen had enormously increased and it was also reported that a number of subscription had been sent by christian coolies towards the expenses of this social and political propaganda in their own country. The visit of the Pundit to his own country appears to have increased his sympathy with the movement, and on his return there is no doubt that he and his friends have attempted to spread it on the garden and on other gardens in the east of the district where Christian Mundas are to be found".



Keeping in line with the prevalent mood of the labouring class Rev. A. Duncan Dixey of Cinnemera, while deposing before the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1921 severely attacked the planters for paying low wages, for the rise in the mortality rate and for the wretched conditions of the hospitals and the sanitary system. His criticism was also directed against the abuses of the agreements under the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act of 1859. He told the Committee that he had information from the Chota-Nagpur as a great attraction in getting them up to Assam, "I find here that some of the coolies do not realise", said the reverend, "that at the end of the year they are free .... The babus for instance, tell the coolies that they were ill certain days and they have perhaps another month or two to serve ....."

Before he finished his sentence, Memorran who represented the interests of the planters in the Committee, sprang up and demanded from the reverend the names of the Padres. When Rev. Dixey declined to divulge the names, the said member left the room in protest. The President of the Committee, however, allowed the reverend to continue his speech. But the latter was reluctant to speak any more and thus ended up by saying: "I am sorry, gentlemen, to bring up these various things, but, I believe there are grievances to put right, and after consultation with my Bishop and other responsible people, I feel it my duty to do so".<sup>46</sup>

The views of the missionaries were thus not always in tune with the planters'. There were missionaries like Logsdail, Dowding, Dixey or Christoson, belonging to the lower echelon of the missionary hierarchy who did not subscribe to the views of the planter regarding material conditions of the labourers. Still there were missionaries like Nortrott, Endle and others who did.



In the midst of such conflicting opinion amongst the missionaries, it is difficult to ascertain what were the representative views of the Churches of the various denomination. Did the dominating sections amongst them agree with Rev. S. Endle or did they feel that the labourers were really 'under chains and slavery'? In any case the fact remains that even in the closing years of the British rule in India an important body of the christians like the National Christian Council drew a rosy picture of the labour condition in the plantations. This Council stated that it was usual "to provide two free meals a day for all children who are too young to work in the gardens", that "pails of rice appear followed by the smaller vessels of dahl (lentils) or sometimes a little fish"; and that "garden pays extra two rupees a month every man who has more than two children below working age", "The Council also affirmed that every garden had its own hospital and "patients receive free food and treatment and half pay, with full pay for the relatives who came in to attend them". The conclusion that followed was that "the tea garden labourers in India to-day might well rouse the envy of his fellows in other industries".<sup>47</sup>

This kind of cock and bull stories dished out by many christian missionaries could have been possible only because they looked at the entire problem through the planters' eyes. This was self-evident from their attitude to the Workmen's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859. This ill-reputed Act, having served the planters' cause faithfully for nearly seventy years, was repealed in 1926.<sup>48</sup> Even years after its repeal, its authority died hard in the mind, of the labourers. The planters had taken no steps to notify the labourers with regard to the change in their legal status. To justify their position, the planters said that they would have



invited trouble if the labourers were suddenly made aware, of their freedom. It is interesting to note that when Rev. D.J. Tirthi was asked by the Royal Commission on Labour as to whether, as a preacher in close contact with the garden workers, he had told them of the abolition of the said Act. His brief reply was in the negative.<sup>49</sup>

It is because the missionaries held such views or positions, that they chose to leave the labourers under the mercy of the planters. This attitude of the missionaries was strikingly in contrast with activities of the Bengali Brahma Missionaries in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

#### MISSIONARIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLANTERS :

Apparently, there was no reason to believe that the relationship between the planters and the missionaries was not cordial. With a view to promoting migration, correspondence went on between the missionaries and the garden managers. Sometimes even the garden manager came down to the Padre of the recruiting district and reciprocal visit was made in turn by the latter. When the missionary visited tea garden, he accepted the offer of hospitality at the bungalow of the planter. The Catholic Mission was successful in convincing the management of Assam Frontier Tea Company that in order to persuade the labourers to settle down in Assam, it was necessary to satisfy the religious needs of the labourers.

Planters, too, in some case, realised on their own that the influence of the missionaries could be not a negligible factor in the matter of promoting order and discipline and in keeping the labourers contented and hard working.<sup>52</sup> Planters, therefore, thought to make good use of the good offices of missionaries to solve the labour problems.



In the matter of education, planters' reliance was exclusive. When the Government insisted that in the tea gardens or, at least, in their vicinity, schools should be opened for labourers' children at government expense, planters agreed to the proposal provided appointments could be given to catchists as school teachers, instead of engaging "unknown persons who were not under control".<sup>53</sup>

In spite of such reliance and confidence, the planters, in general, did not however like the missionaries to make frequent visits to the labour lines or meddle in their affairs. In 1878 when Dr. Bronson, an American Baptist Missionary was sent to the plantation areas of Dibrugarh to commence his work, he was compelled to turn back owing to "the violent opposition of the managers of the gardens".<sup>54</sup> Again in 1890, an Assamese Eveengelists was sent to North Lahimpur, to investigate the possibilities of work among the tea garden labourers of that area. He had to face hostile garden managers who feared that christian labourers would be a liability. He was not permitted to visit a single garden.<sup>55</sup> An extract of the actual conversation between a planter and Father Rudlof Fontain of the Catholic Mission, as given below, would reflect the exact attitude of the planters, "Good Morning, Padre, come in. What do you want"? "I want to see some Christian coolies, who are on this plantation".

"I don't know anything about them. Are you sure that there are Christian Coolies here?"

"Yes, according to my list, for example, in line No.7 there is a man by the name of Augustine".

"Oh, the badmas ! (the rogue). Why do you want to see these people?"



"To hold a Church service for them".

"I can not allow this. I am the boss here, and boss of the Padre also. The missionaries always cause confusion among the people. A good beating is the best medicine for these lazy Indian Christians, and not religion !"

"But I do not want to interfere in the affairs of your garden !"

"May be, but it is just the Christian coolies who give us the greatest amount of trouble".

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"I shall hold the church service early in the morning so that their work in the garden is not hampered and they can start work with the others".

"I do not need your help. I shall deal with them myself. I do not want you to visit these coolies and hold church service for them".<sup>56</sup>

Referring to the above mentioned case, Fr. Rudolf spoke thus on one occasion :-

"The hard heartedness of this man, his cutting remarks, and his personal affronts hurt me very much. Eleven years ago, I wept at the death of my mother. But even at my first mass, and at the death of my father I suppressed every tear. But on this occasion I could not prevent tears from rolling down my cheeks".<sup>57</sup>



## CONCLUSION

The christian missionaries played different roles, at two different levels - but at both the levels their activities were, by and large, in accordance with the desire of the planters. When the planters were searching for labour recruits at the cheap and declining wages, the missionaries helped them to flush out the labourer, from the tribal areas of Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, etc., to Assam tea gardens. And when those labourers were brought in and tied to the deplorable working condition in the garden through the legislative abetment of slavery, the missionaries preferred to leave them at the mercy of the planters, with the conviction that the labourers under the latter were well off. Even if, sometimes, any enterprising missionary would be going to take the initiative to work amongst the labourers, he had to be prepared to be rebuked by the planter with the words "I am the boss here, and the boss of the Padre also".

Secondly, as the mode of labour disciplining in a colonial plantation system largely depended upon the direct personal authority of the planters backed by legal and extra-legal coercive methods, planters did not generally require the mediation of the missionaries to "discipline" their labour force.

However, in the last decade of the British rule in India, when trade unions began to make their appearance in Assam, the planters fiercely resisted and adopted a policy of allowing elements more malleable to control to form registered trade union in plantations. First some enlightened Indian christians set up company unions with a view to forestalling the rise of radical unionism. P.M. Surwan, a college teacher and his brother



Binod Surwan, bath elected to the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1937 as labour representatives, were utilised by the Indian Tea Association for this purpose.<sup>58</sup> That their efforts become redundant in the circumstances of availability of other and more useful collaborators is another story. The scope is limited to limited to include that<sup>59</sup>. In any case, it is the general experience that the Christian churches, particularly the Catholic Church, actively advise their followers to disassociate themselves with trade unions of any kind, and particularly the unions led by the communists.<sup>60</sup> Such advice, however, is not necessarily heeded upon by workers in Post-Independence India.



APPENDIX-I

Salana : Nowgong Assam - 782139

Parish letter for the Catholic communities.

Ref. PRSH/118/SM

Dear Christian brothers and sisters,

dated 4th April  
1982.

Long Live the Christ

1. Every year the Mission celebrates its annual congregation. All the brothers and sisters christened in our faith should congregate in the name of the Christ and pray to God, pay tributes to Him and brighten the prospects of the faith. Our Bishop also attends the annual congregation. Let us express our faith by attending the congregation throughout the day. Let us justify the words of the scripture "Seeing your good work will people pray to God".

This year our annual congregation will take place on April 24-25. Reach the Mission by April 24, Saturday morning. The congregation involved large expenditure, but every family is asked to pay a nominal sum of Rs.2/-. Give this contribution to the missionary. The plantation workers should ask for compulsory leave from the Garden Managers for April 24 so as to reach the Mission by morning of that day. If somebody needs a letter from the mission he can come to us for it. You can make arrangements about your ration and attendance at the plantations on April 24. You should invariably reach the congregation in time.



2. Today we want to give you a special advice. The prime enemy of the Catholic Church is communism. That is why father christians are put in jails in those countries and are killed. They want to abolish religion. The communists help people at time only to win them over to their side. No catholic should even by mistake join the unions led by the CPI or CPI(M). Communism is fundamentally opposed to religion. They will not tell this fact to ignorant masses. When they come to power, they suppress all religions in general and Catholicism is particular.

That is why Pope has asked all Catholics not to join a Communist Party or their unions. In our country the Bishops also teach the same lesson. A person can neither be allowed to follow the religion by being a member of a Communist union nor can he take the sacrament. Those who join a Communist union disqualify themselves for sacrament. If by mistake any christian has joined a CPI(M) union, he is bound to taste the bitter fruit of his mistake. The Christian faith does not allow a person to vote for the Communists or to join a Communist organisation. This is not a preaching coined by us, this is practised everywhere in the catholic world.

If some body still has a soft eorner for CPI(M) in his/her heart it is sure that he she has fallen victim to the Satan design in the testing time who is opposed to our faith and sacrament. They should liberate themselves from this effect by praying to God. It is not a political question, it is the question of Christianity. We are trying to convince you that you should not join the unions of those who torture us when they get an opportunity. It is not a political question, it is the question of the soil the question of the Christian faith. It is the duty of our fathers to tell you all about this faith. One



day our brethren may ask us, "Why did 'not you tell us all about it before hand".

There are many unions other than those of CPI or CPI(M) in our country. You can join any of those unions. But you can't join those of CPI or CPI(M). Keep this advice in mind throughout your life.

3. The missionaries have reported that the marriage study course is on from today. This year all those who are in "mixed ethnic groups" should try to attend the course. This year Texpur diocese has been selected for the centenary Jubilee Celebration.

All persons belong to "the mixed ethnic groups" will get hel: for marriage at the time of marriage study course. The marriage blessings will be offered at the time of the con- gregation.

4. This year the sacrament of confirmation will be given in the emgregation itself. Those who have not taken the sacrament of confirmation even after baptism and first communism will have to come to the Mission on April 20 because they are required to stay in the Mission for six days till the congregation. Those coming for confirmation should bring 7 kg. of rice.

Happy Easter to all of you.

Yours in the name of the Christ,

Fr. Pallatty M.  
( Parish Priest )

Fr. Thomas P.  
( Asstt. Parish Priest )

Source: All India Plantation Workers' Federation, Bulletin of the 4th Conference September 16-18, 1982, Siliguri, (New Delhi) 1982 pp.106-107.



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38. See The Indian Churchman, July 15, 1893. Endle is well-known for his contribution to othmography for his posthumus publication The Kacharis (London) 1911.
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