

“Coolie” Question in the Age of Transition, 1940s to 1960s

Raj Kumar Thakur
Assistant Professor of Modern and Contemporary History,
Department of History,
Assam University,
Assam, India.

Abstract:

This paper investigates the transition from Empire to Nation from the vantage point of the “Coolies” employed in the tea plantations of Assam. By doing so, it attempts to ask and answer whether there were continuities with colonialism? The complexities of decolonisation are explored by scrutinising the promises and hopes of independence and by evaluating the behaviour of the Indian state in practice. To do so, it examines the visions and industrial policies of the post-colonial state and its conversation with the coolies. In the overall biography of the Indian nation, the decades from 1940s to 1960s is crucial to investigate how the idioms of migrants and migration acquired negative idioms in policy making. This paper is therefore a critical conversation between the nation and the coolies.

Introduction:

Transition from empire to nation, has been explained in myriad ways. The term that is often used to describe this transition is decolonisation. Decolonisation itself has been interpreted and described in diverse ways. But the most dominant trend has been to see decolonisation as an event that resulted in partition and independence. Within it, there are three perspectives, namely: the metropolitan perspective (which privileges the political events of withdrawal of imperial control)¹, the international perspective (which emphasizes on the shift in global power and emergence of bipolar world order post Second World War)², and the peripheral perspective (which shows how the anti-colonial struggle shaped the road towards dissolution of empire).³ These three perspectives have been entangled in an academic battle of refuting

¹ John Springhall, *Decolonization Since 1945*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2001; Nicholas Manserg, ed. *The Transfer of Power 1942-1947*, 12 vols, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Service, 1970-1983; Nicholas Manserg, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of Wartime Co-Operation and Post-War Change 1939-1952*, Oxford University Press, 1958. For a detailed survey, see, D. A. Low, *Eclipse of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991; D. A. Low, *Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity 1929-1942*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

² David George Boyce, *Decolonisation and the British Empire, 1775-1997*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999.

³ For historical debates on decolonisation and British Empire, see, John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1991. Also see the following: John Darwin, *Britain and*

one another. Beyond this perspective of seeing decolonisation as an event, there are other historians, who argue that decolonisation should be seen as a process.⁴ While for some it as a rupture, for others it is a ‘historical process’ that is ‘fragmentary and incomplete’. Some see it as ‘continuity yet change’, there are historians who see it as a long drawn out process of political transition, and as a process of translation and transformation of political forms and institutions.

In an attempt to move out of this stalemate, historians have argued that decolonisation should be studied as a ‘dialogic process between the colonial past and the post-colonial present, a dialogue that has not yet ended’⁵, and therefore, ‘it should be studied as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional process’.⁶ This paper brings in two important components of British Empire, namely tea (which was and is still a global commodity) and ‘coolie’ (who were and are involved in the production of this global commodity). The existing scholarship has failed to include tea and ‘coolie’ within this debate. Tea as a global commodity, and migration as a global phenomenon that shaped the longevity of empire. Without taking these two components of British empire, the historians will continue to remain in a stalemate. This paper by bringing in tea and ‘coolie’ and empire and nation at centre-stage, draws

Decolonization: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed. *Nationalist Movement in India: A Reader*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: Meanings of Freedom in Post-Independence West Bengal, 1947-1952*, Routledge, London, 2009; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2016.

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Introduction’, in. D. Chakrabarty, R. Majumdar and A. Sartori (eds), *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: Indian and Pakistan in Transition*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007, p. 3. Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2007, p. 27. Ted Svensson, *Production of Postcolonial India and Pakistan: Meanings of Partition*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013. Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Enchantment of Democracy and India*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2011. Meera Ashar, ‘Decolonizing What? Categories, Concepts and the Enduring “Not Yet”’, *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 27, no. 2. 2015, pp. 253-265. Jayanta Sengupta, *At the Margins: Discourses of Development, Democracy and Regionalism in Orissa*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2015. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2016. Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, p. 6.

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2004; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2016.

⁶ Bandyopadhyay, ed., *Decolonisation and the Politics of Transition in South Asia*, p. 6.

conclusions that will enrich the scholarship on decolonisation. To draw conclusion, the paper examines the visions and industrial policies of the post-colonial state and its conversation with the coolies. The paper puts forward the thesis that in the overall biography of the Indian nation, the decades from 1940s to 1960s is crucial to investigate how the idioms of migrants and migration acquired negative idioms in policy making. By doing so, the paper engages in a critical conversation between the nation and the coolies by comparing the promises and hopes of independence with the behaviour of the new nation state in practice. The paper has four sections. The first section shows the position of tea industry from 1940 to 1960s. The second section discusses how the new nation state visualized the 'coolies'. The third section critically engages with the idioms of politics by evaluating the discussion around migration and migrants. And the final section draws conclusions.

I.

Tea as a Global Commodity:

What was the share of tea in terms of total export? Out of the total export of commodities from India, the share of tea export was 13.51 per cent in 1951. As far as the global percentage of Indian tea production is concerned, just before the world war second, i.e., in 1939, India produced 38 per cent of the total tea produced in the world. This share was 44 per cent in 1947 and in 1954 this share reduced by 4 per cent to 40 per cent of the total world produce.

As far as nature of ownership is concerned, the original capital for creating this industry was mostly from United Kingdom. It took the shape of a sterling company in U. K that owned the share in India. Even after independence the predominance of sterling companies continued. The companies located in London had agents or secretaries in Calcutta who carried out the policy laid by Board of Directors. By 1955, thirteen leading agency houses in Calcutta controlled over 75 per cent of the tea production in India. Details on shareholdings of the company in 1939 reveal that 88.1 per cent of the total share was of non-Indian companies and 11.9 per cent was of the Indian Companies. In 1953, the foreign share reduced by almost 10 per cent, i.e., now it was 77.7 per cent and Indian share increased to 22.3 per cent, i.e., almost a 11 per cent increase in the share. Despite a ten per cent reduction in share of foreign capital, the foreign share was still 77 per cent of the total share holdings.

Since the early 1950s, there was a demand that the tea industry should be nationalised. This demand was raised by the Communist Party. Quite opposed to this, it was argued that 'Government of India and the state governments had adequate control over the affairs of the industry and more than adequate share in sale proceedings of the Industry.' Therefore, the Government of India resolved that it had no intention of nationalisation of the tea industry.

In 1955, when the nationalisation of the Tea Industry was once again discussed in the Lok Sabha, the Minister of Commerce and Industries, Moraji Desai, urged the house to ‘throw out the resolution and was severely critical of the theoretical notions of nationalisation.’ In rejecting the resolution, he said, ‘if the tea industry was nationalised, the country would have to shell out Rs. 181 crores as compensation – an expenditure it could ill afford particularly at a time when the government was inviting foreign capital to invest more.’

In the early 1960’s Khogendra Nath Barbaruah, a Member of Legislative Assembly of Assam had moved a resolution for the nationalisation of the tea industry of Assam. Despite his insistence on the nationalisation of the tea industry, the proposal faced immense criticism and was rejected in the Assembly. It was argued that the nationalisation of the tea industry would be of ‘no use to anyone.’ ‘Tea Industry’ ‘was fairly well controlled.’ It was also stated that ‘direct management by the government will not serve any real or substantial benefit and the talk of nationalisation of tea will have adverse effects on the morale of the industry. In the decades of 1960s and 1970s, the issue of nationalisation of the tea industry resurfaced. To cite a few instances, in 1970, the government of Assam sent a plea to the central government for taking over the plantations in Assam. In 1971, this proposal was rejected by the central government on the ground that tea industry was ‘efficiently managed’.

Thus, one can argue that decolonisation did not bring much change either in terms of ownership or in terms of production of tea. Tea as a global commodity retained its hegemony, India in the 1950s was still providing 40 per cent of tea to the world, and foreign shareholdings was still dominant.

II

Coolies in the Vision of a New Nation State

The foundations of the labour policies were laid in the 1940s. To begin with, in 1943, the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), a trade union body of the Communist Party of India (CPI) demanded a detailed enquiry on the labour conditions in Assam.⁷ It also pointed out that the government of India was ‘handicapped’ by the absence of any machinery by which ‘reliable facts’ regarding the condition of labour could be ‘collected, compiled, and analysed.’ As a result, a tripartite labour conference was held in September 1943. The conference recommended that it was necessary to set up an investigative machinery to

⁷ Setting up an investigation committee was one of the major demands raised by All India Trade Union Congress in its session that was held in Nagpur in 1943. *Report of the All India Trade Union Congress* (Nagpur, 1943) 36.

enquire questions of wages and earnings, employment and housing, and social conditions. The findings of the investigation committee were to be utilised for initiating a policy of social security for labour. Following this, the government of India appointed a Labour Investigation Committee on 12th February 1944 to carry out a detailed investigation which was headed by D. V. Rege.⁸ The Committee submitted its findings in 1946 and observed that even as late as the 1940s, the plantation labour industry was not protected by any labour legislation. Seeing the need for legislation, the Committee advocated for a Plantation Labour Code.

The suggestion put forward by the Labour Investigation Committee for a 'Plantation Labour Code' was also adhered to by the government of India. A year later, it set up the Industrial Committee on plantations which deliberated on the framing of a 'labour code' for regulating the working conditions in the plantations. In January 1947, a tripartite tea plantations conference was held in Delhi. In the conference, the dearness allowances and maternity benefits were increased. The increase in allowances was also an outcome of the demands raised by AITUC in the Nagpur session of 1943. In the tripartite conference, the participants agreed that there should be separate legislation to regulate the conditions of plantation workers. A memorandum which set out the outlines of plantation legislation was prepared and placed before the second session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations held in March-April 1948. Some proposals were accepted, and the rest were discussed at the first session of the Standing Plantation Committee held in September 1949. Subsequently, in the third session of the Industrial Committee on Plantations in November 1950, the rest of the proposals were discussed. A year later, the Plantation Labour Bill was introduced in the Parliament by the Minister of Labour, Jagjivan Ram. He argued that although the tea plantations were 'one of the biggest organised industries in India,' yet, there was 'no legislation except a few to regulate the conditions of labour in the Industry.' Jagjivan Ram went on to highlight the salient features of the Bill. He dealt on issues related to the appointment of inspecting officers, surgeons, providing maternity benefits, provisions of creches, supply of drinking water, housing accommodation, and measures such as regulating the working hours and prohibition of children below twelve years to work in the tea plantations. The Parliament of India adopted the motion of the Bill after some revisions on 15th October 1951. The Bill is known as the Plantation Labour Act. Till date, this Act

⁸ D. V. Rege was the Chairman, Teja Singh Sahni was the Secretary, and there were three additional members, namely: B. P. Adarkar, Ahmad Mukhtar, and S. R. Deshpande. Rege submitted the report on 20th October 1945, and Government of India published this report in 1946

regulates the contract between the employers and the employees in the tea plantation industry in Assam. Thus, one can see that in the vision of Independent India, the recommendations of Rege Committee served as the foundation on which the edifices of the labour legislation were laid.

These developments bring us to another important question. How were the workers of the tea plantation industry perceived by the new nation? During the colonial period, the official term used for the indentured labourers was 'coolies'. Contrary to this, in the nationalist imagination, the experiences of the coolies were seen akin to slaves. Since the 1870s, articles, stories, plays, dramas, poems, and books were written around the world of the tea plantation workers of Assam which highlighted the oppressive and exploitative conditions under which the workers lived and worked. Thus in the nationalist imagination, by the first half of the twentieth century, the word coolie was seen as a derogatory term that had acquired a pejorative meaning. Simultaneously, most of the trade unions, especially, the one led by the CPI held the view that the workers would be the harbingers of revolution. Therefore, they advocated for working-class unity. In its pursuit of uniting the workers from all sectors, it had introduced 'mazdoor' as a new political term to designate the workers. In Assam too, some of the major trade unions, namely: the AITUC and the Assam branch of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) expressed their reservations on the usage of the term 'coolie'. As a result, in 1949, the government of Assam discontinued the usage of the term 'coolie'. It was replaced by the word 'mazdoor' and labour and the same year, the government of Assam created a labour department. Simultaneously, in 1949, a memorandum was received by the government of India from D. G. Baran of Durban, South Africa, who was in the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations. He requested the government of India to abolish the term coolie and replace it with either 'bhai' or 'porter'. He also emphasised that the abolishment of the word coolie in India would 'help the prestige of Indians living abroad.' Taking due note of the above representation, in June 1950, the Government of India released a press note to encourage the use of the term mazdoor to represent the same class of workers now termed coolies. This change in the temperament of the Indian state in renaming the coolies as mazdoors, indicates that the newly constituted Indian state was guided by a sentiment of equality and dignity of labour. Now, in the perception of the nation, the workers were seen as independent citizens who through their sweat and blood would toil for a new and industrialised India. While the above step ensured dignity to the workers, there were other interventions too that went on to shape the future of the plantation workers.

In 1951, the government of Assam meddled with the lives of the tea and ex-tea garden workers by enumerating and placing them in the category of Other Backward Classes. Three decades ago, that is, in 1921, the tea and ex- tea garden workers were categorised as 'Depressed Class'. A decade later, in the 1931, they were separated from Depressed Class and were categorised as a single caste, i.e., 'tea garden cooly caste.' A decade later, in 1941, there was another development. The tea garden cooly castes of 1931 were enumerated as 'garden tribes'. Now, they were included in the category of Scheduled Tribe. This step increased the population of Scheduled Tribes.

The continuous meddling with the population of depressed classes in Assam and the reshuffling of the tea garden workers between the categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribe created confusion during the Constituent Assembly Debates. It also shows the complexities of enumeration and categorisations. The complexities came to surface during the Constituent Assembly Debates. Nibaran Chandra Laskar represented the Scheduled Caste population of Assam during the Constituent Assembly Debates. He argued that in the Census of 1941, eighty percent of the people enumerated as Scheduled Tribe were Hindus, and, therefore, he stressed that they should be enumerated as Scheduled Caste. In the Constituent Assembly Debates, Kuladhar Chaliha, the representative of Indian National Congress from Assam agreed that there were 'discrepancies' in the Census of 1941. He assured the members that 'in the next census, such sort of things will not occur, and that things will be just and equitable.' However, the assurance ended in rhetoric. In the census of 1951, the tea and ex-tea garden workers were excluded from the category of depressed class. Now, the government enumerated them as 'Tea Gardens Tribe'. It included the following communities, namely: Gonds, Mundas, Khonds, Oraons, Santhals, Savaras, and Pans. All these communities were placed in the category of Other Backward Class.

This reordering was done on the ground that it would 'not disturb the local political structure.' The above step also shows that in the broader visions of the elected representatives of Assam, tea garden workers were outsiders. Most politicians in Assam felt that the inclusion of the tea garden workers in the category of either Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe would disturb the local political arithmetic. The above step taken by the Government of Assam proved to be of far-reaching consequences. The youths, the political representatives and intelligentsia of the tea and ex-tea garden workers saw this as a 'betrayal'. This conclusion can be drawn from the fact that even in contemporary times the tea and ex-tea garden workers have been demanding to be recognised as Scheduled Tribes. The meddling and the reshuffling with the workers population also shows that despite certain distinct traits,

there were many overlaps between the categories of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, which made it difficult for the enumerators to fix them into a category. Moreover, given the lack of political will—as there was no one to argue for the case of the workers and build political pressure for their inclusion into a category, and given the tensions of local arithmetic of politics which meant that if the tea and ex-tea garden workers were enumerated as Scheduled Caste/Tribe—the ‘indigenous’ population of the reserved categories would have to compete for opportunities with the tea garden workers. Under the given circumstances, the political class of Assam failed to deliberate on the socio-cultural-political and economic status of the workers and enumerated the workers as Other Backward Class.

Simultaneously, the Constitution of India abolished the provision of recognising the ‘interest groups’ as a political category. As per the provisions of the Government of India Act of 1935, four seats were assured to the tea garden workers in the legislature, which were known as labour constituencies. The provincial elections in 1937 and 1946 saw the election of four labour leaders from these reserved labour constituencies. But in the first Assembly election (1952) held in Assam after independence, the tea garden labourers were denied representation as labourers and were required to fight elections from general constituencies. Based on their networks and affiliations with big political parties (principally, the Indian National Congress), some representatives from the tea gardens were elected. However, for most of the workers—the road to politics was closed. It was the disenfranchisement of a particular kind. During the colonial period the Census Commissioners had time and again brought to light the backwardness of the tea garden workers. But during the constituent Assembly Debates, these observations were not taken into consideration, and as a result, the tea garden workers were excluded from political representation. Time and again, the intelligentsia among both the tea and ex-tea garden workers have accused the government of India and the makers of the constitution of depriving the people the right to communal representation. But these representations and accusations keep echoing without any substantial gain.

III

Tea was shaped my movement and migration of labour force. Tea was one of the primary attractions for impoverished peasants and tribes and every year, thousands of impoverished poor were recruited and brought of the province of Assam from the far flung areas of United Provinces, Central Provinces, Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and tracts of Chotanagpur and Madras Presidency. These labour force were called coolies. After independence flourishing of the nation was prioritised, industrialisation received the primary focus of the state, and national

economic progress was to be measured by evaluating the level of industrialisation. The first commission constituted by the government of independent India to understand the nature of the plantation industry submitted its report in 1956. The focus was not on labour, but on increasing the productivity. It suggested measures such as the necessity for proper training, need for labour-saving equipment and devices, regulating surplus-labour by family planning, repatriating the surplus-labour, fixing retirement age of the workers, etc. The Commission also emphasised that 'a better way of addressing the question of increasing the productivity of labour would not be 'how to make labour productive' but 'how to make labour more willing'. The objective was to decrease the cost of production, boost production, and strengthen the national economy. In the larger vision of a robust industrialised nation, workers had to be made 'enthusiastic', 'loyal', and 'skilled'. It was to be a new age industry where the 'surplus labour' would be repatriated and the 'old' worker would retire 'making room for the young. Thus one can see that in the years after independence, the government was eager to develop and expand the tea industry and the principles of utilitarianism were applied. Utilitarianism meant that for the 'greater good' of the nation, it was essential to introduce measures to increase industrial production. In this utilitarian view, the flow, mobility, and productivity of labour would be determined not just by the demands of the industry, but also by the grammar of regional politics.

The debates on who constituted 'surplus labour', who would stay in Assam, and who would be repatriated to their home districts were shaped by the rising tide of regional nationalism in the 1940s and the 50s. In the utilitarian visions of the Indian state, the people were either treated as resources or as a liability. The regional power dynamics in the state of Assam, and the growing regional nationalism also facilitated in creating these binaries. With increasing unemployment, and with the crisis in the tea industry looming large, the unemployed workers were seen as liabilities.

In the colonial period, the recruiting of labour for the tea industry from outside the province of Assam was not seen as a liability. As a result, in the years from 1873 to 1947, more than three million 'coolies' were recruited and transported to Assam. The flow of labour from outside the province of Assam continued until 1960. However, after 1930, the numbers of imported labourers showed a considerable reduction. Between 1930 to 1950, six lakh fifteen thousand labourers were imported from outside the state of Assam. During the same period, thirteen lakh fifty-nine thousand local labourers were recruited. It meant that the overall share of local labourers increased to 54.74 per cent as compared to the labourers recruited from outside the state. This rise in the share of local labourers was the result of a hundred years of

migration—most of the labourers who came decided to stay back in Assam and made efforts to make it their home. The labourers whose contracts expired were known as time-expired labourers. While some labourers chose to pursue other vocations, there were many others who chose to settle down in bastis (villages) around tea gardens. Some labourers re-engaged with the tea industry after receiving bonus. The increasing share of time-expired labourers ensured the tea industry of a seasonal flow of labour. During the plucking season, which was generally the busy season, some of the time-expired labourers worked as temporary labourers.

While migration which was integral to the expansion of empire, was now counted as a problem within the visions of the nation state. It was argued that migration resulted in ‘surplus labour’. In the 1950s, the government of Assam was anxious about relieving the ‘problem of ‘surplus labour’. Discussions were held by the Assam government to look into the possibilities of banning the recruitment of immigrant labour to Assam. Terms such as immigration and immigrant acquired negative meaning with the coming up of the new nation. Now, the government made efforts to persuade the workers to migrate from gardens with ‘surplus labour’ to those gardens, which were labour deficient, and efforts were also made to repatriate the surplus labour to their home districts.

Furthermore, as migration was read as a problem, this problem was tackled by the state government by restricting the entry of immigrant labour and thus forcing the tea estates to employ the surplus labour in the estates and villages.’ The government of Assam repeatedly emphasised that the recruitment of labour from outside Assam should be stopped and in 1960 the recruitment of labourers from outside the territory of Assam formally came to an end.

Ever since 1930, migration was seen as a problem within the political discourse of Assam. With rising trends of unemployment, the political debates revolved around the notion of surplus labour. It was argued that continuous recruitment in the tea industry had given rise to the problem of surplus labour. The provincial leaders attached negative value to migration and it was being repeatedly emphasised that Assam did not have the capacity to absorb those labourers whose contracts had expired. The trend of repatriation of the labour force to their home districts was on the rise, and in the years between 1937-1938 to 1947, 1,82,000 labourers were repatriated to their home districts. After independence, this trend was further intensified. Moreover, the political debates in Assam were more about absorbing the sons of the soil than about absorbing those who were from outside. Thus the binary of ‘indigenous’ versus ‘outsider’ was another important trend that one gets to see during the phase of decolonisation. In the years between 1947 to 1958-59, 3 lakh 4 thousand labourers were

repatriated. The share of labour repatriation, therefore saw a 39 per cent increase in the decade after independence when compared to the decade before independence.

Closing the gates of migration and attaching negative value to migration was the first victory of ethno-nationalist dimensions of politics. The rhetoric of sons of the soil versus outsider went on to shape the regional and national politics of Assam. 70 years later, the blossoming and polarization over the National Register of Citizens should not be seen as a surprise. It should therefore be seen as a culmination of a Malthusian gaze of politics. The phase of decolonisation should therefore be read as a phase that sowed the seeds of ethno-nationalism, whereby both the figure of the migrant and the process of migration was seen as antithetical to the flourishing of the region. The politics over labour, migrant and migration clearly reveals that Malthusian gaze of reading population as a 'problem' was at work.

As to the question of what did independence signify for the workers of the tea plantations, the context needs to be located within the visions of the nation for the workers and simultaneously the financial crisis of the tea industry. While the nation expected workers to be 'skilled', 'robust', 'fit' and 'hard-working', the crisis of the tea industry denied even the basic necessities to the workers. For many of the tea garden workers, independence was accompanied by 'starvation' and work without wages. In December 1952, as many as 12 tea gardens were reported to have been closed, which rendered around sixteen thousand workers jobless. In the next few months, around 72 gardens in Cachar district alone closed, leaving 42,000 workers jobless out of which only six re-opened. As per an official enquiry conducted in 1954, 96 percent of tea garden labourers in Cachar district, and 88 percent in Assam Valley were found to be 'irretrievably lost in debt.' During this period of crisis, the Government of Assam requested the workers to 'accept cheerfully its decision to cut their minimum wages given the difficulties facing the industry.' In the press note release, the government stated that 'the provision was purely temporary and should the prices of tea look up the government would be most happy to restore immediately the first sacrifices made by labour.' Furthermore, it added that the 'industry would appreciate the generous sacrifice of the workers and make every endeavour to re-open immediately the gardens which had closed.' As a result of this crisis, the food that was supplied to the workers on a concessional price was stopped.

The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee also urged upon the government to take immediate steps to resolve the crisis. It adopted a resolution on 2nd July 1951 to express concern over the decision of the Assam government to take over un utilised lands in the tea gardens. The APCC found out that in many of the tea gardens of Cachar, there was a problem of 'surplus

labour'. It suggested that this problem could be resolved by 'distribution of surplus lands to the labourers so that they can earn their livelihoods by cultivating land.'

Therefore, it urged upon the government of Assam 'not to requisition lands of tea gardens', but to 'initiate a policy of settling such lands with surplus labour in tea gardens of Cachar'. But since 1951 onwards, the questions of labour were linked to the questions of resources in the state. On 2nd July 1951, the APCC decided to ask the government to stop recruitment from outside Assam because it felt that with increase in recruitment the 'pressure on land would increase.' A year later, on 30th May 1952, the APCC reversed its earlier held position of distributing lands to the 'surplus labour'. Now, it suggested that the government should not allot land to 'anybody except the bonafide agriculturists.' It was also of the opinion that the 'protection of the interest of the labour could easily be given by fixation of minimum wages, sharing of profits, etc.' In the later years, the APCC raised the demand of employing the 'children of the soil' as managers and other higher grade services in industries such as tea, oil, coal, and river transport.

Unemployment, wage-less work, and hunger forced workers to come out in the streets and raise their demands. Thus resistance became a tool for negotiations. In 1955, there were 48 instances of strikes led by the workers in the tea gardens of Assam out of which 46 were in the Assam Valley which involved 41,060 workers. In Surma Valley, there were two instances of strikes. A total of 363 workers took part in these two strikes in Surma Valley. In 1957, there were 18 strikes in the tea gardens of Assam in which a total of 7809 workers participated. There was a further upsurge in the number of strikes particularly, in the months from August to December of 1957. On 6th August 1957, about 250 tea garden labourers of Deha tea estate in Sibsagar district, led by the Cha Mazdoor Union and Communist Party of India, went on strike. The labourers demanded a bonus for the year 1955 as well as compensation for the cuts in ration. They resumed their duty after the district magistrate assured them that their legitimate demands would be fulfilled after a due enquiry by a government labour officer. On 11th August 1957, the dispute was reported to be amicably settled by the labour officer and Cha Mazdoor Union. On 17th August 1957, the labourers of Barfalong and Daria tea estates in Sibsagar district resorted to a strike for non-receipt of cash allowance in lieu of rice concession, and double wage for working on Sundays. However, because of the intervention of the trade unions, the labourers called off their strike and returned to work on 24th August. Simultaneously, on 20th August 1957, about 200 workers of Durgapur tea estate in the Dibrugarh district struck work primarily because they were not paid the arrears of bonus.

On 18th and 19th September 1957, around 500 labourers of Dikhu Hengera tea estate in Sibsagar district resorted to strike for two days and demanded supply of better quality of ration. On 22nd September 1957, about 400 labourers of Anandabag tea estate, in Lakhimpur district, surrounded the garden office and assaulted the manager, agent, and some assistants. They did so, because on the previous day, the manager of the garden had detained the labourers for plucking till late hours and man-handled some of the factory labourers. It was also reported that the manager sustained injuries because of the assault by the workers. Three days later, on 25th September 1957, about 250 women labourers of Bihubor tea estate in Sibsagar district surrounded the manager's bungalow and demanded to be paid bonus arrears. During the first half of October 1957, the labourers of Hatigarh-Bagjan tea estate in Sibsagar district abstained from work for a day as a protest against the indifference of the management in fulfilling certain agreed terms. They reported for duties the next day at the intervention of the Labour Officer who assured them that their grievances would be looked into.

Seeing the growing resistance in the tea gardens, the government of Assam declared it as a 'growing' signs of 'lawlessness'. To check this 'lawlessness', the government constituted a twelve-member committee to find out the reasons behind this. In the meanwhile, the labourers of the Beheating tea estate in Lakhimpur district struck work from 23rd October 1957 to demand an increase in their wages. Simultaneously, the labourers of Santhali tea estate in Cachar district 'threatened to sell the garden properties for realisation of their wages' which were not paid to them since 31st August 1957. In 1958, there were 13 strikes involving 4994 workers directly. The matters in dispute were wages, bonus, task, and high-handedness on the part of the staff and several others. All these strikes were reported to be of short duration. They were settled either by direct negotiations or through the mediation of the government labour officer. In 1959, there were 13 strikes involving 7365 workers.

After a decade of "sacrifice" and resistance by the workers, the government of Assam in 1959 decided to increase the wages of the workers by twenty annas for adults, and ten annas for minors per day. This decision was taken unanimously in a meeting presided by the labour minister of the state, K. P. Tripathi. Despite this, there was a huge disparity in the wages earned by workers employed in the tea industry in Assam. By the late 1950s, the monthly wage of men employed in tea plantation as varied from rupees seventeen to rupees twenty-three. For women, it ranged from rupees eleven to rupees twenty-one, and children earned between rupees six to rupees fourteen per month.

Conclusions:

From the above discussions, one can conclude that the two decades beginning from the 1940s to the 1960s were long and tiring for the workers, and the seed of independence awaited nourishment. Rather than mitigating the grievances of the workers, the Indian state prioritised the nation and nation building. In the utilitarian visions of the state, the workers were conceptualised either as resources or as liabilities. The elevation of 'coolie' to 'mazdoor' was a reflection that rhetorically the workers were cherished as resources. They were entrusted with the responsibility of toiling hard and building an industrialised nation.

The thesis that Indian state had socialist leanings which is often derived from the ideas of five year plans, welfare economics and the stress on expansion of industry is brought to question. The emphasis of the plantation enquiry commission was more on the idea of increasing productivity. The policy makers borrowed utilitarian ideas and applied it to both industry and labour. Within the frame of the "greater good" of the nation and region, workers were asked to sacrifice. The emphasis on the young and skilled labour, and retiring those who were unskilled and were in surplus was surely driven by utilitarian calculations. Tea industry was yet to be decolonised. Foreign capital continued to have a strong grip and the government of India readily surrendered to the idea that without the foreign capital the tea industry would die.

The paper also reveals that for the workers of tea industry this was a phase of uncertainty. They were at the receiving end of the high politics. While with the intervention of trade unions, the coolies were now named as mazdoors and were celebrated as economic assets of the nation, in real terms the workers lost on many grounds. In the 1950s and 1960s, most of the workers in the tea industry of Assam were laid off. The workers were asked to work on nominal wages, and many of the tea gardens closed. The workers were asked to sacrifice and work for the larger good of the industry, which would lead to an industrialized nation.

The distance between labour being considered as economic assets and as citizens was a long one. In the constituent Assembly debates, the question of whether tea garden workers should be seen within the frame of depressed classes went unresolved. In the years after independence, the keeping in view the regional dynamics, the labourers were categorised as Tea Garden's Tribe and placed in the category of other backward class, thereby opening a fissure that kept resurfacing time and again. The regional dynamics and the rise of ethno-nationalist idioms in politics meant that the tea and ex-tea garden workers would have to repeatedly rely on their utility, and make utility as their political tool to remain relevant in the domain of politics. The local power dynamics and the regional nationalism linked to the politics of the 'sons of the soil' meant that both the tea and ex-tea garden workers had to

continuously negotiate for their survival, dignity, and political representation in the state of Assam. Moreover, the deployment of the term such as ‘surplus labour’ and ‘lawless elements’, and with the gaining currency of the terms such as repatriation and ban of recruitment meant that the workers were forced to assert their own rights. Now, they were required to think: how to transform from being perceived as a liability to being cherished as a resource.

We also discussed that prior to 1947, labour had political representation, as there were labour constituencies. The abolishing of these constituencies was a major break in terms of politics. Now, for political representation, the workers were dependent on the good will and mercy of big political parties. The Malthusian gaze of population being a problem meant that the ‘migrants’ were required to prove their utility and had to showcase how they were different from other ‘migrants, and why their presence was important. Socialist ideas if present were at distance and its music was yet to be heard in the tea gardens. Utilitarian ideas and Malthusian world view meant that the workers were forced to negotiate within its principles and not outside it. The conversation between the nation and the coolies also reveals that in the high politics that was played, coolie’s were secondary to both national and regional interest.