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**Wage Structure  
and Labour:  
Assam Valley  
Tea Plantations,  
1900-1947**

**Rana Partap Behal**



**V.V. Giri National Labour Institute**

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# **Wage Structure and Labour: Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1947**

**Rana Partap Behal**



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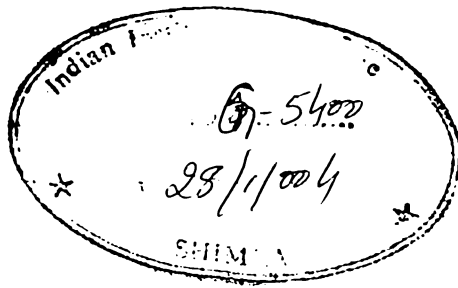
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Rana Pratap Behal is with Deshbandhu College, Delhi University, Delhi. The author is grateful to Prabhu Mohapatra and Babu P. Remesh for their valuable suggestions, which helped in revising an earlier draft of this paper.

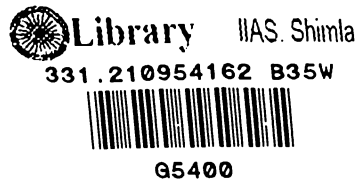
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## Preface

In July 1998, a new research programme, *Integrated Labour History Research Programme (ILHRP)*, was initiated at the V.V.Giri National Labour Institute, in collaboration with the *Association of Indian Labour Historians (AILH)*. The programme envisaged the establishment of an apex repository of labour history documents, an *Archive of Indian Labour History*, with special emphasis on digital storage and retrieval. Alongside this, it was felt that there is need to encourage substantive research on the neglected areas of labour history. A specialised programme, *Writing Labour History* was designed in 1999 to encourage historical research on labour. A first step in this direction was the commissioning of a series of thematic essays by renowned scholars in the field, covering a wide range of issues. The essays were discussed and presented at two workshops held in January 1999 and January 2000. Dr. Rana Behal's essay, '*Wage Structure and Labour: Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1947*', belongs to this series.

Plantation Industry in India is an enduring legacy of the colonial period, which was initiated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of indigo plantations. Gradually several new commodities came to form the staple of Indian exports in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Tea plantations were established in Assam in 1834 and rapidly grew in size and value to become the major exporting industry of India. At its height, not less than a million workers were employed in the Tea plantations of Assam, Darjeeling, Bengal Dooars and in the Western Ghats of South India. The labour force to these remote regions were imported over a long distance and were employed under stipulated contractual provisions regulating wages and working conditions under a severe work regime. The history of labour relations developed under the force of the incessant drive to increase production under global economic pressures is a fascinating part of Indian labour history. Many scholars argue that the Plantation employment conditions provided

a model for development of the broader industrial relations regime in the colonial period.

By its sheer size and spread plantations have deeply imprinted themselves on the labour landscape of India and the patterns developed in the colonial period continue to influence the structure of labour relations long after Independence even with major changes in the pattern of ownership and various welfare measures of the Government of India. A key feature of the Plantation industry was the strict control over the wage component as it formed a large part of the cost of production. This was necessitated largely by the fluctuations in the international demand and consequent price instability. These relations had direct effect on the living condition of the largely immigrant labour force.

Rana Behal's study takes up the case of the Assam tea plantations and specially the relation of the wage structure of the industry with various indices of workers' living standards. This is a little understood area of labour history of the plantation and the author makes a valuable contribution to this area. The structuring of the wage relations and constant struggle of the workers to defend their living standards form the core of this study. There is perhaps an important lesson to be derived from this study specially for the present times when the tea industry under the pressure of increasing globalisation is leading towards closure of gardens and, consequently, job loss to a large number of workers.

I hope that scholars and practitioners working in the area of labour history in general and plantation labour in particular would find this essay useful.



**Uday Kumar Varma**

Director

# **Wage Structure and Labour: Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1947**

## **I**

Tea plantations have been the major employer of wage labour in Assam Valley for nearly one and a half century. Majority of its labour force was by nature immigrant recruited from various parts of British India. Its spectacular expansion during the nineteenth century was followed by a steady growth in the twentieth century. In 1947 the three major tea producing districts of Assam Valley (or Brahmaputra Valley) viz., Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang: had a labour population of nearly three quarters of a million. This represented an increase of nearly 116 per cent from the figures of 1900. The total daily working strength of labour force (both permanent and temporary) in the above districts increased from 289,920 in 1900 to 394,799 in 1947.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I shall analyse the nature of wage structure in the Assam Valley tea plantations during 1900 and 1947. Most of the wage data used here relate to the three districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. Methodologically the analysis shall proceed in the following manner. Section I critically surveys the official methods of collection and compilation of wage data in order to highlight its severe limitations and the constraints encountered while analysing the wage trends, etc. In section II I have attempted a critical examination of the employers' claims of fair wage and comfortable living conditions of labour in the tea plantations. In this context the nature of the mode of payment, differentiation in wages and wage incentives have been examined. I also discuss the implications of concessions' like land grants to labourers for

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<sup>1</sup>Rana Partap Behal. "Some Aspects of the growth of the Tea Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) 1900-1947" Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, pp. 71-73.

private cultivation, subsidised rations and 'bonus'. In section III I have tried, within the limits set by the data, to construct a price index in order to get an idea of the trends in nominal and real wages. Finally in section IV I discuss the conditions of living of the plantation labourers.

In this section we shall critically survey the source material and the quantitative data on wages in the Assam Valley tea gardens. The most important source of information is the annual reports on the emigrant labour published by the Government of Assam till 1933. From 1934 onwards these reports were published by the office of the Controller of Emigrant Labour which had been constituted under the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act XXII of 1932. These reports contained, apart from other information regarding the emigrant labour in the province, the figures of average monthly earnings of different categories of labour in various tea districts for each year. For example, there are separate figures of average monthly earnings of men and women under the category of Act labour.<sup>2</sup> In the second category came the average monthly earnings of Non-Act labour with separate figures for men, women and children in each district.<sup>3</sup> With the repeal of Act XIII of 1859 in 1925 and Act VI of 1901 in 1932 the above two categories disappeared. From 1934 onward, when the newly passed Tea District Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932) came into effect, the wage figures were published under two different categories viz., settled labour and *faltu* or *basti* labour.<sup>4</sup> Under both these categories average monthly wage figures of men, women and children were published separately for each district every year.

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<sup>2</sup>All those who had been contracted under *Assam Labour and Immigration Act V of 1901* were called Act labour. The wage figures for this category were given only up to 1918-19 because after that year there was no more Act labour under employment.

<sup>3</sup>All those labourers who were not contracted under Act VI of 1901 or were mostly employed under the *Workman's Breach of Contract Act XIII of 1859* were included in this category.

<sup>4</sup>The term 'settled' referred to the permanently employed labour and '*faltu*' or '*basti*' to the temporary labour force.



First I shall discuss the methods of collection and compilation of wage statistics of the Act and Non-Act categories. This statistical information had been originally compiled by the district officials out of the wage returns submitted by the planters to the government. The district officials worked out average monthly earnings of each category of labour for each district from these returns to be published in the annual reports. At this point there is an important question to be asked: to what extent do these figures represent the actual earnings of the labour force in the tea gardens? Apparently the rules of labour law had been strictly followed. But a closer scrutiny of the methods of collection and compilation of the wage statistics shows major flaws making their accuracy highly suspect.

In the first place, the district officials compiled the averages out of the statistical information submitted by the planters without any system of ascertaining their accuracy even when it was well known that the latter often did not provide correct information.<sup>5</sup> Though it was a violation of the provisions of labour laws the government never reprimanded the planters for concealing the actual earnings of labour and for providing inflated figures. Nor was any attempt made to establish any government agency, which could collect this information independently or regularly check the accuracy of the returns submitted by planters. Similar situation existed with regard to the data on vital statistics concerning the tea garden labour in the province. The planters submitted statistical on labour mortality in their respective estates. This information was often not correct (as we shall show later) but, as the Controller of Emigrant Labour admitted, there was no government agency for the registration of births and deaths in tea gardens.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Annual Report on the Production of Tea in India*, 1902, p.1 Hereafter referred as Production Report.

<sup>6</sup> Government of Assam, General and Judicial Department, Immigration Branch B, Nos. 127-35, September, 1934, p.20

Besides, the planters submitted the returns in an arbitrary manner. For example, until 1905-06 the wage returns were submitted only for the last six months of the year. Therefore, the yearly average of the monthly earnings were calculated on the basis of last six months' returns and not on the basis of twelve months' earnings.<sup>7</sup> This was especially misleading because the last six months of the year included the peak season of work during which the earnings of labour were higher compared to the slack period. After 1905-06 this practice was discarded. Now the yearly averages of monthly earnings were worked out on the basis of figures for two months only i.e., March and September. This practice was followed both in case of Act and Non-Act labour. The argument in defense of such a practice was that March and September represented the slack and peak periods respectively. This again was an arbitrary method. While it is true that these two months fall in the slack and peak period, it does not necessarily follow that the earnings of the labour during these two months were also the lowest and highest in the year. Moreover, no record of the original wage returns was maintained. The district officials were instructed to destroy all the original returns of the wages immediately after the compilation of yearly average had been completed.<sup>8</sup> Thus any possibility of a cross examination of officially published time series was also destroyed.

There is another problem with regard to the accuracy of the above wage statistics. The planters' supporters and some other official reports claimed that the labourers supplemented their cash earnings through *ticca* work and other forms of concessions which they were required to give under the labour laws.<sup>9</sup> This implies that the wage figures published in Assam Government's annual

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<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report on Immigrant Labour in Assam, 1901*, p.6 Hereafter referred as Assam Labour Report.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Eastern Bengal/Assam, Department of Commerce and Industry, B Proceedings, Nos. 356/360, May, 1905, p.9.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967). Most of the Annual Reports on Production of Tea in India. Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, and the planters' representatives in the Central Legislative Council made these claims.

reports did not represent the actual earnings but only the cash earnings excluding the supplementary income. On the contrary, however, all the annual reports on emigrant labour in Assam, invariably pointed out that the wage figures represented “average monthly cash wages including *ticca*, subsistence allowances, value of diet or rations provided in lieu of wages or subsistence allowances” in the case of both Act and non-Act labour.<sup>10</sup> Thus it appears that these average monthly wage figures represented more than the cash earnings i.e., it included the value of most ‘concessions’ the planters were supposed to have provided the labour force as well as the part-time or overtime earnings in the form of *ticca* work.

The fourth difficulty in determining the accuracy of wage statistics arises from the two different sets of figures published under the heading of ‘monthly average earnings’ in the Assam labour reports. Both sets of figures are published under further sub-headings: (a) calculated on the basis of total number of labourers on the gardens books; (b) calculated on the basis of daily working strength.<sup>11</sup> The figures in set (a) were calculated by dividing the total wage payment with the total number of labour on the books during the above two months. And in the case of set (b) the figures were calculated by dividing the total wage payment with the daily working strength of the labour force during the same two months in each year. The figures in set (a) are lower compared to the figures in set (b). But the reports did not make it clear as to which set presented the actual earnings of the labour force. And from 1925-26 onwards the reports only published the figures given in set (b). Given the fact that plantations experienced a very high rate of absenteeism (nearly 25 per cent) the figures in set (b) could not be taken as representing actual earnings.<sup>12</sup> These figures simply

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<sup>10</sup> Assam Labour Report. 1900, 1904-05.

<sup>11</sup> The yearly average of the monthly average earnings in both sets of figures were calculated on the basis of earnings during two typical months, i.e., March and September in each year.

<sup>12</sup> Royal Commission Report, 1931, p. 387; Behal, op. cit, Appendix Table IV, p. 357.

represented what a labour would earn if he or she had worked on every single day of the month.

In 1933 serious objection was raised against this erroneous practice by Mr Lee, the newly appointed Controller of Emigrant Labour. In his confidential report to the Government of India he pointed out that the wage statistics published in the annual reports of Government of Assam were 'misleading'. In his opinion only the wage figures earlier published under set (a) represented the actual earnings of labour which were less compared to the set (b).<sup>13</sup> In his reply Mr Clow, a senior official in the Department of Industry and Labour, Government of India agreed with the Controller of Emigrant Labour that "the present method of calculating the average monthly cash earnings is open to serious objection as the figures do not represent what they purport to represent and are definitely misleading". But the government was not in favour of publishing the substitute figures of average monthly earnings calculated on the basis of total number of labour on the garden books. The reason given for this was that it will show a big drop in the figures of average earnings which "might be misinterpreted by the public".<sup>14</sup> Instead it was suggested that the present figures in set (b) should be substituted by the average amount earned by a labourer in a day's work. This could be obtained by dividing the total wage payment by the number of working days. "This will not lend itself to misleading comparisons, and it would give a figure representing something real, whereas the present figures represent something that borders on the imaginary."<sup>15</sup> However, the Emigrant Labour reports published three sets of figures, which included the former two sets of figures as well as the figures representing average daily earnings of all categories of labour. Unfortunately most other sources which published the figures of average monthly earnings of tea labour

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<sup>13</sup> Lee's letter dated 21st November 1933, marked *Confidential* to Mr. A. J. Clow of the Department of Industry and Labour, Government of India. See Government of Assam, General and Judicial Department, Immigration Branch B, Nos. 127-35, September 1934, P. 20.

<sup>14</sup> A. J. Clow's letter to Mr Lee dated 6th December 1933, in *ibid*, p. 21

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

simply reproduced the figures from Assam Labour Reports. For example, the annual reports on production of tea (1900-1929) and the Indian Tea Statistics (1930-1946) reproduced the provincial averages of monthly earnings which were originally published in the Assam Labour Reports respectively. Similarly, Rege's report in 1946 also reproduced the wage figures published in the latter sources. The same practice was repeated in the Indian Labour Year Books.

Deshpande's report (1948), however, adopted a completely different method of calculating (based on data collected through sample survey) weekly average earnings and expenses of tea garden labour families in Assam. In Assam Valley 560 family budgets of labour out of twenty gardens were selected for tabulation.<sup>16</sup> The average size of the family was determined at 4.15 persons including earning and non-earning members (men, women and children). Out of these the number of earning persons was 2.44 and 1.71 were dependents.<sup>17</sup> While calculating the weekly family income of tea garden labour Deshpande included wages, *ticca* earnings, dearness allowance, bonus, money value of concessions and income from other sources like land, etc.<sup>18</sup> Using this method the Enquiry Committee calculated the weekly income earned by 2.44 persons (of an average family of 4.15 persons) as Rs.10.82.<sup>19</sup> As compared to this the nominal wages of two adult (man and woman) and a child works out to be Rs. 8.42 per week (the averages of three districts combined) for 1947. This figure also includes the value of concessions and *ticca* earnings<sup>20</sup> Thus Deshpande's estimated figure is 22 per cent higher compared to the figure worked out from the official time series.

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<sup>16</sup> S.R. Deshpande, *Report on an Enquiring into the Cost and Standard of Living of Plantation Workers in Assam and Bengal*. 1948. p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Table XI, p. 24 and p.22.

<sup>18</sup> "The money value of concessions was evaluated by taking into account the difference between the market prices of the selected commodities and the concession rates at which they were supplied to the workers by the management," *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, Tables XIII and XIV, pp. 27 and 28 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Worked out of Table 3.

Two factors are responsible for this. First the money value of concessions and, second, dearness allowance. The assumption behind the first seems to be that all labourers received full concessions. This is not entirely correct as we shall show later. It was clear from the inspection reports of the district officials that 'sickness allowance', 'subsistence rations' and 'bonus' did not always functioned as concessions. Secondly, the dearness allowance was officially introduced only in February, 1947.<sup>21</sup> However from the past experience of antipathy of planters towards provisions regarding labour welfare in the law it would be too optimistic to expect them to have implemented the dearness allowance clause immediately. The fact that the official annual report of the Controller of Emigrant Labour did not include this in its published wage figures for 1947 strengthens our argument. Moreover, the dearness allowance and the money value of concessions constituted nearly 41 per cent of the total weekly earnings of a labour family in Deshpande's calculations.<sup>22</sup> Deshpande accepted that 41 per cent of the total wages were actually earned in kind by a labour family. This appears to be a very high figure in the light of the evidence (shown below in section II) available in the inspection reports of the district officials which render such claims of concessions highly suspect.

There is only one set of separate wage figures available outside the above source which in our view fairly represents the average monthly earnings of the labour force. This set of figures are available only for the year 1900 and 1901 and were reported in the unpublished inspection reports conducted by the district officials in some of the tea districts in Assam Valley. These figures were collected and compiled out of the original books maintained in the planters' offices in the tea estates by the inspecting officials. Unfortunately, we have not come across any other such report for the rest of the period of our study.

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<sup>21</sup> Deshpande, *op. cit.*, p. 8

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Table XIV, p. 28

These figures show that wages earned by the labour in the inspected tea estates were much lower compared to those published in Assam Labour Reports of 1900 and 1901. For example the yearly average monthly earnings (based on figures for 12 months during 1900) of labour in Latabari Tea Estate of Sibsagar district were Rs. 3.48 and Rs. 2.74 for men and women respectively.<sup>23</sup> Compared to this the wage figures published in the official time series for the corresponding year were much higher, i.e. Rs. 5.38, Rs. 5.30 and Rs.4.89 per men, Rs. 4.07, Rs.4.06 and Rs.3.92 for women in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.<sup>24</sup> Similarly the yearly average of monthly earnings (based on the figures of January and June, 1901) of non-Act labourers in Sadhrugope, Shakemato and Aberdeen tea estates (Darrang) were Rs.3.54, Rs.1.96 and Rs.1.30 for men, women and children respectively.<sup>25</sup> Comparatively the figures of monthly earnings for the yearly average of the corresponding year in the official time series were higher, i.e. Rs. 5.27, Rs. 5.31 and Rs.5.06 for Men, Rs. 3.57, Rs.3.78 and Rs.3.56 for women and Rs.2.23, Rs. 2.46 and Rs. 2.44 for children in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Following the above arguments about the limitation of wage data published in the Assam Government reports on emigrant labour and on the basis of its comparison with the figures given in the inspection reports for the corresponding years (1900-1901) we put forward our main proposition: that the data published in both set (a) and (b) in Assam Labour Reports represented inflated figures of average monthly earnings for each year. Our contention is based on the following arguments:

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<sup>23</sup> Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration, A Proceedings, No.6-8, File No. 90, 1901, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Assam Labour Report, 1900,p. 10

<sup>25</sup> Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration, A. Proceedings, No.6, File No.81, 1901, pp. 944, 947; Behal, op. cit.. Table 5.4, p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> Assam Labour Report, 1901

Under the prevailing laws for the emigrant labour in Assam the planters were required to pay a minimum fixed rate of wage to their labour force. But in the pre-1900 period the wages paid to the labour were generally below the statutory minimum rates of Rs, 5.00 and Rs.400 for men and women respectively.<sup>27</sup> The respective Chief Commissioners, however, chose to ignore this obvious breach of the labour law. When Henry Cotton suggested a raise in the wages of tea labour, his major argument in support of his recommendation were the above facts: “The accuracy of the statements of figures given in the Provincial Immigration Annual Reports, obtained from the employers’ accounts, is perhaps open to question, and there is reason to believe that the average returned in recent years are in excess of the wages actually paid”.<sup>28</sup>

The bitter public controversy which took place between Cotton and the planters over the question of wages during his tenure as the Chief Commissioner of Assam made the planters somewhat cautious.<sup>29</sup> Hence the necessity to publish inflated wage figures which would conform with the statutory minimum rates instead of actually paying stipulated wages. This was successfully achieved by adopting arbitrary methods of collection and compilation of wage returns. This could not have been done without the sanction and active support of the colonial bureaucracy.

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<sup>27</sup> See Behal, op. cit., Table 1.7, p. 41

<sup>28</sup> *Proceedings of the Central Legislative Council*, 1901 Vol. XII. p. 23. Hereafter referred as PCCC.

<sup>29</sup> For details see Behal, op. cit., Ch. III



## II

The general impression of the material conditions of labour in the Assam tea plantations projected by the planters and the colonial state was one of 'comfort' and 'well-being'. This impression was reinforced by claims that labour was paid well enough not only to live in 'comfort' but also even to save. For example, the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in 1906 wrote: "on the whole the wages paid to the labourers are sufficient to keep them in comfort, and even to enable them with the practice of a little thrift to save money".<sup>30</sup> The picture painted of the permanently settled labour was even rosier. It was claimed that the object of such emigrants was not, as a rule, to save money but rather to lead a 'pleasant' life. The emigrants of aboriginal stock were specifically mentioned as belonging to this category. "He works enough to provide himself with food and clothing and a few luxuries, and if he has any surplus cash, he spends a good deal of it in drinking, gambling, and cockfighting. The standard of living of the ordinary coolie is certainly much in advance of what it would be in his own country... In addition to the ordinary supplies, fowls, ducks, and fish are largely bought, and there is a general air of prosperity about the holiday making crowd, which is convincing proof that the coolie is fairly well off in his new home".<sup>31</sup> It was further pointed out that the cash wage did not represent the total earnings of the labour, since it was supplemented by grants of cultivable land, either free or for nominal payments, as well as by the provision of cheap subsidised rice during certain periods.<sup>32</sup> Mr. Buckingham, a representative of planters in the Central Legislative Council, had provided a longer list of such supplementary sources of income

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<sup>30</sup> *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*. 1906 p. 71. Hereafter referred as RALEC, 1906

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 73

<sup>32</sup> Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 297

by including in this category medical comforts, sickness allowances, free diet for sick 'coolies', free housing, firewood, etc.<sup>33</sup>

Another factor supposedly contributing to the 'prosperity' and 'luxurious' living of tea garden labour was said to be the much higher "family-wage" as compared to the individual earnings. It was asserted for purposes of comparison, that plantations, by employing men, women and children afforded the labouring family a much higher 'family-wage' than in other major industries in the organised sector.<sup>34</sup> In the plantations, therefore, there were "comparatively few non-working dependents in a working class family. The effect of this on the standard of living is important, for, even with low individual earnings, the total family income is sufficiently high to prevent the worker from feeling the pinch of poverty."<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the "concessions" and "family-wage", *ticca* (over-time) earnings were considered to be yet another source of income, it was said, because the standard daily wage, *hariza*, was fixed with regard to the daily task, *nirikh*, which it was claimed could be completed in four to five hours.<sup>36</sup> After the completion of this daily task the labour had the 'liberty' to undertake *ticca* work.<sup>37</sup>

In order to examine the validity of these claims it is essential to analyse the different features of the wage structure in the Assam Valley tea plantations. Foremost amongst these was the fact that the foundations of the wage structure lay in the indenture system.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>PCLC, 1901, Vol. XL, p.51. *Annual Detailed Report of the General Committee of Indian Tea Association, 1900. pp. 129-30.* Hereafter referred as ITA Report, 1900. Another spokesman of the industry provided a longer list of "concessions" which included "free housing, sanitation, water supply, medical attendance, fixed wages security against famine, and subsistence when sick" *The Times*. April 4, 1902, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup>PCLC 1901, Vol. XL, p. 52; *Royal Commission, 1931, P.385; Griffiths, op. cit., p. 297.*

<sup>35</sup>*Royal Commission, 1931, p. 385*

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid. p. 383; Griffiths, op. cit.. p. 299*

<sup>37</sup>*Griffiths, op. cit.. p. 299.*

<sup>38</sup>For details on the nature of indenture system see Behal, *op. cit., Chapter I*

Under this system labour was bound to the gardens for a period of 5 years on the basis of a fixed rate of payment. The wage-rate was fixed by the employers and thrust upon the labour. Even more crucial was the fact that planters, in the period when the industry grew rapidly and became highly organised, also managed to build a mechanism for controlling labour mobility within the tea districts. The Indian Tea Association successfully enforced what came to be known as the “wage agreement” (an agreement between the employers themselves) which functioned as an effective constraint on labour mobility. Under the provisions of the “wage agreement” every employer agreed not to pay labour wages higher than those paid by his neighbours.<sup>39</sup> In other words the “wage agreement” imposed uniformity in wages and drastically weakened the power of labour to secure better wages or working conditions.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, the planters through their use extra-legal authority, successfully checked the emergence of any labour organization.<sup>41</sup> This put labour in a truly helpless position vis-a-vis the employers in the tea gardens. Even the Royal Commission, though not objecting to the “wage agreement”, pointed out that “workers suffer owing to the absence of any organisation on their side to counteract the powerful combination of their employers.”<sup>42</sup>

Another important feature was that the wage payments were made under two distinct systems, i.e., (1) the *hariza* and *ticca* system, and (2) the unit system. The wages of tea garden labour were generally piece-work earnings depending upon the quantity and quality of the work turned out. Whether expressed in terms of a daily or a monthly wage, they were contingent upon the execution of a standard daily task or *nirikh*, the payment for which was known as *hazira*. The labourer who completed the full *nirikh* on each working day of the month was entitled to receive the

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<sup>39</sup>Royal Commission. 1931, p. 386

<sup>40</sup>There was also a “gentlemen’s agreement” which totally deprived the labour of his ability to seek employment in another tea garden even under the same terms. Behal, op. cit., Chapter IV, p. 166

<sup>41</sup>Ibid. Chapters IV and VI.

<sup>42</sup>Royal Commission, 1931) p. 386

monthly wage.<sup>43</sup> Only after completing the daily task was a labourer entitled to earn *ticca* earnings. The Assam Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 expressed its doubts in this regard: "There are obvious limitations to the possibilities of *ticca* earnings. The rule of the maximum efficiency at the minimum cost holds good in tea gardens as in other industries."<sup>44</sup> In 1946 Rege reported that " *ticca* earnings constitute a very small proportion of the total cash earnings of workers. It was found that such earnings were more in Indian-owned gardens, which are generally short of labour and therefore offer more *ticca* to their labourers."<sup>45</sup> The unit system, a modified version of *hazira* and *ticca* system, was a later innovation. Under this system the payment was made for each unit of work done which, in the case of hoeing and pruning, was based on the one-anna unit and, in the case of plucking, on the one-pice unit.<sup>46</sup>

One major flaw in both these modes of wage payments was the fact that while the daily task was linked with the fixed minimum statutory wage, the volume of work per unit or per *nirikh* was decided by the employers. This was conceded by Sir Charles Rivaz (a member of the Select Committee constituted by Viceroy Curzon to go into the question of wages of tea garden labourers in Assam) when he pointed out that the "system of minimum wage-rate was contingent upon the condition of a daily task, the regulation of which is practically in the hands of the employer."<sup>47</sup> The total inability of labour to bargain because of their lack of any organisation was compounded by the complete absence of even a nominal legislative check on the regulation of the daily task. This gave the employers a free hand to use the *hazira* and unit system for exacting maximum work for a fixed minimum wage. We know, for instance, that through the arbitrary use of their extraordinary powers, the managers in the tea estates generally

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<sup>43</sup> *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22*, p. 31. Hereafter referred as RALEC, 1921-22; Royal Commission, 1931, P. 383.

<sup>44</sup> RALEC, 1921-22, p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> D.V. Rege, *Report on An Enquiry into Conditions of Plantation Labour in India*, 1946, P. 46.

<sup>46</sup> RALEC. 1921-22, p. 31; *Royal Commission*, 1931, PP. 384-9.

<sup>47</sup> CLC. 1901, p. 72.

assigned so heavy a task that the labourers often took more than one day to finish it. This was revealed in December 1900 by an inspection committee which reported on a Sibsagar tea garden, "From the nature of the work... coolies, especially women, would have to work very hard to earn a full *haziri* and a glance at the *haziri* books will show that it seems almost impossible for a great number of men and women to be able to earn anything like a full day's pay. The number of fractional *haziris* far exceed the full one."<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, the balance was further weighted in favour of the planters by the fact that it was left to managers to determine whether the labourers had done the full day's work. The civil surgeon of Sibsagar district observed from the garden books in 1899: "it may be noticed that a system of quarter *haziris* seems to have been started. This means that because the manager decides that only a quarter has been done, only a quarter of a full day's salary is to be paid. Similarly, regarding a particular month, he reported, "fractional *haziris* preponderate in this month and not a single full wage has been earned by men and only one by a woman." There were few labourers in 1899 who earned their full *haziri*.<sup>49</sup> Sir Charles Rivaz, after examining some of the garden books remarked, "the practice of strictly enforcing the daily task and of keeping down the labour bill by method of fractional *haziri*, that is, of paying half or three quarters wages for short tasks, has grown of late years".<sup>50</sup> Clearly, daily task fixed by the managers was excessive and it was one of the major complaints of labourers in a large number of strikes which took place in the Assam Valley gardens during the late 1930s.<sup>51</sup>

The wage data published in the annual official reports, do not reflect any significant wage differentiation. This was perhaps a consequence of the "wage agreement" and "labour rules." The

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. III

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73

<sup>51</sup> For details see Behal, *op.cit.* Chapter VI

Royal Commission termed its effects as “standardisation.” “Each planter fixes his own piece rates, but in so doing, regard is paid to the agreement arrived at by the Committee in order that the wages of his employees may not be appreciably higher than the agreed level.”<sup>52</sup> Another factor responsible for this was the statutory minimum fixed wage rates under the indenture system. Finally, the labour intensive tea plantation industry utilising limited technology did not generate a wide range of specialisation that would require various levels of skilled work which in turn would have affected the structure of wages.

Nevertheless within this “standardised” or “uniform” framework there were variations, though very limited, in wage rates between Act and Non-Act labour, and between men, women and children. In the case of the Act and Non-Act labour the officially published statistics show higher figures for the latter. The official explanation for this are the following: (i) that the non-Act labour was free labour, i.e., they were earlier working as Act labour and, after the expiry of their contract, they re-employed themselves as non-Act labour; (ii) since these labourers were experienced and acclimatised to the conditions on the plantations, they were employed in better paid jobs;<sup>53</sup> and (iii) being “free labourers”, the non-Act workers contracted themselves under Act XIII of 1859, because they received ‘bonuses’ amounting to Rs. 12 in the case of men and Rs.10 for women for each year of engagement.<sup>54</sup>

The difficulty in accepting such explanations rests on the following arguments: while the majority of non-Act labour had been contracted under Act XIII of 1859, one has to keep in mind the fact that no provisions, even nominal, were made for any kind of labour welfare or protection in this Act. On the contrary, labour was bonded to the gardens for long periods and controlled by penal laws just as Act labour was. Moreover, the better paid jobs

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<sup>52</sup>*Royal Commission*, 1931, p. 386

<sup>53</sup>*Assam Labour Report*, 1902-03, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup>*Assam Labour Report*, 1901, p. 7.

were available only in the tea factories where slightly higher levels of skill were required. According to one authoritative estimate of the total labour force in a standard size tea garden only 10 per cent was employed in the tea factory.<sup>55</sup> Obviously the bulk of the non-Act labour could not have been employed in such better paid jobs. Here it is worth mentioning again that the non-Act labour was increasing very fast and after 1918-19 there was virtually no Act labour in Assam Valley tea plantations. It is important to note that in terms of actual performance of work on the field there was no difference between Act and non-Act labour. The decline in the employment of Act labourers was due to the fact that Act VI of 1901 (under which most Act labourers were contracted) was no longer as useful to the employer because by 1908 its penal provisions were abolished.<sup>56</sup>

And finally, as far as the question of 'bonus' was concerned it seems that the term was loosely used in official literature. The concept of profit bonus as we understand today (labour sharing certain portion of the profits) did not exist in the tea industry till the end of the period under study. While answering a query from Sir Nicholas Beatson Bell, the Governor of Assam, in February, 1921 the representatives of the tea industry admitted that their labour force did not receive a bonus on profits.<sup>57</sup> The Royal Commission also acknowledged that no such system was in force in the Assam tea industry.<sup>58</sup>

The variation between the wages of men, women and children was totally arbitrary and discriminatory. Women and children were paid less than men. Reasons for this were never given. The hours of work for women and children were the same as those of men. Women, moreover, performed most types of work done by men like hoeing, pruning etc. In fact the women labour even specialised

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<sup>55</sup> C.R. Harler, *The Culture and Marketing of Tea* (Oxford University Press, 1956) 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 64.

<sup>56</sup> For details see Behal, op. cit., Chapter III, pp.103, 109-10.

<sup>57</sup> RALEC, 192122, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> *Royal Commission, Written Evidence*. Vol.VI, p.23.

in plucking and their number was fairly large. In peak season, it was estimated, nearly 60 per cent of the labour force consisted of women who were engaged in plucking the leaves.<sup>59</sup> Besides, there were no complaints either in the official reports or in official histories and ITA reports of women performing less work compared to men. Moreover the technique of production in the tea plantations did not undergo any radical changes and there was hardly any differentiation of skills which could explain the variation. Since male and female labour worked on similar types of jobs of low skills and for the same number of hours it would appear that productivity per unit of male and female labour did not differ significantly. Therefore, it seems that the variation between male and female wages was created purely on the basis of conventional values of sexual discrimination. As for the effects of this discriminatory policy, the low rate of wages for women and children served to depress the overall average rate of wages. The lowering of wage rates through such discrimination was certainly of very significant magnitude considering the fact that the employment of women and children combined, was proportionately higher than that of men.<sup>60</sup>

Grants of land made by managers, for private cultivation by labour, was considered to be an important 'concession' which supplemented their earnings.<sup>61</sup> Most of the labour reports remarked that gardens with plenty of cultivable land were 'popular' with labour. The Royal Commission remarked, "The garden worker is essentially an agriculturist and his desire for the possession of a holding which he can cultivate with the help of the members of his family is great."<sup>62</sup> However, the labourers who were granted such lands, had to pay rent to the gardens. And, while it is true that such lands were granted by the planters to their labour force for their private cultivation, the motives claimed are suspect. Besides,

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<sup>59</sup> Harler, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Behal, op. cit., Table 5.1, p. 187.

<sup>61</sup> Griffiths, op. cit., p. 302; Royal Commission. 1931, p.384.

<sup>62</sup> Royal Commission. 1931, p. 384.



whether cultivation of such lands significantly contributed towards the extra earnings of labour has to be critically examined.

First of all, most of such grants were conditional; the labour had no occupancy right over such land and he could hold it only so long as he performed labour in the tea garden.<sup>63</sup> The land could be taken back on “disciplinary” grounds.<sup>64</sup> Secondly, while not every labour received land for private cultivation, the size of holdings given, was usually very small. A study of the number of adult labour (settled) and total area held by them as tenants of the tea estates in Table 1 shows that in Lakhimpur the average land granted per worker was less than 1/3 of an acre. In Sibsagar it fluctuated between less than 1/4 of an acre to less than 1/3 of an acre, and in Darrang between less than 1/2 of an acre to less than 1/4 of an acre.

From the limited evidence available, we have tried to work out the approximate money value of the total produce from such holdings. The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 estimated that between 15 to 20 maunds of paddy per acre may be taken as a fair amount of the crop in a normal year.<sup>65</sup> For our purposes, we shall take both the highest and the lowest figure. The market price of unhusked rice for the year 1921-22 was on an average quoted at Rs.2.69 per maund.<sup>66</sup> The total value of crop per acre for one year then works out to Rs, 53.80 (for 20 maunds) and Rs.45.35 (for 15 maunds). In that year it was reported that the labourers as tenants of the tea estates held 35, 358 acres of land in Lakhimpur, 18,012 acres in Sibsagar and 9,103 acres in Darrang.<sup>67</sup> Compared to this there were 120, 802, 118, 155 and 69, 895 adult labourers in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively in the same

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<sup>63</sup> *Report on the Working of the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932)*, 1937, p. 15. Hereafter referred as RTDEL Act (XXII of 1932).

<sup>64</sup> RALEC, 1921-22, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>66</sup> *The Agricultural Statistics of British India*. 1921-22, Vol. I. This figure represented the provincial average.

<sup>67</sup> RALEC, 1921-22, p. 23. These figures also include the acreage held in the sub-division of each district.

year.<sup>68</sup> The average holding therefore, came to be less than one-third of an acre in Lakhimpur, little less than one-seventh of an acre in Sibsagar and about one-eighth of an acre in Darrang.

**Table-1**

Total Number of Adult Labourers (on the garden books) in the Tea Gardens and Total Amount of Land.

Year	Lakhimpur		Sibsagar		Darrang	
	Total Number of Adult Labourers	Area held as Tenants of Tea Estates (Acres)	Total Number of Adult Labourers	Area held as Tenants of Tea Estates (Acres)	Total Number of Adult Labourers	Area held as Tenants of Tea Estates (Acres)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1934	133,868	39,227	119,708	25,956	38,787	16,657
1935	132,529	39,797	123,656	35,162	37,276	19,494
1936	136,625	39,004	121,441	34,498	75,415	16,628
1937	135,245	38,703	117,369	35,437	72,840	17,789
1938	134,853	40,748	117,959	36,795	69,396	17,308
1939	136,376	38,929	121,623	38,386	70,825	18,813
1940	139,481	38,914	119,906	38,729	71,487	18,174
1941	133,862	42,455	108,127	41,011	57,309)	21,590
1942	141,148	39,412	115,899	40,566	64,958	21,930
1943	131,316	45,355	116,924	40,983	69,198	21,681
1944	125,012	37,230	109,963	40,178	69,728	23,840

**Source:** Annual Reports on the Working of the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932) for respective years.

**Note:** Granted (for private cultivation) by the Planters to the Labourers in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. 1934-1944

<sup>68</sup> *Supplement to the Indian Trade Journal*, 1921. These figures have been worked out after reducing 15 per cent, 16 per cent and 13 per cent for Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively from the original figures of total labour force given in the above sources. The reason for doing so are the following: (1) separate figures for adult and child labour are not available for the period 1900-1933; (ii) From 1934 the Controller of Emigrant Labour published separate figures of adult and child labour employed in each district. In these figures the child labour formed average 15 per cent, 16 per cent and 13 per cent of the total labour force. Given the fact that there was no dramatic change in the pattern of labour employment in the tea districts we have used this ratio for the year 1921-22.

The combined average for three districts works out to be approximately one-fifth of an acre per labour in 1921-22. After deducting the yearly rent (at the rate of Rs. 1.58 per acre) the approximate money value of paddy comes to Rs.10.44 (for the highest figure) and; 7.80 (for the lowest figure) per labour during the corresponding year.<sup>69</sup> Calculated in yearly averages, it represented about 12.7 per cent (for highest figures) and 9.46 per cent (for the lowest figures) of the yearly income of an adult labour earned in 1921-22 (this average represents all three districts).

However, these figures cannot be accepted at their face value as representing real extra income for the following reasons. Firstly, the labour received no wages while engaged in their own cultivation because the concept of leave with pay (even on Sunday) did not exist in the gardens.<sup>70</sup> Therefore; the wage foregone ought to be deducted. Secondly, the deduction of the cost of seeds still further lower the figure. The Enquiry Committee of 1920-22 did not accept the argument that the cash value of crops so raised should be considered as a "concession."<sup>71</sup>

However, though private cultivation did not contribute significantly towards the total earnings of the labour force, they became increasingly dependent on such lands because of very meagre cash earnings. It was more so during the period of rising prices of foodstuffs when the private cultivators obviously functioned as a cushion. This fact, more than anything else, perhaps explains the 'popularity' of gardens with plenty of cultivable land among labour.<sup>72</sup>

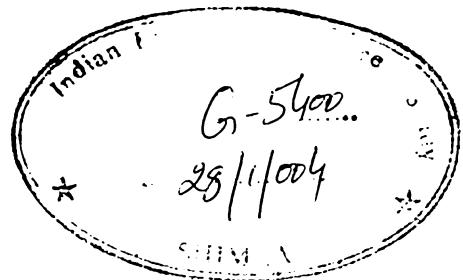
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<sup>69</sup>The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 reported that generally a nominal rent was charged but economic rents up to Rs. 6 an acre were not unknown. The Committee estimated that the average rent of Rs.1.58 (provincial average) was paid by the labourers. RALEC, 1921-22, pp. 23-4.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.,

<sup>72</sup>The total number of land grants given to the planter to their labour in the plantation for the years (see Table 11). Rege reported that in 1944 about 165,000 acres of land was held by garden workers as tenants of tea estates. Rege, op. cit., p. 48.



The role of other 'concessions' like sick diet and subsidised rations etc. in supplementing earnings need critical examination. There is some evidence to show that very often sick diet and subsidised rations did not function as concessions but as a tool of indebtedness of the labour. For example, after inspecting a couple of gardens in September 1901, the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang, Captain Cole came to the conclusion that "Although the labour force appeared on the whole well nourished, it is clear that a very large proportion of them are unable to earn a living wage, and that they would inevitably starve if the management did not provide sufficient rations and enter the cost of the same as an advance against the coolie."<sup>73</sup> A number of similar cases from other districts were reported by the district officials where the subsidised rations given to the labourers were entered as outstanding advances against them.<sup>74</sup>

The cases of sick diet were no different. Capt. Leventon, the Civil Surgeon at Sibsagar District, reported his finding after inspecting Latabari Tea Estate to his superiors, "...in the *haziri* books may be found numerous cases where people who have been sick for a good part of the month, or even the full month, have the cost of the rice they drew charged against them... I have traced a good number of cases who have "S" (sick) marked a few or many times in the month, and find they owe much more at the end of the month than at the beginning, that is, if they get rice they are charged for it. The cases of those who did not work on account of sickness and who did not get deeper into debt are very few"<sup>75</sup> Mr. J.C. Arbuthnott, the deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar, reported that wages in this garden were 'scandalously' low: "Comfort is hardly compatible with a starvation wage, and the condition of the labourers, which is practically that of slaves, can hardly be satisfying, except to the owners, who naturally in their own interest supply

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<sup>73</sup> Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration, A Proceedings, No.6, File No.87, November, 1901, p. 904.

<sup>74</sup> For details see Behal, op. cit., pp. 158-162.

<sup>75</sup> Government of India, department of Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration, A Proceedings - Nos. 6-8, File No.90 of 1901, p. 146.

them with food while gradually increasing the debt against them, in order that the period of bondage may be interminable.”<sup>76</sup> Complaining against the Nagora Tea Estate in Sibsagar district, the Commissioner of Assam Valley wrote that “...provision S.112 of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act, that requires that subsistence allowance as sick diet shall be given to sick labourers, have been ignored by the management and that sums have been illegally debted against the coolies on this account, as well as on account of rewards paid for the arrest of labourers.”<sup>77</sup>

The planters and their apologists often complained that labour in the tea gardens did not respond favourably to higher wages. These complaints were lodged in defense of their opposition to any demand or suggestion for wage increases. Buckingham, the representative of tea interests in the Legislative Council opposed the proposed increase in wages on the following grounds: “An increased rate of payment leads to a lesser task instead of an augmented task, the coolies taking out the balance, so to speak, in the only form of luxury which appeals to an Asiatic viz., the luxury of sitting still and doing nothing ”<sup>78</sup>

There is enough evidence within the official literature on the subject which would refute the above allegation. During the inspection of Latabari Tea Estate in Sibsagar District, the Civil Surgeon, Capt. Asher Levention had found that the majority of labourers did not earn a full month’s *haziri* (day’s earnings) wage. A large number of labourers had outstanding ‘advances’ against their names. The manager of the estate attributed this to the ‘laziness’ of the labourers because they were getting enough food to live and were therefore satisfied. Unimpressed by this explanation the inspecting official remarked: “I do not think the class of coolies on the garden a lazy type... it is impossible to believe that the whole labour force is so lazy that only a few were willing to

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

<sup>77</sup> Government of Assam, Revenue B. Proceedings, Nos. 526/535, August, 1901, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> PCLC. 1901, p. 63.

work a full month's haziri".<sup>79</sup> A large number of witnesses interviewed by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the recruiting districts on this question were convinced that the wages and general living conditions in tea gardens were not particularly more attractive than those prevailing in mines or other industries which competed for labour recruitment in those areas. Many of them in fact were of the opinion that both wages and working conditions were much worse than in the collieries and other industries. And, therefore unwillingness on the part of many people in the recruiting districts to take up employment in Assam tea gardens.<sup>80</sup>

The Royal Commission also did not agree with the allegation that workers did not respond to an increase in wages and that, instead of raising his standard of living, he was content to do less work if he could earn enough for his bare subsistence.<sup>81</sup> The employers in the Tea Plantations put forward a theory of what would be called today 'backward bending supply curve of labour' for the single reason that it was not wage incentive which they used to maintain (or increase) productivity of labour, but compulsions and restraints of various kinds, including physical coercion.<sup>82</sup> This is a factor to be borne in mind in considering the wage question in the Indian tea industry.

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<sup>79</sup> Government of India, Department of Revenue and Agriculture, emigration, A Proceedings - Nos. 6-8, File No,90 of 1901,p. 145.

<sup>80</sup> Among the witnesses were district officials, Labour contractors; Christian missionaries, merchants and local bankers. Proceeding of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906, p. 3. For further details see Behal, op. cit., pg. 193-95.

<sup>81</sup> Royal Commission. 1931, p. 388.

<sup>82</sup> Behal, op. cit., Ch. IV.

### III

In this section we shall analyse the trends of wages of different categories of labor in the three districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. We have taken the wage figure for the district headquarters in the case of Sibsagar and Darrang as fairly representative of the entire district. However, in the case of Lakhimpur we have preferred the figures for North Lakhimpur to those of Lakhimpur Sadr. The main reason for our preference is not because the figures in the former case are lower compared to the latter but because Lakhimpur Sadr statistics fluctuate from one extreme to the other for certain years without any explanation for the unusual amplitude of fluctuation. Since the wage figures of most other districts during the corresponding period do not show such tendencies the extremely high wage figures for Lakhimpur Sadr might not necessarily mean so much rise in earnings of labour. Thus in the absence of any explanation for such a sharp increase in wage figures for Lakhimpur Sadr and the lack of any other set of wage data we have preferred the figures for North Lakhimpur, which, as we shall see, represented a consistent trend. Secondly, while maintaining that official time series on wages was inflated. for the purposes of studying trends and in the light of our earlier criticism of wage data and source material, we shall accept the figures calculated on the basis of total number of labourers (set a) on the book (officially published) as the nominal earnings. At the same time, we shall also use the figures calculated on the basis of daily working strength (set b) as an index of 'potential' earnings provided the labourers had worked every single day of the month. This could be termed as wage rate. Before we start the analysis of wage data for studying trends a word of explanation for the periodisation is warranted here. Broadly speaking we shall study the trends decade wise which is admittedly an arbitrary division. However, within this periodisation specific emphasis is given to certain junctures, viz., the World War I and II. We have to note that the price data are not available in the form of a single time series for the period as a whole under study. Instead different sources provide price data for varying periods and sometimes the covered also varied.

## ***Nominal Wages of Act Labour***

Table 2 shows the yearly averages of monthly wages of men and women Act labourers in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. Before we analyse the data in Table 2, we would like to point to the minimum rate of wages fixed by the Act VI of 1901, which was to be Rs.5.00 and Rs.4.00 in the first year, Rs. 5.50 and Rs.4.50 during the second and third years, and Rs.6.00 and Rs. 5.00 in the fourth year of contract for a man and a woman respectively.<sup>83</sup> This means that the average monthly wages of Act labour during the contractual period work out to be a minimum Rs.5.50 for a man and Rs.4.50 for a woman. A comparison of the minimum fixed wage figure within the figures in Table 2 shows that the average earnings of both men and women labour were lower than the average prescribed minimum in most cases. For example, during the 19 years from 1900 to 1918-19 the wages of men labour remained below that level for 12, 11 and 13 years in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively. Only in Darrang women's wages was considerably higher in most years.

In all the three districts the wage trends in the long run (with the exception of women's wages in Darrang) remained stagnant during 1900-1918-19. Insignificant increases were experienced during a few years. Women's wages showed upward tendencies only in Darrang the increases being little less than double during 1900-1918-19. But the overall increase was very insignificant in all the three districts. For example the increase in men's wages was 5 per cent, 0 per cent and 9 per cent and women's wages was 18 per cent, 13 per cent and 43 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively between 1900-1904-05 and 1914-15-1918-19 (see Table 2).<sup>84</sup> This represented an annual average rate of increase for men 0.26 per cent, 0 per cent and 0.47 per cent for women 0.94 per cent, 0.68 per cent and 2.26 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.

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<sup>83</sup>RALEC. 1906, p. 146.

<sup>84</sup>For the purpose of comparison the base is 5 yearly averages from both end.



**Table-2**

Yearly Average of Nominal Monthly Wages of Act Labourers including Allowances paid under Sections (128(1) and 130(1), value of diet in lieu of such allowances and rations provided under section 134(A). and also including ticca earning and 'bonus', (Calculated on the basis of number of labourers in the garden books) in the districts of North (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang.)

Year	North Lakhimpur		Sibsagar		Darrang	
	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1900	5.38	4.07	5.30	4.06	4.89	3.92
1901	5.57	4.40	5.77	4.38	4.81	4.28
1902-3	5.21	4.00	5.63	4.37	5.07	4.37
1903-4	5.29	4.22	5.57	4.23	5.13	4.50
1904-5	5.13	4.00	5.68	4.37	5.10	4.39
1905-6	5.42	4.68	5.61	4.84	5.61	4.58
1906-7	6.23	5.29	5.40	4.34	5.63	5.22
1907-8	5.37	4.81	5.45	4.60	5.54	4.98
1908-9	5.04	4.31	5.48	4.48	5.57	5.17
1909-10	5.40	4.50	5.37	4.48	5.23	5.18
1910-11	5.64	4.41	5.25	4.27	5.11	5.2
1911-12	5.36	4.47	5.28	4.58	4.71	5.3
1912-13	5.56	4.68	5.38	3.90	5.11	5.16
1913-14	5.28	4.57	5.17	4.61	4.80	5.36
1914-15	5.78	4.90	5.45	5.15	4.90	5.53
1915-16	5.38	5.08	5.33	4.92	5.09	6.03
1916-17	6.19	5.21	5.63	4.59	5.68	7.69
1917-18	5.78	5.02	5.65	4.59	5.45	6.66
1918-19	4.90	4.20	5.98	4.86	6.13	6.68

**Source:** Assam Labour Reports for respective years.

**Note:** (i) Figures for the years 1909-10 are worked out of two preceding and succeeding years for all districts.

(ii) Figures of women's wages in Darrang district for the year 1918-19 worked out of two preceding and two succeeding years.

### ***Wage Rate of Act Labour***

We shall now examine the wage figures (set b) calculated on the basis of daily working strength (see Appendix Table 1). The figures of wage rate are higher compared to the nominal wage. However, what is important is that the long term trends are strikingly similar in both. The wage rate (both for men and women) remained stagnant in all three districts. In fact, in Sibsagar there seems to be express tendencies of decline in the early years while women's wages in Darrang showed upward trends in later years. The overall increase in wage rate between 1905-06 - 1910-11 and 1914-15 - 1918-19 for men was 0 per cent, 8 per cent and 3 per cent and for women 12 per cent, 18 per cent and 27 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang.<sup>85</sup> The average annual increase in wage rate then works out to be for men 0 per cent, 0.61 per cent and 0.23 per cent and for women 0.92 per cent, 1.38 per cent and 2.07 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively (Appendix Table I).

One striking feature common to both set of figures was the fact that compared to men the percentage of increase was higher in the case of women's nominal wages as well as the wage rate. On the other hand, the actual wage figures for women in both cases were lower compared to men. Thus, because of the lower wages paid to women compared to men the total wage bill was further reduced which benefited the employer.

### ***Nominal Wages of Non-Act Labour***

We shall now examine the wage data (official time series) of the Non-Act labour. They were increasingly replacing the Act labour and the process was completed by 1918-19. One of the features of these data is that the figures of wages of Non-Act labour are slightly higher compared to those of Act labour, the possible explanation could be the growing difficulty in recruiting labour

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<sup>85</sup>As pointed out earlier, the figures of (set b) wage rate of Act labour were published only from 1905-06 onwards. The comparison is made on the basis of five yearly averages on both ends.

under Act VI of 1901 as its notoriety came to be widely known in recruiting districts. Therefore, the need to offer slightly higher wages under a different contract. Secondly, to lure the labour under Act XIII of 1859, cash advances were offered supposedly, as 'bonus'. The ignorance and illiteracy of labour were cleverly exploited in this case. It seems the labour was given cash advances as 'bonus' but on the contract document (written in English) it was mentioned as advanced money to be deducted later on. The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 reproduced some versions of these contract documents according to which the labourers contracted themselves under Act XIII of 1859. It would be worth quoting one such version in which a labourer was to bind himself or herself to a particular garden by declaring the following : "The amount of any advance made to me, by the manager in cash or otherwise and the price of rice, or any other food I may receive from the garden godown shall be deducted from my monthly wages and I shall only be entitled to receive the balance of my wages after such deductions have been made."<sup>86</sup> In none of these documents was there any mention of the so-called bonus payment. Thus, it appears that the average amount of these advances might have been added into the average cash wage of non-Act labour which obviously inflated the figures of their actual earnings.

Unlike the Act labour there were no rules of fixed minimum wage in the case of non-Act labour. Nor were the employers bound to provide 'concessions'. Nevertheless, the latter were also contracted on a long term basis and controlled by usually repressive penal laws. Besides, the official reports also include the value of most such 'concessions' (meant to be given to the Act labour) in the figures of cash wages of non-Act labour. Therefore, we take the average prescribed minimum wages for non-Act labour (Rs.5.50 for men and Rs.4.50 for women) as our base for the purpose of analysing the wage data of non-Act labour in the three districts. The minimum wage figures for child labour we may assume to be Rs.3.50.

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<sup>86</sup>RALEC, 1921-22, Appendix XIII, p. 140.

In order to maintain the uniformity in the method of analysis we shall, as in the case of Act labour, begin with the data on nominal wages of non-Act labour, i.e. set a. Table 3 shows the wage figures of non-Act labourers (calculated on the basis of number of labourers on the books) in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang between 1900 and 1925-26.<sup>87</sup>

Men's wages in all three districts between 1960 and the beginning of World War I remained stagnant with a tendency to decline. The increase during certain years in North Lakhimpur and Sibsagar was very marginal. Besides, the wages of men, women and children, did not conform to the average minimum wage figures during most of the years between 1900 and 1914 (except men's wages in Sibsagar). In fact, children's wages rarely conform to the average prescribed minimum during the early two decades. World War I and post-war period witnessed increase in the nominal wages of labour force. For example, between 1914-15 and 1925-26 the increase in man's wages was 57 per cent, 45 per cent and 42 per cent and in women's wages 35 per cent, 36 per cent and 37 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively. Children's wages increased significantly only in the post-war period. In all the three districts the wage figures for all the three categories of labour were the highest in the third decade (Table 3).

### ***Wage Rate of Non-Act Labour***

We shall now examine the data on wage rate or 'potential' earnings (set b) of non-Act labour in the three districts. Appendix Table II shows the yearly averages of monthly wages of non-Act labour (calculated on the basis of daily working strength) in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Assam Labour Reports did not publish wage figures of non-Act labour based on total number of labourers on the garden books after 1925-26.

<sup>88</sup> The figures of yearly averages of monthly wages (calculated on daily working strength) were published in Assam Labour Reports only from 1905-06 onward.

**Table-3**

Yearly Average of Nominal Monthly Wages of Non-Act Labourers including the Value of Subsistence Allowances, Diet or Rations and also including ticca earnings (Based on Number of labourers on the Garden books) in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang Districts.

Year	North Lakhimpur			Sibsagar			Darrang		
	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.
1900	5.43	3.63	2.30	5.83	4.17	2.50	5.92	3.67	2.38
1*	5.21	3.57	2.23	5.31	3.78	2.46	5.06	3.56	2.44
1902-03	4.65	3.46	2.31	5.03	3.67	2.51	4.64	3.56	2.44
1903-04	5.03	3.44	2.22	4.96	3.56	2.42	4.70	3.07	2.56
1904-05	5.21	3.44	2.15	4.95	3.61	2.46	4.69	3.34	2.23
1905-06	5.78	3.87	2.18	5.78	3.91	2.42	5.34	4.16	2.59
1906-07	5.59	4.00	2.27	5.65	4.27	2.53	5.25	4.06	2.57
1907-08	5.18	4.09	2.43	5.53	4.28	2.51	4.96	4.18	2.59
1908-09	5.19	3.96	2.15	5.53	4.32	2.52	5.05	4.17	2.65
1909-10	5.93	4.44	2.43	5.91	4.72	2.62	5.03	4.42	2.79
1910-11	5.46	4.59	2.40	5.79	4.57	2.79	5.38	4.77	2.62
1911-12	5.57	4.45	2.45	5.71	4.64	2.88	5.66	5.02	2.80
1912-13	5.61	4.64	2.54	6.05	4.75	2.95	5.83	4.94	2.76
1913-14	5.73	4.77	2.58	5.99	5.00	2.83	5.81	4.98	2.87
1914-15	5.64	5.10	2.57	6.22	5.45	2.30	5.96	5.38	3.01
1915-16	6.10	5.54	2.99	5.20	5.20	3.00	5.70	5.60*	3.20
1916-17	6.44	5.99	3.10	6.07	5.34	2.84	5.74	5.81	3.17
1917-18	6.32	5.66	3.07	6.24	5.08	3.05	6.05	9.95	3.23
1918-19	6.46	5.95	3.30	6.16	5.31	3.17	3.24	5.71	3.23
1919-20	6.69	6.00	3.45	6.89	6.06	3.53	6.78	6.85	3.77
1920-21	6.47	5.26	4.00	7.03	3.93	3.77	7.33	6.79	3
1921-22	7.35	6.29	3.82	7.61	6.42	4.03	7.25	6.32	3.82
1922-23	7.72	6.38	4.01	7.91	6.53	4.39	7.93	7.08	4.00
1923-24	7.71	6.50	4.13	8.13	7.08	4.59	7.65	6.81	4.29
1924-25	8.10	6.50	4.19	8.36	7.17	4.70	8.14	7.14	4.30

**Source:** Assam Labour Reports for respective years.

- Note:** i) Figures for 1901 in Lakhimpur Sadr are worked out as the average of one preceding and one succeeding year.  
ii) Figures of wages for women in Darrang district for the year 1915-16 worked out of one preceding and one succeeding year.

Men's wage rate in all the three districts remained stagnant with a tendency to decline between 1905-06 and 1913-14. Women's and children's wage rate, on the other hand, showed upward movement marked by minor downward fluctuations during the corresponding period in all the three districts. The War years experienced slight increase in the wage rate of labour force in the above three districts. Between 1905-06-1909-10 and 1916-17-1920-21 the increase in wage rate for men was 21 per cent, 13 per cent and 18 per cent, for women 40 per cent, 24 per cent and 36 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.<sup>89</sup> Children's wage rates fluctuated sharply during the corresponding period and only from 1914-15 show marked signs of consistency in most cases. The increase in wage rates between 1921-22 and 1929-30 was for men 24 per cent, 17 per cent and 37 per cent, for women 34 per cent, 16 per cent and 25 per cent and for children 31 per cent, 28 per cent and 56 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.<sup>90</sup> The wage rate for all the three categories of non-Act labour, however, declines sharply in following two years after 1929-30. The wage rate declined in the case of men by 16 per cent, 7 per cent and 15 per cent, for women by 24 per cent, 11 per cent and 15 per cent and children's by 20 per cent, 3 per cent and 6 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively. One feature common to all was that the figures of wage rate reached the highest during the last years of third decade (see Appendix Table II).

After reaching the peak during the late 1920s the nominal wages as well as the wage rate registered a sharp decline in the 1930s. Apart from the decrease in wages the labour force was also deprived of statutory "protection" with the final repeal of Act VI of 1901. The newly passed labour legislation (the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act XXII of 1932), which came into effect in October 1933, was mainly concerned with the process of labour recruitment and their journey up to the tea district. There were no provisions in the new labour law to deal with conditions of living

<sup>89</sup> Five yearly averages on both ends form the basis of this comparison.

<sup>90</sup> In the case of women's wage rate in Darrang we have taken year 1922-23 as base to calculate the percentage of increase.

or wages in the tea districts. Under the new legislation the labour force was categorised as 'settled' and *faltu* or *basti* labour.<sup>91</sup> Besides, the "concessions" were no longer the statutory obligation for the planters. However, the annual reports on emigrant labour published by the Controller of Emigrant Labour, create confusion by their contradictory reporting. In some years the reports mentioned that the value of "concessions" included in the figures of cash wages while in others it was pointed out that apart from the cash wages the labour supplemented its income out of various 'concessions' offered in the tea districts. Despite the confusion it seems that the practice of giving 'subsidised' rations may have continued in many gardens in order to supplement the cash earnings which were certainly not adequate enough to provide a living wage for the labour. Particularly during the period of extremely high prices of foodstuff it was very crucial. In the case of *ticca* earnings Rege confirmed in 1946 that its value had been Included in the wage figures given in annual official reports.<sup>92</sup>

Between 1926-27 and 1932-33 the data on the nominal wages of tea garden labour for each district was not published in the Assam Labour Reports. However, we assume that the trend of nominal wage (calculated on the basis of total number of labour on the garden books) would have been proportionate to that of the wage rate (based on daily working strength). For the latter again we have figures only upto 1931-32. These figures (Appendix Table VI) show constant upward movement of wage rate upto 1929-30 (which we assume may have been true in the case of nominal wages) followed by a sharp decline in the early 1930s. We have data on nominal wages for the Assam Valley as a whole from 1930 onwards. We shall, however, use these figures only for 1930-34 period because from 1934 Onwards the annual reports of the Controller of Emigrant Labour published such data for each district separately. Table 4 shows the nominal monthly wages (calculated on the basis of total number of labourers on garden books) in the Assam Valley between 1930-31 and 1934-35.

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<sup>91</sup> RTDEL Act (XII of 1932), 1934

<sup>92</sup> Rege, op. cit. p. 46.

**Table-4**

Yearly Average of Nominal Monthly Wages of Labour (Calculated on the basis of Number of Labourers on the Garden Books)in Assam Valley, 1930-31 - 1934 - 35.<sup>93</sup>

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Children</i>
<i>Year</i>	<i>Rs.</i>	<i>Rs.</i>	<i>Rs.</i>
1930-31	14.01	10.79	7.2
1931-32	12.53	9.54	6.98
1932-33	11.79	8.98	6.42
1933-34	7.47	5.90	4.22
1934-35	7.18	5.46	3.33

The above table shows rapid decline in wages during the first half of 1930s. Men's wages declined by 49 per cent, women's by 49 per cent and children's by 54 per cent in the Assam Valley between 1930-31 and 1934-35. Our analysis of the wage data for the period 1934-47 will move on the same lines as we have done in the case of Act and non-Act labour earlier, i.e., (i) official time series on nominal wages (calculated on the basis of total number of labour on the garden books) or set (a), and (ii) potential wage or wage rate (calculated on daily working strength or set (b)).<sup>94</sup>

### ***Nominal Wage of Settled Labour***

Table 5 shows the wage figures (calculated on the basis of total number of labour on the garden books) of settled labour in the three districts between 1934 and 1945. In the pre-World War II period men's and children's wages between 1934 and 1938 remained stagnant with a tendency to decline in tendency- to-decline in all three districts (in Sibsagar this trend continued well into the war years). Women's wages remained stagnant in Sibsagar

<sup>93</sup> *Indian Labour Year Book*. 1946, p. 177

<sup>94</sup> The annual reports of the Controller of Emigrant Labour published the wage figures for the district as a whole and not for separate sub-divisions as was the practice in the earlier labour reports.



and Darrang though there was slight increase in Lakhimpur during the corresponding period. The World War II experienced fluctuating tendencies which varied from district to district. The overall increase in the nominal wages between 1934-35 and 1941-45<sup>95</sup> for men was 14 per cent, 33 per cent and 24 per cent, for women it was 26 per cent, 22 per cent and 28 per cent and for children it was 27 per cent, 33 per cent and 41 per cent in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively (Table 5)<sup>96</sup>

**Table-5**

Yearly Average of Nominal Monthly Wages of Settled Labourers (Calculated on the basis of Number of Labourers on the Garden Books) on the tea Estates in Lakhimpur, Sibasagar and Darrang districts (Based on the Averages of two months - March and September for Each Year) including the Value of Ticca work, dist, rations and subsistence allowances, 1934-47

Year	North Lakhimpur			Sibsagar			Darrang		
	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.
1900	5.43	3.63	2.30	5.83	4.17	2.50	5.92	3.67	2.38
1934	8.10	6.05	4.57	7.16	6.18	4.23	6.57	4.90	3.42
1935	8.28	6.31	4.11	6.43	5.03	3.53	6.23	4.52	3.48
1936	8.29	6.69	4.57	6.59	5.28	3.93	6.37	4.47	3.07
1937	8.28	6.72	4.85	6.71	5.60	4.03	6.68	4.90	3.33
1938	8.69	6.71	4.81	5.03	5.54	3.95	6.79	4.89	3.43
1939	9.37	7.72	5.16	6.72	5.91	4.37	7.23	5.25	3.92
1940	9.01	7.09	5.00	6.62	5.96	4.34	7.73	5.75	3.93
1941	9.31	7.59	5.33	7.04	5.96	4.37	7.79	5.62	4.03
1942	9.05	8.08	5.75	8.83	6.95	5.12	8.12	6.33	4.92
1943	10.32	8.20	5.82	8.09	7.02	5.19	6.96	4.72	4.35
1944	10.46	8.47	5.97	9.33	7.80	6.14	8.95	7.04	4.82
1945	8.39	8.70	6.21	9.09	5.96	5.41	8.76	6.56	5.39
1946	NOT AVAILABLE								
1947	16.56	13.60	9.15	11.30	9.12	7.54	15.42	10.71	7.72

**Source** : Annual Reports on the Working of Tea District Emigrant Labour Act. (XXII of 1932) for respective years.

<sup>95</sup> 1947 being an extreme year has been excluded and figures for 1946 are not available.

<sup>96</sup> For the purpose of comparison five yearly averages from both ends have been used as the basis.

The year 1947 shows a massive jump in wage figures of all the categories of labour in all the three districts. The labour reports offer no explanation for this sudden and unusually high rate of increase in wages. Deshpande's report in 1948 pointed out that because a very high increase in prices of foodstuff and other necessities the Indian Tea Association issued heavily subsidised ration and other necessities to the labour force from October, 1946 onwards. He estimated that 27 per cent of a labour family's income in Assam Valley accrued from the difference between the prices charges for the commodities sold and the prices which the workers would have to pay in the open market.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, from 15th February, 1947 onwards, as a result of the Tripartite Conference which took place in January 1947 between the Government of India, representatives of the labour and planters, the ITA decided to give an interim Dearness Allowance of 2 annas and 1 anna a day per adult and per child respectively along with the cash wages.<sup>98</sup> If we accept that these additions are included in wage figures then it can, perhaps, explain the unusual increase in wages in 1947. However, the Controller's report does not mention any such additions in the wage figures.

However, Deshpande's estimate of a labour family earnings are debatable. His analysis of a sample 560 labour family budgets in Assam Valley shows that in an average family, consist of 4.15 members, the weekly earnings from the employment of 2.44 working members was Rs.10.82.<sup>99</sup> In other words, the average monthly earnings of 2.44 working persons of a labour family (including men, women and children) were Rs.43.28. These figures included cash wages, the money value of *ticca* earnings, dearness allowance, 'concessions' and joint income of the family from sources other than employment in tea gardens.<sup>100</sup> The above

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<sup>97</sup> S.R. Deshpande, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>98</sup> The Indian Labour Year Book, 1946, p. 174

<sup>99</sup> Deshpande, op cit., p. 30

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Appendix XIV, p. 97.

figures are much higher compared to the figures published in the Report of the Controller of Emigrant Labour for 1947. For example the average combined monthly earnings of a man, woman and child works out to be Rs. 39.31 in Lakhimpur, Rs.27.96 in Sibsagar, and Rs.33.85 in Darrang.<sup>101</sup> And these figures, as pointed out earlier, were extremely high compared to the wage figures of any previous year prior to 1947.

### ***Wage Rate of Settled Labour***

We shall now analyse the data on wage rate or 'potential' earnings of 'settled' labour in the three districts. Appendix Table III shows the yearly average of monthly wage rates of settled labour (calculated on the basis of daily working strength) in the districts of Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang. The wage rate between 1934 and 1940 in all the three districts for all three categories of labour fluctuated but on the whole remained stagnant (the minor exception are men's wage rate in Darrang and women's wage rate in Lakhimpur). The World War II period witnessed a general upward movement of wage rate. The over-all income in wage rate between' between 1931 26 per cent, for women 21 per cent, 31 per cent and 24 per cent and for children 22 per cent, 19 per cent and 23 per cent in Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively.

From the above analyses of wage data the following broad trends emerge: between 1900 and the outbreak of World War I, the wages of all categories of labour often did not conform to the statutory minimum figures in all the three districts. The wage tended to decline or remained stagnant and the overall increase, even in exceptional cases was very insignificant. The wages moved upward during the World War I period. And despite the fluctuations at the end of the war years wages continued to rise. The third decade experienced a steady increase and wages reached the highest in most cases by the end of 1920s. They began to decline very sharply from 1930 on wards. One possible reason for this decline was the

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<sup>101</sup> See Table 5.

world wide depression of the early 1930s when the employers cut-down wages. The decline was accelerated by the International Tea Control which came into operation in 1933-34. The control restricted production which resulted in the reduction of work and consequently earnings of labour.<sup>102</sup> The planters further depressed the wages by increasingly employing the 102 surplus or *faltu* (basti) labour in 1930s and 1940s.<sup>103</sup> The wages paid to this type of labour were lower compared to the average earnings of settled labour. For example their wage figures in 1934 for men were Rs.5.28, Rs.3.73 and Rs. 4.05 and for women Rs.4.86, Rs.4.32 and Rs.3.73 and for children Rs.2.91, Rs.2.47 and Rs. 2.54 for Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively. These were much lower compared to those of settled labour (see Table 5). This trend continued up to the end of 1947.<sup>104</sup>

The wages recovered by the beginning of the Second World War and experienced an upward movement though they continued to fluctuate. However, the massive jump in the figures from 1945 to 1947 was the most baffling feature of wage increase which took place during and after the Second World War. Besides, at this juncture it seems appropriate to ask whether the periodical increase in nominal wages represented a proportionate increase in the real wages of the labour force in the Assam Valley tea gardens. The answer to this question involves a study of level and cost of the standard of living of labour force during the corresponding period. And this in itself is a complicated problem.

Before we set about formulating the cost of living index of tea garden labour it will be an interesting exercise to compare their wages with those of agricultural labour working outside the plantations. The evidence on this is very limited and there is no way of examining its accuracy. Moreover we do not know whether the figures available represent an average of number of months or the peak season.

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<sup>102</sup>Rege, op. cit.. p. 44.

<sup>103</sup>See Behal, op. cit.. Table 2.6, p. 75.

<sup>104</sup>For details see Behal, op. cit.. Table 5.11, p. 235.

However a comparison of two sets of figures of wages of agricultural labour with those of tea garden labour show that in the case of the former wages were much higher (see Table 6). The first set of these figures were published in the Prices and Wages in India series between 1900 and 1911. These figures were compiled from the district officials and they represented the averages of the preceding six months' wages.<sup>105</sup> The second set of wages of such labour were published in Rege's report for the year 1944. According to this the daily wages paid to agricultural labour ranged between Rs.1.50 to Rs.2.00 in Lakhimpur and Rs.0.75 to Rs.1.25 in Sibsagar.<sup>106</sup> These set of figures, compared to the nominal wages of tea garden labour (Table 5), show that wages of agricultural labourers outside the plantations were much higher.

**Table-6**

A Comparison Between Yearly Average of Monthly Wages of Able-bodied Agricultural-Labourer and Tea Garden Labour in Lakhimpur District.<sup>107</sup>

		<i>Agricultural Labour/Act</i>	<i>Tea Garden Labour</i>
<i>Year</i>	<i>Rs.</i>	<i>Rs.</i>	<i>Rs.</i>
1900	8 to 11	5.38	5.43
1901	9 to 12	5.57	5.21
1902	9 to 12	5.21	4.65
1903	9 to 12	5.29	5.03
1904	10 to 12	5.13	5.21
1905	8 to 12	5.42	5.76
1906	8 to 10	5.23	5.59
1907	8 to 10	5.57	5.18
1908	8 to 10	5.04	5.19
1909	8 to 10	5.40	5.93
1910	8 to 10	5.64	5.40

<sup>105</sup> Prices and Wages in India. 1910, p. 175.

<sup>106</sup> Rege, op. cit.. p. 56.

<sup>107</sup> (i) *Prices and Wages in India*, for respective years (ii) Tables 2 and 3.

## ***Cost and Standard of Living***

As late as 1946 Rege reported that there was no official cost of living index for the whole province of Assam. At that time attempts were made to start family budget enquiries by the Director of Cost of Living Index Scheme in some districts of the province.<sup>108</sup> However, in the plantation areas even this type of enquiry was not undertaken. Rege observed that "... the absence of an authoritative cost of living index in Assam makes it difficult to assess accurately the fall in real wages of the plantation workers.<sup>109</sup> The earliest attempt to properly conduct such an enquiry was made only in 1947 and it was conducted by S.R. Deshpande of the Labour Bureau of the Government of India.

The official reports on the emigrant labour in Assam while publishing the figures of earnings of labour in the tea estates never bothered to evaluate whether such earnings were adequate for a decent living. Such an apathy perhaps was due to the prevailing practice in tea gardens of wage being partly paid in kind. That such a feudal practice had the official sanction and continued well into 1920s and even later on is clear from the provisions of subsidised rations etc. in the labour laws. And hence the assumption among the official circles that the tea garden labour was being 'well-fed' by their employers even though many of them were aware of the prevailing poor wages. It was the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 which, for the first time made an effort, though inadequate, to investigate the level of consumption, and individual and family budgets of tea garden labour. These budgets, showing the level and cost of consumption of a labour family or individual labour, were then compared with the level of income. But most of these budgets were prepared either by local bureaucrats or by the planters themselves who used very arbitrary methods to show comparability between the expenditure and earnings of an individual labour or a family. Even the Royal Commission on Labour in India did not seriously enquire into the question of what constituted a fair living wage in Assam tea gardens.

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<sup>108</sup> Rege, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

Prior to 1921-22 an individual effort to work out the cost of the diet of tea garden labour in Assam was made by Harold Mann in 1906. Mann's estimate was extremely limited. He did not make any proper or even general survey of consumption level among the garden labour. Instead he obtained his data on the basis of 'hotel' diet in two gardens.<sup>110</sup> This 'hotel' diet included only limited items of simple food like rice, dal, salt, spices, mustard oil, potatoes and onions. The items of industrial consumption like clothing etc. and expenditure on fuel etc. were not included in Mann's estimate. Nevertheless, in the absence of any other source of information Mann's estimate of the cost. of a simple or subsistence diet of a labour family in tea gardens is very useful. A comparison of Mann's estimate with some of the moderate estimates of the Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 will be useful in analysing the extent of increase in the cost of subsistence, diet of tea garden labourers in the Assam Valley.

We have pointed out earlier that Assam lacked an authentic price index for the period under study. The data on prices of consumer goods compiled through a scientific survey does not exist in Assam which could help in constructing a time series of real wages for 1900-1947. However, the data on prices of food grain is available from various sources for different years. The major limitations of the latter data are, (i) no single source covers the entire period under study, and (ii) rice and sugar (gur) are the only items for which the data from different sources covers the entire period.

Moreover, the categories of rice differ in different sources. For example, between 1900 and 1920 the annual reports on Prices and Wages in India published the retail and wholesale prices of rice (common), wheat, gram and salt in the district of Lakhimpur and the average of the Brahmaputra Valley as a whole separately. The data on prices of foodgrain in the above reports was compiled

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<sup>110</sup>According to Mann these gardens had an arrangement to feed weak or sick labourers before going to work in the morning and after returning from work in the evening. The idea was to improve their health so that they could work properly in the gardens. The place at which the labourers were provided food was referred to as 'hotel' and hence the term 'hotel diet'. For further details see his article "Note on the Diet of Tea Garden Coolies in Upper Assam and its Nutritive Value" in Harold H. Mann. Social Framework of Agriculture, op.cit., pp.

from half monthly statements from the districts which were regularly published in the Gazette of India.<sup>111</sup> Sometimes, it was compiled out of the fortnightly returns from selected markets in the province furnished by local authorities and market reports published by Chambers of Commerce.<sup>112</sup>

The second source of information on prices of the above mentioned goods is the annual reports on the Administration of Land Revenue in Assam. These reports published the figures of average prices for each district and sub-divisional headquarters separately. However, the figures were published consistently only between 1903-04 and 1909-10 or prior to 1900. In the post 1910 period these reports generally published only a brief commentary on prices of food grains in Assam Valley in each year.

K.L. Datta's report on the Enquiry into the Rise of Prices in India, 1914 provides annual retail and wholesale prices of food grains and other articles of consumption in Assam. His report published the figures upto 1912 only. He gave the price of rice under two separate categories viz., the ordinary and good rice.<sup>113</sup>

The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 published the annual averages of prices of common rice for the period 1912-1921. These figures were given for districts and sub-divisional headquarters and had been calculated on the basis of average prices in the last fortnights of January, April, July and October of each year as given in the Assam Gazette.<sup>114</sup>

From the post-World War I to 1947 our main source of prices of food grains is the officially published. Agricultural Statistics of British India and is confined only to rice and raw sugar (gur). One major problem with this source is that while in most years the figures quoted are of average wholesale market prices at the time of harvest, in some years the prices quoted are based on 'median' average at the time of harvest. Secondly, the harvest prices may not necessarily represent a fair average of the whole year. However, since the prices for entire period are quoted on the basis of harvest season, it may be taken as a fair indicator of general long-term trends. Thirdly,

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<sup>111</sup> *Prices and Wages in India*. 1902, Preface.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 1920, p.2.

<sup>113</sup> K.L. Datta, *Report on the Enquiry into the Rise of Prices in India*. 1914. Vol.III, pp. 382-3.

<sup>114</sup> RALEC. 1921-22, p. 38.



there is no uniformity in the presentation of the price data for the period as a whole in the above source. For example, between 1917-18 and 1929-30 the figures were published for the province of Assam as a whole except during the years 1919-20 and 1920-21 when separate figures for Lakhimpur were also given. During this period the provincial annual averages of prices of rice were reported under two categories viz., 'winter rice cleared' and 'winter rice unhusked'. Only the prices of raw sugar (gur) were reported under a sin' head. Unfortunately, there is no other time series of price data which would have helped to minimise the errors and limitation of the above statistical information. Therefore, despite the major limitations of the above source, we shall use it to see long-run trends in prices in one of the most important tea districts, i.e. Lakhimpur and the province as a whole.

Before we resume an analyses of the data on prices it is important to ask whether the comparison of wage movement with the movement of the cost of food grain. alone would be a fair indication of either decline or increase in real wages. Here two factors have to be taken into account. Firstly, our evidence on the level and cost of consumption of goods other than food grains is very superficial. Secondly, all the family or individual budgets reported in the 1921-22 Enquiry Committee and Deshpande's report uniformly demonstrate that a major portion of the total expenditure was spent on the consumption of food. For example, in an annual budget of a labour family of 5 members (3 adults, 2 children), in Suntak Tea Estate in Sibsagar district, the cost of food consumption (rice, salt, oil, spices, fish, vegetables and milk) was as much as 78 per cent of the total expenditure (see Appendix III). Similarly, a male and a female labourer, in a tea garden in Lakhimpur district, spent 86 per cent and 74 per cent respectively on food (rice, mustard oil, dal, salt, spices and onion) alone out of their total annual expenditure.<sup>115</sup> Even in 1947 Deshpande's enquiry into the cost of living of Assam Valley tea garden labourers revealed that the cost of good consumption of a labour family consisted of 4.15 persons was 71.55 per cent of the total weekly

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<sup>115</sup> RALEC. 1921-22, Appendices (d) and (e), pp. 34-5. Appendix VII (A), p. 123. of this Committee Report shows another annual budget of a labour family consisted of one man, two women (all working) and 2 children (1 working), The cost of food consumption of this family was nearly 70 per cent of the total annual expenditure. The other budgets reported in this report reveal a similar trend.

expenditure<sup>116</sup>. The expenditure on rice (common) alone occupied the major portion of the total food expenditure.<sup>117</sup> Thus, the cost of food remained the major expense of the tea garden labour in the Assam Valley during the period under study. Hence, the validity of comparison between food prices and wages as a fair indication of increase or decline in real wages.

We shall begin with an analysis of the data on prices of food grains given in Prices and Wages Series for the period 1900-20. This series is more reliable compared to the other sources mentioned above. Table 7 shows annual average retail prices of rice (common), wheat, gram and salt in the district, of Lakhimpur and the, averages of the Brahmaputra Valley (Assam Valley). The data is visually projected in Figures I and II for Lakhimpur and Brahmaputra Valley respectively.

**Table-7**

Annual Average Retail Prices of Rice (Common) Wheat, Gram and Salt in Lakhimpur and Brahmaputra (Assam) Valley. 1900-1920

(Rs. per pound)

Year	Lakhimpur				Brahmaputra (Assam) Valley			
	Rice	Wheat	Gram	Salt	Rice	Wheat	Gram	Salt
1990	3.50	6.19	4.58	4.87	2.88	4.59	4.26	4.33
1901	4.17	5.93	4.76	5.00	3.98	4.01	4.47	4.33
1902	3.71	4.97	3.83	5.00	3.73	4.21	3.99	4.37
1903	3.82	4.71	3.50	4.24	3.43	3.99	3.53	3.83
1904	3.16	4.32	3.18	4.05	2.82	3.46	3.20	3.70
1905	3.27	4.89	3.41	3.83	3.11	3.97	3.52	3.30
1906	4.88	5.59	4.36	3.52	4.87	4.74	4.31	3.34
1907	5.26	5.62	4.39	3.05	5.29	5.02	4.44	2.34
1908	4.73	6.57	5.36	2.35	4.88	6.50	5.62	2.62
1909	4.91	5.94	4.16	2.59	4.37	5.72	4.39	2.52
1910	3.84	6.37	4.01	2.52	3.84	5.02	3.79	2.42
1911	3.85	5.93	3.85	2.98	3.82	4.21	3.47	2.63
1912	4.07	5.72	4.02	2.67	3.86	4.48	3.79	2.50
1913	5.15	6.03	4.53	2.66	4.87	4.93	4.24	2.50
1914	5.29	6.71	5.28	2.80	5.37	5.74	5.29	2.68
1915	6.28	7.53	5.83	3.74	5.66	6.54	5.51	3.33
1916	5.70	7.62	5.00	4.39	5.23	6.25	4.82	4.01
1917	5.17	7.62	5.00	5.52	4.72	5.59	4.57	4.85
1918	4.49	7.38	5.14	5.44	4.16	5.78	4.99	5.22
1919	6.75	8.33	7.87	5.00	6.28	7.77	7.82	4.51
1920	7.97	10.00	7.22	5.04	7.74	7.45	7.59	4.46

Source : Prices and Wages in India for respective years.

<sup>116</sup> Deshpande, op. cit., Appendix XV, ppp 98-101.

<sup>117</sup> In the Enquiry Committee (1921-22) budgets the cost of rice consumption occupied 74 to 90 per cent of the total food expenditure. In Deshpande's report the cost of rice was 64 per cent of the total food expenditure.

In Lakhimpur the prices of rice, wheat and gram experienced fluctuating tendencies throughout the period. Despite fluctuations the price of rice increased by 40 per cent during the first ten years (1900-1909). Prices fell sharply in 1910 and 1911 followed by an upward movement from 1912 onwards. Though the upward movement of rice prices was not smooth the increase between 1911 and 1920 was 108 per cent. During the first decade of the twentieth century the price of wheat fluctuated with a tendency to decline.

From 1911 onwards it registered a constant upward movement and increased by 98 per cent between 1911 and 1920. Similar tendencies were noticed in the case of gram. After a fluctuating first decade its price increased by 88 per cent between 1911 and 1920. The prices of salt registered downward trends right upto the outbreak of World War I. But during the war years the salt prices increased and came upto the level of the early period.

The overall increase was the highest in the case of rice amounting to 128 per cent between 1900 and 1920. This represented an annual/increase of 6.4 per cent. It was followed by 62 per cent and 58 per cent increase in the prices of wheat and gram respectively during the corresponding period. This works out to an annual increase of 3.1 per cent in the case of wheat and 2.9 per cent for gram (Figure I and Table 7).

The movement in the prices of the above articles for the Brahmputra Valley average experienced were similar to those in Lakhimpur district. But the percentage of increase in the former case is much higher in the case of rice, wheat and gram prices during the first decade.<sup>118</sup> The overall increase in average Brahmputra Valley prices between 1900 and 1920 was 169 per cent, 62 per cent and 72 per cent for rice, wheat and gram respectively (see Figure II).

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<sup>118</sup> But in most cases the figures of prices are higher in the district. In other words, the prices at the Valley level presented a conservative average compared to the average in the district.

The above analysis of the price data shows two important trends. Firstly, the percentage of increase in the prices of rice, wheat and gram was much higher during the second decade compared to the first decade. Secondly, the cost of these articles (the actual figures) was also the highest during the second decade. Another important feature was the fact that the increase in rice prices was the highest among the articles while the price of salt had declined during the first decade and then they rose to the earlier level during the First World War period. Here two factors are crucial. First, as pointed out earlier, the expenditure on rice formed the major portion of total value of food consumption and the cost of food formed the bulk of the total expenditure of a labourer or labour family. Therefore, the extent of increase in the price of rice is the most important factor in determining the increase in the cost of living. Secondly, the expenditure on salt occupied only about 2 per cent of the total cost of food consumption and therefore the increase or decrease in its cost was insignificant factor in determining the trends in the cost of living of a labour family in Assam Valley tea gardens.<sup>119</sup>

A comparison of the movements in the prices of rice, wheat and gram with the movements of nominal wages of different categories of labour will show that real wages had declined in the Assam Valley tea plantations between 1900 and 1920. The overall increase between 1900-1904-05 and 1915-16-1912-20 in the combined wages of Act labour (men and women) was 11 per cent, 6 per cent and 25 per cent and of non-Act labour (men, women and children together) was 41 per cent, 30 per cent and 43 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively during the corresponding period (see Table 2 and Table 3). Compared to this the combined increase in the prices of above-mentioned articles between 1900-04 and 1916-20 was 57 per cent in Lakhimpur district and 59 per cent for the average Brahmaputra Valley (see Table 7). Even more interesting is the comparison between the

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<sup>119</sup>For the same reason we shall exclude the salt prices from our analyses when we compare the price trends with the wage trends.

two movements during the second decade, the period of the First World War when the tea industry was prospering. While the combined increase in nominal wages of non-Act labour (men, women and children together) was only 20 per cent, 9 per cent and 12 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively between 1910-14 and 1916-20, the combined increase in prices (rice, wheat and gram together) was 43 per cent in Lakhimpur and 44 per cent for the Brahmaputra Valley during the corresponding period.<sup>120</sup> Thus while the nominal wages registered upward movement the real wages were actually declining between 1900 and 1920.

That the real wages in tea gardens had declined during the early two decades of the present century is also evident from other sources. For instance, according to the findings of K.L. Datta's report of 1914 the real wages of tea garden labour had declined by 6 per cent between 1895 and 1912 (Table 8)<sup>121</sup>

**Table-8**

Nominal and Real Wages in Tea Gardens<sup>122</sup>

Year	1995	1900	1905	1910	1912
Nominal Wages	106	103	106	117	120
Real Wages	101	96	90	98	95

After comparing the wages in different industries Datta came to the conclusion that "the coolies in tea gardens appear to be in the worst position."<sup>123</sup>

In 1906, Harold Mann estimated the cost of an adult labourer's 'hotel' diet as Rs.3.04 per month (taking the price of rice at Rs.3.00 per maund). The diet consisted of rice, dal, salt, spices, mustard

<sup>120</sup>For the purposes of comparison between the prices of foodstuff and wages we have used five yearly averages on either ends as the basis for both.

<sup>121</sup>K.L. Datta, op.cit.. Vol. I, p. 171.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid, p. 170.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.. p. 171.

oil potatoes and onion.<sup>124</sup> In 1912 the cost of exactly the same diet was calculated to be Rs. 5.49 per month for an adult labourer.<sup>125</sup> This represented 81 per cent increase in cost of monthly diet per adult labour in the Assam Valley tea gardens between 1906 and 1922. During the corresponding period the combined wages (nominal) of the non-Act labour (men, women and children together) increased by 48 per cent in North Lakhimpur, 49 per cent in Sibsagar and 44 per cent in Darrang.<sup>126</sup> The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 estimated that the cost of living of the tea garden labour had increased by 44.4 per cent in Jorhat (Sibsagar), 50 per cent in Doom Dooma (Lakhimpur) and 50 to 75 per cent in Tezpur (Darrang) between the years 1913 and 1920.<sup>127</sup> The European accountant of the Empire of India Company in Tezpur had calculated the difference in the cost of living in 1920 as compared to 1913 at 100 per cent taking rice at the current market rates. The Deputy Commissioner of Darrang thought that 75 per cent was the fairer figure.<sup>128</sup> The Committee quoted the price of common rice (reported in Assam Gazette) for the years 1912-21. According to these figures the price of common rice increased by 91 per cent in Tezpur Sadr, 111 per cent in Mangaldai (Darrang), 98 per cent in Dibrugarh, 59 per cent in Lakhimpur (Lakhimpur), 71 per cent in Sibsagar and 92 per cent in Jorhat (Sibsagar).<sup>129</sup> A comparison of these figures with wage data (Table 2 and Table 3) will further strengthen our argument that the real wages in Assam Valley tea gardens during 1900-1920 had declined.

Our source of information for the post-1920 price data is limited to the Agricultural Statistics of British India.<sup>130</sup> The price data from this source for 1920-30 is even more limited. Only the provincial

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<sup>124</sup> Mann, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>125</sup> RALEC, 1921-22, p. 69.

<sup>126</sup> See Table 3.

<sup>127</sup> RALEC, 1921-22, p. 35.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38

<sup>130</sup> There is no other source which gives the statistical information on the prices in Assam for the period 1920-1947.

averages of harvest prices are available for this period and that also only of the winter rice (cleaned and unhusked) and raw sugar (gur). From 1930 onwards, however, the harvest prices of winter and autumn rice and raw sugar are quoted separately for two districts (Lakhimpur and Goalpara) and the averages of the province as a whole.

The comparison between price and wage movements in the 1920s will be restricted up to 1925-26.<sup>131</sup> Between 1921-22 and 1925-26 the prices of winter rice (unhusked) increased by 42 per cent and of winter (cleared) by 20 per cent, in Assam. The price of raw sugar, however, registered a decline of 5 per cent during the corresponding period (see Table 9).<sup>132</sup> The combined wages (nominal) of non-Act labour (men, women and children together),

**Table-9**

Harvest Prices of Winter Rice (unhusked and Cleared) and Raw Sugar(Gur) Rs. Per Maund in Assam 1921-22-1929-30.<sup>133</sup>

(Index Base: 1921-22-1925-26 100)

Year	Winter		Rice		Raw Sugar	
	Unhusked	Index	Cleared	Index	Gur	Index
1921-22	2.61	84	5.31	98	9.25	102
1922-23	2.56	82	4.31	80	8.96	99
1923-24	2.88	92	4.81	89	8.75	96
1924-25	3.75	120	6.25	116	9.75	197
1925-26	3.81	122	6.38	118	8.75	96
1926-27	3.69	118	6.56	121	8.50	94
1927-26	4.00	128	7.06	130	7.56	83
1928-29	3.50	112	5.75	106	7.63	84
1929-30	3.13	100	5.00	92	7.81	86

<sup>131</sup> As pointed out earlier, the data on nominal wages on non-Act labour was published only up to 1925-26. Between 1926-27 and 1931-32 only the figures of wage rate were published. However, wage rate does not represent the real nominal earnings of the labour force and hence its comparison with wage trend would not be fair.

<sup>132</sup> Raw sugar (gur) constituted an extremely small proportion of the total food consumption. Deshpande's estimate of a labour family budget shows that sugar consumption constituted only 2.6 per cent of the total food expenditure. Therefore, 5 per cent decrease in its prices between 1921-22 and 1925-26 would not have significantly reduced the total expenditure on food. See Deshpande, op. cit., Appendix XV, pp.98-101.

<sup>133</sup> Agricultural Statistics of British India for respective years. These figures represent the wholesale market prices. The figures of retail prices would have been even higher.

on the other hand, increased only by 15 per cent, 16 per cent and 19 per cent in North Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang respectively (see Table 3). In other words, real wages continued to decline in the early 1920s. But the decline in real wages was not as sharp as was the case during the second decade. Table 9 shows that the price of rice (of both categories) continued to rise upto 1927-26 and then declined in the next two years. It appears that the price of unhusked rice declined by 28 per cent, of cleared rice by 29 per cent between 1927-28 and 1929-30 and of raw sugar by 8 per cent between 1926-27 and 1929-30.

But looking at the increase in the wage rates of non-Act labour (Appendix Table II) during these years if we assume that the nominal wages also increased proportionately,<sup>134</sup> then the combined wages (nominal) may have increased by 7 per cent in North Lakhimpur, 13 per cent in Darrang and stagnated in Sibsagar. This will imply that for the first time the increase in nominal wages represented actual increase in real wages of non-Act labourers in North Lakhimpur and Darrang. Even in Sibsagar, despite stagnant nominal wages, the fall in prices indicate some increase in the real wages.

During the depression of the 1930s prices of rice of all varieties and raw sugar declined very sharply in all the districts, (see Table 10). As far as the prices of winter rice (both cleared and unhusked) were concerned it was the continuation of declining trend from the earlier years. Between 1927-28 and 1934-35 the prices of winter rice (unhusked and cleared) declined by 58 per cent and 57 per cent respectively at the provincial level (Tables 9 and 10). Though the price data at district level for the 1920's is not available but looking at the general trend of prices at the provincial level we assume that prices in districts also would have declined proportionately. Similarly, in the case of wages for the years

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<sup>134</sup>The wage rate of non-Act men, women and children increased by 3, 9 and 7 per cent respectively in Lakhimpur, and in Darrang the increase was 9, 5 and 18 respectively between 1926-27 and 1929-30. In Sibsagar, on the other hand, the wage rate remained stagnant during the corresponding period (see Appendix Table II).



**Table-10**

Harvest Prices of Gur (raw sugar) and Rice Crops Rs. per Maund  
in the Province of Assam 1931-32 - 1946-47

(Index Based 1931-32 - 1934-35 - 100) Lakhmipur (Dibrugarh)

Year	Winter Rice (unhusked) Rs.	Index	Winter Rice (unhusked) Rs.	Index	Autumn Rice (unhusked) Rs.	Index	Autumn Rice (unhusked) Rs.	Index	Gur (Raw Sugar) Rs.	Index
1931-32	2.06	85	3.81	157	2.25	93	4.13	117	7.75	116
1932-33	2.94	121	3.25	95	3.00	124	3.56	101	4.44	95
1933-34	2.69	111	3.19	132	2.63	109	3.13	89	4.44	91
1934-35	2.00	83	3.44	101	1.81	75	3.25	92	3.08	97
1935-36	*	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1936-37	1.63	67	3.69	108	1.75	72	3.19	91	4.25	95
1937-38	1.56	64	2.94	66	1.88	78	3.06	37	4.31	93
1938-39	2.00	83	3.25	95	2.00	83	3.19	91	3.50	111
1939-40	2.56	106	4.31	126	2.38	98	4.13	117	7.13	191
1940-41	2.75	114	4.88	143	2.75	114	4.81	137	6.19	133
1941-42	2.88	119	4.44	130	3.25	134	6.00	170	..	
1942-43	4.88	202	9.13	267	4.00	165	7.81	222	7.00	195
1943-44	8.19	338	16.63	486	10.50	434	22.75	646	22.88	476
1944-45	7.88	326	15.25	446	9.06	374	18.00	511	27.00	544
1945-46	6.88	284	13.38	391	..	...	13.75	391	10.25	323
1946-47	6.88	284	13.56	396	6.88	284	13.25	376	15.75	382

Year	Provincial Average Winter Rice (unhusked) Rs.	Index	Winter Rice (husked)	Index	Autumn Rice (unhusked)	Index	Autumn Rice (Husked) Rs.	Index	Gur (Raw sugar)	Index
1931-32	1.50	96	2.94	106	1.75	107	3.63	123	4.88	116
1932-33	1.31	84	2.38	86	1.50	92	2.88	109	4.00	95
1933-34	1.75	112	2.69	97	1.69	104	2.63	89	3.81	91
1934-35	1.69	108	3.06	110	1.50	96	2.63	89	4.06	97
1935-36	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1936-37	1.56	100	2.81	101	1.63	100	2.94	100	4.00	95
1937-38	1.69	108	3.00	108	1.81	111	3.06	104	3.83	93
1938-39	1.94	124	3.19	115	2.06	126	3.31	113	4.63	111
1939-40	2.38	152	4.00	144	2.36	146	3.94	134	8.00	191
1940-41	2.31	148	4.44	160	2.56	157	4.38	149	5.56	133
1941-42	2.88	135	4.69	169	3.44	211	5.88	200	a)	-
1942-43	4.10	263	8.81	318	4.00	245	7.63	260	8.19	195
1943-44	7.50	481	13.13	474	3.06	556	18.75	633	19.94	476
1944-45	6.44	413	12.31	444	7.75	475	13.63	464	22.31	544
1945-46	5.56	356	10.25	370	6.44	395	12.00	408	13.63	325
1946-47	6.44	413	12.19	440	6.25	333	12.06	410	16.06	382

Source: Agricultural Statistics of India, Vol. I for respective years.

1930-31 and 1934-35 we have data, as pointed out earlier, giving average nominal wages only for the Brahmputra Valley and not for each district separately. And the combined nominal wages (men, women and children together) of labour force at the Valley level registered a decline of 51 per cent in the corresponding period (see Table 4).

Thus a sharp decline in prices was accompanied by a sharp decline (a little less than the prices) in the nominal wages in the early 1930s. The downward movement of prices, with slight increase in some cases, continued right upto the beginning of World War II (see Table 10). Wages also declined though less than prices. This might have led to maintenance or even an increase in real wages. However this does not seem to have happened on any significant scale since we know how the planters tended to employ *faltu* or *basti* labour who were cheaper.<sup>135</sup>

From the beginning of the Second World War prices of almost all varieties of rice and raw sugar showed a very sharp and secular upward movement. Particularly during 1943-44 and 1944-45, there was a massive jump in the prices of food grains. The base years for our comparison of prices with the wage data on settled labour at district level will be 1933-34 - 1937-38.<sup>136</sup> The prices of winter rice, unhusked and husked, increased by 279 per cent and 343 per cent in Lakhimpur and 288 per cent and 314 per cent respectively at the provincial average between 1933-34 - 1937-36 and 1943-44 - 1946-47. Similarly, the prices of autumn rice (unhusked and husked) increased by 336 per cent and 436 per cent in Lakhimpur 342 per cent and 400 per cent respectively at the provincial level during the corresponding period. The price of raw sugar (gur) increased by 350 per cent and 360 per cent in

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<sup>135</sup>The causes of decline in wages during this period have been discussed earlier.

<sup>136</sup>Because the wage figures of settled labour were published from 1984 onwards after the Tea District Emigrant Labour Act (XXII of 1932) came into effect. It is four yearly averages which are used as base year and 1935-36 is excluded as figures for that year are not available.

Lakhimpur and at the provincial level respectively (see Table 10). In contrast the combined wages (nominal) of settled labour (men, women and children together) increased by 46 per cent in Lakhimpur, 42 per cent in Sibsagar and 48 per cent in Darrang between 1934-37 and 1944-47 (Table 5).<sup>137</sup>

Rege reported that the Government of India had conducted family budget enquiries through the office of the Director of the Cost of Living Index Scheme in Silchar, Gauhati and Tinsukia (some of the important towns outside the plantation area in Assam) during 1939-45. The purpose behind this enquiry was to compile cost of living index numbers for three centres. Table 11 presents figures, supplied by the above office of prices of certain articles in non-plantation centers. But the trends of prices were similar in the plantation areas too.<sup>138</sup> Rege estimated that the cost of living of Assam tea garden labourers had gone up by at least 200 per cent between 1939 and 1945. On the other hand, their earnings (including cash value of concessions in foodstuffs and cloth) had increased by only 82 per cent during the corresponding period.<sup>139</sup>

From the above analysis of the wages and price movements in the Assam Valley tea plantations during 1900 and 1947 the following conclusions emerge: During the first decade the wages remained more or less stagnant while the prices of articles of foodstuff showed a slight increase. In the second decade the nominal wages showed upward movement but could not keep up with the increases in prices. Therefore, the first two decades experienced a decline in the real wages of the labour, The decline in real wages was much sharper during the second decade despite high rate of increase in the nominal wages during and after the first World War.

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<sup>137</sup> These figures of percentage do not reflect the actual increase in the nominal wages because, as pointed out earlier, the figures of wages for the year 1947 were extremely high compared to the previous years. Hence, if we take 1945 as the point of comparison, the actual increase should work out to be much less than the above figures. Four yearly averages are used at both ends as the basis of comparison.

<sup>138</sup> Rege, *op. cit.*, p. 55; P.P. Pillai, ed., *Labour in South East Asia: A Symposium* (New Delhi, 1947), P. 18.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

**Table-11**

Retail Prices in Assam During Pre-War Period, 1943 and May, 1945

Article	Rate per	Prices obtaining in 1939	Prices obtaining in 1943	Prices in Gauhati in May 1945	% of column 5 to col. 3	Prices in Silchar in May 1945	% of column 7 to col. 3	Prices in Tinsukia in May 1945	% of column 9 to col. 3
Rice	Maund	4.00 to 5.00	30 to 40	14.88	337	14.75	328	16.00	356
Dal	Seer	0.13 to 0.19	0.75 to 0.88	0.57	367	0.70	447	0.52	333
Fish	Seer	0.25 to 0.50	1.50 to 2.00	1.25	333	1.00	267	2.44	650
Eggs	Four	0.9	0.63 to 0.75	-	-	-	-	-	-
Chicken	Each	0.25 to 0.37	1.25 to 1.75	-	-	-	-	-	-
Goat	Each	2.00 to 3.00	10.0 to 12.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vegetables	Seer	0.13	0.50 to 0.63	0.37	300	0.40	-	0.68	538
Mustard Oil	Seer	0.37 to 0.50	1.75 to 2.00	1.63	371	1.88	429	1.63	371

**Source:** D.V. Rege, Report on An Enquiry into Conditions of plantation Labour in India 1946. p.55

During the third decade the real wages continued to decline till 1926-27. Prices declined in the next two years while wages (nominal) continued to rise. In other words, for the first time the increase in nominal wages actually represented increase in real wages. The depression of 1930s affected both prices and wages and there was sharp decline in both. The decline in prices was slightly higher compared to that of wages in the 1930s. However, the possibility of even slight benefits was neutralised by the increasing employment of *faltu* or *basti* (temporary) labour whose wages were much lower compared to those of settled labour which further depressed the overall wages. The Second World War created a boom for the tea industry and the nominal wages also experienced a constant upward movement reaching the highest figures of all time in 1947. But the war also created inflationary tendencies in prices and the increase was massive. As a result the real wages declined very sharply.

## IV

The obvious result of the constant decline in real wages of the tea garden labour in Assam Valley was their appallingly low standard of living. The employment of large number of children is a clear indication that the earnings of the adult workers were not enough even for the subsistence of a labour family. In contrast to the stereotype of 'wel-fed' labour, presented by the planters and various earlier official reports, Rege's observations in 1946 are revealing: "The standard of living of tea garden labourers in Assam is appallingly low. They merely exist. They have hardly any belongings except a few clothes (mostly tattered) and a few pots (mostly earthen). Their womenfolk have no jewellery except German silver bangles in a few cases. Their houses presented a picture of stark poverty."<sup>140</sup> Even Deshpande, whose report was generally appreciated by the Indian Tea Association, observed: "speaking generally, the workers on the Assam tea plantations are very scantily clothed and children generally go about naked. Most of the workers and their families walk about bare-footed."<sup>141</sup>

The inability of wages to keep up with the rising cost of living resulted in reduction in the level of consumption causing undernourishment and malnutrition among the labour force. This further exposed them to all sorts of disease and illness. Their physical ill-health was further aggravated by inadequate sanitation, water supply and the generally unhealthy climate of the tropical forest areas surrounding the tea gardens. The Royal Commission reported that material infection played an important part in lowering standards of health and physique and causing most of the sickness in Assam plantation areas.<sup>142</sup> The Commission also reported that a large number of tea garden labourers were infected with hookworm because of highly inadequate arrangements for latrines.<sup>143</sup> Official supervision of health and welfare of plantation labour hardly existed. "In Assam, the Director of Public Health

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Deshpande, op. cit., p. 33.

<sup>142</sup> *Royal Commission*. 1931, p. 406.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. pp. 409-10.

has apparently little or no contact with the plantations, as he is neither an official inspector of factories, nor has the right to inspect plantations.”<sup>144</sup> The incidence of malnutrition and consequent deterioration in health were particularly high during the World Wars because of extremely high prices and comparatively low wages. Reports based on proper medical investigation were brought out only from the late 1930s onwards. In one of these reports one Dr. Lapping stated that malnutrition was widespread throughout the tea districts in the Assam Valley and that the class of the population most affected was the non-working children. He attributed this to the economic inability of the labourers to purchase food rather than to any real shortage.<sup>145</sup> In December 1943, Mr K.C. Dutta, Assistant Commissioner of Labour, Assam, surveyed nearly 73 gardens in both Valleys and reported that there was malnutrition amongst labourers in most of the tea estates and that this was caused by high prices and scarcity of the articles of food containing fats and vitamins.<sup>146</sup> However, this was not a war time phenomenon only. In 1938 and 1939 the All India Institute of Public Health and Hygiene had carried out diet and physique surveys among Assam tea labour and cultivators in certain areas in Bengal. The survey showed that the diet of Assam tea labourers was deficient both in quantity and quality and the nutrition and development of children were lower than those of other classes which were included in the survey.<sup>147</sup> It was pointed out that a Assam labour boy of seven consumed 1,090 calories per day against the recommended 1,600 to 2,100 per day.<sup>148</sup>

Even more damaging was the information collected by E. Llyod Jones, the Deputy Director General, Indian Medical Services in his Report on standard of medical care in Tea Plantations in India. Undernourishment and General weakness were evident among

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.. p. 417

<sup>145</sup> Cited in Rege, op. cit.. p.60

<sup>146</sup> Cited in Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Dr. Wilson and Dr Mitra, "A Diet and Physique Survey in Assam Rural Bengal and Calcutta, a survey conducted for the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, Calcutta." *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, Vol. XXVII, pp. 131- 54

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.. p. 134.

people working in gardens or walking along the roads. “There seemed a general lack of vitality. Children were rarely seen running about or playing. They ambled along like old men.” Lloyd-Jones observed that the vast majority of patients attending outdoor treatment were under nourished and anaemic.<sup>149</sup> Statistics obtained from 17 European owned gardens in Assam by Lloyd Jones showed that infant mortality rate in 1944 was 188.0 per thousand births and maternal mortality was 35.2 per thousand live births (Table 12).<sup>150</sup> Among the causes listed by him for all this were malaria, bad water supply, lack of proper conservancy methods, poor housing and poor standard of nutrition of the labourers.<sup>151</sup>

**Table-12**

Vital Statistics of 17 European Owned Tea Estates Surveyed in Assam Valley. 1946

<i>Infantile Mortality</i>		<i>Maternal Mortality</i>
<i>Per 1000 Live births</i>		<i>Per 1000 cases</i>
	189.1	38.3
	37.33	58.3
	216.2	50.0
	106.0	35.3
	125.5	18.4
	193.4	58.4
	156.1	54.2
	127.2	27.5
	148.1	17.2
	202.5	24.8
	231.0	22.8
	166.5	34.1
	189.0	40.1
	206.2	32.4
	297.0	46.3
	158.4	22.1
	147.3	18.2
Total	3,196.8	598.4

**Source:** Jones' Standard of Medical Care for Tea Plantations in India. 1946, Appendix III, p.70

<sup>149</sup> Lloyds Jones' *Standards of Medical Care for Tea Plantations in India*. 1946, p. 70.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*

The annual official reports on emigrant labour in Assam published vital statistics every year. However, like the wage returns, the information on mortality among tea garden labour was originally sent by garden managers. These were reproduced in the official reports without any scrutiny regarding their accuracy. This was admitted by a senior official in his confidential letter to the Government of India. He reported that the information regarding deaths of labourers was entirely dependent on the reports submitted by garden managers, there being no government agency for the registration of births and deaths in tea gardens.<sup>152</sup>

**Table-13**

Statement Showing the Death Rate in some of the Tea Estates in Darrang District for 1919-20 and 1920-21.<sup>153</sup>

<i>Year</i>	<i>Name of Garden</i>	<i>Ratio per Mille</i>
1919-20	Dhekiajuli Tea Estate	99.18
	Shamuguri Tea Estate	193.35
	Panchnoi Tea Estate	131.96
	Dalhousie Tea Estate	113.44
	Dufflagur Tea Estate	94.97
	Hirajuly Anuja Tea Estate	79.36
	Kherkheria Tea Estate	138.00
	Total:	850.26
	Average:	121.46
1920-21	Tarajuli Tea Estate	84.39
	Dhekiajuli Tea Estate	80.32
	Dalhousie Tea Estate	133.75
	Bermajon Tea Estate	165.93
	Greanland Tea Estate	127.89
	Kabira Tea Estate	101.01
	Bhutiachang Tea Estate	87.80
	Kherkheria Tea Estate	76.99
	Majbat Tea Estate	80.84
	Bahipukhri Tea Estate	30.59
	Total	969.51
	Average:	90.95



The Enquiry Committee of 1921-22 had also cautioned that the vital statistics for the tea gardens must be accepted with considerable reserve. The explanation for this caution was that the reporting agency for areas outside the Municipal lilies was undoubtedly defective and unreliable. It was pointed out that despite the efforts to improve “there are instances in which figures reported are incredibly low, notably in the case of deaths of children.”<sup>154</sup> This note of caution was not without justification. A comparison of the annually published official vital statistics with the figures compiled (unpublished) on the basis of inspections of some of the tea estates by the district officials in 1919-20 and 1920-21 is revealing. The average mortality rate of the seven inspected tea estates in Darrang district during 1919-20 was 121.46 and of ten estates during 1920-21 was 96.95 (see Table 13). As compared to this the officially published mortality rate was 49.2 for adult and 20.4 for children during 1919-20 and 37.7 for adults and 22.0 for children during 1920-21 in Darrang district.<sup>155</sup> However such complaints fell on deaf ears and deaths among tea garden labour in the province continued to be under-reported. This is borne out of the fact that even as late as 1946 a survey report complained that many of the doctors were not familiar with the commonly accepted methods of maintaining vital statistics. For example, the report continued, the figures supplied on infantile mortality represented the number of infant deaths per thousand of population instead of the number of infant deaths per thousand live births, which was usually accepted definition of infantile mortality rate.<sup>156</sup> It was pointed out that figures collected through the survey (Table 12) were confirmed by reference to the daily attendance sheets, and the births and deaths registers, and therefore may be accepted as reasonably accurate.

Thus, to sum up, the picture which emerged from the above study - was not one of a ‘comfortable’ and ‘well-fed’ labour force in the Assam Valley tea gardens. On the contrary, through the mechanism of ‘wage-agreement’, ‘labour-rules’ and ‘standardisation’ etc.. the labourers were regularly under-paid.

Though nominal wages increased over time, the real wages actually declined. This created a situation of under-nourishment and malnutrition. The situation became worse during the period of extremely high prices. However to keep the labour force alive and working, the systems of advances and 'concessions' (subsidised rations, land for private cultivation) proved useful to the employers. Thus instead of paying a viable market wage it was the practice of wage in kind which appeared to be the major feature of capital-labour relations in the Assam Valley tea gardens.

## Appendix-I

Yearly Average of Monthly Wage Rates of Act Labourers including the Value of Ticca, Diet, Subsistence Allowance(Average for each year based on the Figures for September and March Months). Calculated on the basis of daily working strength.

Year	North Lakhimpur		Sibsagar		Darrang	
	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1905-06	6.69	6.03	7.14	6.46	7.53	6.42
1907	7.69	6.98	6.75	6.21	7.08	6.46
1908	6.97	6.20	7.05	5.79	6.93	6.25
1909	6.97	5.78	6.91	5.73	7.09	6.62
1910-11	6.88	6.45	5.40	4.91	6.29	6.31
1911-12	6.92	6.13	6.77	6.26	6.48	6.51
1912-13	7.61	6.41	6.31	5.01	6.27	6.53
1913-14	7.15	6.28	6.89	6.02	6.43	7.07
1914-15	7.75	7.02	7.52	7.23	6.68	6.78
1915-16	6.72	6.40	6.84	6.60	6.89	7.30
1916-17	7.08	8.01	7.14	6.50	7.47	8.70
1917-18	6.72	6.39	7.03	6.47	6.59	8.06
1918-19	6.96	7.30	7.50	7.54	8.24	10.00

**Source :** Assam) Labour Reports for respective years.

## APPENDIX -II

Yearly Averages of Monthly wage Rates of Non-Act Labourers(calculated on the basis of daily working strength) including, the Value of Subsistence Allowances, Diet or Rations and Ticca earnings in North Lakhimpur,Sibsagar and Darrang Districts.

Year	North Lakhimpur			Sibsagar			Darrang		
	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.	Men Rs.	Women Rs.	Children Rs.
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1905-06	7.44	5.35	3.25	8.07	5.70	3.20	6.94	5.85	3.32
1906-07	7.64	5.84	3.39	7.28	5.55	3.38	6.73	5.94	3.66
1907-08	6.78	5.30	3.58	6.89	5.88	2.35	6.45	5.54	3.68
1908-09	6.84	5.47	3.27	6.94	5.92	3.37	6.84	5.54	3.97
1909-10	7.63	6.15	3.64	7.40	6.50	3.43	6.25	5.79	3.76
1910-11	7.31	6.42	3.51	7.06	4.34	2.77	6.88	6.41	3.30
1911-12	7.41	6.25	3.32	7.29	6.20	3.78	7.05	6.53	3.47
1912-13	7.54	6.42	3.42	7.17	6.46	4.10	7.50	6.56	3.61
1913-14	7.91	6.86	3.67	8.13	6.77	3.67	7.30	6.50	3.84
1914-15	8.62	7.88	3.99	7.85	6.64	3.90	7.85	7.24	4.15
1915-16	8.80	7.97	4.28	7.58	6.73	3.36	7.67	7.46	4.29
1916-17	8.92	8.01	4.23	7.36	6.96	3.80	7.73	7.57	4.16
1917-13	8.27	7.10	3.89	7.68	6.21	3.81	7.51	7.65	4.09
1918-19	8.72	8.55	4.42	8.04	7.42	4.30	7.91	7.85	4.28
1919-20	9.14	8.42	4.51	8.78	8.15	4.59	8.25	8.41	4.40
1920-21	8.85	7.41	4.51	8.77	7.81	4.76	9.02	7.79	4.97
1921-22	10.02	8.87	5.14	9.66	8.73	5.24	8.90	7.08	5.15
1922-23	10.56	9.10	5.50	10.03	8.83	5.56	9.54	8.94	5.18
1923-24	10.52	9.39	5.57	10.09	9.50	5.77	9.65	9.17	5.19
1924-25	11.57	9.55	5.67	10.51	9.44	6.05	10.21	9.33	6.24
1925-26	11.84	10.13	6.05	11.38	10.28	6.42	11.00	10.26	6.51
1926-27	12.08	10.89	6.31	11.58	10.96	7.03	11.35	10.66	6.85
1927-28	11.68	10.85	5.78	12.15	10.52	6.92	9.94	9.16	6.20
1928-29	12.14	11.88	6.22	11.71	10.65	6.78	12.25	11.43	7.85
1929-30	12.43	11.91	6.73	11.34	10.09	6.73	12.35	11.18	8.08
1930-31	11.55	10.68	5.98	11.46	9.44	6.98	11.98	10.74	7.60
1931-32	10.39	9.07	5.41	10.57	9.02	6.54	10.55	8.93	7.58

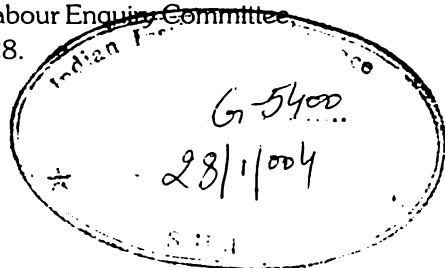
**Note :** The average wage figures for each year were worked out on the basis of earnings during March and September months.

### APPENDIX-III

Annual Expenditure of a Labour Family of 5 Members - 2 male, 1 female and 2 children in Suntok Taa Estate, Sibsagar, 1921-22

<i>Items of Expenditure</i>	<i>Cost (Rs.)</i>
A- Food	
Rice	216.00
Salt-2 seers monthly consumption	3.00
Oil rough calculation	3.00
Spices	1.50
Fish	3.00
Vegetables	1.50
Milk	1.13
<b>Totals :</b>	229.13
B- Other Household Expenses	
Betal nut	1.50
Kerosine	1.50
Tobacco	1.50
C - Clothes	
Three 7 cubit dhotia	5.25
One 6 cubit dhoti	1.63
Two saris	5.25
Two blankets ordinary	5.00
One drill coat	4.13
D - Liquor and Ganja	21.00
E - Household Utensils	2.25
Two earthen Jugs	0.30
One brass plate	1.88
F - Miscellaneous	6.00
Festivals and entertainment	3.00
Other expenses	3.00
Cigarattes	1.50
<b>Grand Total :</b>	293.90

**Source :** Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1921-22, Appendix VIII(K), p. 128.



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