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REPORT

OF THE

DUARS COMMITTEE,

1910.



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* Not printed.

APPENDIX.

Dated Shillong, the 30th November 1921.

From—J. A. Dawson, Esq., I.C.S., Secretary Assam Labour Enquiry Committee,

To—The Managers of Tea-gardens in ^{Assam Valley}
^{Surma Valley}

On behalf of the Committee appointed to enquire into the conditions of tea-garden labour in Assam, I have the honour to append a list of questions, and should be glad if you would answer them as far as they relate to gardens under your control. Should you not be in a position to supply all the information asked for, the Committee would still be glad to be favoured with replies on those points on which you may be able to enlighten them. They would welcome any other facts or statistics illustrative of the economic conditions under which tea-garden coolies in Assam live and opinions as to whether any, and if so, what, remedial measures are required.

2. The terms of reference are:—

To enquire into conditions of coolie labour on tea-gardens in Assam and in particular—

- (i) to enquire whether the remuneration in money payments together with the concessions received by the coolies in the way of free housing, medical attendance, cheap rice, clothing, garden land, etc., is sufficient to maintain the labourers in health and reasonable comfort;
- (ii) to enquire whether it is possible and desirable that the indirect remuneration represented by the abovementioned concessions should be converted into an increase of money wages; and to make any recommendation which seems desirable for improving the conditions of labour.

3. The Committee regret that there has been some delay in framing the questions, but feel sure that you will, in the interests of the tea industry, treat the matter as urgent and will send the answers—it will suffice to quote the numbers of the questions—as soon as possible to the Secretary, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, Shillong. I may say that the Committee intend to examine witnesses at convenient centres, and also to visit typical tea-gardens. If you would like to give evidence before the Committee, this fact may be communicated to the Secretary. The tour programme will be sent out as soon it is finally settled. Provisionally, it is intended to visit Darrang in December, Sylhet and Cachar in January, and Sibsagar, Nowgong and Lakhimpur in February.

QUESTIONS.

I.—Labour Force.

1. What is the working population living on the garden—men, women, and children? Can you give the approximate percentage of the different classes of coolies in your garden—Oriyas, Santals, etc.?

2. How many coolies, not residing on the garden, do you usually employ—men, women, and children? Are they employed throughout the year or usually at a particular season?

3. What is the acreage of tea under cultivation and the average yield per acre? Is your labour force sufficient? If all your coolies worked 8 hours a day, how many approximately would you require to work your garden?

4. If you employ outside labour, would it be possible to have all the work done by your coolies residing in the garden? If so, can you give any reason why this is not done?

5. (a) What is the explanation of the difference between the total labour force on the books and the average daily working strength, which is in some cases considerable?

(b) How many hours' work is done per week on the average in a normal year by (1) your best coolies, (2) your average coolies, in (a) busy season and (b) slack season?

6. (a) How much have you spent in recruiting during the last five years? Trace the increase in your labour force as a result of recruiting.

(b) If the increase appears to be in commensurate with the expenditure, how do you explain the unsatisfactory nett results?

(c) In the circumstances stated in (b), would it, in your opinion, have been more profitable to spend the bulk of the money devoted to recruiting on the coolies you already hold? If so, in what directions?

(d) If little or no recruiting has been done, can you explain how you have managed to maintain an adequate labour force with so little recruiting?

(e) Is it a fact that some gardens are more popular with labour than others? If so, please state what you consider to be the most important factors of such popularity?

7. Leaving out of consideration times of cholera and influenza epidemics, how does the birth-rate in your garden compare with the death-rate?

8. Is the type of coolie recruited at the present day as good as ten years ago? If inferior, in what respect?

II.—Organisation and Discipline.

9. State briefly but as fully as possible the customary duties of manager, assistants, and Indian staff on your garden.

10. What are the duties, powers and privileges of sardars and line chaukidars on your garden? On what principle are they selected? Are they popular in general with the labour force?

11. Have there been cases of abuse of power on the part of your staff (all grades) in your experience? Have these been common? What is the best way to avoid such abuses?

12. Do you consider it essential that the European staff on a garden should be thoroughly conversant with some vernacular understood by the coolies? In your experience is this always the case?

13. Do you have a system of fines? If so, what is it, i.e., who have the power to fine and on what principles are they allowed to do so?

14. It is said that in some gardens everything is done for the old settled coolie and that on other gardens everything is done for the new coolie. Is it possible so to arrange matters as to keep the old coolies contented while in no way discouraging the new? If so, how is it done?

15. Is it a fact that there has been a widespread feeling of unrest among tea-garden labour during the past few years? If so, to what do you attribute it? State your own experience. Were you aware of a feeling of unrest apart from any caused by the efforts of political agitators and do you think that without these efforts the unrest would have manifested itself?

16. To what extent do you attribute recent disturbances among tea-garden labour to the incitement of agitators? If possible, give your own experience.

17. Have coolies had any real grievances—economic or personal of which agitators could make capital? If not, how do you account for the sporadic nature of the troubles that have occurred?

18. During the past few years of enhanced cost of living (1916, 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920) has the remuneration of the staff, European and Indian, and of the labour force increased? If so, please give details. If not, were any other steps taken to mitigate the hardship of the increased cost of living?

19. What dividends did your garden or Company pay during the abovementioned five years?

20. Have you on any occasion during the past five years suggested to your agents or directors any measures for ameliorating the lot of your labour force? If so, with what results?

III.—Wages.

21. What is your system of payment, daily or monthly? What is the daily rate of wages (*hasira*) paid to men, women, and children living in the garden for a full task? If payment is according to a monthly rate, what is it for men, women, and children? If the daily or monthly rates have changed since 1913, please give details.

22. If different rates from above are given in the case of labour living outside the lines, please state them.

23. Have the cash earnings of coolies for work done on the garden increased since 1913? Can you give any figures to show the difference? The figures should include regular *hasiras* and also *ticca* earnings, (i.e., additional pay for work over and above the standard task).

24. What do you consider a decent living monthly wage for a working coolie—man and woman—not a mere subsistence allowance, but a wage that would suffice to keep them in health and reasonable comfort with a possibility of saving a little ?

25. Can you give any idea of the extent of difference in the cost of living in 1913 and 1920 ?

26. (a) Taking into account all the earnings and concessions received by an average coolie, would you say that he gets enough to keep him in health and reasonable comfort with the present price of necessities ?

(b) Please state the total sanctioned provision for remuneration of labour in your garden budget year by year for 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, and 1921 and side by side with these figures please give the strength of your labour force in the same years.

(c) Please give in tabular form the actual earnings of a number of your best working coolies—men, women, and children—month by month for a year showing number of days' work done,—total *hazira* earned and total *ticca* earned—for the years abovementioned.

(d) Please state the average daily number turning out to work on your garden (1) during the period July to September inclusive and (2) during the period December to February inclusive. Also the average number of coolies who earned *ticca* during these periods. The figures should be for the years 1917, 1918, 1919, 1920, and 1921.

27. Can you give any idea of the indebtedness of coolies in your garden either to the garden or to outside *mahajans* ? Can you give any idea of how many of your coolies are free of debt either to the garden or to the *mahajans* ?

28. Can you say to what extent coolies in your garden remit money to their home districts ?

29. To what extent do your coolies save money to buy cattle, buffaloes, land and the like ? Do any of them lend money to other coolies.

30. Are payments made daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly for regular task work ? What would the coolies prefer ? When are *ticca* payments made ?

31. Are payments made in cash or in tickets ? If the latter, does the garden cash the tickets or the shopkeeper ? Is there any reason to believe that the latter does not pay the coolie the full value of the tickets ?

32. If rice or *dhan* is issued, is the cost or any part of it recovered ? Please describe your system in detail.

33. Do you think the fixing of a standard wage is feasible for the district, for the sub-district, or for a group of gardens ?

34. (a) Do you favour the idea of a provident fund for your Indian staff ?

(b) Do you favour the idea of giving coolies a bonus proportionate to the prosperity of the garden year by year ? If so, what form should it take ?

35. Does the unit system exist in your garden, *i.e.*, a system of remuneration based on small units of work, the coolies being paid in terms of multiples of such unit. If you have such a unit system, describe it. Is the coolie allowed to earn as much or as little as he chooses, both in busy and slack season, or is there a limit ? Under the unit system does the coolie tend to sacrifice quality to quantity ? If the unit system is not in force in your garden, would you be in favour of its introduction ?

36. Is it the case that earnings are inadequate in the cold weather as compared with the rest of the year ? Can this be remedied ?

37. Are wages paid into the hands of the coolies by the Manager or Assistant Manager ?

Is this an invariable rule in your garden ?

38. In the case of your garden to what extent do coolies supplement their regular and *ticca* earnings by cultivation of paddy or other crops, sale of firewood, milk, fodder or vegetables, by rearing cattle, by hiring carts, or in other ways such as working on Government or Local Board roads ?

39. In the case of a coolie living with his wife and children would you say, as a general rule, that his own total earnings are sufficient to maintain himself and his family in health and reasonable comfort ?

40. Is it your experience that increased wages encourage labourers to work substantially longer hours ?

41. How far do you think it true that any appreciable rise in the rate of wages would result in the coolie not earning more from the garden but in his doing less work for the same pay ?

IV.—Tasks.

42. What is the task for plucking? Does it differ at different times of the year? Has it altered in recent years, say from 1913? If so, how? How many hours does it take the average woman to do the task?

43. Has fine plucking altered the task? With a reduced task for fine plucking is it possible for a coolie to earn as much in a given time as was the case when coarser plucking was the practice?

44. What is the *ticca* rate for plucking and how does it compare with the rate before the war? Granted that there is leaf to pluck, can a coolie earn as much *ticca* as he or she chooses or is there a limit? Can a coolie earn as much by *ticca* plucking now as during the war boom in tea?

45. In weighing leaf what deduction is made for the basket? Is the deduction always the same? What other deductions are made, *e.g.*, for wet or stalky leaf or for factory charges? Suppose a plucker brings in 25 pounds of *actual* leaf in a basket weighing 5 pounds, the leaf being perfectly dry, for what weight of leaf will she get credit in your garden?

46. Is leaf weighment made in presence of the Manager or Assistant Manager? Is this the invariable rule?

47. What is the task for (a) light hoeing, (b) deep hoeing? Has it altered in recent years, say from 1913? If so, how?

48. Does the hoeing task differ at various times of the year or for different soils in the garden? How many hours does it take the average man to do the work?

49. What is the *ticca* rate for hoeing and how does it compare with the rate before the war? Can a coolie earn as much *ticca* in hoeing as she chooses, or is there a limit? Can he earn as much now by *ticca* hoeing as he could before the war?

50. How are hoeing measurements made? By a *nal* rod or by so many *galis* (rows) of bushes? Are the results identical? How many feet in your garden *nal*?

51. To what extent and in what circumstances are fractional *haziras* given in your garden?

V.—Concessions.

52. (a) To what extent have coolies in your garden got land for cultivation of paddy or other crops (1) within the garden grant, (2) outside? In the case of (1) can you say what amount of land is so held and by how many adult coolies? On what conditions do the coolies hold land inside the grant; if not on rent-free terms, what is the rate of rent? Are they liable to be turned out of their land, and for what reasons?

(b) What percentage of the adult male coolies in the garden have got land for cultivation either inside or outside the grant?

53. Is it your experience that coolies living in the garden who hold land inside or outside the estate do a reasonable amount of garden work, either by themselves or by other family members?

54. Have you still got land within the estate which the coolies could take up for cultivation? If so, is there any desire to take it up? If not, why not?

55. Is it your experience that new coolies are keen on taking up land for cultivation or only coolies who have been settled in the garden for some time?

56. Do you give facilities to new coolies to cultivate, or do you prefer to give this privilege only to those who have been for some time on the garden?

57. Is there much Government waste land in the neighbourhood of your garden suitable for cultivation which your coolies could take up?

58. Can you give any idea as to what extent coolies in your garden hold land outside the estate and whether as direct tenants of Government or as sub-tenants of others?

59. Does the coolie as a rule sell the produce of his land in the open market or to other coolies, or does he keep it chiefly for his own consumption?

60. Is the coolie in your garden allowed leave freely to cultivate his land or are restrictions placed?

61. Are the coolies housed in lines or houses built at garden expense? Or are they allowed to build their own houses? In the latter case, thus the garden supply materials and pay the coolies for a reasonable time while building them? Can you

give any idea of the money value of free housing? Do they prefer to build their own houses or to live in the houses built by the garden? Have they a plot for growing vegetables, etc.?

62. Is there free grazing land available in the garden? If so, does the garden provide cowherds?

63. Apart from agreement advances, does the garden lend money to the coolies for miscellaneous purposes? Is interest charged? How are the loans recovered? Does the borrower mortgage his cattle or any thing? If he takes the money to buy cattle, do you consider the cattle garden property until the advance is repaid?

64. Are many of these loans irrecoverable? On an average how much do you write off annually as irrecoverable?

65. Do the coolies have any difficulty in finding fuel within the estate? If so, is any help given to them?

66. On the occasion of festive days like the *Durga Pujas*, is anything given to the coolies?

67. Have you accommodation for in-door patients in your hospital and is it much used?

68. Do you supply clothing or blankets free or at a reduced rates, and in what cases?

69. What pregnant sick leave is given before and after birth? What sick pay, if any, is given during that time? Is any bonus given on the birth of a child? Are any arrangements made for nursing?

70. In the case of children or weakly coolies unable to work, are free meals or sick *haziras* given? In the case of the latter, what amounts? If men or women fall below *par* and are unable to earn sufficient to keep them in good health, do you do anything to assist them such as by feeding them till they are fit for work?

71. Have you a garden school and would you call it a success? If, in the past, you have had such a school which has now ceased to exist, can you give the reason for its abolition?

72. (a) When rice is dear, is it your practice to sell it to the coolies at concession rates? Taking the last 5 years or any other suitable period, what has been your loss by making this concession? What is your guiding principle in fixing the rate at which you sell rice to the coolie or have you a fixed rate? If you have a fixed rate, what is it?

(b) Is this concession of cheap rice granted over and above the full rates of pay, or do those who avail themselves of the cheap rice concession get less pay than those who do not? How much concession rice may a working coolie—man, woman, or child—purchase per week?

73. Is it possible and desirable that the indirect remuneration represented by the various concessions in the shape of free housing, medical attendance, cheap rice, clothing, garden land, etc., should be converted into an increase of money wages? The question may be considered from the points of view both of the garden and the coolie.

VI.—Contract.

74. (a) Do you put coolies in your garden under Act-XIII agreement? If so, what advance is given to men and women? Do you recover the advances? Do you put newly-recruited coolies under agreement as soon as they come up from their country?

(b) Has the amending Act XII of 1920 which restricts the term of agreement to one year, altered the amount you give as advance? How has your garden practice been altered as the result of this Act?

75. Do you think it necessary to put the coolie under contract at all? Probably many coolies put themselves under contract in order to get the advance. Would you be willing to make the present advances if the coolie was not put under contract? Would you be willing to give the coolie the money as a bonus at the expiry of a year's work?

76. Do you think the coolie would be more content if he was not under contract?

77. Do you file many cases under Act XIII against absconding coolies? If so, do they usually go back to the garden, refund the advance, or go to jail?

78. If it is the practice in your garden not to put coolies under contract, do you find that this is satisfactory? And do many coolies abscond?

VII.—General.

79. Is there a shop in the garden from which coolies can get supplies and are prices controlled by the management? Have the coolies any complaints against the shops?

80. Is it the custom to hold muster parade before the coolies go out to work in the morning? Is this necessary?

81. Do the coolies in your garden spend much money on liquor or on opium? In recent years the price of these commodities has increased, do you think that this has led to a decrease in consumption among your coolies? Where there has been an increase of wages, is there any reason to believe that much of this has gone in liquor or in opium? In the case of the heavy drinker or confirmed opium-eater, have these habits caused diminished earnings among these classes?

82. Is there any co-operative society in your garden where coolies can get goods at reasonable prices? Do you think there is any prospect of success if this is tried?

83. Do you think the coolie has more time to devote to his own pursuits at the present day than he used to have? Can you explain why?

84. In the case of disputes in your garden among the coolies themselves, do they prefer settlement by the manager to going to court?

85. What is your opinion about giving pensions to coolies who have done long and faithful service?

30th November 1921.

J. A. DAWSON,
Secretary, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee.

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