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[Despatch Abstract.]

*Recording resolution of the Govt reviewing
the report on Labour Immigration into
Assam for the year 1896.*

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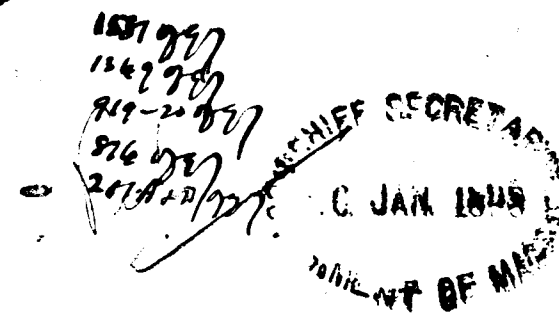
BACK PAPERS.

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190 Pub.

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SERIAL No. 2.

1898.

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE AND AGRICULTURE.

EMIGRATION.

22/9/98 16/11/98

RESOLUTION.

No. 2-80-2.

Dated Calcutta, the 8th January 1898.

Issued 11.1.98

C.S.

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Recorded.

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no. 2.2.98

SUBJECT.

Reviews the Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for the year 1896.

G. L. O. P. J.—No. 673 B. & A.—10-1-98.—220.—J. N. D.

Received 16/1/98
17/1
24/1/98

READ—

Report on Labour Immigration into Assam for the year 1896.

RESOLUTION.

Though due on the 1st August, the Report was not received till the 19th October, but the dislocation of work caused by the severe earthquake from which the province has recently suffered amply accounts for the delay. The Government of India have now before them a Special Report on the working of the Assam Labour and Emigration Act, and the whole system will shortly come under full discussion.

2. The scarcity and high prices which prevailed during the latter half of the year in the Central and Upper Provinces gave, as was to be expected, a stimulus to emigration. The number of persons who entered Assam in 1896 to work on tea gardens and coal mines reached the large figure of 81,115, and several thousand more, not dealt with in the Report, sought employment as free labourers on the Assam-Bengal Railway. The increase over the figures of 1895 (in which year also immigration was unusually active) amounted to 8,278 or 11·3 per cent. Almost the whole of this increase occurred in immigration to the Assam Valley, the share of the Surma Valley being nominal. Of the total, 61,301 were adults and 19,814 children. Both women and children formed a larger proportion than in the preceding year owing to the larger emigration of whole families. An increase in recruiting by garden sardars and a decrease in contractors' recruits are also satisfactory features in the returns. It was, however, in the class of so-called non-Act coolies that the increase is most noticeable; and this class comprised 7,077 persons who subsequently entered into contracts in the labour districts, and 44,708 others who worked as free labourers, not under contract, to whom should be added 12,979 persons who contracted at Dhubri.

3. Immigrants were recruited from places as far distant as Madras and Bombay, but the chief recruiting grounds are Bengal, the North-Western Provinces and the Central Provinces. Notwithstanding the stress of scarcity, Bengal contributed fewer immigrants than in the previous year (24,224 adults against 28,583), and the increase from the North-Western Provinces was trifling (19,135 against 18,957). Experience has proved that the North-Western Provinces coolie is unfitted to stand the climate of certain parts of Assam, and the tendency which is apparent to restrict recruiting in those Provinces is not to be regretted. This fact, and the exhaustion of the recruiting grounds in Behar and Chota Nagpore, have forced recruiters to look further afield, and there is accordingly a rapidly increasing flow of immigrants from the Central Provinces, to which the Act was extended in 1893. In that year the number of adult immigrants obtained from the Central Provinces was 896, while during the year under review it has increased to 17,285. Here also the increase was most marked in the non-Act class. The Chief Commissioner attributes it to the influence of returned emigrants in popularising tea garden labour.

4. Of the total of 81,115 immigrants who reached Assam, only 16,351, against 23,141 in 1895, were placed under contract in the recruiting districts. Excluding children, the remainder, *viz.*, 44,950, represent labourers brought to Assam outside the Act. As already noted, of these 12,979 were placed under contract at Dhubri, 7,077 are returned as having been placed under contract in the labour districts, while 24,894, excluding children, retained the status of free labourers. The statistics of the last two classes are, however, imperfect. Free labourers comprise coolies who have incurred liabilities under laws other than the Emigration Act, a practice largely in vogue in the Surma Valley, which took no fewer than 25,018 out of the total of 31,971 non-Act adults.

5. Garden sardars not only obtained a larger total number of recruits than in previous years, but there was also an improvement from 1·7 to 2·0 in the average number recruited by each sardar. These figures do not take into account coolies recruited outside the Act by sardars, but they would seem to indicate that the success attending sardari recruitment under the Act continues disproportionately small by comparison with the expense incurred. The Government of India are glad to note that the improvement of sardari recruiting, which furnishes the best class of coolies, is receiving the special attention of the Central Recruiting Agency recently organized in the planting interest.

Two-thirds of the recruiting certificates granted to sardars provided for the medical examination of recruits prior to registration. This was an improvement on the previous year, but, having regard to the importance to the employer of engaging only able-bodied labourers, the safeguard provided by section 70 of the Act is made use of to a surprisingly small extent.

6. Last year saw a notable decrease in the number of immigrants taken to Dhubri to be placed under contract. This decrease has not been sustained. The total number brought up to be placed under contract at Dhubri rose from 9,660 in 1895 to 13,422 in 1896. The Chief Commissioner, however, believes the increase to be mainly due to a change in railway routes, which gave Dhubri an advantage over Goalundo in respect to certain recruiting centres, and is of opinion that now that the daily steamer service has been extended to Goalundo, the popularity of Dhubri as a contracting station will rapidly decline.

Only 426 or 3·2 per cent. of the labourers presented for contracts at Dhubri were rejected on medical examination, against 835 or 8·6 per cent. rejected in 1895. The explanation of the decrease is that the old practice, which was enforced by executive order and not authorised by law, of examining coolies as to both their fitness to labour and their fitness to travel, has ceased, and the examination is now restricted to their fitness to make the journey to the labour district. It is the Chief Commissioner's opinion that the change is not beneficial, and tends to the admission to the province of a large number of sickly coolies. He considers that the law on the subject should be amended. This matter, together with other proposed measures of reform, will come under consideration when the special report on the working of the Act is dealt with.

7. It is observed with regret that considerable mortality attended the transit of immigrants to the labour districts owing to the prevalence of cholera, which was so severe at the beginning of the year, as to lead to the temporary suspension of emigration. A similar outbreak occurred in the early part of 1897, but prompt and vigorous measures were adopted, to which, the Government of India are pleased to note, the steamer companies lent a willing co-operation. These measures succeeded in suppressing the epidemic; and the necessity of closing emigration, at a time when the pressure of famine rendered it important that it should be facilitated as much as possible, was averted.

A searching enquiry was instituted during the year, by a medical officer specially deputed by the local Administration, into the arrangements for the transit of coolies; and the measures which have been taken in consequence of his recommendations have been separately reported to the Government of India, who join with the Chief Commissioner in the hope that they will result in substantial improvement in the present system. The Government of India have still to learn the action which the Governments of Bengal and the Central Provinces propose to take or have taken on such of the recommendations of the medical officer as affect those provinces, but they have no doubt that everything that is possible will be done to lessen the hardship and risks to which the emigrant labourer is exposed in his journey to the tea gardens.

With regard to anti-cholera inoculation, to which reference is made in paragraph 24 of the present Report, the Government of India desire to repeat the caution already conveyed, that in the present condition of our knowledge of the subject, it is essential that such inoculation should be entirely optional, and that no labourer should be compelled against his will to submit to it.

8. Complaints of fraudulent and irregular recruitment were less numerous, both at Dhubri, where there were 88 cases against 124 in 1895, and in the labour districts (128 against 132), and there were no serious cases. A large number proved, as usual, false and trivial, but where there was a reasonable

suspicion of substantial irregularity, the District Officer, acting upon the instructions of the Chief Commissioner, did not hesitate to exercise his power to cancel the contract and order the repatriation of the labourer. Fifty-six contracts were cancelled, against 18 in 1895. They had for the most part been made by contractors licensed as recruits under the Act; and if the Tea Association are successful in their endeavour to bring home to the contractor his liability for the expense incurred owing to his mal-practices, that will of itself go far to put a stop to fraudulent recruitment.

The statistics of local labour contracts contain nothing calling for special notice. Such contracts continue to increase with the increase of the labour force, and their number rose to 28,915 from 26,327 in 1895. The great majority are executed by time-expired coolies, and about half of them are for one year only. Contracts executed at Dhubri are also technically local contracts, as Dhubri is situated in a labour district, but they are all executed by new immigrants, and are almost without exception for the full term of four years allowed by law. The statistics given in paragraph 48 of the Report regarding contracts cancelled for permanent incapacity are interesting. Out of 1,159 coolies whose agreements were annulled on this ground, no fewer than 1,015 had been obtained through the agency of contractors. As remarked by the Chief Commissioner, this confirms the general opinion that garden sardars procure better labourers than contractors.

9. Commenting on the returns of wages, the Chief Commissioner is inclined to doubt whether the present rates are sufficient. He points out that wages are at the same level at which they stood forty years ago, though prices have risen greatly, and he is of opinion that the desirability of raising them must soon come under consideration. An increase of the legal minimum wage is a question of much difficulty and requiring careful consideration, which will be given to any representations that the Chief Commissioner may make on the subject.

10. Chapter IV of the Report deals with offences of labourers. There was an unsatisfactory increase in offences against the general criminal law, convictions for rioting having risen from 86 to 243. Convictions for offences under the Labour Law (Act I of 1882), on the other hand, fell from 148 to 129. There was no increase in desertions, and the proportion to the total adult population fell from 5·21 to 4·79 per cent., but the total number, 17,595, continues large. As might be expected, the proportion of desertions was largest in unhealthy gardens, being 6·22 per cent. of the labour force of such gardens against 3·58 in the case of healthy gardens. The Government of India note with approval that orders have been issued directing that special enquiries should be made into the circumstances attending desertion in all cases where the proportion exceeds 4 per cent. of the labour force employed under the Act.

11. Complaints under Act XIII of 1859 ended in the conviction of 199 persons, against 198 in the previous year, of whom 169 were ordered to complete their contracts and 21 were imprisoned. Under the Act warrants may be and occasionally are issued for the arrest and return of labourers alleged to have committed a breach of contract who have left the province and gone to their homes. The hardship thus involved to labourers who may be dragged several hundred miles to be tried for a breach of a civil contract has been represented to the Government of India, and the matter will be considered together with other questions affecting the working of Act XIII of 1859 in its relation to tea garden labour.

12. Another matter to which the attention of the Government of India has been recently drawn is the number of destitute labourers who have been found emigrating from Assam. The majority of these persons are said to be coolies who come to the province in search of employment upon the railway. Measures have already been taken for affording assistance to these destitute wanderers, and for enforcing more strictly the responsibility of employers for the repatriation of incapacitated labourers and of the dependants of those who have died in their employ. The Government of India trust the matter will continue to receive the attention of the Chief Commissioner.

13. Turning to the important subject of the vital statistics of the labour force, and the action taken against unhealthy gardens, the Government of India notice with satisfaction that the average death-rate of the year was only

32.0 per mille, and was lower than it has ever been except in 1881 and 1894. The improvement, moreover, has been steady and continuous, and was maintained in the year of report in spite of the large influx of unacclimatised immigrants during the past two years. Coolies from the Central Provinces and North-Western Provinces continue to show the highest death-rate. A reduction of the mortality in this class of immigrants must be looked for in more careful recruiting, in greater attention to the matter of dieting, and in the closure to them of gardens which owing to situation and climate are unsuited to their employment.

The registration of births is still obviously very defective. For the province generally, excluding tea gardens, the estimated birth-rate per 1,000 of adult females is 127, while on tea gardens it is only 75.1. It is to be hoped that the instructions which have been issued in order to secure more accurate registration of births will be successful in attaining this end.

14. Only 46 gardens were classed as unhealthy during the year, against 73 in 1895. An account of the action taken against these gardens is given in detail in the Report. Two gardens were closed to all Act labourers, one to Act labourers of less than one year's residence in Assam, and four to North-Western Provinces and Oudh coolies. In four gardens there were no Act coolies, while in six others the gardens were unhealthy only in respect of their non-Act labourers. In these cases the action which can be taken by the executive is limited, but suitable orders were passed and sanitary defects remedied where they existed. In nine cases a final decision was postponed pending the experience of another year or the results of further inspection, because the previous record of the gardens concerned was good, and prompt and proper measures had been taken to remedy defects. In twenty cases in which the gardens concerned were ordinarily healthy, and where their appearance on the unhealthy list was due to exceptional causes such as epidemics, no action was taken beyond insisting on the removal of any defects or deficiencies in sanitary arrangements or management that were brought to notice by the inspecting officers. The Government of India are glad to see that the Chief Commissioner has taken decided action in this matter, tempered with due consideration for the circumstances of each case. The findings of the Committees appointed under the Act seem, in some cases, difficult to reconcile with the facts as reported; but, as the Chief Commissioner points out, they are conclusive for the time being.

The mortality in some individual gardens was severe, but, as the Chief Commissioner justly points out, to condemn the tea industry upon these premises as an occupation necessarily attended with great loss of life among the labourers, is as unfair as it would be to judge of the healthiness or otherwise of a whole province from the mortality of individual villages or towns within its limits.

15. The Report is a full and interesting one, and the Government of India desire to acknowledge the careful supervision maintained by the Chief Commissioner over the working of the immigration system, the proper administration of which is so important to the prosperity of the province.

ORDER.—Ordered that a copy of the foregoing Resolution be forwarded to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to the Governments of Madras, Bengal, and the North-Western Provinces and Oudh and to the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces for information.

[True extract.]

Dr. J. N. S. S. S.

Secretary to the Government of India.

[9]
74
2,000—24-8-97.

NOTE FOR THE CHIEF SECRETARY.

The Report on the Labour Immigration into Assam appears to be not communicated to the Government. If India considers that Madras should do views on the Report, it seems that the Report itself should also be sent. Numbers of Madras coolies from the N. Sikhs go there. Orders are solicited whether the Report should be asked for.

ALL. No. We have no need of it. It will only add to our work.
At 2.2.98

To

The Secretary to the Govt. of Madras.

B-Hav. B-Hav. by Post & Post.

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[Faint handwritten notes, mostly illegible]

SA AS
CW
2/1/98

I have looked up
carefully, & I don't find
any similar received from
India either last year
or any year previous to it.
This is the first ~~possessed~~
time it is received.

J.H.
19/1/98
14 Not used
121 Put up
138 Put up
20/1/98
21/1/98
22/1/98
23/1/98
24/1/98
25/1/98
26/1/98
27/1/98
28/1/98
29/1/98
30/1/98
31/1/98

1. Has no copy of the Report
referred to within been
sent?

2. What up. Also mentioned
CW
20/1/98

3. Is the number of 814997 incorrect?

Get sharp. The for. quoted on docket is
No 1349997 with 22/1/98 Put up 25/1/98

When given for copying _____
 When copied _____
 When examined _____
 When signed _____ } 189

READ AGAIN G.O., No. _____ DATED _____
 189 _____

CURRENT No. _____

ENCLOSURES TO C. No. _____

ORDER OF GOVERNMENT A A A A A A A

LETTER OF GOVERNMENT. _____

STATEMENT WITH DITTO. _____

PAPERS NOT FILED UP, BRING MEANT FOR DESPATCH
 IN ORIGINAL.

N.B.—

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- B = Not to be copied.
- P = Copy abstract only.
- Q = Copy heading only