

Growth of Tea Industry: The growth of tea industry was one of the most remarkable developments that took place in Assam during British rule. Expansion of tea industry is by far the most important factor in the growing prosperity and commercial importance of the province. The credit for the discovery of tea in Assam goes to Robert Bruce and his brother Charles Alexander Bruce. Robert Bruce was a merchant and a soldier of fortune. It was in 1823 Robert Bruce learnt of the existence of tea in the upper part of Brahmaputra Valley from a Singpho chief. The chief furnished the plants to Robert Bruce's brother who on the outbreak of the Burmese war went to Sadiya in command of a division of gun boats. C. A. Bruce submitted some of the plants to David Scott who forwarded the same to the Superintendent of the Botanical Gardens, Calcutta for examination. The plants were pronounced to be of the same family, but not of the same species, as the plant from which the Chinese manufacture their tea.

Nothing further seems to have happened until 1832. In that year Captain Jenkins was asked to submit a report on resources of Assam. In his report he referred to Assam tea-plant and said that it is indigenous in Assam. In 1834 Governor General William Bentinck appointed a Committee to prosecute inquiries, and to promote the cultivation of the plant. During the time of Lord Auckland planting of tea into Assam was introduced on experimental basis. In 1835 the first tea garden was opened at Lakhimpur. At the initial stage seeds were brought from China and skilled Chinese tea manufacturers were imported. In 1838 the first twenty chests of tea from Assam were exported to England. It was not the intention of the government to carry on the tea trade but to resign it to private enterprise as

soon as the experimental cultivation proved successful. Mercantile associations for the planting and manufacture of tea in Assam began to be formed in 1839. In 1840 government made over its experimental establishment to the Assam Tea Company. In the earlier years, the Company was far from prosperous but by about 1852 its prospects began to improve. By 1853 nine other gardens were opened in Upper Assam. In 1854 gardens were opened in Kamrup and Darrang. In 1855 existence of indigenous tea plants was discovered in Cachar and in the same year the pioneer garden was opened in the district. Almost simultaneously tea garden was opened in Sylhet.

During the next few years the new industry made rapid strides, and many companies acquired lands both in the Surma Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley. Extraordinary profit created excitement and reckless speculation, and gardens were opened in land not suitable for tea, in places where supply of labour was not available, and with insufficient number of plants. The result was a general crash in 1866 and for the next few years the promising industry lay in a condition of extreme depression.

The depression continued till 1869, when it was found that well-managed gardens were yielding a good profit. This gave a great impetus to the industry, and during the next thirty years there was a steady increase in the number of tea gardens, the area of cultivation and the output of tea. In 1872 about 27,000 acres were actually planted in the Brahmaputra Valley, 23,000 in Cachar and 1,000 in Sylhet. In 1871 approximately 11,000,000 pounds of tea were manufactured in the province.

The want of labour had always been one of the most serious obstacles in the development of the industry. Local labour was not found suitable and so labour was imported from other parts of India, such as West Bengal, Chotanagpur, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. Special Acts had to be passed to regulate the relations between the employers and their labour force. In spite of the acts the condition of labour was no better than slaves.
