

THE VICEROY'S TOUR.

Visit to Tezpur.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASSAM.

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.)

CALCUTTA, MARCH 11.

A most enthusiastic welcome was accorded to the Viceroy and Lady Curzon on their arrival at Tezpur on Friday. A large number of guests and officials from all parts of Assam were present to welcome their Excellencies. A number of ladies were presented to Lady Curzon by Colonel Buckingham. In the evening the Viceregal party were entertained at dinner by the Planters. After dinner his Excellency was presented with an address of welcome, and in his reply dealt with the subjects relating to the industrial development of Assam raised in the address. He said:—

I have already, at Dibrugarh, expressed the pleasure which it gives me as head of the Government of India to visit this important province, and if it be the fact that I am the first visitor in that capacity to this part of the Brahmaputra Valley I concur with you in thinking there is every reason why I should not be the last. I also accept the proposition that Assam is a province demanding in a peculiar degree the sympathy and assistance of the Government, but if that statement be held to imply that such sympathy and such assistance have not yet been forthcoming I must, in justice to the Government over which I preside, deprecate what would, I think, be an unjust imputation. I have sometimes in the press observed an inclination to present Assam as a sort of abandoned Garden of Eden, watered by great rivers and furnished with the fruit-tree of life, which but for the frowns of an angry Providence, represented in this case by the Government of India, would long ago have recovered its pristine richness and beauty. Such a picture would in my opinion be both over-coloured and overdrawn. The province of Assam is indeed in a backward condition compared with some other and more highly favoured localities, but its backwardness is no more due to any indifference on the part of the Government of India than it has been to any lack of initiative on the part of the British pioneers, who have come hither, and with so much courage and perseverance have sunk their capital and expended their energies in its exploitation. On the contrary the services of these pioneers have constituted a claim for unusual consideration at the hands of Government, which for a long series of years has authorised expenditure upon Assam that the revenue of the latter has hitherto failed to balance. At the present time a larger proportion of the gross receipts of this Province is expended upon administration and development than in any other province in India. In the last recorded financial year, viz. 1898-99, the gross income, Imperial, Provincial, and local, amounted to 147 lakhs, and the gross expenditure chargeable to revenue was 123 lakhs, which, with the additional 120 lakhs representing capital outlay on the Assam-Bengal Railway, constituted a total disbursement of 243 lakhs, or an excess of expenditure over revenue of nearly one crore of rupees. Again, so far from the railways in Assam being remunerative, there was in the same year a loss of 10 lakhs on their working expenses, exclusive of interest charges on railway capital account. It is clear, therefore, from these calculations that Assam at present is contributing nothing to the military and other general changes of the Indian Empire, but that she is actually absorbing a good deal of Imperial capital. We are, in fact, engaged in the development of Assam, which may one day recoup our outlay, but for the present the balance is on the wrong side of the ledger.

THE IMPEDIMENTS OF THE PROVINCE.

Gentlemen, in your address you speak of the conditions by which the efforts of the British planter have been handicapped and retarded. You point correctly to the long previous history of rapine and misgovernment in the Brahmaputra Valley, to the scanty indigenous population to the paucity of labour, entailing reinforcement from outside, to the increasing cost of that importation, and to the external competition which your industry has to face. To these sources of difficulty, with which the Government has to the best of its ability helped you to cope by means of special labour laws by which your contracts are enforceable, by railway extensions, both in Assam and in Bengal, which have been planted in the interests of this province, should be added that which, in my opinion, is the main explanation, both of the backwardness of the province, and of the anxieties by which you are opposed. I allude to the climate of Assam. Lord Beaconsfield, when Mr. Disraeli, once said that the true secret of the woes of Ireland consisted in the fact that she lies under weeping skies and is surrounded by a melancholy ocean. A similar diagnosis gives the real clue to the impediments of this province. A humid and malarial atmosphere, injurious to the indigenous population, which steadily recedes in numbers, and which is fatal to the immigrants from the drier plains of Behar and Bengal, an atmosphere which is still further poisoned by exhalations from the recently upturned soil, and which carries mysterious and deadly diseases in its train. This is the real enemy of Assam, with which private enterprise and Government patronage alike find it hard to contend. When the Provincial death-rate is always greatly in excess of the birth-rate, and when a labouring population of over half a million persons requires to be imported from outside, and to be perpetually replenished, the conditions are such that expansion can scarcely pursue a natural course, and, however encouraged, is liable to the fluctuations of what is not an organic but an artificial growth.

THE LABOUR QUESTION.

Gentlemen, in your address you invite my special attention to the increased cost of labour importation. This is a subject to which, in connection with legislation now before the Government of India, I have necessarily given close study. The very paid rise in cost, which is said to have nearly doubled in ten years, is no doubt partly to be attributed to the keen rivalry and to the familiar wiles of many middlemen, to whose fingers some of the money sticks at each stage of the passage of the coolie from India to Assam. In so far as the evil is to be attributed to the system of recruitment practised by these unlicensed traffickers it will be arrested by our Bill. The increasing demand for labour here, owing to the opening of new tea gardens, is a further explanation of the enhancement of the cost, but, gentlemen, we should both of us be shutting our eyes to facts did we not realise that the main cause, which no legislation can greatly affect or altogether remove, is the increased industrial competition that prevails in the Indian labour market itself. You desire for the work of your plantations the hardy aboriginal tribesman of the jungles of Chota Nagpur, but he is also wanted for coal mines in Bengal, for work on railways, and for the tea gardens of the Douars and the Terai. Now in those employments be it remembered that he earns higher wages than you are able to give him, that he is engaged for a shorter term, that he is near to his own home, and that he can frequently return thither within a year. You have to consider whether with your lower monthly wage, your four years' contract, and your great distance from the source of recruitment, you can permanently and successfully compete with your rival employers. In the long run a problem of this sort will not be settled by Labour Commissions, or by Government Bills. It will be decided by the immutable laws that regulate demand and supply. You cannot make water run up hill, and you cannot provide labour for industry below its market price. The wage question itself I need not now discuss, since the postponement of the Bill till next year will afford ample time for its re-examination.

RAILWAY EXTENSIONS.

The subject of guarantee lines of railway and of a Government guarantee which figured next in your remarks I will reserve for treatment in my reply at Gauhati, where I understand that it also occupies a prominent place in the address to which I shall be called upon to respond. I pass to the question of the waste lands of Assam, and of the measures that may properly be taken for their reclamation and cultivation. Your contention is that these lands, amounting as you say to no less than 6½ million acres, are suitable for the production of rice, jute, corn, and other cereals, and that as they cannot be cultivated by the overflow of time-expired labour, labour must be specially imported from elsewhere for the purpose. This is a subject upon which, as you know, the Government of India have for long been in correspondence with the Chief Commissioner and upon which, as the question is largely hypothetical in character difference of opinion may be expected to exist. This is not the only country which presents the spectacle of sparsely populated and unreclaimed tracts lying at no insuperable distance from congested centres of population. Nothing is easier for the doctrinaire than to say "Why not bring the people from a district where there are too many to a district where there are too few," but there are a good many intervening fences to be cleared, of which the doctrinaire is apt to take insufficient account. There is the unhealthiness of the climate, upon which I have previously touched, the reluctance of immigrants, and the novelty of the conditions. You call my attention to the Chenab Canal Colony, which I visited last April. There the circumstances are entirely different. The movement is merely from one part of the Punjab to another, the place is extremely healthy, there is no jungle to be cut down, and no clearing to be made. The Government have brought water, and Nature may be trusted to do the rest. Finally the applicants, instead of requiring to be coaxed by alluring offers or imported at considerable cost, are jostling each other in anxiety to be taken on. In the present case it is no doubt true that in any scheme of Government colonisation we must look in the main to external

sources for recruitment. Time-expired tea coolies, I dare say, make the best settlers, because they are already acclimatised, and I should think that it would be to the interest of the planter himself to settle his coolies upon neighbouring plots of land, so as to retain a call upon their services after the expiration of the contract, but I agree that the labour supply of the gardens and the labour supply of the provinces are subjects which should not be confused, and which should be treated independently of each other. As regards the particular question whether the ryotwari or big zemindari form of tenure is more suitable to the development of a backward province, I will not here recapitulate the argument, which has already covered perhaps a sufficient amount of paper. Two desiderata are unquestionably wanting, namely, first, the man or men to initiate the experiment; second, the colonists to undertake the reclamation. If Mr. Cotton can produce any of the former I do not think that he will find the Government of India grudging or obstinate in insistence upon terms, provided always that these do not contemplate a mere commercial speculation in land, and that they include some effective guarantee that the estates will be brought under cultivation within a reasonable period of time. In my opinion the main question at issue is not the size of the grant, that is relatively a small matter, but the capacity, stability, and aptitude of the grantee. Perhaps, later on, when we get the connection completed between Gauhati and the main line of the Assam-Bengal Railway, we may be able to try some colonisation scheme which will appeal to the land hunger of the many, even more than to the public spirit or the enterprise of the few.

THE P. W. D.

Gentlemen, in one of your later paragraphs you express a desire that the Local Boards in Assam should call upon the civil engineers of the Public Works Department not merely for advice but for the execution of public works in the province. We have already in the former respect conceded all that your Chief Commissioner asked, and have indeed insisted upon even more, since we have required that the opinions of Inspectors of Works shall not only be sought but shall not be disregarded by the Local Boards or their servants, the district engineers. The further proposal that the Public Works Department should also be responsible for the execution of works is one that is approved neither by Mr. Cotton nor by the Government of India. The question has also arisen in Bengal, and we agree with the Lieutenant-Governor of that province in thinking that the adoption of the change would stifle the legitimate energies and independence of local self-government, since it would transfer to an official department authority and responsibility in respect of public works that ought properly to remain with the boards. In conclusion, gentlemen, let me assure you that the candid interchange of opinions between us, which the present and other occasions during the past week have afforded, cannot fail to be of much benefit to me in my future administration; that I shall always feel that I know these planters and understand their aspirations better from having met them in the homes which they have created, and on the lands which their industry has reclaimed, and that Lady Curzon and myself will carry away most agreeable recollections of this beautiful valley and its adventurous and public-spirited pioneers.

At the end of his speech the Viceroy said what a pleasure it was to him to meet the Tezpur planters, and how much Lady Curzon and he had appreciated the welcome they had received and all that had been done to render their visit a pleasant one.