A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India

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INTRODUCTION

In 1868, the Asiatic Society of Bengal planned an ethnological exhibition of the different tribes and races of India. With a view to offering ethnologists and other scholars an opportunity to study these different races in actual life, the exhibition was supposed to bring down a couple of 'specimens' of each race from all over British India. The planners of the exhibition were not only intent on gathering the most reliable and meticulously collected data, but the exhibition itself was going to be a picture of colonial order and efficiency with the exhibited themselves being employed as labourers at the exhibition:

On the western border-land (of Bengal), in the Chota Nagpore Commissionership and the borders of Cuttack, we have what I can only describe as a perfect congeries of aboriginal tribes of every kind. Dravidian Gonds and Rajmahalees, the Coolie tribes, Mooldales and Bhoonigises, and Santals: Bhooyas and Khonds and others yet unclassed. They are all within easy reach of Calcutta... An exhibition of Aborigines would be the easiest thing in the world. And as they are excellent labourers, they might be utilized as Coolies to put in order the Exhibition grounds at certain times, while at others they take their seats for the instruction of the Public.

This colonial obsession with the 'primitive', on the one hand reifying it through the display and classification of aborigines, and, on the other, fetishizing that same aboriginality as a magical solution to the colonial demands for labour, forms the central concern of this paper. Specifically, how should we understand the colonial representation of aboriginals as 'excellent labourers'? How was this interweaving of race and labour performed in colonial India?

More than a hundred years later, activist-scholars Dev Nathan and Govind Kelkar wrote about the consequences of such colonial visions of the primitive: 'What imperialism and the Indian ruling classes want is that the Jharkhandis become a "cooie nation", so that they can be easily suppressed as the lowest-paid workers and producers. Becoming a "cooie nation"... that's what this paper tries to trace, and in tracing this history it hopes to unsettle the

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very settled nature of contemporary Indian images of the primitive as both exotic tribal and everyday manual labourer. Building on such dualisms of our modernist discourse of the primitive, an entire exploitative nation has constituted itself ideologically and in material terms. Therefore, an effort to push against this dualism has become crucial today.

CIVILIZATION AND THE COLONIAL FRONTIER

1. Chotonagpur

In the north-east corner of Chotonagpur-Santal Parganas, where the hills slowly give way to the plains and the river Ganga, lies the city of Bhagalpur. This frontier town was one of those centres from which colonial expansion into the hills and the hill societies was enacted. To this day, flanking the government offices of Bhagalpur, stands one of the earliest colonial memorials to this expansion. Dedicated to the memory of a British civil servant, Augustus Cleveland, the two-hundred-year-old stone monument sent by the Court of Directors celebrates a moment of colonial pacification. The engraved words on the 1784 monument read:

To the memory of Augustus Cleveland . . . who, without bloodshed or the terror of authority, employing only the means of conciliation, confidence, and benevolence, attempted and accomplished the entire subjection of the lawless and savage inhabitants of the jungleetry of Rajmahal, who had long infested the neighbouring lands by their predatory incursions, provided them with a taste for the arts of civilized life, and attached them to the British conquest over their minds — the most permanent, as the most rational, mode of dominion, the Governor-General and Council of Bengal in honor of his character, and for an example to others, have ordered this monument to be erected.\(^5\)

Nearby this monument there is a bigger and more grandiose building — 'a Hindu pyramid surrounded by a heavy Grecian gallery'\(^6\) — also dedicated to Cleveland. This latter building was, however, donated by Indian landlords. Together the two edifices memorialize the union of an upper-caste Indian gentry and the expanding colonial state of the late eighteenth century against the might of the 'lawless and savage inhabitants' of the hills. Their 'subjection' allowed the full blossoming of both these forces in this frontier region.

The people whom Cleveland had pacified were the Paharias. Like many other groups of this hill region — Santals, Bhumij, Mundas or Hos — the Paharias had not only 'maintained a virtual independence during the period of Musalman ascendency in Bengal', and from the plains states in general, but were also a source of great fear at the hilly fringes of these plains states. Various hill polities of Chotonagpur and Santal Parganas conducted regular raids on the markets and settlements of the plains. These polities rarely paid tribute to the massive revenue-generating states in the plains; instead, the hill chiefs often received regular financial payments and land and ritual gifts from the states as an insurance against the raids. In addition, military outposts were established to guard against such raids. The stretches of land between the plateau and the plains were often made over to small chiefs called Ghutvals or Samanta Rajas. For the powerful plains states these political settlements were buffers protecting them against the hill raids. Accordingly, taxes here were assessed at very low levels and the regions were allowed a great degree of autonomy. To emphasize the seriousness of the raids one may quote from Hunter again:

'Deduct', saith the deed for the Benares district for the year 1782, 'deduct the devastations, etc. for two months' disturbances, sicca rupees 666,666: 10:10, or over 70,000 pound sterling. If this were the result of two months, what must have been the destruction of two years?\(^7\)

The terror the Paharias generated after some of their chiefs were treacherously murdered by the zamindars (feudal landlords) of the plains around the middle of the eighteenth century, and following the massive famine of 1770, is worth taking note of:

... the terror they occasioned was so widespread, that the alluvial country was deserted by its cultivators, no boat dare moor after dusk on the southern bank of the Ganges: and even the Government mail-runners, who in those days passed along the skirts of the hills, by way of Rajmahal and the Teli Gharh pass, were frequently robbed and murdered at the foot of the hills.\(^8\)

A similar tale of raids may be narrated for Birbhum where Santals raided the plains, often with support of the local peasantry, and all colonial calculations of revenue and prosperity had to be shelved.\(^9\) This pattern of raids by the hill-men on the plains was

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) William Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal (SAB), vol. XIV, 1887, p. 84.


\(^8\) Ibid., vol. IV, 1887, p. 303.

\(^9\) Ibid., vol. IV, 1887, pp. 314–16.
repeated almost all over Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas and was a salient feature of the relationship between the hill polities of Central India and the states of the contiguous plains.\(^{10}\) Although military raids occurred in the reverse, i.e., military expeditions set out from the plains and attacked the hill peoples, these were much more infrequent; and even though organized into greater military operations, owing to the alien terrain of forests and hills, their success was limited to immediate payments of tributes by the hill kings which ceased almost as soon as the armies retreated. Reorganizing for another raid was expensive and years passed before it could be undertaken again.\(^{11}\) Whatever the gains might have been, they were not enough to diffuse the terror that the Bengali and Bihari plains-dwellers, especially those of property, felt towards the hill peoples. What the hill people felt towards the states and societies of the plains we cannot tell for sure, but given the frequency and success of their daring raids we can imagine a strong sense of autonomy, lack of subservience and even a sense of superiority. Often what colonial administrators later described as ‘tribal pride’ was an effort to racialize this sense of autonomy and confidence.

This paper does not allow scope for further exploration of the rather understudied relations between the well-organized states and societies of the North-Indian plains and the societies and states — polities — in the hills and valleys of the Central-Indian plateau at the time of colonial expansion in India. However, from what has been said so far, it should be amply clear that we need to push our imaginations beyond the contemporary Indian reality of extensive exploitation and domination of ‘tribal’ societies by ‘mainstream’ society and the State in order to grasp the radically different nature of the pre-colonial relationship between the hills and the plains.

This relationship between the hills and the plains started to change with the early British attempts, like Cleveland’s, at destroying the autonomy of the hill polities and thus putting a stop to their raiding activities. This was largely effected through the employment of a variety of factors, including conquests carried out by a well-organized colonial army, efforts at creating divided loyalties among the hill chiefs, and the rapid transformation of the hill societies through the enforcement of vastly alien land tenure systems that aimed at creating and recognizing the division of the population into landlords and their tenant farmers. Land was often collectively held in Chotanagpur, and revenues paid were quite minimal. With the introduction of alien land tenures, the colonial state dispossessed many hill villagers, nobles, chiefs and headmen: it also encouraged a rapid growth in the market for land and an extensive moneylending business. Alien traders, landlords and administrators at the forefront of frontier colonial capitalism increasingly controlled the resources, and managed to get the Chotanagpur peasants into enormous debts. The entire system was backed up by an equally alien legal system and a powerful colonial army. There were repeated and numerous rebellions till the very end of the nineteenth century against the displacement and transformations of such large numbers of people. But the colonial army, despite the occasional defeat, crushed these revolts and killed, deported and imprisoned large numbers of the rebels. Thus, the Ho, Munda, Oraon, Bhumij, Santal and Paharia peoples — the raiding hill-men who so terrified others and remained autonomous of the people of the plains — increasingly lost the autonomy that they had maintained at the time of their initial colonization.

The ‘pacification’ that was thus brought about led to the creation of an enormous population that had to move out of the region in search of a livelihood. As we will see, this signalled the start of a whole series of changes that orchestrated radically new relations among the plains societies, Chotanagpur peoples and the colonial State. The image of the Paharias as a fierce, independent body of hill men standing in defiance of the expansion of ‘civilization’ is quite representative of how the colonial State looked at most Chotanagpur societies. This image gradually faded away and within the space of a century we see the Paharias

\(^{10}\) For a detailed discussion of very similar structures of power and social relations in the Dangs of Gujarat, see David Hardiman, ‘Power in the Forests: The Dangs, 1820–1940’, in David Arnold and David Hardiman (eds) Subaltern Studies VIII, Delhi, 1994, p. 89–147.

\(^{11}\) The futility of these expeditions are recorded in Mughal sources as Hunter observes himself: ‘Up to 1778, the British Government, like the Mohammedans before them, made various attempts to suppress the Paharias by military force. In 1772, a corps of light infantry, armed expressly for jungle fighting, was raised and or placed under the command of captain Brooke. But the Paharias never gave the troops a chance in the open country; while in the tangled undergrowth of the hills, firearms had no decided advantage over the strong bamboo bows and heavy poisoned arrows of the hill men. Besides this, the absence of roads, the difficulty of keeping up supplies, and the fatally malarious climate of the Rajmahal jungles, made the permanent subjection of the Paharias a hopeless task for native troops.’ Hunter, SAB, vol. xiv, 1887, pp. 303–4.
(and other hill peoples) transformed into the figures of docile and hardworking coolies engaged in the near slavery of plantation life in Assam. In the account of a tea-planter in Assam:

The next garden has a lot of Paharias, and the Manager speaks very highly of them. They have been generally a success, and all planters speak well of their physique. There have been instances of absconding, but as a rule they are very good in that respect. They seem content and happy when they first arrive....

This transformation was neither inevitable nor an evolutionary progression from tribe to peasant to wage-labourer. New imaginations and discourses of primitivism had to be created in place of the older discourse of savage, raiding hill-men as an inseparable part of the transformation of the Chotanagpur peoples into a stream of coolie labourers.

2. Assam

The colonial pacification of ‘wild frontiers’ in eastern India extended far beyond Chotanagpur-Santal Parganas. Assam was another frontier that was ‘civilized’. Assam lies to the north-east of the Bengal plains and to the west and south-west lie the Chotanagpur-Santal Parganas. Peopled by ‘wild races’ no less aggressive and daring than the Chotanagpur peoples, Assam became, over the latter half of the nineteenth century, one of the largest producers in the world of that magical drink — Tea. Like everything else in Assam, British explorers found tea growing wild in Assam. It was another ‘discovery’ in the long list of European ‘discoveries’ and it was soon to rid Assam of its ‘wildness’ and subject it to the ‘civilization’ of tea gardens. ‘Garden’ — what an edenic label for a plantation! After all, like the English gardens, weren’t tea-plantations a massive spectacle of order, productivity and enterprise, a constant picture which provided the self-assurance that was so crucial to the European culture of colonial rule? Tea, it was hoped, would give Assam a culture which was worthy of being linked to the English Empire. Eventually, Assam tea was not only to be the means of bringing the ‘wastelands’ of Assam under colonial culture and productivity, it was also to be the answer to Chinese tea that had rendered British trade unprofitable in relation to China. By the end of the nineteenth century, Assam tea was certainly responsible, in part, for the emergence of British domination over Chinese and world tea production.

Yet, in the early decades of tea cultivation in Assam — between 1840s and 1860s — tea planters repeatedly pleaded with the government to take ‘measures’ that would facilitate the supply of labourers to clear land for the plantations, and plant and produce drinkable tea. Because of the scarcity of labourers, tea cultivation was barely profitable or significant during these early years in Assam. In chorus with the planters, the principal assistant commissioner of Durrung, a tea-growing district of Assam, Captain A.K. Comber wrote in 1859:

... (In Assam) the ryots have the very greatest objection to exert themselves in the least degree, so long as they have sufficient rice and opium: and any measure which would raise the Assamese people from the lethargy induced by the excessive indulgence in the use of opium, would unquestionably result in an improved condition of the people both physically and morally, at the same time that an increased rate of taxation would oblige the ryot to work, and thus benefit both himself and the Tea planters.13

We can hardly tell when opium is a poison to civilization and when a harbinger of it. After all, wasn’t it opium that allowed English enterprise to flourish by breaking the Chinese refusal to trade, through the generation of massive addiction to opium in China?14 In that peculiar world of colonial capitalism, the basis of all that passes as civilization today, the rationality of opium and the opium of rationality interplayed ceaselessly to define the wildness and indolence of the Assamese.

The ‘primitiveness’ of the local labour in Assam was seen as driving the very rational working of the plantations to a standstill. The few inhabitants who were coerced into working the plantations through a dramatic rise in taxes were by no means what the planters had hoped for; these labourers came and went without regard for the demands and requirements of the plantations, and they disappeared and rioted, apparently at the slightest provocation. Their wildness and primitive nature were embodied in that excess that is not ‘rationality’. It was a fantastic world of wild tribes that would withhold and offer labour in complete disrespect for the needs of the plantation order. The Kacharis, for example, were riotous and indolent according to many accounts, and yet George Barker, an Assam planter wrote:

Kacharis are the only natives that can be relied upon for work, and they form the only bright side to the labour question. They travel in gangs of ten or twenty, from garden to garden, and will not take a job unless they are assured of being allowed to do at least a double day’s work in one day. After a garden is got into a good condition, and the work falls short, they will frequently pack up and move off to some other place, where their services are in demand.15

Working too little or too much, sedated with opium or alive with vengeance, the difficulties of taming this fantastic wildness of the local population drew forth even wilder experiments from colonial civilization. At very high costs, the building of a highway was undertaken, but never finished, cutting through the Assam jungles into the province of Yunnan in China, lying to the east of Assam. Chinese coolies with knowledge of tea manufacture were to be brought up to Assam to relieve the dependence on local labour. Chinese coolies did arrive via the Calcutta port. But the experiment dissolved with the Chinese rioting and refusing to work under the conditions of the plantations. As the colonial imagination ran wild in trying to control labour unrest on all fronts, as it lashed out at the wildness of the tea plant and the wildness of frontier tribes, there were other colonial primitivisms which could be engaged to civilize the wilderness and wastelands of Assam.

WITH PRIMITIVE WINDS
IN THE SALES OF WORLD HISTORY

While the news of the discovery of tea growing ‘wild’ in Assam made waves in London, events from the not-so-far frontier of Chotanagpur never arrested the British imagination in England or in other British colonies; these were really no match for the stories of English enterprise in India, about the ‘Hindoos’ and their caste beliefs, about Indian magic, about Oriental civilization, or about the glitter of greater colonial centers like the ‘City of Palaces’ (Calcutta). Yet, in bits and fragments, as in an occasional intrepid traveller’s report, in the correspondences of merchants and administrators or even in rare newspaper stories, aspects of the Chotanagpur frontier and its primitive inhabitants did seep through. On the morning of 23 October 1792, many Londoners read in the Morning Chronicle that ‘Every proprietor [in western Bengal] is collecting husbandman from the hills [Santal Parganas] to improve his lowlands’.16 Absentee planters from the sugar plantations of Mauritius or the Caribbean picked up similar tales and yarns in London about a new set of labourers who came down from the hills to man the British indigo factories. Around 1826, Gladstone, a planter in the Caribbean, foreseeing the end of slavery, inquired into the possibility of importing labourers from India. He was told that there was a caste of people — Dhangars or Hill Coolies — who came down to the Bengal plains from their wild homes in the western hills in search of work. They were, eventually, to become a crucial factor in the continuation and extension of plantations the world over. ‘Dhangar’ was the term commonly used in nineteenth-century Bengal, along with a host of others — Boonahs (wildmen), Junglis (of the jungle) or Kols — to refer to the hill peoples of Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas, about whose fierce raiding habits and eventual ‘subjection’ we have read before.

The Dhangar himself was a new figure in the history of labour and the civilization of the plains. John Mackay, an indigo planter in Bengal from the early years of the nineteenth century remembered the freshness of the events: ‘Before the year 1820, no Dhangars were ever to be seen in Calcutta; nor many before 1824 and 1825.’17 But by 1837, the Dhangar was a familiar figure and seemed to have been caught up in a furious storm of restless wandering. Mackay estimated that at least 50,000 Dhangars were employed by the indigo-factories after a good harvest and he himself had occasionally hired ‘as many as 500’.18

The storm that brought such massive numbers of men and women from the Chotanagpur plains down to the Bengal plains and into the city of Calcutta is a storm that we have encountered before. It was the storm of the colonial pacification of the Chotanagpur frontier and its inhabitants. The civilizing of the frontier, as this pacification was described by the colonial State, resulted in a massive exodus of the hill people in to the Bengal plains. In the 1830s, when the Parliamentary commissions gathered the ‘facts’, the hill peoples resistance to colonial control continued with great intensity and it continued throughout the nineteenth century.

16 Hunter, Annals of Rural Bengal, p. 117.
18 Ibid., pp. 191–2.
Pacification of such revolts resulted in an ever greater exodus from Chotanagpur. The farmlands, indigo-plantations and urban labour in the plains offered a last chance of survival. The Dhanger was the hill man who was engaged in this last effort to survive. The availability of the Dhangers for the most demanding physical labour depended on the pacification attempts by the colonial state. This occasionally appeared in the logic of the calculation of cost and supply of the Dhanger coolies. Mackay, the old-hand of colonial enterprise in India, saw the link clearly:

'It is very difficult for me to inform the committee accurately as to the expense of bringing Dhangers from their own country to Calcutta, and then from Calcutta to this colony, as so much will . . . depend upon the result of the operations of the troops sent into Chota Nagpore during the last year.\(^{19}\)

Little wonder that these colonial wars were sometimes called the 'Coolie campaigns'.\(^{20}\) Military pacification was a mode of taming both the wildness of the people and the wilderness of the land. The thousands of men and women who left the hills and spread into the plains were certainly not raiders now. With nothing but their labour to sell and survive on, they were the signs of a new set of meanings that were binding the hills to the plains, primitivism to civilization, the Kol tribes to the Bengalis. The very meaning of the word ‘Dhanger’ — a hired labourer and seasonal farmhand — signified this new bondage with startling accuracy. An entire civilization and various societies all flattened out within the confines of this one term, the Dhanger. All the specificities of language, of religion, of proud histories of autonomy from sedentary states; all that was wiped out rapidly and was replaced by a monolithic identity beaten out from the labour contracts that were the last hopes of survival. The transformation of the primitive terror of the raiding hill-man into the docility of the Dhanger proto-wage-labourer contained the logic of the civilizing mission of colonial capitalism.

The storm that had transformed the hill-man into this refined commodity, changed its course soon. Within a decade of Gladstone’s inquiry, the ‘wild’ hill-men from Chotanagpur and Santal Parganas became a virtual drug to the planters’ consciousness across the various island colonies of Europe. In Mauritius, in British Guiana, in Trinidad, in the agency-houses of London, and even in Australia, all the hysteria over the loss of profit due to slave-emancipation or over the scarcity of labour in comparison to the vastness of land, came to be treated with the dreams of Dhangers arriving from India by ship in the thousands. Within the global plantocracy, these dreams moved fast. As early as 1836, a Mauritian planter was communicating the magic of the Dhanger coolie to his Australian counterpart in Sydney in these words:

\[\ldots\] it will be interesting to you to know, that the introduction of these people [Dhanger coolies] has been attended with the most complete success. 1000 individuals have arrived in the past week; and a cargo is at this moment coming up the harbour, and 2,000 men more [sic] are on their passage.\(^{21}\)

It is hard to estimate how many Dhangers had sailed during the early years of the indentured coolie trade. From the various ships’ tables during the late 1830s, we know that at least one-third of all the coolies who sailed from the Calcutta port were the hill-men from Chotanagpur. Between 1 June 1837 and 27 August 1838 — in fifteen months — as many as 7337 coolies sailed from Calcutta for various colonies. Among them there must have been well over 2000 Dhanger coolies. ‘It [the Dhanger as the post-slavery labour solution for sugar-plantations] . . . became a mania’, remarked the Mauritian planter J.R. Mayo in front of the Select Committee on Transportation, set up to regard the question of scarcity of labour in Australia;\(^{22}\) and he went on to explain it:

\[\ldots\] Natives of caste require kinds of food, certain forms of cooking, and other observances. Of several castes, in the same gang (of labourers), one will not eat with the other, nor allow their food to be cooked by any other than of their own caste. But in several parts of India there are people to be found who have no caste, especially the Hill Coolies of Bengal, a fine athletic race of people, who eat fresh meat or any other kind of food without scruple. They are free from the prejudices of the Hindoos and Mahometans.\(^{23}\)

‘Having no caste’ became the refrain in various confirmations of the stories about Dhangers. As they were interviewed and examined by the commissions’ members, sugar planters from Mauritius who had employed Dhangers, European indigo-planters in India, Indian indigo-planters, British administrators, and captains

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 192.

\(^{20}\) Deposition of Charles Bury of the Bengal Civil Service, ibid., p. 194.

\(^{21}\) From Messrs. Thomas Blythe & Sons of Mauritius to Messrs. Bettington & Co. of Sydney, 7 October 1836, ibid., p. 174.

\(^{22}\) Deposition of J.R. Mayo, ibid., p. 175.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
of coolie ships, all repeated the benefits of employing the Dhangars, benefits that were invariably seen as inhering in their castelessness. The planter John Mackay’s words captured the details of this vision:

... the Dangurs entertain no prejudices of caste of religion, and they are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever. Neither are they unwilling to partake of any kind of animal food, the worst description of which would be luxury to them.

In their own country they have but little rice, and eat snakes, lizards, rats, mice, etc. Their clothing is simple and scanty, and they eat only once, rarely twice, in 24 hours.24

Cast as being outside of caste — no food taboos and no work taboos either — Dhangars emerged in these reports as subjects whose only identity stemmed from their almost fantastic suitability for plantation labour. For the planter Mackay, not only did the Dhangars go almost naked and starved as a habit, but their demands on the planters’ resources were also to be most minimal as even space was not demanded by them: Their habitations are equally simple and confined; any dry place, 20 feet square, and 8 feet high, would suffice for 20 men. They are unacquainted with the luxury of a bed beyond a dry floor ... 25

Such were the compulsions of these images that ships regularly sailed off to Mauritius or Trinidad with hardly any space for the coolies to sleep: ‘... he is ... comfortable rolled up in his blanket, on deck, in dry weather, and in as little room below, in wet weather, as his body occupies ...’ 26 Three decades later the Dhangars were still caught in such colonial fantasies about race as the coolie steamers carrying them worked their way up to the Assam tea-plantations. ‘From 1861–3,’ said Dr J. Berry White a civil surgeon in charge of inspecting all coolies who arrived in Dibrugarh, a tea district in Assam, ‘high mortality (sometimes as high as 50 per cent), was chiefly caused by overcrowding, insufficient and improper food supplied on the voyage and no medical supervision ... Many unfortunate were crushed overboard ... there was not even standing space ...’ 27

‘Overcrowding, insufficient and improper food supplied on the voyage and no medical supervision!’ Were not these precisely the conditions that were natural to the lives of the magical figure of the Dhangar that was constructed in the reports? Wasn’t the Dhangar supposed to thrive under exactly such conditions in the Chotanagpur hills that he called his home? Were not these the very features of his life that made him an obsession in the emerging market for indentured labour?

In those compressed decks in the open seas, having no clue as to their destination, packed like cattle among hundreds of other strangers as desperate as themselves, the Dhangar coolies died of cholera so often that a Dr Payne, in charge of inspecting emigrants to Mauritius at Calcutta, told a Tea Commission in 1868, ‘It is a tradition, as old as Mauritius emigration itself, that populations of (Dhangurs) die at sea in larger numbers than any other ... For several years ... I have rejected as emigrant all hull men ...’ 28

Fact after fact, the Commission reports elaborated on the peculiarities of the Dhangars. ‘Dhangar’, ‘Dangur’, ‘Dangah’, ... there was no agreement on the sound of the name. But there was no stopping the march of emerging anthropological facts marshalled with relentless persuasion. The ‘facts’ sometimes went off into wild spins: the Dhangars apparently did not have any idea of marriage; Dhangar women formed two-thirds of their race. And, as the Commissions pressed on for solutions to the post-slavery labour scarcity, the Dhangar emerged as a wild man — more animal than human — who barely hovered at the margins of civilization.

And this wildness was a direct result of his castelessness. ‘No prejudices’ or pollution taboos towards ‘any labour whatever’. Wasn’t this the ideal ‘cooly’? That the Dhangars themselves expressed such a mythical enthusiasm for ‘any labour whatever’ was beyond anyone’s doubt. When contradiction leapt out into the open, explanations that left the construction undisturbed were always found. A senior official in the tea industry viewed expressions of dissent and refusal to do ‘any labour’ in the following way:

The Dhangar, who, in their own country are of no caste, refused to do certain acts which were expected of them. I allude to the use of deodorized night-soil as manure. I believe the other coolies persuade them to refuse, for fear that they should be expected to do the same.29

Caste — in so far as it was embodied in any sense of boundary, pollution or refusal to do any work — was, therefore, firmly...

24 John Mackay, ibid, p. 174
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid, p. 192
27 Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the State and Prospect of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet, Calcutta: 1868, emphasis added.
28 Ibid, Dr Payne’s deposition, p. 33.
29 Ibid, Mr A.H. Blechyden, Sec. to Co. in Hylakandi Cachar.
outside the consciousness of the figure of the Dhangar; and it could only be the coolies with caste — the ‘Hindoos’ or ‘Mahometans’ — who could possibly display any signs of discrimination towards work and, through that, a dimension of ‘self’ that wasn’t fully determined by labour. Caste was everything that was outside the self and society of the Dhangars, the wild man destined only for labour. Caste was what existed beyond their primitiveness. Caste, therefore, was civilization in India. And civilization was now getting increasingly embedded in the very discourse of the customs of a race: habits, diet, requirements of space or clothing. Well before Orientalist philologists and racial theorists of the British Empire had produced the theory of an Aryan invasion in the latter half of the nineteenth century and, based on that, a rough division of Indians into tribes being the descendants of the conquered aborigines, the modus operandi of such a theory — ‘caste-ascivilization-in-India’ — was being well established through the discourse of coolie indenture.

But it was not only the lack of caste or civilization which defined, for the labour commissioners, the utility of the Hill Coolie. A Dhangar signified even more. The Indians of caste like the Bengali coolies from the plains, were, supposedly, harder to control. Circumscribing his wildness, which produced the Dhangar’s minimal demands on life and on the plantations, was his docile and tractable consciousness. ‘The Dhangar or Hill Coolie’ said a Mauritius planter ‘were more docile and worked harder than any other labourers... whether Coolies from other parts of India or Africans.’

There was no doubt in the depositions. ‘[A] quiet and contented race of beings, and more easy of management than the common Bengalee Coolie, besides being better and harder workers,’ commented the chairman of a committee appointed to look into the abuses allegedly existing in the exportation of coolies. ‘Tractable and good tempered’ added an old hand in indigo plantation with over twenty-eight years of experience. For some, the Dhangar was even better than the African, if not in strength certainly in docility and in meeting the demands of plantation discipline.

Thus, within the space of less than a decade, a global plantation capitalist discourse developed and naturalized an image of docility for the hill-men of Chotanagpur that was quite the opposite of the fierce, raiding image that had animated the colonial State’s pacification attempts at the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, the image of a wild, uncontrollable savagery continued to pervade the colonial officers’ and army’s language at the very same time that plantation capitalism was weaving the figure of the ‘tractable’ Dhangar. The ‘Coolie campaigns’ and ‘the operation of the troops sent into Chuta Nagpore’ that John Mackay, the Mauritius planter, had pointed out as crucial in determining the availability of a plentiful supply of Dhangar coolies, were extensive military conquests that the East India Company carried out over the peoples of the Chotanagpur and Santal Fargana region. The 1852 Kol Revolt, a major rebellion of great historical significance for the region, had just ended while other rebellions continued. The Santal Hul was two decades away. The acts of great military resistance to and attacks on the new structures of colonial rule were certainly very much contemporary events in the lives of the Dhangars. In the face of these events the colonial State continually feared and reproduced the image of the wild, marauding, and unpredictable savage of the Chotanagpur hills. But as each ‘Coolie campaign’ furthered the colonial state control over the hill societies, the images of the hill-men as docile coolies, created in the discourse of plantation capitalism, came increasingly to provide an ideological balance to the military conquests themselves. Thus, William Hunter, writing only five years after the colonial suppression of the massive Santal Revolt of 1855–6, found, in the new tradition of the hill-coolies’ migration to plantations, the perfect means to ‘effectively’ address the ‘real grievances’ of the Santals:

[Now] his whole family gets employment, and every additional child, instead of being the means of increasing his poverty, becomes a source of wealth. The labour is the lightest known to agriculture, and as soon as a boy can walk he can earn his living.

... In a few years the emigrants return rich men, and meanwhile their going away renders the struggle for life easier among their countrymen who remain at home. While one stream flows steadily to the north-east frontier (Assam), another diverges at Calcutta, and crosses over the sea to the Mauritius or the West Indies, whence they return... with savings averaging £20 sterling, a sum sufficient to set up the Santal as a considerable proprietor in his own village. The more industrious of the emigrants amass very considerable properties, a single family sometimes bringing back £200, which is as great a fortune to the hill-men of Western Bengal as £5000 would be to an English peasant.

30 Correspondence Between the Government of India and the Court of Directors Relating to the Hill Coolies, 1841, (British Parliamentary Papers, 1801–52), p. 8.

The devastation brought about through military massacres — the suppression of the Santal Revolt had claimed at least 25,000 Santal lives — could now be overwritten by the stories of a ‘well-being’ in the form of wage-labour under the control of the colonial State. The discourse of the Dhanger-as-coolie, and his suitability for plantation labour, slowly but surely wove itself into the post-pacification ‘prose of counter-insurgency’ of colonial historiography and state policy, replacing the image of a wild savagery threatening at the door of colonial civilization.

To return to the question of the very emergence of the discourse of Dhanger docility, let us note that the repeated stress on the easy manageability of the Dhangars as an aspect of their casteless, primitive nature was not an accident. The 1830s were crucial years in the life of the sugar plantations in the island colonies. With the end of slavery, the mode of absolute control over the slaves’ labour had clearly become more difficult for the planters to maintain. There were visible signs among the ex-slaves of wanting to negotiate a significantly different contract with their ex-masters and with life itself. Last ditch efforts like the ‘apprenticeships’ that bound the ex-slaves to their respective plantations for several years, even after the formal end of slavery, aimed at providing the planters with the time to reorganize and come up with plans to protect their profits. The development of coolie labour in plantations, the enormous trade in coolies or the very emergence of the Dhanger as the ideal plantation labour were, of course, the outcomes of such plans. And for the planters such designs and massive alternatives were more than necessary, because, as far as the African ex-slave was concerned the reality was very different:

Upon the completion of the term of apprenticeship of the Negroes in the West Indies, which will be in about three years’ time, there must be a great defalcation, if not an entire failure of crops; for it is the general opinion that the Negroes, when once free, if they can be induced to work at all, will work in so little a degree, that the operations of a sugar estate cannot be carried on.32

This was in 1837, and the importance to the sugar planters of a more ‘tractable’ labour population is quite obvious. Theirs was a deep wish for a rapid and silent displacement of the ex-slaves with an imported flood of cheap Indian labour and, especially, the Dhanger coolies. One correspondent, with some experience in Mauritius,

wrote in 1838 to a Committee appointed to inquire into the system of coolie recruitment and transportation:

The advantage which the Coolie possesses in the Mauritius will certainly go on increasing; for such is the sensuality and want of care of the African Negroes that their race threatens to become extinct in the island in a few generations. They are not prolific and the mortality among the infants is already fearfully on the increase, amounting to the death of half the children during the first year; a large proportion of whom die within the nine first days after birth. This large population is to have their liberty in a few years, when this mortality must be expected to increase, as will be then left to their own resources.33

‘To become extinct’, such an inevitable process in the workings of nature! After all, were not the Africans primitive savages whose time had elapsed? And mortality? That too would have wiped out the ‘Negro’ long ago had he been left to the ‘devil’ of his sensuality without the master control of the planter! This purported ‘savagery’ of the African race, the image that is tirelessly worked to obscure the colonial discourse of genocide, was to be overcome with the primitiveness of the Dhanger or the Boona, the Indian savage. Savagery overcome by savagery, the resistance of the Negro overcome with the tractability of the Boona, the end of slavery overcome by indenture! As we plunge through the pages of evidence, testimonies, reports, and depositions that were being collected and mastered in London, we can hardly ignore the thought: ‘whose savagery and whose civilization? Whose caste and whose lack of it?’ In those sun-drenched islands, about which the Dhanger coolies had no idea, barring the lies that the recruiters told them — like ‘Mauritius was only a few hours’ river-journey from Calcutta’ when it was actually a three-month journey in certain seasons — colonial fantasies and fears of race and colonial primitivism came to construct a caste system of their own. The pyramid that was the sugar plantation had the Dhangars and other coolies — worked to the limits of exhaustion — as its base, the African ex-slave, if not already ‘extinct’, as the overseer with the whip, and several ‘Hindoos and Mahometans’, the ones who had ‘caste’ and, therefore, civilization, as servants or cooks in the house of the master. Suboo, a Dhanger who went to Mauritius in 1839 was a victim of this caste system: ‘My master is a good man, he never beat me, but his blacks did so; we used to complain to the master, but he did not understand us; from the effect of the beating

32 Report of the Select Committee on Transportation, p. 198.

33 Correspondence Between the Government of India and the Court of Directors Relating to the Hill Coolies, 1841, (British Parliamentary Papers, 1801–52), p. 174.
I fell sick, and was in the hospital for four months... The master's blacks (overseers) beat him but his master did not. And he was a good man. Suboo was in Mauritius for only a year but with such penetration and surity he had the caste system of the plantation seized his 'caste-less'. Dhangar imagination.

The favoured Indians who served the master's house were, similarly, made to play out the hierarchy of the plantation. They were awarded the privileged right of driving the sugar carts that carried the sugar to the towns. They had replaced the Africans in this job. And the 'Africans'? Apart from the few who had the right to the overseer's whip, they were made to work exclusively in the sugar factories away from the fields worked by the Dhangar and other Indian coolies. But the race-caste boundaries had their limits and a returned coolie revealed exactly that: 'There are a great many Negro women in that country. Some coolies used to live with Negro women as man and wife. Some children have been born to coolies there.'

In helping us reveal the nature of this civilization of colonial capitalism, based as it was on the plantation system, new scholarship has focused on how the 'coolie' was imagined and produced. The image of the coolie, it is pointed out, had to be both highly mobile and highly fixed at the same time. At the point of origin, all elements of his rootedness - land, property, debt (the opposite of property but equally binding), community, kinship or family - had to be removed to turn him into the essential migrant who responded effortlessly to the stirrings of the market.

And at the end of his journey to the plantation, this very restless migration had to be reversed and the coolie reinvested with as many 'roots' in the plantation system as possible. Indenture was the most blatant mode of effecting the latter.

The primitivism that was elaborated in the Commission reports and the indentured coolie trade of the 1830s, constituted the Dhangar in precisely these ways. The supposed lack of caste and the easy tractability of the Dhangar ensured the simultaneous mobility and fixity that was demanded of the coolie.

In the colonial imagination, caste coolies - like the Bengali coolies who had apparently rioted - were more difficult to control than the Dhangars. The absence of caste in the Dhangar was therefore what made his docility possible. And docility was at a great premium in the process of incarceration and surity that was the life of plantation coolie. It was what ensured that the coolie could not run away from his work or from the plantation. It was what allowed the gradual coercion of the rootless, wandering Dhangar into the rooted identity of the plantation coolie.

By situating these ideal coolie characteristics of the Dhangar in the depth of his primitive nature, colonial discourse on race and coolie labour tried to hide its own interests and recent invention. After all, there was no demand for coolie labour in plantations till the end of slavery became obvious in the 1820s. The very rudimentary and fragmented nature of the anthropological information that could be obtained on Dhangars was also the result of the newness of the need to gather such information for the plantations.

Suboo, the Dhangar coolie from Hazaribagh in Chotanagpur, who had been beaten by his 'Master's blacks', returned from Mauritius only after a year. Typically, the indenture contract was for five years and breaking it was a punishable offence.

From the hospital I was sent to the Chief of Police, where I was told that I was disabled by the fall of a tree on my wrist, I had better return to my own country and I was put on board ship... I received two months' wages... which was taken away from me by the blacks; this was done at the police before the eye of the magistrate, who took no notice of it.

Before going to Mauritius, the recruiters in Calcutta had taken almost half the four months' advance wages that Suboo had received for signing up as a coolie! Beaten, left a pauper and disabled, Suboo was sure that he would never go back to Mauritius: 'I would not go to Mauritius again, nor would I advise any of my friends to go there; I wish to go and live in my own country.' Suboo's nephew, Karoo, who also went and came back from Mauritius with him, had the same things to say. Other hill coolies were similarly sure:

I [the Magistrate in Calcutta] asked them if they would send any living being there; they said, 'No'. I wished to know the reason; they said, 'We have been separated from our wives and children, taken from our country, worked hard, got sick, have been absent about 12 months, have returned sick, and weak and useless and we have not pice. We could have got our rice and food in this country, and been as rich as we are.'

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34 Ibid., p. 73.
35 Ibid., p. 46
37 Correspondence... Relating to the Hill Coolies.
38 Ibid., p. 73.
39 Ibid.
There were also many who thought they were well off in Mauritius or Trinidad and had taken their families there and some had settled down.

Many others, however, who were not so lucky. In crowded ships many died of cholera; the rate of cholera deaths among Dhangars became so high that, as we have seen before, they were increasingly stopped from going overseas by the civil surgeons who inspected prospective coolies. Others committed suicide — throwing themselves overboard, or cutting their throats with razors — in sheer desperation born out of depression, loneliness and the fear of not knowing where they were sailing to.

And there were still others, like the fifty Dhagar men and women, some of them married couples, who had boarded the barque ‘Mercury’ in 1833 — neither the vessel nor the passengers were ever reported to have landed anywhere. They were going to King George’s Sound in Australia.40

A MARKET FOR ABORIGINALITY

The demand for cheap labour and the discourse on race and primitivism quickly fetishized the Dhagar into the solution to the labour crisis of the plantations. The more the Dhangars were fetishized, the greater became the demand for them. And as the demand grew into ‘a mania’ the fetishism fastened itself deeper in the colonial consciousness. In the newly emerging practice of indenture and coolie labour in plantations, few remained outside its thrall.

Within three years of the government’s confirmation of the discovery of tea in Assam in 1836, recruiting parties were already arriving in Chotanagpur to obtain the magic of Dhagar labour power. Armed with official letters, a team of three — two Dhagar men under ‘another Indian’ — tried their best to recruit a few Dhangars for Assam in 1839. The local authorities themselves encouraged the Munda and Oraon people under their jurisdiction to emigrate. But it all came to nothing. The hill peoples refused to go to Assam. A local official’s letter to the Tea Commission described the process: ‘They also expressed their fears that I might be endeavouring to procure them to send them beyond sea, as several had been sent from Calcutta.’41 Obviously, the idea of working in the sugar plantations was not received with any great enthusiasm among the Chotanagpur peoples. Beginning with such events, the efforts to recruit Dhangars for tea-plantations in Assam were unsuccessful for almost two decades. Mostly the hill peoples did not want to go off to an unknown province, or suspected that they were being sent to distant overseas plantations. The few who were induced to go to Assam did not start a new migration wave. In 1859 an official from Assam wrote:

Two or three attempts on a small scale to bring in Dhangars and others have been made by the Assam company, and one or two of the planters, but as yet owing to some mismanagement of the planters or misconceptions on the part of the immigrant, all such undertakings hitherto have been conspicuously failures.42

But as we have seen, the local inhabitants of Assam were not easily ‘tamed’ into the disciplines of coolie labour. From the very early years of the tea-plantations, the need for importing coolies who could be fully subjected to coolie life was felt very strongly. The experiments with the Chinese coolies were of course an early instance of this. It was more a matter of years before the Dhagar could be brought in as coolies, subjected to the discipline of the tea-plantations and thereby made to expend their primitive labour power in the expansion of ‘civilization’ over the Assam ‘wilderness’.

The increasing number of deaths among Dhagar coolies in the coolie depots of Calcutta and on board the emigrant ships had forced inspecting doctors at the depots to refuse permission to send Dhagar coolies to the overseas plantations. The fact of these enormous numbers of deaths due to cholera was easily explained by colonial authorities as a result of some peculiarity of the Dhagar race, who seemed particularly susceptible to the disease. Yet, quite ironically, in the general colonial perception in Britain and India, cholera was of particular concern and alarm because of the ruthlessness with which it seemed to pursue the European troops in India. As David Arnold writes, ‘... cholera was a leading cause of sickness and death among soldiers, especially European troops. Living in crowded and insanitary barracks or lines, surviving during the campaigns on whatever food and

40 Report of the Select Committee on Transportation.
41 Ibid, pp. 126-7
water they could find, thirsty and fatigued from long marches, troops were particularly susceptible to cholera . . . for a colonial regime so heavily dependent on European soldiers, the disease posed a serious military and political threat . . . 43 The conditions under which the white troops could become so susceptible to cholera were after all not so different from the ones faced by the Dhangars: 'crowed and insanitary' depots, insufficient food and water supplies during their migration to the depot and their virtual incarceration in them and during their final transportation on the colonial ships, and 'thirsty and fatigued' during the whole long uncertain ordeal of becoming a coolie.

Since permission to migrate overseas was increasingly being refused by the medical inspectors, by the 1850s, the number of Dhanger coolies had drastically declined in the coolie ships. This gave the recruiters and tea-planters a chance to increasingly engage this mass of available migrant Dhanger coolies for work in the Assam tea-plantations. As we will see through the rest of this essay, this process of engagement was not a smooth redirecting of the flow of Chotanagpur migrants to Assam. Yet, the numbers of coolies recruited from Chotanagpur for Assam were extremely high and remained so throughout the period of indenture and even afterwards. Thus in 1878-9 itself — a year with a particularly high number of emigrants — at least 25,614 people left Chotanagpur for Assam alone. These were the coolies who had registered as emigrants in the coolie registration towns. Another 8000 or more coolies were suspected to have left Chotanagpur without being registered. Chotanagpur coolies were also recruited from the plains or from Calcutta where they may have been temporarily employed in various public works, or as fieldhands. The colonial reports supply us with staggering evidence for the high rate of emigration of the hill peoples from Chotanagpur to the tea-plantations. Nine-thousand-seven-hundred-and-ninety in 1885; 12,160 in 1886; 20,252 in 1888; 18,594 in 1898 . . . The numbers spread out in front of our eyes, bringing the picture of emigration alternately in and out of focus. The emotions involved in emigrating, the meaning of Assam to the emigrant and the recruiter, the horrors of the long journey, the making and breaking of expectations, the lies and the truth, the condition of the ones left behind, the life on the plantation for the new coolies and the old ones, all that remains obscured in the meticulous sterility of the numbers. Yet, the numbers do reveal a few things. In 1891, for example, we can tell that around twenty per cent of the roughly 900,000 indigenous inhabitants of the Ranchi district of Chotanagpur, the district most heavily recruited from, were in the Assam and Jalpaiguri tea-plantations of northeast India. The extremely heavy recruiting from the region also becomes obvious from the fact that at any given time at least one-half to one-third of the emigrant coolies in Assam were from Chotanagpur.

The Assam coolies from Chotanagpur were the same Dhangers who had once been the 'mania' of sugar planters the world over. The obsession of the Assam planters far outstripped that 'mania'. The discource of primitivism that was tentatively developing around the figure of the Dhanger in the 1830s discussions regarding the supply of coolies to overseas plantations, acquired a full-blown fetish characteristic in the Assam coolie trade and became a common sense of the tea industry itself. 'Santhals and Coles, jungles or Dhangers keep best health; the Nepalese come next and the worst are the coolies from Shahabad and Chupra (from the north Indian plains)', listed the civil surgeon of the tea district of Dibrugarh in 1868. The Revd. E.H. Higgs of the same district, who invested as much in religion as he did in capitalism, having invested 70,000 pounds in the tea industry, was sure that the Dhangers 'are better workers'. The colonial state even authorized the industry's magical beliefs in the primitive robustness of the Dhanger by identifying the worst malarial tea gardens and allowing them to employ only 'class I' or Chotanagpur coolies. Mr Driver, an agent for the Tea District Labour Supply Association — an association of the planters formed to smoothen and intensify the supply of cheap labour to the tea plantations — described the complex interweaving of racist commonsense, government policies regarding the labourers' health and the workings of the coolie market:

The commissions sitting on unhealthy gardens often limit them to the employment of certain castes of coolies, so those gardens must employ good castes, whatever they have to pay for them . . . They say they must have the pick. They will not take second or third class coolies. 44

And this new class/caste system that was so rigidly adhered to by all agents of the coolie trade, appeared to them a natural fact that belied nothing of the history of its recent invention in the

43 David Arnold, Colonizing the Body, California, 1993, pp. 169, 170.
colonial making of the primitive and the modern. With such great conviction and specificity did E.N. Baker, a deputy commissioner in Chotanagpur lay out the hierarchy of the caste system:

First class belongs to the following castes — Bhumij, Sonthal, Uraon, Dhangar, Munda, Kora, Kol, Paharia (i.e. Chotanagpur hill peoples). Second class includes all other castes including the Bengali coolies. A third class comprises of the Khattris from Bihar and generally castes from Bihar and North-West provinces.45

‘Pure aborigines or jungles.’ This is how a labour commission described the ‘first-class’ coolies. To be jungli — from the forest or primitive — was to be a pure aborigine, and to be an aborigine was to be the best class of labour. ‘Aborigine’ — this term never occurred in the thick and numerous reports from the early indenture years. As the language of race and labour continued to become the common sense in the Assam coolie trade, the term appeared suddenly and replaced that of ‘Dhangar’. ‘Dhangar’ itself embodied a language of primitivism and it referred to the lack of caste or civilization. Yet, it could only anticipate the evolutionary racial meaning that a concept of ‘pure aborigine’ brought to the language of the coolie trade. Aboriginality was a new language classifying Indians as labour for plantation work. First, second or third class were the classifications of different degrees of aboriginality; and one’s regional location, like one’s caste, was an integral part of it. Thus the Chotanagpur coolies, being castes from the forest, i.e. jungli jats, were the most aboriginal and the Bihari, upper-caste Khattris from the Gangetic plains were the least so. Indian caste hierarchy was closely linked to a graduated system of evolutionary status, and aboriginality was the basis of its measurement. There is little doubt that an early evolutionary anthropology and Orientalist history contributed greatly to this new language of racial classification based on primitivism. By the late 1860s, theories of an Aryan conquest that pushed the original inhabitants of India slowly into the forests and hills of central India (including Chotanagpur) had gained wide currency. Such a racial history became increasingly naturalized in modern India and the present-day societies in the central-Indian hills were understood to be the remnants of those vanquished races. The classification of Chotanagpuris as pure aborigines and the emergence of a language of aboriginality, as can be found in its most extreme form in Risley,46 were clearly linked to such evolutionary discourse of race and civilization.

But, as we have seen, this classification of coolies had a much more complex genealogy, and clearly predated the evolutionary anthropology of the 1860s. In fact, this pre-1860s configuration of a relationship between aboriginality and labour is crucial for understanding the rise of evolutionary anthropology itself, and how a disciplinary anthropological discourse of tribes and castes as the organizing conceptual units of Indian society derived much from a significantly earlier logic of plantation capitalism. Most importantly, though, aboriginality was now the measure of the fitness of a caste to labour as tea-coolies.47 The overseas indenture system was the site where such a discourse developed into a compelling logic in the plantation system, at least in reference to Indian coolies, and it fully shaped the nature of the Assam coolie market, where it was further formalized through the institutionalization of a formal pricing system.

The further this system of classification of coolies mutated into the everyday common sense of the coolie trade and the tea-planters, the more maniacal became the craving for aboriginal labour, i.e., for first-class jungli coolies. The extent of the grip of this discourse and the resultant mania reflected itself in the vast


46 See Herbert Risley, The People of India, Delhi, 1969 (1915). Risley’s entire explanation of each caste being the present day appearance of an original racial group, and all such groups being aligned along the evolutionary slope of racial superiority, is both the most extreme and the most logical outcome of evolutionary race theories that criss-crossed anthropology in the late nineteenth century. But all such theories cannot be understood as emerging out of a purely disciplinary or scientific domain. To understand the evolutionary discourse of nineteenth-century anthropology, for example, we need to take into serious consideration the far older and more complex history of other colonial practices, such as coolie labour, wherein some of the most crucial conceptualizations about race and civilization were developed prior and parallel to the disciplinary discourse.

47 Prabhu Mohapatra has convincingly shown how ‘ethnic stereotypes’ operated as the basis of the pricing system of the Assam coolie market. See Prabhu Mohapatra, ‘Coolies and Colliers: A study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur, 1880-1920’, in Studies in History, Delhi: Sage, 1.2, n.s. 1985, pp. 247–3 As we have seen, a discourse defining aboriginality through labour, and vice versa, has a genealogy dating well before the emergence of the Assam coolie market. The overseas indenture system was the site where such a discourse developed into a compelling logic in the plantation system, at least in reference to Indian coolies, and it fully shaped the nature of the Assam coolie market, where it was further formalized through the institutionalization of a formal pricing system.
recruitment market that developed as a result of the indenture system. The tea-planters, following the model of the overseas plantations, recruited their coolies through contractor houses and their agents, and, after 1882, increasingly through unlicensed contractors and specifically appointed tea-garden labourers or sardars who were sent back to their original home to recruit more coolies. The price that the planter paid the contractors and the contractors paid their agents depended on the aboriginality or the primitiveness of the caste of the coolie recruited. The coolies all got the same wages. The prices fetched by an aboriginal coolie remained significantly higher than those fetched by the other castes, and it continued to rise throughout the history of indentured labour in Assam. The other coolies fetched different prices depending on their aboriginality. The nature of the fetishization of aboriginality can be seen in the gradations of costs and the price-ceilings that some labour contractors suggested in the 1890s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Price (Rs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For pure aborigines or junglis</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For good hardy coolies (semi-aborigines, Central Province coolies)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For coolies suitable to the Surma Valley (healthy gardens) and for healthy gardens in the Brahmaputra Valley</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For North-Western Provinces coolies (North-Indian plains coolies) suitable for healthy gardens in the Surma Valley</td>
<td>60&lt;sup&gt;48&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In reality, aboriginal coolies cost between Rs 130–150 during the same period and planters paid Rs 110–130 for the second-class ‘hardy’ coolies. Being in the coolie business was, doubtless, a lucrative occupation! Several famous contemporary British-Indian corporate houses — Andrew Yule, Gillanders & Arbuthnot or Balmer Lawrie — originally started out and made their initial big profits as these ‘coolie-catchers’!

The animated price listings of a market for aboriginality looked much like an evolutionary chart. Classifying and reifying race, measuring aboriginality with the precision and soundness of money, it brought alive the colonial discourse of racial evolution and further enabled it in the process. And evolutionary discourse itself — now parcelled in ‘practical’ volumes like the handbooks on Castes and Races on Tea-plantations — ensured a basis for the link between aboriginality and labour that drove the market on. Colonial knowledge and colonial production blended into each other, each making out of the other the objective terrain of its truth.

This market for aboriginality contradicts an economic discourse that sees in the evolution of markets an evolution of class and labour towards increasing homogeneity and the erasure of cultural differences. In the late eighteenth century, in an effort to end the ‘savagery’ of the Paharias, Cleveland had tried to lure them into ‘visiting’ (and not ‘raiding’) the nearby civilization of weekly markets in the plains. Savagery, after all, was the signifier that set the hill-men apart from the people of the plains. Cleveland had hoped that each market transaction they made would result in the creation of another need binding them even more firmly to the culture of civilization. The market was civilization itself, the antidote to primitivism. A hundred years later, the market was frantically producing and consuming primitivism, encapsulating and authenticating degrees of aboriginality in the neatness of price-tags. Instead of erasing the differences among a vast working class of tea-coolies, the market was the incessant producer and consumer of it! The more primitive the better . . . it was civilization’s craving for primitivism which needed price-ceilings now.

THE REVERSED FACE OF ABORIGINALITY

The language of aboriginality and labour took other interesting twists, illuminating the nature of colonial discourse itself. Chotanagpur-Santal Parganas, while becoming a legendary labour catchment area in colonial history, also developed into the most significant mining region in modern South Asia beginning in the late nineteenth century. Coal mining was the most important of all the mining industries in this region. It is quite remarkable how, in the coal industry, the tea industry’s conceptualization of labour and aboriginality was completely inverted. Aboriginality, in the discourse of labour that came to operate in the coal mines, was precisely the sign of what was not desired in the person of the labourer. If in the tea industry the preferential order of coolies was aboriginal-semi-aboriginal-NWP/Bihari caste coolies, this order

<sup>48</sup> *Williams Commission Report*, p. 34.
was completely reversed in the coal mines. Thus, although ‘aboriginal’ groups like the Santals and ‘semi-aboriginals’ like the Bauris, from the immediate and adjacent areas to the coalfields, were a majority among the miners, in the discourse of labour commissions, they were unfavourably compared to NWP caste miners in terms of their desirability as labourers. The Williams Commission, which was set up in 1895 to explore the possibility of establishing a centralized recruitment agency for importing labour from the NWP to Jharia coal mines, was already clear about the greater suitability of the ‘up-country’ or NWP labourer:

...the best miners are those who come from NWP and Oudh ...49

...the NWP non-aboriginal labourer is a steady worker, intent on saving, and not as a rule addicted to drink... (He) could easily do double the amount of work ordinarily done ... and he will work for 25-27 days in the month.50

In contrast, the commission claimed,

The Sonthali and Bauri, and the few kindred tribes who work on the mines, are by no means of a thrifty disposition, and, like most aboriginals, prefer to idle when they have earned enough to satisfy their immediate wants. Having had no competition in the labour market, they have hitherto been able to dictate their own terms, and have taken holidays when and as often as they like, since three or four days’ hard work suffices to keep them and their families in the utmost comfort for the rest of the week.51

When they [Santals and Bauri coal miners] have collected enough for a few days’ eating and drinking [and their holidays and festivals are numerous] they take themselves off and care not at all whether, by their idleness, their employer is unable to fulfill a contract, and so suffers a pecuniary loss.52

This difficulty of exercising sufficient control over aboriginal labour in the coal mines continued to be bemoaned by colonial authorities well into the twentieth century. In 1925, a chief inspector of mines, is found saying: ‘Santals are the most suspicious race in India that I have come across. For example, I have seen a whole gang of them would clear out and leave the mines without any rhyme or reason, or at any rate it appears so.’53 But were not these characteristics — indolence, addiction, and offering and withdrawing labour without ‘any rhyme or reason’ — the very ones that the local inhabitants of Assam were supposedly infusied with, and that were to be overcome by the importation of the aboriginal coolies from Chotanagpur-Santal Parganas? Through what logic does the same aboriginal labourer become the embodiment of all the problems of labour that he himself was the solution too?

In scholarly literature, the most pursuasive explanation has been provided by Prabhu Mohapatra in his essay on the ‘coolies and colliers’ of Chotanagpur. Mohapatra argues that the basis of the contradiction in colonial racist stereotypes of labourers lay in the ‘different requirement of work process in the coal mines and the tea gardens’.54 The combination of the absence of managerial surveillance inside the pit and a piece-rate mode of paying miners by each tub of coal they cut, was decisive. This meant, it is argued by Mohapatra, that a section of the miners who had a tradition of long-distance seasonal migration or as Anand Yang called them ‘the maximizing migrants’ would tend to cut more coal and earn more, while the laxity of work discipline combined with the limited purpose of employment, i.e., gaining sustenance during the agricultural slack season, tended to make the ‘semi-aboriginal’ population less motivated in expending energy in a controlled, regulated fashion, so necessary for steady mining of coal throughout the year. Instead, the local labour tended to spend energy in a spasmodic fashion, cutting as much coal as was necessary, perhaps, for the day’s meal.55

The logic of work in the plantations, on the other hand, required

That the labour should be not merely plentiful but also of a particular type liable to a greater degree of control ... which strictly restricted the average earning of an individual labourer and limited his individual efforts, [to which] the motivated up-country coolie could not adjust. What was a boon in the coalfields was a bane in the plantation. The uprooted tribal, on the other hand, seemed to have submitted to the strict control of the planters. Apart from their long-standing tradition of jungle clearing, their passive adjustment to the rhythm of plantation life was the main reason for their being the planter’s favourite.56

These differences in the orientation of different ‘ethnic types’ of labourers towards the ‘rhyme and reason’ of work, are reflected in the difference in the rate of desertions by ‘aboriginal’ and ‘caste’

49 Ibid., p. 11.
50 Ibid., p. 17.
51 Ibid., p. 11.
52 Ibid., p. 17.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., pp. 265–6.
coolyes from the Assam plantations. Mohapatra shows that, unable to adjust to the greater control exercised in Assam, the NWP coolies escaped from the tea-plantations at a rate twice that of Chotanagpuri 'aboriginal' coolies.

This argument allows us important insights into the nature of power exercised in colonial labour regimes and the labourers' response to it. It also takes us away from specific colonial explanations based on race, such as the claim that in the tea-gardens mortality rates among the 'aboriginals' were much lower than among the NWP coolies. Mohapatra shows how the mortality rates were not significantly different.

Yet, the argument about the differential responses to the rhythms and regimentation of work as the basis of the different rates of desertion is problematic on at least two counts. Firstly, in trying to explain why the two different classes of labourers respond so differently to the nature of work, culturally essentialist explanations are entered into which tend to duplicate colonial racial logic itself. Thus, both the concepts of 'the motivated up-country coolie' and the 'aboriginal' coolie's 'passive adjustment to the rhythm of plantation life' are uncomfortably close to reproducing the very logic of colonial discourse on the racial nature of labour. While Mohapatra tries to provide an historical, as opposed to a racial or ethnic explanation for the motivation of the NWP coolie by mentioning a 'tradition of long-distance seasonal migration' among them, it should be taken into account that the existence of this tradition has never really been substantiated by any evidence, nor is it mentioned that the 'aboriginals' and 'semi-aboriginals' themselves had a fairly long tradition of seasonal migration — from at least the end of the eighteenth century — into the Bengal plains and to Calcutta for harvesting, indigo manufacturing, construction, clearing and other jobs. In fact, to a great extent, it is through the organized exploitation of that tradition of migratory work that indenture recruitment for both overseas and the Assam plantations could take place. Local recruiters were often described in colonial documents as not mentioning Assam to the recruited, telling them instead that there was some kind of construction work available in Calcutta. Once in the recruiter's control, there was little possibility of the recruit determining his or her own destiny.

Secondly, in searching for an explanation within the archives of colonial knowledge, we often forget a general character of the recruitment pattern of capitalist labour regimes: the preference for immigrant over local labour. What is contained in the colonial representation of the local populations of Assam is the recognition of the difficulty of controlling local labour that enjoyed a significant access to and control of agricultural and forest lands, as well as the detailed knowledge of the local cultural and physical geography. It is, ultimately, the question of the greater degree of freedom which local labour manages to exercise to the detriment of capitalist requirements of control. In the coal fields, the reason that the Santali and Bauri labourers were complained about in a language very similar to the complaints from the tea-planters about Kacharis and other Assam populations, lay in the fact that local population were difficult to control. This is akin to what Marx described as a form of private property pre-dating capital 'where the labourer is the private owner of his own means of labour set in action by himself as the peasant of the land he cultivates and the artisans of the tool he handles as a virtuoso'.

And it is through 'primitive accumulation... the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production', a process of 'conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, [to a] great part', that capitalist production creates the labour market that is fundamental to its creation and continued existence. As the complaints about the Kacharis of Assam and the Santals and Bauris of Chotanagpur indicate, this originary condition of capital, the availability of a body of free wage-labourers dependent on the capitalist for their survival, was precisely what was not available locally for the tea-plantations and the coal mines. Thus, even when available, local labour had enough autonomy to command wages which were far higher than the ones immigrant labourers could. This problem of the incompleteness of primitive accumulation in the colonies in the nineteenth century, is remarked upon by Marx:

... [In] the colonies... the labour-market is always under-stocked. The law of the supply and demand of labour falls to pieces. On the one hand the [mother-country] constantly throws in capital... on the other, the regular reproduction of the wage-labourer as wage-labourer comes into

59 Ibid.
60 An 1868 Commission of Enquiry said that 'even if local labour was now largely available, the high price which it commands would materially affect the profits of tea cultivation'. Quoted in P. Griffiths. A History of the Indian Tea Industry, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1967, p. 103.
collision with impediments the most impertinent and in part invincible. What becomes of the production of wage-labourers, supernumerary in proportion to the accumulation of capital? The wage-worker of today is tomorrow an independent peasant, or artisan, working for himself. He vanishes from the labour-market, but not into the workhouse. This constant transformation of the wage-labourers into independent producers, who work for themselves instead of for capital, and enrich themselves instead of the capitalist gentry, reacts in turn very perversely on the conditions of the labour-market. Not only does the degree of exploitation of the wage-labourer remain indecently low. The wage-labourer loses in the bargain, along with the relation of dependence, also the sentiment of dependence on the abstemious capitalist. Hence [the colonist] complains, 'The supply of labour is always, not only small, but uncertain.'

This is exactly what we heard in the complaints of the fitful nature of local labour in the discourse of both the tea planters and the mine owners.

The immigrant labourer, of course, was the solution forged by capital to the above problem. Such a person was in a position exactly opposite to that of the local labourer. Having been expropriated of his means of production, the immigrant labourer had little resources available to him for resisting the control exercised by the managers. It is no wonder then, that as early as 1868, J. Warren the superintendent of the Chubwa Tea Company, told a commission, 'We never had any strikes among our imported coolies, but I have known frequent cases among the Cacharees (local labourers) in former days'. By uprooting a vast number of labourers and replanting them firmly in the indenture-bound existence of the plantation what was achieved was a vast, controlled and assured labour supply reflecting the accomplishment of primitive accumulation of colonial capital. What was argued in colonial discourses on labour and race was shot through with this consistent logic connecting work, locality and labour control. Using this logic it is clear how 'aboriginality' becomes simultaneously the solution and the problem of labour regimes in different moments of colonial capitalism.

Yet, one is still left with the problem of the greater desertion of the NWP coolies from the Assam plantations. Like the 'aboriginal' coolie he was also a migrant into the plantation system; then why did he put greater efforts into escaping the bounds of the plantation? An interesting opening into this question comes from the tea-gardens of the Chargola Valley in Sylhet, just south of the Assam Valley. Contrary to the usual pattern of the tea-plantations, in Chargola, the NWP coolies were present in large numbers and were also the most preferred ones. Thus a report on the functioning of the tea industry compiled for the years 1886–89 said:

In the case of the Chargola valley. . . contrary to the general opinion elsewhere, NWP coolies are considered the best coolies available, both as regards work and ability to stand the Sylhet climate . . . coolies of this nationality in the Chargola Valley formed a striking contrast to those found in other parts of the province (Assam).

The report also stated that the NWP and Bihari coolies were present in large numbers in Chargola Valley and were 'in many cases permanently settled' unlike in the rest of the province where they were present largely as isolated men with no families. The extent of this settlement, and the possible effect on a first-time coolie was fleshed out by the S.D.O. of Karimgunj:

A coolie (in the Chargola Valley) does not come up to an utterly strange place, with no friends or relatives near. He does not come into exile. He comes, as it were, into a part of Ghazipur (a district of heavy recruitment in the NWP) planted in the Sylhet District, for all the large concentrations in the Valley are recruited on the same principle and from the same locality. There is no doubt that the average Northwester is very subject to home sickness. In the Chargola Valley that is not the case.

This theme of 'home-sickness' as the major cause of desertion is mentioned by the S.D.O. again in the report:

The most general causes of desertion are indebtedness and family jars among jongs, and what I may call home sickness amongst the North-westers. It is notorious that North-westers do not do well except in numbers. A few North-westers will never stay among a lot of jongs.

What induced homesickness and what its nature was is hard to tell from the reports. But it is well documented that except for the Chargola Valley, NWP coolies were few in number and were 'isolated men and women with no family or other ties to attach them to the garden'. And it was this attaching to the 'garden', once the labourer had been uprooted in the turmoil of primitive

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61 Ibid., p. 770.
62 Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the State and Prospect of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet, Calcutta: 1868. IOL.
63 Special Report On the Working of Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886–9, p. 17. IOL.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid, p. 177.
accumulation, that was the other half of the process of the ‘making of the coolie.’ Throughout the rest of Assam, the few NWP and Bihari coolies found themselves in the midst of large communities of Chotanagpuri coolies, with whom they had little linguistic, cultural and historical commonality. The arrangement of coolie settlements, the ‘coolie lines’ in colonial parlance, were also made along ethnic lines thus exaggerating the distance and incompatibility of the different groups of coolies.

Furthermore, and most importantly, most NWP and Bihari coolies recruited were single coolies, predominantly single men. This was unlike the Chotanagpur coolies among whom the proportion of married coolies was very high and among whom the number of women was almost the same as men. The lack of families among the NWP and Bihar coolies was most likely the result of the minimal use of coolie sardars, i.e., employed coolies sent back to their villages to recruit others, by the tea-planters. An 1880 commission report stated that seventy-five per cent of the immigrants under the Sardari system were dependents, indicating the ‘family migration’ effected by this mode of recruitment. Since sardari recruitment was significantly used in the case of the Chotanagpur coolies, the possibility of migration of entire families, related to or acquainted with the sardar, was much higher. The advantage of this kind of recruitment was expressed by tea-garden managers in this manner: ‘the sardari coolies . . . come with their families and therefore are not given to absconding.’ In Chargola Valley this was the major mode of recruitment of NWP coolies with great implications for the question of the permanent settling of coolies:

The sardar maybe a coolie sent to his country by his employer, or he might be a coolie who obtains leave to go home, and at the time of return brings back neighbours, friends and relatives with him. This last is what occurs in the Chargola Valley . . . if a man brings up his father or mother or near relative, even though such a person may be unable to do full work, the employer is pleased, and makes it a point of finding some easy work for him. By this system the result brought about is one which might be called ‘family colonization’.

Thus, the NWP coolie possessed a relatively deeper ‘attachment’ to the Chargola Valley that was produced through the recruitment and reproduction of the family and the community within the logic of the plantation system.

Other recruiters — the licensed and unlicensed contractors — recruited without any particular consideration to get entire families. The effects of this non-sardari recruitment were the isolation and disorientation of the newly recruited and, therefore, increased desertion:

There is a general consensus of opinion among Managers that the sirdari coolies are better than (non-sardari or) depot coolies . . . Depot coolies are discontented, seem to be disappointed, have no relatives on the garden and are generally isolated individuals and are thus more likely to desert.

Among contractors’ coolies . . . there is a certain proportion which has been recruited more or less against their will. These sometimes refuse to proceed to Assam they are unwilling workers when they get there, and frequently desert.

Without the presence of family or one’s linguistic/regional community, the plantation remained an unfamiliar and threatening place with little to which one could belong to or be protected by. This is probably what the up-country coolies experienced outside the Chargola Valley. Recruited by contractors as ‘isolated men and women’ and a small numerical minority amidst the larger coolie population of each plantation, they remained relatively more unattached to the tea-garden, and, in the face of the severe work requirements and coercion by the plantation management, were the most likely section of the coolies to desert. This, very minimally, was the dynamic behind the ‘homesickness’ of up-country coolies and their greater propensity to escape from the plantations.

RESURRECTING SAVAGERY:
A STORY OF CIVILIZATION

Desertion from the plantations, whether by NWP coolies or by Chotanagpur aboriginals, was an extremely dangerous act. The

69 Special Report on the Working of Act 1 of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886-9, p. 16.
71 Special Report On the Working of Act 1 of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886–9, p. 23.
72 Ibid, p. 16.
planters, first of all, had at their disposal an elaborate set of rules and acts that gave them overwhelming judicial and police powers over the coolies. Incarceration, flogging and pay deductions were commonplace punishments handed out to the captured absconder.

Additionally, in creating a system to capture the asconding coolie, ‘civilization’, at least in the tea-plantations, nurtured its old visions of primitivism — the tradition of ‘raiding’. The plantations had failed to make the local Assamese people give in to the discipline of coolie work.Attributing this to their savagery and primitive, mutinous character, the planters put their ‘savagery’ and raiding to their own use. As the tea coolies — worked to exhaustion, minimally fed, badly housed, and severely tortured — tried to flee the plantations, the local Assamese tribes were used to seek them out. The different Assam tribal villages that dotted the landscape outside the plantations, were paid by the planters to hunt down the deserters and bring them back for small cash rewards. The reward was deducted from the coolie’s wages who was often severely flogged in addition. The coolie, not knowing the language or the terrain very well, was easy prey to these ‘hunting raids’. The plantation and the villages in the steamy jungles and hills around it; civilization and the savagery of primitivism encircling it; the aboriginal coolie and his terror of the aboriginals waiting to hunt him back into cooliehood! Different primitivisms working on each other, enabling the primitive civilization of the plantation.

**HILL RAIDS, A NINETEENTH-CENTURY STORY OF CIVILIZATION**

Right from the beginning of the Assam plantations, it was obvious to all involved in the industry that the coolies would rarely go to Assam of their own volition. At least, the numbers that were willing to go were not nearly enough to meet the vast demands of the extensive plantations. The most frequent complaint of the planters was with regard to the ‘labour problem’ or the scarcity of labour. Almost every commission that reported on the tea-plantations spent most of its energy pondering this question. In the early 1900s, the refusal of people to become Assam coolies was still strong, and an experienced labour contractor pointed to the resultant mode of recruitment: ‘No coolies can be got without enticement. My experience of 14 years is that if a coolie is asked whether he is willing to go to Assam he will say, “Never”.’

So, despite its rhetoric of free labour and anti-bondage, the colonial State developed and conditioned different modes in which the coolie could be tied down to the plantation. Indenture — a legal labour contract of three to five years that was enforced with the threat of imprisonment and heavy fining of any deserter — was the key to this system of maintaining a labour force through coercion. The need to obtain a large and cheap labour force had also encouraged the tea-planters to support an elaborate labour recruitment network of a similar type for overseas colonies. This recruitment network was, in effect, a means of filling the huge gap between demand and supply that would have resulted if Chotanagpuris and others were left to migrate on their own. The coolie contractor houses with their network of agents and sub-agents devised a myriad ways of persuading, bribing, coaxing, kidnapping and forcing potential migrants to go to Assam instead of Calcutta or the nearby, non-indenture, tea-plantations of North Bengal.

This recruitment network was the crucial lifeline for the entire system of tea-plantations in Assam. As the tea-plantations spread over Assam, ‘civilizing’ its frontier wilderness, the system of paid recruitment had become a necessity. The demands created by the opening of new plantations, the extension of old ones, or any other factor that necessitated a sudden increase in the number of labourers, were met through this recruitment network. Because of its dependence on this network, the tea industry could not dissolve this system even when it managed to get a free-emigration legislation passed in 1882. This legislation, the planters had hoped, would allow migrant coolies to come to the plantations on their own with some help from garden sardars, thus bringing the costs of coolies down. To facilitate matters, the legislation allowed for a free emigrant to proceed to Dhubri in the Goalpara district in Assam and get registered there. The actual effect, however, was the great proliferation of unlicensed contractors who found the absence of the need for official registration a great advantage in the recruiting district of the free emigrant. The advantages and profits of the unlicensed system were so great that it led to a rapid decline of the old agencies of licensed contractors. In the new

75 Williams Commission Report, p. 22.
arrangement, the prices of coolies soared because of the involvement of several middle-men, and the coolies became subject to the greatest manipulation, deceit and violence of an unregulated market. Thus, in 1895, we listen to a recruiter telling the Williams Commission, 'The price of 'jungly' coolies has lately risen very much'. This became an often repeated statement in the coolie trade. With prices rising, and the best aboriginal coolies always remaining elusive given the unlimited demand, coolie business became a seriously profitable one. Even the men and women who formed the village-level link of this entire recruitment network — the **arkattis**, as they were called — sometimes made Rs 200 to Rs 400 a month. This, at a time when the tea coolies were being paid a maximum of Rs 4 or Rs 5 a month. The majority of the coolies recruited soon started to pass through this unlicensed contractor system and, as a result, the planters paid exorbitant amounts for coolies obtained, at least 60–80 per cent more than what was paid for a sardari coolie.

The recruiters, at every level of the hierarchical system, were also quick to respond to every opportunity of increasing their profits. And given the aboriginal fetish of the planters, the profits were highest when recruiting the 'aboriginal.' The more the aboriginality of Chotanagpur peoples was fetishized the more intense became the fear of recruiting hill men — the junglis — from Chotanagpur. In 1889 there were more than five thousand arkattis or village-level recruiters in Ranchi district alone. In Purulia, the biggest contractor town, fourteen different recruiting agencies had between five hundred to one thousand and five hundred arkattis each in their books.76 There was a recruiter in almost every village. Through false promises, enticements, intoxication or kidnapping, the arkattis job was to somehow take a person — preferably young — to the various coolie depots that were located in the region or to labour contractors as far as Calcutta or even to Assam itself. Once in these depots, the coolie was a good as imprisoned because he was watched twenty-four hours by armed security men.

In a market thirsting for the aboriginal coolie, the arkattis and contractors devised ways to profit even when suitable coolies were not found. A 1901 commission reported:

The contractors are up to all manner of tricks to pass of inferior coolies as first class labourers; they make them dress their hair on one side and stain their skins so as to look like aboriginals. It is no use trying to find out a man's caste here he is so well tutored.77

The arkattis were the most important link in this trade in aboriginality. Although a great majority of them were non-Chotanagpuris, they managed to fasten themselves securely to the rural society of this forested region, and with every new turn in the spiralling fetishization of the aboriginal they became better and bolder in their means of recruitment. The arkattis' methods were varied.

To persons in debt . . . the arkattis represent that emigration is the only way of escape from importunate credit. At the same time, the ease and comforts of life in the tea-gardens are described in glowing colours . . . . But if the arkatti fails in the above, he seeks help from the mahajan (money-lender). By promising the mahajan payment of a portion of what is probably a hopeless debt, he induces him to threaten his debtor with court and imprisonment, with the alternative of being made over to some arkatti as an emigrant for the tea districts . . .

Women are seduced and enticed away and then dropped into depots . . .

Rustics are shown the wrong way if they happen to ask an arkatti which way . . . their destination lies. They are tricked into a jungle and kidnapped and taken to some depot . . .

A man elopes with another's wife and fearing resentment . . . hides about. He falls in with an arkatti, who suggests emigration. He and his fellow in guilt consent and are taken to a depot . . .

Ignorant villagers are offered work. They unsuspectingly accept the offer but on entering the house they are to work in find themselves in a depot . . .78

The arkattis, inspite of being despised for his or her role in sending away people, also held an exotic appeal for young Chotanagpur men and women. An official narrated the working of the process:

They are said to especially delude persons by sexual considerations, and a good looking male or female generally is able to secure many recruits of the opposite sex . . . One case I heard happened like this. The arkatti induced the girl by promises of keeping her himself to accompany him to his house. It was prearranged with his lawful wife that when the newcomer came she was to pick a quarrel with her and to make the house as hot for her as possible, and so it all happened, and a grand row ensued, in the course of which the arkatti left the house in assumed anger, taking

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76 Ibid., Appendix.
78 Deputy Commissioner, Hazareebagh to Offg. Sec. to Chief Commissioner, Assam in Bengal General Proceedings, 1890, p. 114.
Debts, new and broken loves, or poverty and the desperate need for work, all these could become reasons for wanting to go away from one’s village. The arkattis’s job was to ensure that the destination was the recruitment contractor’s depot. The extent of the arkatti’s presence in the social fabric of Chotanagpur was grasped by the missionary, Father Hoffman, who wrote that the villagers feared the arkattis more than the tigers that prowled at the margins of the forests, and that many a man satisfied his hatred for another by ‘selling’ the latter to an arkatti.

The colonial fetish for aboriginality made coolie recruitment one of the biggest markets in the surrounding plains, employing a great number of people from the region. The arkattis themselves were mostly ‘up-country’ men, i.e., men from the plains to the north of Chotanagpur. Their immediate employers were small contractors who were also from the plains. These in their turn were linked to large contractors from Bengal or the English coolie-houses themselves. The Williams Commission found that together these various recruiters were ‘doing the work of hunting and offering the spoils of the chase to the planters but at an enormous cost’. Each existed as a small link in the long chain of a colonial market that hunted the primitive for the plantations of colonial civilization; and together they formed a new civilization in the plains that thrived by ‘raiding’ for primitives in the hills. Organized by a colonial labour market driven on by a spiralling fetish for the aboriginal coolie, the recruiters now composed a culture of the plains that increasingly turned primitivism into profit and the hill-men into a ‘cooie nation’. In a matter of less than a hundred years, the raiders and the raided of the hills and the plains had reversed their roles as colonial capitalism inscribed the equation of civilization and primitivism in eastern India.

Many subjects have entered the purview of the historians of Subaltern Studies, and considerably inflected the meanings of subordination and dominance. Issues of ethnicity and gender have simultaneously broadened the dialectic of subordination and power, as well as revealed the limits of a universal and permanent bipolarization which pits elite against subaltern. In order to nuance the study of subordination and domination further, the following pages will add another fragmented history — of slaves and slavery — to our assessments of the first century of colonial India.

1 I would like to thank Ruth Vanita, Salim Kidwai, Shahid Amin, Ajay Skaria, Sumit Guha and Susie Tharu for detailed comments on the first draft of this essay, and the audience on 8 April 1997 at the Fellows’ seminar programme at Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, for engaging with some of the arguments presented here. The abbreviations used are BPP = Bengal Past and Present, BPubC = Bengal Public Consultation; BMC = Bengal Military Consultations; BCJC = Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultation; BC = Board’s Collection; at OIOC = Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library; GOB = Government of Bengal and GOI = Government of India, IJP = India Judicial Proceedings, PP = Parliamentary Papers.