

## *'Lazy' Natives, Coolie Labour, and the Assam Tea Industry\**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the creation of a 'coolie' work-force for the Assam tea industry and the local dimensions of tea plantation enterprise. While the industry has flourished through its use of migrant labour and export markets for tea, it has retained important connections with the locality. The Assam tea industry was a predominantly colonial enterprise manned by white British planters. It allowed participation, albeit in subordinate and dependent roles, by local peasants and gentry, though mainly based on the labour of migrant 'coolies' recruited on indentured contracts. The prominence of 'imported' coolie workers has obscured the significance of various local groups as well as the tea industry's importance in the local 'imagination'. Despite the gradual development of nationalist antagonism towards the white 'Planters' Raj', tea enterprise retained a hallowed place for the Assamese middle classes, as tea workers continued as a racialized labouring class.

### **Introduction**

On 24 December, 1834, the Tea Committee of British India made a vital announcement. The Committee announced a discovery that was 'the most important and valuable . . . on matters connected with the agricultural or commercial resources of this empire.'<sup>1</sup> Previously,

\* I thank the Commonwealth and Overseas History Seminar at Cambridge, the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale, my former colleagues at the University of Cambridge, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Western Ontario for their support and encouragement of this research.

<sup>1</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1839; *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Volume 39, Paper 63; India Revenue Consultations, 7 January, 1835; Letter Tea Committee to Revenue Department, 24 December, 1834.

botanists believed that China was tea's only native home. The tea-plant, *Camellia sinensis*, was indigenous to Upper Assam, and this discovery inspired optimistic imperial visions. Britain might soon be independent of expensive Chinese tea and the monopolistic Canton trade. Commercial tea production in remote Assam might offer imperial subjects 'the opportunity of becoming partakers of that civilization, that innocent commerce, that knowledge and that faith with which it has pleased a gracious Providence to bless our own country.'<sup>2</sup> Tea consumption could unite metropolis and colony in shared tastes and habits. However, this first flush of optimism was modified as colonial officials condemned Assam's peasants as the epitome of the 'lazy native'. By the 1850s, labour difficulties represented the chief obstacle to a profitable tea plantation regime.<sup>3</sup> This paper considers how a suitable work-force was obtained for the tea industry. The industry found a sound footing when British planters bypassed local workers to rely on racialized and displaced migrants. From the 1860s until the 1920s, plantations in remote Assam recruited 'coolie' labourers from different parts of British India via a penal and indentured labour regime.

This paper argues that even as migrant 'coolie' labour became indispensable for the Assam tea industry, the plantation world retained important and complex connections to local Assamese society. The prominence of 'imported' coolie workers from Central and South India has obscured the significance of various local groups in the Assam tea industry. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Assam tea industry remained a predominantly colonial enterprise controlled by white planters and British capital. However, it allowed participation, albeit in subordinate and dependent roles, to local peasants and gentry. While the indentured labour system made the tea industry virtually independent of local labour, plantations continued to employ locals in different niches. At different times participants in the industry included the Singpho, Khamti and Naga 'hill tribes' living in and near Upper Assam, the Kachari 'plains tribes' who travelled from Lower Assam in search of seasonal wage-work, and the Upper Assam peasants who settled in villages around the tea tracts. Also, important connections developed between local elites and the tea enterprise. This paper considers how the involvement

<sup>2</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1837; *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*; Volume 425, Paper 7; p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Syed Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (London, 1977).

of Assamese groups, whether as labourers, supervisors or planters, changed over time and fluctuated in scope, based on the shifting needs of colonial capital and changing local attitudes to the tea industry. Despite strong nationalist antagonism towards the white ‘Planters’ Raj’, the plantation enterprise itself retained a hallowed place in the Assamese imagination. Well after Indian Independence, tea’s migrant workers remained a permanent labouring class, marked by a complex history of racialization and displacement.

### I. Chinese Skills in the Assam Jungle

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the words China and tea were virtually synonymous. Even where tea grew wild in Monsoon Asia, the leaves required extensive processing. Until tea’s diffusion through early modern trading networks, its use as a beverage was rooted in a set of settled agricultural mores particular to East Asia. The Chinese Empire cultivated, consumed, and marketed the crop many centuries before the industrializing societies of the modern West made tea into a global commodity.<sup>4</sup> The historian, Robert Gardella, describes how China’s tea industry long relied on peasant family labour supplemented by specialists. Wealthy peasants hired extra hands at picking time and skilled artisans to process the final harvest. More substantial merchants rented land, planted tea, and managed the entire production process with skilled and semi-skilled wage workers. Even the small peasant producers who converted their own leaves into semi-processed tea might hire specialist artisans at some stage.<sup>5</sup>

The British Empire’s engagement with tea production was impelled by the necessity to find an alternative to Chinese tea imports. The British disliked the Qing state and its restrictive trade policies, although they revered Chinese tea knowledge. During the 1830s, British explorers located tea forests in the Eastern Indian region of Assam, newly incorporated into British India after the Anglo-Burmese War. In 1836, the East India Company’s Tea Committee formally authenticated this tea discovery. Even as British scientists visualized Assam as a new ‘El Dorado’, they evinced considerable pessimism

<sup>4</sup> See Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains. Fujian and the China Tea Trade, 1757–1937* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 10–44.

about its inhabitants, depicted as near savages. British administrators and botanists were convinced that Chinese experts and the China plant were essential to incubate the Indian tea industry. To this end, they established an experimental venture in Upper Assam to cultivate tea in nurseries with seeds and plants smuggled in from China. This enterprise was supervised by a former gunboat captain, C.A. Bruce, who had played a key role in the plant's discovery. Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India, suggested that 'an intelligent agent should go down to Penang and Singapore, and...concert measures for obtaining the *genuine* plant, and the actual (Chinese) cultivators...who shall then be employed, under the promise of liberal remuneration, to carry on the cultivation.'<sup>6</sup> At his bidding, the normally miserly East India Company opened its purse wide to recruit such Chinese cultivators and artisans for India. It respectfully dubbed them as 'tea-planters' or 'tea-growers'. Imperial botanists such as William Griffiths declared that it was essential that these tea-growers should hybridize the 'wild' Assam plant with the cultivated China variety.<sup>7</sup>

In 1836, the 'once mysterious and still curious process' of tea production began. Under Bruce's supervision, the first batch was processed by the newly recruited 'China manufacturers'. From Upper Assam's forests, Bruce sent this tea on a long voyage, first by country-boats to Calcutta, then by steam-ship to London. In January 1838, this Assam tea reached London. The London experts provided a cautiously positive verdict. They declared the tea 'satisfactory for a first experiment'.<sup>8</sup> However, at the auction, it sold for a record price of 21 to 38 shillings per pound.<sup>9</sup> This was about twenty times the usual price for the China variety. Clearly, patriotic British consumers welcomed Empire tea. This gave the green light to metropolitan investors.

In February 1839, the provisional committee of a newly established Assam Tea Association met in London. It resolved to gather information about tea production, and the support forthcoming from

<sup>6</sup> *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions, with the Discovery of the Tea-Plant, and of the Countries Adjoining Assam* (London, 1839), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1839; India Revenue Consultations, 20 June, 1836; *Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam*, by Mr Assistant-Surgeon William Griffiths, Madras Establishment, late Member of Assam Deputation.

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company, 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp. 263-236.

<sup>9</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1839, 'The Tea of Assam', quoted in: Letter Jenkins to Bentinck, 6 May, 1838.

the East India Company. The promoters declared that Assam tea only required 'the application of European capital and enterprise' to make it a great source of profit.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, these London merchants formed a new joint-stock enterprise, 'The Assam Company', with a capital of £500,000. They were encouraged by the fact that the [new] Charter Act of 1833 permitted land ownership in the East India Company's colonies to Europeans. From 1838, the Wasteland Rules for Assam further authorized the East India Company to lease or sell vast stretches of 'wasteland' to European capitalists at concessional rates. The new Assam Company began operations in the Upper Assam area in 1840. Its holdings made it one of the region's largest landholders. It was soon joined by other British firms and individuals. As they soon discovered, land was in liberal supply, but lack of labour was the chief problem.

As yet, British tea experts believed that consumers would find only the cultivated China tea or a China-Assam hybrid acceptable. They viewed the pure Assam variety as too wild to be palatable. To nurture the China plant in Assam, 'genuine' Chinese tea-growers seemed essential. Hence, in its first years, the tea enterprise recruited Chinese workers. But what was the purport of 'genuine'? The botanist, Griffith, believed that a genuine Chinaman was one who was physically located in China, not one who had left for other shores.<sup>11</sup> This was a crude and early foreshadowing of late-nineteenth century race science theories that migration and exposure to other climes and cultures produced racial degeneration. Since British agents found it easiest to recruit Chinese through established labour networks in Singapore and Penang, the bona fide status of these workers seemed increasingly suspect.<sup>12</sup>

Remarkably soon, the tea enterprise's white supervisors began to be dissatisfied with their coveted Chinese tea-growers. The Assam Company returned many Chinese recruits to Calcutta, calling them 'turbulent, obstinate and rapacious'. It retained the 'most experienced tea-makers and the quietest men'.<sup>13</sup> Upper Assam's ecology also imposed a high labour cost. During the 'rains', many newcomers to these forested tracts fell ill, with malaria and other ailments. Lacking

<sup>10</sup> Minute Book of Assam Company Provisional Committee, quoted in: Antrobus (1957), *A History of the Assam Company*, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1839, Indian Revenue Consultations, 20 June, 1836, *Report on the Tea Plant*.

<sup>12</sup> Letters issued to Assam Government, Volume 24, 1861, Assam State Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company*, pp. 378–380.

proper care, the attrition rate was high. During June to September in 1840 and 1841, more than half the Chinese could not work and were dismissed. To replace the dismissed hands, the Company tried to recruit local, unskilled labour. British grievances against Chinese tea-growers overtook earlier enthusiasm.

It is difficult to unravel the reality faced by these anonymous Chinese workers from the blanket condemnation of the colonial archive. Europeans previously praised the Chinese as universally skilled and refined. Their knowledge of tea, a commodity linked with luxury and civilization, provided them with further cachet. However, after close contact with Chinese tea-growers, the Assam Company managers condemned them as 'too great gentlemen.'<sup>14</sup> The tea enterprise failed to recognize that its demands often incited uncooperative behaviour. For the British, it was insupportable that Chinese labour should consider certain tasks to demean them. J.W. Masters, the tea superintendent fulminated, 'they object to do anything else but make tea. When spoken to, they threaten to leave the service if they are insulted by being asked to work'.<sup>15</sup> The Chinese migrants' expectations about work and livelihood stemmed from longstanding employment and migration networks in South-east Asia. They had firm notions of their dues. They resented the Assam Company and its recruitment agents as having reneged on customary employer obligations. They expected the set norms for pay and service that the Straits credit-ticket system followed.<sup>16</sup> When these workers reached Upper Assam there was a marked gap between their contracts and their employers' demands. The nature of work was a contentious issue. In this first stage of the tea enterprise, an essential task was to clear the forest undergrowth. To clear Assam's luxuriant jungles required considerable inputs of wearisome manual labour. Although the Chinese men were hired to grow and process tea, the scarcity of general labour meant that they were often summoned to perform all kinds of gruelling tasks, while physically debilitated in new surroundings and overwhelmed by disease and unfamiliar food.

As a result, the Assam Company began to employ local recruits. Initially, locals were allotted only to the manual tasks that the Chinese

<sup>14</sup> Letter J.W. Masters, quoted in: Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Chen-Tung Chang, 'Chinese Coolie Trade in the Straits Settlements in [the] late Nineteenth Century,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica*, 65, Spring (1988), pp. 1–29.

were unwilling to undertake. Upper Assam's indigenous inhabitants appeared well suited to such tasks. Many of its 'wild' people such as the Nagas were already accustomed to clearing jungle with fire and axes in their practice of shifting cultivation. At the Hookumjooree station, near Naga villages, a manager reported: 'by presents and good treatment, many of these wild people have been induced to help in the labour of clearing the jungle. A few cowrie shells and a buffalo feast have established a very amicable feeling.'<sup>17</sup> Assam Company managers were pleased with these Nagas who had no use for money (given their barter economy), and who were content to be paid in 'shells, beads, rice etc.'<sup>18</sup> However, the Company was less pleased when the Nagas would not work for more than a few days at a time.

During the 1840s and 1850s, alongside the Chinese and the Nagas, the Assam Company tried its best to recruit from amongst other local groups in Upper Assam. A prevailing cash shortage and the low availability of waged work attracted almost one hundred Assamese labourers every month. The Company paid them far lower wages than the Chinese workers. Under the direction of Bruce and the remaining Chinese, many were trained as *taklars* (tea-makers). However, as with the Nagas, the Assam Company found it difficult to retain these workers for long.

Such local workers became notorious for a high rate of desertions. While on the job, they actively showed their resentment of their low wages. There was 'on every payday a general strike among the *taklars*, and some have left the employ, refusing to sign a covenant'.<sup>19</sup> The tea enterprise attempted to bring these workers under engagement for a fixed term with the promise of wage increases. Grudgingly, the Assam Company agreed to provide 'an increase of Rs 1 p.m., on their present salary after they have signed a covenant for three years, and have served one year, and a further increase of Rs 1 p.m. for each succeeding year'.<sup>20</sup> This measure succeeded only in part. Once local workers left, it was almost impossible to trace them, 'so as to bring them back to fulfill their engagements when they have once deserted'.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the unreliability of Upper Assam's locals, Assam Company managers continued to employ them in the absence of other

<sup>17</sup> Replies: Assam Company Board Chairman's Queries to Bruce, in: *Reports of the Local Board, 1840-42* (Calcutta, 1841), Appendix D.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Report, 1841*, in: *Reports of the Local Board, 1840-42*, p. 7.

labouring options. By the 1860s, Chinese tea-growers had disappeared altogether from the Assam tea scene. The Assam Company halted fresh recruitment from South-east Asia. Existing workers mostly died or deserted. It is a strange irony that after all the trouble to obtain Chinese labour, the tea establishment did not try to keep them content, in part, due to their high cost. Once the active role of the East India Company and its scientific experts who had advocated Chinese tea-growers receded, the economic rationale of the commercial tea entrepreneurs came to the fore. This rationale demanded cheap labour in preference to highly paid skilled labour. However, although local labour was cheap, it proved too independent and footloose. By the 1860s the tea enterprise, with the aid of the colonial state, began a quest for labour which would be both cheap and easily disciplined.

## II. Lazy Peasants and Opium Eaters

To understand better the complicated relationships that developed between the tea industry, migrant workers, and Assam's locals, a brief look at the region's landscape and economy is required. The 1901 *Gazetteer* described Upper Assam as 'a wide plain on which there is hardly any jungle to be seen. On the lower levels, the staple crop is transplanted rice, while the higher levels have been planted out with tea.'<sup>22</sup> This landscape represented the 'second nature'<sup>23</sup> of ecological transformation by the spread of tea and rice cultivation on these fertile alluvial slopes of the Brahmaputra valley. Almost half a century previously, by 1858, Sibsagar district already had 15 tea estates on 13,977 acres of the district's estimated 1,612,636 acres of wasteland.<sup>24</sup> By 1901, the colonial tea enterprise extended to 164 plantations, which held 244,653 acres.<sup>25</sup> The cropped area under rice and other crops was 357,135 acres.

For the Assamese people, *bhaat* (cooked rice) denoted food. Rice, fish, and *saak* (wild greens) formed an essential part of their diet. Unlike the Chinese, the Assamese did not yet use tea as a beverage. For all, except the orthodox upper castes, their diet was supplemented

<sup>22</sup> B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Volume 7: *Sibsagar* (Allahabad, 1906), p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> See William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1992), pp. 266–67.

<sup>24</sup> Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal, No. 37, in: *Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam* (Calcutta, 1859–1861), pp. 33, 812.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers: Sibsaagar*, p. 274.



with *lao-pani* (rice beer). Rice was the staple. The Brahmaputra valley was characterized by small-scale peasant holdings whose inhabitants practiced a multi-tiered system of plough-based cultivation on wet-rice lands. They used *faringati* (dry) lands for other, inferior varieties of crops. In addition, they collected timber and other forest products from non-arable commons. Large estates were few, usually religious or estates of notables, previously cultivated with servile labour. After the Indian Slavery Act V of 1843, which abolished servile labour, portions of these estates were cultivated by tenants or sharecroppers. The scarce factor of production was labour, rather than land, given the relatively low population and the abundance of uncultivated territory.

Historically, rice was grown by almost all, for family subsistence. However, in the new cash economy introduced by the British, peasants needed marketable products so initially turned to mustard, traditionally grown to obtain oil, which they sold to traders for cash. In the virtual absence of a rice market, sales of mustard enabled peasants to pay taxes, and buy goods such as salt. However, the importance of mustard as a marketable crop was speedily overtaken by opium. Unlike mustard, opium had the advantage of a rapidly expanding demand. During the 1840s, its average after-harvest price was Rs 5 per seer, but the retail price rose to Rs 80 during the lean months. 'Marwari' trader-financiers were ready to provide money advances to cash-strapped peasants, but only if they grew opium.<sup>26</sup> The rice crop maintained the peasant household while the opium crop earned cash to pay the state revenue and other dues.

During the 1840s and 1850s, the tea enterprise made a concerted effort to enlist peasants from Upper Assam villages to work on newly established plantations. Many peasants responded positively, to meet an urgent need for cash or source of extra income, as there were few other options. Most local work was paid in kind, while tea work paid cash. They preferred to work on plantations located near their hamlets. However, these peasants would not remain for long periods if this meant neglecting their fields. Often, the *Gaon Bura* (headman) of the local village supplied labourers to plantations, but he could not make them stay.<sup>27</sup>

In this manner, colonialism discovered Assam's 'lazy native'. Occasionally, British observers admitted that, given the abundant

<sup>26</sup> John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam* (London, 1855), pp. 244–259.

<sup>27</sup> W. Kenneth Warren, *Tea Tales of Assam* (Hampshire, 1975), p. 8.

land availability, most peasants did not find wage labour attractive. For instance, an official reported that it was very rare for an Assamese living at a distance to travel far from his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. 'Their taking such work at all is generally attributed to temporary necessity, as for instance, inability to pay their revenue, wanting to get married and not having the necessary means, being in debt to a *Keya* [Marwari migrant trader] or, as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of a yoke of buffaloes for cultivating purposes.'<sup>28</sup> However, such clear-sightedness became less common as the colonial regime became more entrenched. As the tea industry's need for a regular, disciplined labour force became more urgent, so did its frustrations.

British officials speculated that it was an innate indolence, perhaps a climatic or racial trait which made labouring work unpopular. This explanation of indolence was given medicinal credence from the peasantry's easy access to opium since it grew abundantly in their gardens. Not only were Assamese peasants lazy, but nature seemed to compound their weakness since it provided a fertile soil where crops flourished easily. For example, Captain Rowlatt speculated: 'It is the low cost and great ease with which every ryot is able to procure a supply of opium that so thoroughly demoralizes the whole people. . . . This, if it produces no worse consequence, most certainly induces great laziness . . . the peculiar characteristic of the Assamese people.'<sup>29</sup>

For colonial officials, opium was the definitive sign of a profligate native. Not content with wasting nature's bounty, the peasants abused it to reinforce their moral and physical inadequacy. In 1847, Captain John Butler declared, 'The utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people are greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium'.<sup>30</sup> Local aristocrats such as Maniram Barbhandar Barua expressed concern when opium use spread widely among common people.<sup>31</sup> However, such concern differed in degree from the moral outrage that emanated from colonial officials. British observers ignored the economic logic behind the

<sup>28</sup> Foreign Political Consultations, No. 106–8, 6 June, 1833–6, National Archives of India.

<sup>29</sup> Evidence from District Collectors, in: *Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam* (Calcutta, 1861), Appendix.

<sup>30</sup> John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam* (London, 1847), p. 35.

<sup>31</sup> Petition from Moneeram Barbhandar Barua; in: A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (henceforth *Report*), (Calcutta, 1854), p. 605.

newly increased domestic cultivation of opium and its connections with colonial revenue policies. Instead, they regarded opium addiction as a congenital Assamese defect.

In such discussions about 'lazy, opium-sodden natives', the material meaning behind local opium cultivation was ignored. Rather than opium as a commercial crop under peasant control, opium was cast as a home-grown, morally dubious luxury. Some medical men felt that it had value in a malarial climate, but the usual colonial reaction was to castigate local society for sloth and indulgence. Home-grown opium was a needless luxury for Assamese peasants, just as alcohol was for Britain's factory workers. The moral turpitude was all the more extreme since this luxury was obtained virtually free from the peasant's own garden. It was available in such abundance that observers alleged that peasants even fed opium to their wives and children.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding such moral rhetoric, the East India Company had a longstanding relationship with opium trade. The prosperity of the triangular trade between China, Britain, and India largely depended on British and *Parsi* traders, who sold Indian opium in China. Since 1773, the silver that Britain obtained from China in return for Indian opium was remitted as profits back to Britain. From 1842, after Britain's success in the Opium War, the supply of Indian opium smuggled into China rose sharply, as did Chinese consumption of opium. However, the East India Company was still dissatisfied. It desired other, closer markets in Eastern India where surplus opium supplies from Bengal, Bihar, and Malwa could be marketed. As early as 1837, a colonial functionary had remarked that 'the countries lying between India and China' would be great marts for opium consumption.<sup>33</sup> During the 1840s and 1850s, the East India Company arranged to sell Bengal opium in Assam through government agents. This met with little success due to the abundance of the local supply.<sup>34</sup> At this juncture, a British judge's suggestion was, 'Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it.'<sup>35</sup> In 1861, a ban on local opium cultivation was instituted in Assam. Opium sales were henceforth to be a state monopoly.

<sup>32</sup> Evidence from District Collectors, in: *Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam* Appendix.

<sup>33</sup> John Crawford quoted in: K.N. Chaudhuri, *The Economic Development of India, 1814-1858* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 250-51.

<sup>34</sup> Mills, *Report*, Memorandum from Captain Matthie, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Mills, *Report*, p. 21.

Local indolence and labour unreliability were the two problems facing the tea industry, and state prohibition of local opium seemed to offer solutions for both of these. After 1861, a network of state-licensed opium sellers was established. These outlets would sell imported opium from Malwa. The need to purchase opium might coerce the Assamese peasant into a permanent world of wage labour. Such a policy received widespread support from British officials, planters, and missionaries.<sup>36</sup> For instance, the Reverend Mr Higgs reassured the government that this measure was justifiable on both moral and economic grounds. 'The abkarry (state-distributed) opium is only supplying the place of the indigenous drug, and by forcing the lazy natives to work to gain the money to pay for it, it tends more than anything to bring Assam under cultivation.'<sup>37</sup> Colonial officials further claimed that the peasant's necessity to purchase opium might gradually decrease local consumption.

However, none of these hopes were realized. The only concrete result of the opium cultivation ban was to supply the Assam exchequer with ever larger amounts of excise revenue. Upper Assam peasants still resisted incorporation into tea's labouring ranks on anything but their own terms. In their place, *Kachari* 'tribal' cultivators from Lower Assam, joined the tea plantation's work-force and gave satisfaction, for a brief while.

### III. The Primitive Exception

These labouring discourses and practices in the locality should be taken within the larger context of the colonial construction of racial and civilizational hierarchies. In British India, the 'race' scientists of Europe found new scope as colonial administrators ordered and separated the sub-continent's inhabitants into castes and tribes. A discursive framework emerged around ideas about savages and primitives, and about hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. David Arnold describes how, from the 1830s, once Europeans acquired greater access to the subcontinent's interiors, they began to conceptualize the caste societies of the plains as an

<sup>36</sup> The only non-local dissenting voices were the American Baptist missionaries who worked in Assam.

<sup>37</sup> Communication from Mr Higgs, in: *Home Political Proceedings* (henceforth HPP); No. 15-18, 10 September, 1858, National Archives of India.

Indo-Caucasian race. Europeans viewed the plains caste groups as racially and civilizationally distinct from indigenous groups which inhabited hilly and forested territories. These latter groups were declared to be aboriginal, or tribal peoples, characterized by a minimal use of clothing, hunting, and shifting cultivation who lived in jungle habitats.<sup>38</sup> Ajay Skaria shows how, by seizing upon and magnifying racial and cultural differences among different groups, late-nineteenth century ethnographers prepared exhaustive lists of the 'tribes of India'. Such listings of tribes formed the real invention of primitive societies in the South Asian context.<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, this renewed interest in tribes and primitiveness occurred just as the colonial regime withdrew from its earlier promotion of skilled labour for the tea industry. The quest for a more amenable worker led to a new awareness of the 'primitive virtues' of diligence and docility associated with some tribes. Assam, with its heterogeneous population, provided many additions to the list of tribes. It was not difficult to find one particular group which held potential for the new tea enterprise. This was the Kachari, inhabitants of the Lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang, and Goalpara.

Brian Hodgson, the Himalayan explorer and British Political Officer in Nepal, was the first ethnographer to systematically study the Kacharis. Hodgson contributed over eighty papers to the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* on different 'aboriginal' groups.<sup>40</sup> While Hodgson considered bodily and ecological habits to be important, he recognized that such categories were often loosely applied. He preferred to supplement studies of tribal habit and custom with linguistic and philological data. Hodgson's collection of vocabularies from the sub-Himalayan regions of India and Nepal convinced him that their inhabitants belonged to a unique race. He termed this race the Tamulian and asserted that its members comprised South Asia's original inhabitants. Tamulians were forced to flee into the hills and forests by Caucasian newcomers who usurped the fertile

<sup>38</sup> David Arnold, 'Race, Place and Bodily Difference in Early Nineteenth Century India,' *Historical Research*, May, (2004), pp. 254-73.

<sup>39</sup> Ajay Skaria, 'Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56 (3), August, (1997), pp. 726-45.

<sup>40</sup> B.H. Hodgson, 'On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal People with a general description of the climate they dwell in'. In *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects* (London, 1880), Volume 1, Section 1 (first printed Calcutta, 1847), pp. 1-160.

lowlands.<sup>41</sup> Because of their long exposure to mountainous terrain, Hodgson emphasized the physical suitability of Tamulian groups, such as the Kacharis, to work in terrains and climates inhospitable to Caucasian races.

Guided by Hodgson's research, colonial ethnography believed that many tribal groups of Assam descended from a historical Bodo Kachari race, an offshoot of the larger Tamulian. British observers exulted that the Kacharis possessed a 'share in the marvellous freedom from the effects of malaria which characterizes nearly all the Tamulian aborigines of India.'<sup>42</sup> First-hand evidence about Kacharis came from Sidney Endle, a missionary for the London-based Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Endle headed a new Kachari Mission in Lower Assam's Goalpara district. He described his flock as an aboriginal race who were cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk. They were well-suited to all forms of outdoor labour that required strength rather than skill. Endle called them the 'navies of Assam'.<sup>43</sup>

Assamese elites played a key role in helping the tea industry identify Kacharis as potential labourers. It was no other than the last Assam ruler, Raja Purandar Singha who first directed British attention towards the Kacharis. In the 1830s, when the East India Company asked to use his lands to grow tea, he gave permission. He recommended that the Company recruit 'Cacharees' workers. He described them as the 'labouring class of the country'.<sup>44</sup> Assamese folklore, with its ubiquity of tales about Kachari servants and Brahmin masters, bears testimony to a longstanding hierarchical relationship between high-status elites and the Kachari peasants who made a sparse living from the sub-montane tracts of Lower Assam.<sup>45</sup>

In the labour discourses that circulated in colonial Assam, there is a definite similarity between the ritual purity-obsessed superiority displayed by Assam's high caste groups (who disdained alcohol use as a lowly habit), and the British condescension towards primitive habits. The administrator Francis Jenkins declared that it was because 'the Cacharee consume so much of their rice in making spirits that

<sup>41</sup> B.H. Hodgson, 'A Brief Note on Indian Ethnology,' *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, XVIII (1849), pp. 238–46.

<sup>42</sup> J.W. Kaye and J. Forbes Watson (eds.), *People of India* (London, 1868), Volume 1, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> See Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (London, 1911), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> British Parliamentary Papers, 1839, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63, Extract Indian Revenue Consultations, 11 July, 1836, Letter Jenkins to Wallich, 5 May, 1836.

<sup>45</sup> See Prafullachandra Barua, *Assamese Proverbs* (Guwahati, 1963), p. 10.

they are obliged to labour to pay their rents'.<sup>46</sup> Unlike the high-status, Hinduized groups who shunned alcohol consumption, Kacharis, Nagas, and other tribal people regarded rice-beer as an essential staple. This custom forced Kacharis onto the labour market since they brewed their rice crop instead of saving it for food.

Therefore, colonial observers repeatedly cited 'aboriginal' habits of alcohol consumption and non-settled agriculture as the traits that distinguished 'tribe' from 'caste', and Kacharis from other Assamese. Even more regularly, these observers commented on the primitive habit of diligence that seemed to differentiate Kacharis from many other local groups. Industriousness appeared to be a trait intrinsic to many primitive peoples in Asia, which distinguished them from equally primitive groups in Europe and North America. The British argued that ecology and climate made people who lived in the 'enervating plains' of South Asia lethargic by nature. In those plains regions, 'the fertility of the soil is such that one month's labour is enough to maintain a family in comfort for a year. This was the main reason for the province not being prosperous... it enables natives to live without exertion'.<sup>47</sup> However, observers emphasized that there were exceptions to this rule. Some aboriginal groups, driven out by more 'civilized' peoples into the less productive hills, formed a notable exception as they needed to work hard to live. 'Cacharie labourers almost invariably engage on an agreement to receive Rs 6 per month for single task work, and very frequently they stipulate for double task work for double pay'.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, there were many inconsistencies in such opinions. Quite often, the same observers bemoaned a vagabondage they saw as peculiar to 'savage' people. Nonetheless, for the Kacharis, and later, for another group of 'Tamulian aboriginals' from Central India, colonial ethnography defined industriousness as a prime attribute. The supposed Kachari appetite for work excited tea entrepreneurs. For instance, the planter George Barker commented, '[Kacharis] travel in gangs of ten to twenty, from garden to garden, and will not take a job unless they are assured of being allowed to do at least a double

<sup>46</sup> Francis Jenkins, *Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam* (1849–50), Manuscript, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, Assam.

<sup>47</sup> Home Public Proceedings, No. 15–18, 10 September, 1858, National Archives of India.

<sup>48</sup> Jenkins, *Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam*.

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.<sup>49</sup>

British commentators constantly cited racial difference as the ultimate determinant of work capacity. Paradoxically, they also noted the marked differences in technology and resource base between Kacharis and the Upper Assam peasantry. Most Kachari tea labourers originated from communities that depended on hoes to cultivate crops. By contrast, many of their caste Hindu neighbours possessed superior cattle-driven plough technology. Colonial officials observed: 'The population in Dhurmpore are mostly Assamese who cultivate only with the plough, Cacharees and Mikirs who cultivate much of the lands by the hoe alone, without the assistance of plough cattle, changing their grounds every three to four years and allowing their old fields to run to jungle and remain fallow nine to ten years'.<sup>50</sup>

Historically, Lower Assam's Kacharis (a community low down the ladder of pre-colonial status and power), lived in hilly tracts away from the river-bank. Most households held land suitable only for dry rice varieties, which yielded less than wet rice, and required fallowing after every three years. Since these were marginal lands, their holders were exempt from customary corvée services to the pre-colonial rulers. Before the British entry, these Kacharis often needed to supplement their agricultural income with service for more prosperous neighbours. With the arrival of the British, Kacharis were pushed into plantation wage contracts within an emergent colonial economy whose wage-earning opportunities were still limited but whose revenue and rents were to be paid in cash. Therefore, such Kachari peasants were forced into seasonal labour migrations by an insufficient resource base, not by improvident drinking habits. In colonial Assam, Kacharis availed of a variety of income-earning channels to supplement their agricultural base. Some formed 'a strong element in the military and police forces'.<sup>51</sup> Others became cultivating tenants on government or gentry's lands.<sup>52</sup> Yet others became tea labourers. Generally, these Kachari peasants retained household links in their home villages. A family usually had one son cultivate its lands while his brothers

<sup>49</sup> George Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884), p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> Foreign Political Consultations, No. 106–8, 6 June, 1833–6, National Archives of India.

<sup>51</sup> W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam* (London, 1879), Volume 1, p. 36.

<sup>52</sup> Letters to Indian Government, Volume 24, Letter Hopkinson to Governor General, No 80/20, November, 1861, Assam State Archives.



moved elsewhere to work. On the plantations, observers noted that Kachari men frequently volunteered to work at double tasks during the cultivating and harvest seasons, so as to return home with an ample supply of rupees.<sup>53</sup>

Once again, the British fascination with the Kacharis faded. Despite colonial officials' lavish eulogies, tea planters became increasingly dissatisfied with their Kachari workers. The reality was that all local workers tended to come and go as they pleased, irrespective of whether they were Kachari seasonal migrants from Lower Assam or Upper Assam peasants from villages near the plantations. Tea labourers were unwilling to start work without a wage advance. Planters complained about the Kacharis as Upper Assam peasants that 'after working a few days they go home'.<sup>54</sup> In 1854, the tea enterprise heaped opprobrium upon its once cherished Kachari workers when its entire workforce, 'thousands in number, and all Cacharees, struck work for an increase in pay'.<sup>55</sup> The reason for the strike is evident since even the normally sympathetic *Times* newspaper rebuked the Assam Company for maintaining 'rather too strict a control over its rate of wages'.<sup>56</sup> The dispute was eventually resolved, but the employer-labour relationship had definitively soured. In 1861, Kachari peasants joined an uprising at Phulaguri (Lower Assam) directed against the ban on opium cultivation and the levy of a new agricultural tax. In the resultant altercation, a British officer was killed. This incident caused colonial opinion to depict Kacharis as 'bloodthirsty' and 'primitive'.<sup>57</sup> An unruly workforce with demands for higher wages and a potential for violent resistance seemed uncomfortably reminiscent of the Assam Company's experience with its Chinese workers.

Encouraged by the nineteenth-century British colonial state, tea firms such as the Assam Company sought to control large swathes of land, and to subordinate human skills to an industrial regime. British enterprise gradually reduced the skills of tea manufacture they had learned from the Chinese to a large number of simple, yet arduous tasks. By the 1860s, the agro-industrial enterprise of British India's tea production had taken a well-defined form. Once planters escaped the trap of high wages for Chinese labour, they sought in their

<sup>53</sup> Endle, *Kacharis*, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *The Times*, 25 December (London, 1841).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Home Public Proceedings, No. 88, 30 November, 1861, Letter Hopkinson to Secretary to Bengal Government, National Archives of India.

place, low-waged, unskilled workers from the Assam locality. Instead of Rs. 16 a month, the wage rate for locals was reduced to 2 annas a day. However, low wages alone were not enough to create all the attributes of a proletarian workforce. A Labourer's ability to leave without notice enraged the colonial capital. Planters complained that they lacked the power to discipline local workers who deserted after taking advances. After 1859, employers could invoke British India's new Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, but planters claimed it was useless to launch 'tedious civil cases' when defendants had practically no attachable property.<sup>58</sup> Kachari cultivators, Upper Assam peasants, and Naga workers might have had different imperatives and life practices, but their common role as local labour made them equally unsuitable for the plantation's needs. Assam's locals could not be reduced to total dependence. Ultimately, the unruly, skilled Chinese, the simple, hardworking Kachari, and the indolent inhabitants of Upper Assam seemed equally inconvenient for the tea industry. Nonetheless, even as racial logic failed in its advocacy of the Kacharis, it remained critical as the British colonial regime searched for yet another source of tea worker. A resilient belief in primitiveness necessitated looking even further afield for the right type of labour.

#### IV. Making the Plantation Coolie

In the early years of the tea enterprise, the British nurtured a Chinese illusion. It concerned the tea plant, and its grower, and their ubiquity. However, once the British learnt to grow tea, Chinese tea-growers were dispensable. Soon, Assam's tea industry punctured the remainder of the illusion about Chinese tea. Growers found that the China-Assam hybrid plant was ill-suited to the Assam environs. Planters referred to it as the 'plague' and substituted it with improved varieties of the native Assam plant.<sup>59</sup> In place of the Chinese artisanal system, British capital produced Assam tea on an industrial scale on large plantations. This colonial tea industry's prime need was for cheap, docile, easily reproducible labour. Both imported Chinese workers and local labourers proved unsatisfactory. In order to find its ideal workforce, the tea industry took recourse to the expertise of other imperial plantation enterprises.

<sup>58</sup> Evidence of C. Haxell, Manager, Seconie Estate, in: *Papers regarding the Tea Industry* (Calcutta, 1873), Appendix.

<sup>59</sup> See David Crole, *A Textbook of Tea Planting and Manufacture* (London, 1897).

In the wake of the British Empire's slave emancipation in the 1830s, South Asian labourers were recruited to Indian Ocean sugar plantations as replacements for African slaves. These workers were known as coolies. The majority belonged to tribal groups of Central and Eastern India. Kaushik Ghosh traces how the British conquest of Bengal's 'wild frontier' (the Chotanagpur-Santhal hill territory), physically and economically dislocated its inhabitants.<sup>60</sup> Colonial policy-makers were determined to 'pacify' this turbulent region. Migrants from the plains who operated as moneylenders, traders, and landlords assisted the colonial state in this endeavour. A long, ugly process of 'de-peasantization' took place. These displaced hill people were forced to become compliant and hardworking labourers wherever they could find employment.<sup>61</sup> As in the case of the Kacharis, facile racial explanations by more powerful contemporaries have to be read against the grain to comprehend how the Chotanagpur peoples' dispossession transformed them into a labour reserve. The political and economic processes of colonialism tamed these once fierce and feared populations into labouring 'hill coolies' praised as far as the British House of Commons for their primitive traits of obedience and toil. Such groups became the prime target for tea plantation recruitment, as they already were by the sugar industry.

Colonial race thinkers revised their views on primitiveness as they observed these labouring groups. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Hodgson clubbed together the tribal inhabitants of Assam and Chotanagpur as Turanian aboriginals of the Tamulian race. However, by the 1860s, ethnographic manuals separated the two groups, to match their differential status as colonial labourers. George Campbell, later Bengal's Lieutenant-Governor, pioneered this modification. He adapted Hodgson's scheme to reflect changed realities. Campbell distinguished between two groups of aboriginals: the Kolarian people of the Chotanagpur areas and the Kacharis or 'Borderer people' of the Northeast Frontier.<sup>62</sup> The tea enterprise recruited both these

<sup>60</sup> Kaushik Ghosh, 'A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India', in: Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu (eds.), *Subaltern Studies*, Volume 10, (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 8–48.

<sup>61</sup> Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Plantation Labour in Colonial India', in: E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass (eds.), *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia* (London, 1992), pp. 180–1.

<sup>62</sup> George Campbell, 'The Ethnology of India,' *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Supplementary Number, Volume 30, Part 2, 1865.

groups. Campbell argued that Kolarians were far superior as labour to their fellow aboriginals the Kacharis. He praised Chotanagpur's Kolarian labourers as a unique resource, 'a simple industrious people'. He assured the British government that they were unlike aboriginal groups in other parts of the world who succumbed before the onslaught of modern civilization. Kolarians multiplied rapidly to provide an abundant labour supply. They worked on indigo plantations, railway and road construction, and were 'the favourite material for emigration to Assam.' He speculated as to why they were so prized. 'Partly on account of the cheapness of labour in their country, partly on account of their tractable disposition and freedom from all caste and food prejudices, and more especially, I think, because of that want of attachment to the soil which distinguishes the Aboriginal from the Arian'.<sup>63</sup> He opportunely forgot that Kacharis, the other aboriginals in the tea industry, displayed too much of an attachment to their soil for the planter's liking when they chose to return to their home villages. Campbell's work lay in the mainstream of mid-Victorian race science because of its priority in ordering nature and human beings into categories. It effectively erased history. Campbell conveniently ignored the differential impact of colonial policy upon his subjects. Dispossessed Central Indian groups had little alternative but to migrate from their home regions. By contrast, Assam's Kachari peasants still possessed some control over their labour. Campbell translated this social reality into racialized distinctions between Kolarians and Kacharis.

Tea plantation workers became known as coolies. The term 'coolie' is believed to originate from the Tamil word for wages 'kuli'.<sup>64</sup> It long denoted workers at the lowest rung of the Indian Ocean labour market. Now 'coolie' acquired a specific racial attribution. Through the imperial recruiting process, the terms 'coolie' and 'Dhangar' became closely associated with Central Indian labourers. In Campbell's influential text *Ethnology of India*, he suggested that the term coolie, in fact, derived from the name 'Kol' or 'Kolarian'. He mentioned, in his listing of tribes, 'Dhangars—a term the proper meaning of which is difficult to ascertain, but which appears to be applied generically to the aboriginal labourers in Calcutta'.<sup>65</sup> Following his lead, in 1883,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920* (London, 1974), pp. 236–366.

<sup>65</sup> Campbell, 'The Ethnology of India'.

the influential Anglo-Indian lexicon, *Hobson-Jobson* defined Dhangar as ‘the name by which members of various tribes of Chutia Nagpur [sic] . . . are generally known when they go out to distant lands to seek employment as labourers (coolies).’<sup>66</sup>

From the 1860s, the British state worked closely with Assam planters to establish a regime of coolie indenture contracts buttressed by harsh penal legislation. Planters now attributed earlier labour problems to recruitment of the wrong groups. Unlike docile and diligent Chotanagpur coolies, other labouring groups were aggressive, congenitally lazy, or addicted to opium. Taming the jungle required ‘aboriginal’ talents certainly, but it also required labourers to submit to control and discipline. Neither the Chinese nor the local workers possessed these talents. While the Chinese clung to their contracts for protection, locals collected their advances and deserted. Aided by British administrators, tea planters devised a way to bring these choice hill coolies to the plantations—and keep them there. Beginning with the 1863 Transport of Native Labourers Act, the colonial state passed numerous laws to facilitate recruitment and control of Assam’s migrant labour force. Men, women, and children were sent from Central India, a long, difficult journey by steamers, roads, and later railways, into the jungles and gardens of Upper Assam. By the end of the nineteenth century, Chotanagpur labourers acquired the highest rank among Assam coolies. They became known as ‘Class I junglies’ in the planter’s lexicon.<sup>67</sup> In the recruitment market, such ‘jungle’ or aboriginal labourers were the most prized, and were ranked highest for resilience, labouring ability, and resistance to disease.

A special correspondent of the *Times* lyrically reported on this tea coolie. ‘The labourer has been withdrawn from the fierce battle of the millions amid the storm and stress of varying seasons into the constant shadow of prosperity and peace. He is protected from famine, from fraud, from violence, from usury, from all manner of external ills. For him and his like alone among the poor of India the problem of life is solved’.<sup>68</sup> This account purported to depict the estimated 700,000 and 750,000 recruits for the tea industry who came to Assam between 1870 and 1900. Of these men, women, and children, about 250,000 were from Chotanagpur. However, the reality of their new life under

<sup>66</sup> Arthur Coke Burnell and Henry Yule (eds.), *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (London, 1883), pp. 249–251.

<sup>67</sup> *Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1896), p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> H.J. Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories* (London, 1911), p. 264.

the penal regime of indenture was distant from the ‘prosperity and peace’ that London’s press described.

The ‘he’ adopted by *The Times* and most other official documents, concealed the large number of women and children included within the eponymous term, ‘coolie’. As a manual for would-be planters described, the plantation divided the hundreds of tasks involved in tea production along lines of gender and age.<sup>69</sup> The coolie population working in a garden varied from a few hundred to a few thousand. One and a half to three adult coolies per acre of cultivation were required for outdoor manual work. For optimum supervision, the whole labour force was divided into so many gangs—men, women, girls, and boys; each gang under an overseer. This workforce was under constant surveillance, in and out of hours. Industry handbooks recommended two watchmen for each line of coolie houses, to be built in straight rows, so that the watchmen could move easily amongst them.<sup>70</sup> This degree of control was far removed from the planters’ situation with local workers whom one observer caustically described as just ‘what they term themselves, mon khushi coolies, or labourers who do as they please.’<sup>71</sup>

Unhampered by state regulation, planters used semi-feudal methods to subject ostensibly free labourers to a new kind of serfdom. Indentured labourers’ bodies were open to oppression in a way that earlier tea recruits were not. They were virtually imprisoned in the squalor of the housing lines and locked in at night. These migrants found themselves living in the middle of remote, forested terrain. They were allowed little or no contact with local villagers. Flight was almost impossible since ignorance of the terrain, coupled with bounties offered to hill people to track runaways with dogs ensured that the plantation existence had to be borne against all provocation.<sup>72</sup> A young planter, Alick Carnegie wrote in his letters home: ‘We had awful work driving the coolies, we drove up and down the line and had to shove them on exactly as nigger drivers in America.’<sup>73</sup> The archive records some of the frequent floggings, beatings, and occasional killings of coolies. However, they do not record other forms of exploitation.

<sup>69</sup> See F.T.R. Deas, *The Young Tea-Planter’s Companion: A Practical Treatise on the Management of a Tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886), pp. 1–26.

<sup>70</sup> E.F. Bamber, *An Account of the Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in India from Personal Observation* (Calcutta, 1866), pp. 45–46.

<sup>71</sup> W. Nassau Lees, *Memorandum written after a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal in 1864–5* (Calcutta, 1866), p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> See *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry*.

<sup>73</sup> Letter Alick Carnegie, Carnegie Letters; Mss. Eur. D 682; Private Papers, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library.

Fragmentary anecdotal accounts testify to the many ways in which female coolies were sexually exploited by Assam's white masters, and of the mixed-race, illegitimate children which often resulted.<sup>74</sup> Despite the planters' complaints of the high cost of imported labour, their ability to impose starvation wages and a draconian work regime upon these migrants was quite unprecedented. An integral part of this penal regime was an arbitrary practice of torture, with enquiries unearthing its practice of flogging recalcitrant workers to death, rubbing pepper into the sexual organs of female coolies, all testimony to the ultimate dehumanisation of this workforce. As Samita Sen suggests, like other sectors of colonial capital, plantations could keep labour costs low since the burden of reproduction was more often than not (at least in the first phase of this recruitment), borne by the rural hinterland.<sup>75</sup> The low birth rate and infant survival rate, and the high numbers of abortions among coolie women became an acute concern only in the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> These regressive aspects of coolie life had an enduring, and negative impact on the migrants' status among local populations.

The central importance of the Assam tea industry to British India is indicated by the large body of legislation enacted to facilitate labour supply. Beginning with the Transport of Native Labourers Act of 1863, it included the Bengal Acts of 1865 and 1870, the Inland Emigration Act of 1893, the Assam Labour and Emigration Acts of 1901 and 1915, and finally, the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act of 1932. As in the case of the overseas sugar industry, this legislation had a dual intent: to ease recruitment and retention of labour; and allay concerns about labouring conditions. The first intent proved to be paramount. The state gave priority to the tea industry in every instance, even when labour abuses became widely known and induced protests from officials, missionaries, and the general public in the recruiting districts. Notoriously, the state allowed planters penal rights over their workers. Penal provisions such as the right of private arrest created a virtual Planters' Raj in Assam. The reformist provisions within these laws remained confined to paper. Officials knew well that progressive clauses such as the provision of a minimum

<sup>74</sup> Planters' illegitimate children do not appear in official records, but do so in oral accounts and family papers.

<sup>75</sup> Samita Sen, 'Questions of Consent: Women's Recruitment for Assam Tea Gardens, 1859–1900', *Studies in History*, 2, (2002), pp. 231–60.

<sup>76</sup> See *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee (hereafter ALECR) 1906* (Calcutta, 1906).

wage and medical care had neither the administrative means nor the political will to be enforced. In any case, the minimum wage of Rs. 5, Rs. 4, and Rs. 3 for men, women, and children respectively, remained the same from the Act of 1865 to that of 1901. Low as these wage rates were, they existed at that level only in the statutes. Actual wages depended on the individual plantation management. Legal provisions which limited work to 9 hours a day and 6 days a week, or stipulated a hospital on every plantation, also remained on paper.

The arbitrary nature of this Planter's Raj was so extensive that even contemporary British administrators admitted its omnipotence. After his retirement, the former Chief Commissioner of Assam, Bampfylde Fuller, wrote: 'I came across notices posted at river ferries and railway stations describing runaway coolies and offering rewards for their apprehension, that reminded one of Uncle Tom's Cabin.'<sup>77</sup> His predecessor as Chief Commissioner, the liberal minded Henry Cotton, earned the lasting enmity of the planters' lobby by his condemnation of the 'tale of misery and wrong' that he had encountered with the Labour Report in 1900.<sup>78</sup> While metaphors of slavery and forced servitude conveyed the shock felt even by upholders of the 'White Man's Burden',<sup>79</sup> they cannot be taken as exact descriptions of a production regime. Ann Stoler remarks that such metaphors might describe the tenor of the labour system and evoke the physical and social violence involved but they do not define the productive relations themselves. These workers were subject to a harsh penal code, but this was only one aspect of the coercive apparatus. Given an isolated, regimented, and illiterate workforce, the state and planters easily enforced their writ. Workers had little knowledge of their entitlements. For instance, although the penal provisions were removed in 1926, some three years later, the Royal Commission of Labour discovered that workers still believed that planters could imprison them if they left before their contracts expired.<sup>80</sup> Even after indenture and penal labour were abolished, extra-economic forms of coercion continued within late colonial capitalism, and often, beyond.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Bampfylde J. Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences* (London, 1930), p. 120.

<sup>78</sup> Cotton, *Indian and Home Memories*, pp. 264–265.

<sup>79</sup> The phrase, 'White Man's Burden' originated in an 1899 poem by Rudyard Kipling, in the context of the United States' involvement in the Philippines. Jingoistic voices in the United States and in Britain popularized it to eulogize imperialism as a noble, improving enterprise, undertaken by white races.

<sup>80</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Volume 6, Part 1 (London, 1930).

<sup>81</sup> Ann Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra's Plantation Belt, 1870–1979* (New Haven, 1985), p. 28.



## V. Coolie Labour in a Local Landscape

Sent to Assam wearing the red jackets that many people associated with degrading prison life, coolie labourers often regarded Assam as ‘the end of the world’. The circumstances of their home regions left them no choice but to migrate.<sup>82</sup> The ‘forced commercialization’ of India’s countryside was responsible for the crisis of landlessness and indebtedness faced by most of its migratory labour. Coolies were often cheated all the way, first by mendacious recruiters, then by employers’ exploitation in terms of wages, working, and living conditions. As recruitment by ‘coolie’ contractors became more notorious, the tea industry preferred to send its sardars (overseers) to recruit from their own villages whenever possible, or to employ its own recruiters. The 1906 Enquiry Commission found that there was an increased awareness in the older recruiting districts of Central India of the harsh conditions in Assam. ‘Selling’ was always the term used with regard to Assam. Santhal children learnt to look upon Assam as a ‘death trap’ whence their ancestors had never returned.<sup>83</sup> Not only did workers spread this message about Assam when they returned home, but increasingly, they challenged their oppressors. The Assam administrator Henry Cotton admitted that ‘there is a growing tendency in the Coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the Coolies act in combination among themselves, and armed with formidable weapons, the implements of their industry.’<sup>84</sup> Sometimes, such incidents ended in the burning of the manager’s bungalow.<sup>85</sup> Repercussions were always harsh, but even then, there was a marked rise in cases of assaults, rioting and unlawful assembly.

For locals in Assam, the image of the migrant coolie as ‘bonded labour’ evoked complicated responses. By the late-nineteenth century, Assamese peasants felt their precarious hold on respectability might be endangered by any association with ‘coolie’ status. On such grounds, they shied from any kind of paid manual work for white employers. A District Commissioner exasperatedly observed, ‘The inhabitants

<sup>82</sup> Evidence, Reverend Wuesti, German Lutheran Mission, Govindpur, Ranchi District, in: ALECR (Calcutta, 1906).

<sup>83</sup> Evidence, Mr. C.L. Wilkin, Manager, Hautley Tea Estate, Sibsagar, in: ALECR of 1906.

<sup>84</sup> Report by Henry Cotton (1899), quoted in: Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977), p. 46.

<sup>85</sup> Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences*, p. 120.

stated they were poor [but] could not do “cooly work” as they were respectable people in the Raja’s time.<sup>86</sup> In the Kamrup district, a local peasant, Pura Borkalita elaborated upon this theme of respectability. ‘We do not carry loads for others, we are *bhal manuh* (respectable men).’ He acknowledged that at times, local peasants performed such tasks for wages. ‘We sometimes do earthwork or build reed houses or put on thatch. We do this for the big men of the village, we do not work for Government at all. If we did we should be considered coolies, whereas we are respectable men.’<sup>87</sup> The 1881 Census reported rumours that inhabitants of thickly populated districts would be seized upon by its officials and sent to cultivate its waste tracts. Such evidence of local aversion to its work regime was attributed by the state to the lingering effects of the pre-colonial regime’s exaction of forced labour. However, Borkalita’s response reveals that by now, locals shunned ‘cooly work’ by virtue of its new associations, not the old. Manual labour for the government and planters involved a diminution of local status because of its links with the region’s new inhabitant, the coolie. Villagers’ direct encounters with coolies were extremely limited. This was due to the harsh restrictions imposed by planters on labourers’ interactions with local populations. Guards ensured that no unauthorized locals dared trespass on the plantation grounds or on any of the roads that passed through these properties.<sup>88</sup> The only exception was the weekly (*haat*) market where Upper Assam villagers were permitted to sell produce and other papers to plantation labourers.<sup>89</sup> As a planter remarked, ‘The Assamese instead of labouring at our factories grow rice and vegetables which they sell to our Bengali coolies.’<sup>90</sup>

In the manner of plantation societies elsewhere, this tea regime catalyzed a process whereby ‘coolie’ became a racial as much as an economic category. A Labour Enquiry Committee found that ‘contractors are up to all manner of tricks to pass off inferior coolies as first class labourers; they make them dress their hair on one

<sup>86</sup> Tour Diary of Deputy Commissioner (1898), in: Miscellaneous Papers, District Record Office, Jorhat.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India*, Volume 6, Part 1 (London, 1930), p. 376.

<sup>89</sup> See Nandita Khadria, ‘Internal Trade and Market Network in the Brahmaputra Valley, 1826–73,’ *Indian Historical Review*, 17 (1–2), pp. 152–73, (1990–91).

<sup>90</sup> Evidence S.E. Peal, Tea Planter, Sibsagar, 7 December, 1893, in: *Royal Opium Commission for India, 1894: Minutes of Evidence*, Volume 2, (London, 1895).

side and stain their skins so as to look like aboriginals'.<sup>91</sup> Despite the colonial disparagement of local labour, Assamese and Kachari peasants continued to be engaged for specific, temporary tasks on tea plantations, even at the height of indentured labour.<sup>92</sup> Despite their dislike of the regimented plantation system, such work was frequently the peasantry's only option to meet urgent cash requirements. However, this only crystallised social prejudice against tea work and that migrant population which depended on it for a living. An Assamese folk song has a revealing dialogue between a pair of lovers where the man wished to work on a tea garden and his sweetheart begged him not to go to such a place where 'there is not a bit of happiness' to be found.<sup>93</sup> The song's subsequent lines which disdainfully depicted coolie women in salacious union with white men underlined the social prejudices local respectability generated for the newcomers in its midst.

For a long time, almost the only locals who had sustained face-to-face interactions with these migrant labourers were the caste Hindu Assamese and Bengali *mohurirs* (clerks/overseers), the supervisory staff on the plantations. Teachers bemoaned that pupils, once they had reached the higher classes, left for plantation appointments.<sup>94</sup> While a plantation clerkship was less prestigious, and paid less than an equivalent government position, it provided a useful, and often necessary income to supplement the small rentals received by rural gentry. Jobs on offer ranged from the *burra mohurir* (head clerk) who wrote letters and kept accounts, the *hazrah mohurir* (paymaster clerk) who oversaw coolies at work and in the evening, gave them their *hazrahs* (pay), to the *godown mohurir* (storeroom clerk) who allotted new materials and tools, and weighed picked leaves. 'Doctor Babus'—native medical licentiates who treated the labourers—formed another segment of this supervisory class, who were to treat large numbers of labourers with little equipment.

New planters were cautioned about the differences in social standing between these Assamese and Bengali caste Hindu employees, and their subordinate coolies. The planter, Edward Bamber, observed that these clerks had 'on account of their caste and occupation, a social

<sup>91</sup> ALECR (Calcutta, 1906), p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> A.R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle* (London, 1944), p. 128.

<sup>93</sup> Prafulladatta Goswami, *Bihu Songs from Assam* (Guwahati, 1988), p. 201.

<sup>94</sup> *General Reports on Public Instruction in Assam* (Shillong, 1876–79), p. 5.

status to which the pay they are drawing is no guide.<sup>95</sup> Novices newly arrived on the plantations were warned that these ‘Garden Babus’ were the middle classes of local society, ‘styled in the vernacular by a phrase which may be translated as “respectable classes” in contradistinction to manual workers.’<sup>96</sup> For instance, the plantation managed by A.R. Ramsden employed five mohurirs, all ‘Assamese and agriculturists by birth.’ They supervised its 3,000 strong coolie force at a pay that averaged one rupee a day as well as a monthly commission ‘on the payment for work done by those they supervise.’<sup>97</sup> Such arrangements often caused deep antagonism between the coolie labourers and the caste Hindu gentry who disciplined them on behalf of the plantation’s white ‘sahibs’. A *mohurir*, Someswar Sarma, wrote a traditional style verse panegyric, *Assam Companir Biboron* (Description of the Assam Company), notable for its grovelling praise of its gardens’ picturesque beauty, with complete disregard to the wretched reality of the ‘coolie lines’.<sup>98</sup> Census reports detail how local gentry, when sent as enumerators, refused to enter coolies as Hindus, but clumped them impartially as Christians or Animists for, they said, ‘they eat anything.’<sup>99</sup>

Such ritual distaste was publicly articulated in Bolinarayan Bora’s 1887 essay, titled *Sah Bagisar Coolie* (The Tea Garden Coolie). This was published in the Calcutta-based Asomiya-language periodical, *Mau*.<sup>100</sup> Bora’s sentiments revealed how many Assamese elites perceived these new labourers. ‘Reader, listen, to what manner of creature the coolie is, and how it lives. That whose body hue is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, in whose home are to be found bird, pig, and dog, in whose hand is a bilayati [foreign] umbrella, and in whose hands are held a hoe and basket among the tea bushes, that is what is called a coolie.’ What Tony Ballantyne calls the delusion of Aryanism then overtaking Indian elites is clearly visible in how Bora presented these migrants

<sup>95</sup> Bamber, *An Account of the Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in India*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Ramsden, *Assam Planter*, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> See Someswar Sarma, *Assam Companir Biboron* (Sibsagar, 1875). Following the colonial practice of using terms such as ‘colony’, ‘lines’ and ‘quarters’ to characterize housing, that part of the plantation where the labourers were housed was known as the ‘coolie lines’.

<sup>99</sup> *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881* (Calcutta, 1883), p. 10.

<sup>100</sup> Bolinarayan Bora, ‘Sah Bagisar Kuli,’ (The Tea Garden Coolie) in: Haranarayan Bora (ed.), *Mau or The Bee*, February (Calcutta, 1887).

in the Assam countryside to his readers.<sup>101</sup> The tone of the piece was deliberately crafted so as to delineate the coolie into animal status, by delineating quasi-zoological attributes. It poured ridicule on the coolie's lifestyle, use of 'Western' attire alongside 'unclean' living conditions, and the consumption of meats and drink prohibited by caste norms. Bolinarayan Bora's distasteful invective articulated another strand of opinion among Assamese elites: their hopes of economic and social progress. Many among them nurtured optimistic hopes about the modernity and progress that tea enterprise might bring to Assam. For instance, the influential Assamese intellectual Gunabhiram Barua remained silent in his *Assam Buranji* (History of Assam) about the 'new slavery' which his Bengali counterparts associated with the tea industry. Instead, he chose to exalt an 'intrinsic egalitarianism' in Assamese society, which he claimed British policies had advanced.<sup>102</sup> Paeans to the colonial tea industry were common in other works of this genre such as Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Assam Buranji* (History of Assam).<sup>103</sup> From the 1870s, the Bengali vernacular public adopted tea oppression as a successor to the indigo issue on which they lambasted colonial policies. In contrast, most Assamese publicists still concurred with the colonial claim that British rule in Assam played a positive role in its replacement of pre-colonial slavery with free labour. Ostensibly it was so, but the new indentured system actually concealed semi-feudal modes of coercion under the guise of capitalist rationality. The hollowness of the British claims were exposed when the Brahmo activist, Dwarkanath Ganguli, described a plantation system iniquitous in its violence. His work, *Slavery and British Dominion*, was a pointed rebuttal of British libertarian pretensions, which used metaphors of bondage to expose oppression.<sup>104</sup> Among Assamese intellectuals of the period, the only advocate of the tea labourer was Lakshminath Bezbarua who refuted Bora's essay on the coolie.<sup>105</sup> Bolinarayan Bora's condemnation of 'our newspaper writing friend of the coolie, the Bengali Babu' served to expose tensions between two sections of the colonial intelligentsia: the Bengali and the Assamese. The latter saw themselves as weak and often resented

<sup>101</sup> See Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race* (Hampshire, 2002), pp. 26–55.

<sup>102</sup> Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji* (Calcutta, 1873), p. 169.

<sup>103</sup> See Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji* (Tezpur, 1899).

<sup>104</sup> Dwarkanath Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (first published in the *Bengalee*, September, 1886–April, 1887) (Reprint Calcutta, 1972).

<sup>105</sup> Lakshminath Bezbarua, 'Kuli,' (The Coolie), in: *Mau or The Bee* (March, 1887).

the former's cultural hegemony. So far, Assamese elites viewed the colonial state as the harbinger of progress for their backward region.<sup>106</sup>

Through the late-nineteenth century, as the fame of the tea industry spread, Assamese lawyers, traders, and retired clerks purchased parcels of rural land with their savings. Some of them established small plantations on these lands. However, they were hampered by lack of capital, and the privileges enjoyed by big British entrepreneurs. Perhaps the most successful of these local planters was Bisturam Datta Barua, a local entrepreneur from a high caste gentry background. Bisturam began his tea involvement when he supplied tea seeds to the big colonial firms. He used his stature as a government-appointed *mauzadar* (rent collector) to get Kachari peasants to cultivate tea on his family landholding. A quasi-feudal logic of a different order from the British planters operated here, as Bisturam's local eminence allowed him to extract unpaid labour from the peasants under him.<sup>107</sup> Such native establishments usually lacked resources to set up their own factories to process tea leaves. They usually functioned as subsidiary concerns of bigger British-owned plantations to which they sold their tea leaves. Such a dependent relationship was always risky. The big planters could arbitrarily increase or decrease quotas, and were free to set prices as they wished. In this way, many local planters went out of business. However, Bisturam Barua prospered when he managed to establish a long-term, quasi patron-client relationship with the powerful managing agency firm of Williamson, Magor and Company. Williamson's firm helped him established his own factory with their obsolete equipment. His son, Siva Prasad, became pre-eminent among Indian planters, but continued these ties.<sup>108</sup> In 1903, B.C. Allen compiled some information about local planters. Of the 112 estates in the Sibsagar and Jorhat sub-divisions, less than 20 were in 'native' hands, usually with individual proprietors rather than joint-stock companies. While British-controlled firms employed an

<sup>106</sup> See Peter Robb's discussion of the expectations of progress created by the state versus colonial elites in: 'The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s', *Modern Asian Studies* (1997), 31 (2): 245-83.

<sup>107</sup> Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs of Thengal* (Guwahati, 1990), pp. 27-45.

<sup>108</sup> No better instance obtains of the colonial nature of tea entrepreneurship than that Indian Independence made no difference to such dependent relationships between British and Indian tea firms. Only when the tea industry was nationalized in the 1970s could this Khongiya Baruah firm break loose from their patron-client relationship.

average of 1,000 coolies, local planters had between 10 and 150 workers. The biggest local planters were Jagannath Barua, who had 400 workers on 800 acres (out of a total holding of 2,811 acres), and Bisturam Datta Barua, who had 173 workers on 246 acres (out of 823 acres).<sup>109</sup> Most of their workers were local Kacharis and Assamese, since small-scale native planters lacked the resources to import coolies. European planters constantly accused their Assamese counterparts of luring away their prized imported labourers. Bisturam Barua's cosy relationship with Williamson Magor was quite exceptional. Most local planters found themselves constantly harassed by their prosperous white counterparts. By the early twentieth century, when Assamese nationalists began to express criticism of the Planters' Raj, local planters often were sympathetic to their cause. Prominent nationalist figures such as Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, and Benoy Prasad Chaliha (later Chief Minister of Assam) hailed from Assamese planter families.

## VI. 'Tea Tribes' of Assam

Until the end of indenture in the early twentieth century, coolie workers still continued to migrate to the plantations. Through this entire period, Assam possessed an expanding agrarian frontier. Land availability was an important reason why Assam had some appeal for impoverished migrants from other, land-scarce regions.<sup>110</sup> The possibility of obtaining rice-land to cultivate caused many 'time-expired' labourers to remain, even after the expiration of their contracts. Already in 1868, British observers noted that 'natives... many of them, especially the court officials, are going in for tracts of lands at Rupees 2-8 an acre in the neighbourhood of villages, with a view of leasing them out.'<sup>111</sup> The Brahmaputra valley's settled area increased by 15% between 1881-1882 and 1891-1892. While the population density of Lower Assam fell sharply after the kala-azar (black-fever) epidemic of 1897, in Upper Assam districts with significant immigration and settlement, the size of population

<sup>109</sup> Allen, *Sibsagar*, Tables.

<sup>110</sup> Nepali and East Bengal peasants were the two other migrant groups drawn to Assam by the prospect of land.

<sup>111</sup> Lees, *Memorandum written after a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal in 1864-5*, p. 34.

stayed steady. The 1901 census showed an immense rise in the number of tenants. Officials attributed this rise to the 'practice which is growing up among the Assamese of leasing out the land lying near a tea garden to the coolies.'<sup>112</sup> A tea plantation with an abundance of cultivable rice-lands was a considerable asset. Plantation managements rented out such surplus lands to time-expired labourers. These tenants acquired the name of *faltu* (spare) labour. Such *basti* (village) settlements of former indentured labourers became a useful labour reserve. Such spare labour proved cheaper for specialized tasks than contracting with local peasants or Naga tribals.<sup>113</sup> The Assam government also began to lease surplus wastelands to former plantation coolies. The latter preferred to rent government land which was free of the extra-legal labouring obligations that planters imposed, but were constrained by availability.<sup>114</sup> Largely through this spillover from the plantations, closer contact developed between the former coolies and local peasants. Hamlets emerged where caste Hindus, tribal groups, former coolies, and newer peasant migrants (Nepalis and East Bengalis) lived side by side. By the 1920s, there were 1,200,000 time-expired coolies in Assam. Around 50,000 held land outside the plantations.<sup>115</sup> Relations with local society became less abrasive, although still marked by caste disdain. One index of the shift in this relationship is shown in the locals' gradual acceptance of 'garden *baat* (the plantation dialect)' as a form of the Asomiya language.<sup>116</sup>

Between 1908 and 1926, the penal contract and indentured labour system gradually ended in the British Empire. Over the years, high mortality and desertion rates, coupled with low fertility rates had raised the real costs of labour and reduced its productivity. Despite Assam planters' success in keeping wages low, this recruitment system's contradictions became more visible. The state was eventually forced to act to abolish indenture in order to ensure the long term viability of the tea sector. Its hand was also forced by an

<sup>112</sup> B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901: Volume 4: Assam: Part 1, Report* (Shillong, 1902), pp. 162–163.

<sup>113</sup> Crole, *A Textbook of Tea Planting and Manufacture*, p. 80.

<sup>114</sup> See Ramkrishna Chatterjee, 'Land Grant as a Method of Labour Control in Assam Plantations in Colonial Times,' *Proceedings: Indian History Congress* (1988), pp. 520–33.

<sup>115</sup> Memorandum submitted by Government of Assam, Volume 14, in: *Report of the Indian Statutory Commission* (1930), p. 359.

<sup>116</sup> C.S. Mullen, *Report on Census of Assam, 1931: Vol. 3, Assam: Part 1, Report* (Shillong, 1932), p. 188.



all-India nationalist agitation against the indentured labour system, spearheaded by Gandhi and C.F. Andrews.<sup>117</sup>

From the turn of the century, coolie violence and resistance in Assam steadily increased in scope. Between 1904–1905 and 1920–1921, there were as many as 141 reported cases of rioting and unlawful assembly. The government established a number of enquiry commissions, the first in 1906, then in 1921 and again in 1929. Their recommendations for reform accomplished little in the face of planter intransigence. Instead, the tea industry and British officials blamed Congress and Communist activists for the creation of labour unrest. In reality, a combustible combination of worker grievances, anti-colonial sentiment, and Gandhian inspiration caused a series of labour protests and culminated in the famous Chargola coolie walk-out in 1921.<sup>118</sup>

Over the same period, the Assamese gentry's faith in the progressive potential of British knowledge and capital gradually dissipated. This was catalyzed by a growing resentment of the arrogant white man's tea lobby. The tea industry's close links with the state earned British tea-planters half of the non-official seats in the local boards and the new legislative assembly.<sup>119</sup> At groundlevel, this power expressed itself in a quasi-feudal regime which extended much beyond the boundaries of the plantations. In Upper Assam, the power of the Planter's Raj meant that virtually all natives were prohibited from free movement, or the use of umbrellas or vehicles in the presence of whites.<sup>120</sup> In this anti-colonial climate, the local attitude towards the coolie softened into a patronizing paternalism that sought to reform and incorporate them into mainstream society. Attempts to reach out to plantation coolies were a notable part of Gandhian mobilization in the 1920s. For example, local historian, Benudhar Sarma, described how Assamese middle class nationalists ventured into the villages and tea gardens as part of their new agenda of social and political regeneration.<sup>121</sup> Another Congress activist, Sarbeswar Bordoloi, narrated how planters prevented Gandhian volunteers from making contact with workers,

<sup>117</sup> See Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830–1920*; (London, 1974), pp. 236–366.

<sup>118</sup> India Office Library (IOL) Records, Economic Department, L/E/7/1181/57 and L/E/7/1354/3296; 26 May 1921–1 Dec 1922, and 1921–29, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library.

<sup>119</sup> *Assam Administrative Report, 1882–3* (Shillong, 1884), p. ii.

<sup>120</sup> *The Reis and Raiyyats*, 3 November (1883) and *The Mussalman*, 14 September (1926).

<sup>121</sup> Benudhar Sarma, *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot* (Under the Congress Sun), (Guwahati, 1959).

and how he used mohori sympathizers to evade such restrictions.<sup>122</sup> A local lawyers' group, the Gauhati Pleaders' Association, suspended its legal practice to protest against the British inhuman treatment of coolies after their Chargola exodus. This action was led by the Assamese lawyer and tea planter, Nabin Chandra Bordoloi.<sup>123</sup>

However, rather than a wholesale contestation of the colonial myths of the lazy peasant and the intemperate coolie, Assamese middle-class nationalists implicitly accepted those characterizations of these socially subordinate groups among whom they sought a base. They saw an anti-opium campaign as their strongest weapon to reform local society and attack colonial cupidity. Opium, the 'curse of Assam' now became the keystone of the Congress agitation in Assam. Its eradication became a suitable entry point to uplift coolies and the peasants, and to establish the nationalist sway in villages and plantations.<sup>124</sup>

Before and after Indian Independence, there was a strong rivalry in seeking influence among the coolie population. The Gandhian Congress activists, the socialists, and the communists all vied to establish a base among this numerically large constituency. From the 1930s, left-oriented trade unions had won a strong presence among railway and oil industry workers in Assam, which culminated in the successful Digboi refinery strike. However, the British government prevented the left activists' attempts to unionize among the tea industry.<sup>125</sup> In 1946, with decolonization on the horizon, the tea industry entered into an agreement with Congress which ensured that the latter's trade union wing, the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) would have a monopoly over tea labour unions. This agreement ensured that Communist-affiliated unions, such as the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) would not be able to organize within the tea industry. After 1948, Congress labour organizers such as Robin Kalita established several local branches of a Congress-affiliated organization titled the *Chah Mazdoor Sangh* (Tea Labour Association).<sup>126</sup> In 1958, an all-Assam organization

<sup>122</sup> Hemanta Bordoloi, Prasenjit Goswami and Maniklal Mahanta (ed.), *Shramikpran Sarbeswar Bordoloi* (Labour Leader Sarbeswar Bordoloi), (Jorhat, 1991).

<sup>123</sup> *The Mussalman*, 25 February (1921).

<sup>124</sup> *Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council*, 12 March 1929, Volume 9, No. 4 (Shillong, 1929), p. 400.

<sup>125</sup> See Prafulla Misra, 'The Communist Party of India in Assam: A Brief History', *North-East Quarterly*, July (1984) 2(1): 5-23.

<sup>126</sup> See Nabadipranjan Patgiri and Kanakchandra Deka (eds.), *Gandhibadi Neta Robin Kalita* (The Gandhian leader Robin Kalita) (Guwahati, 1996).

was created under the name of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh (ACMS).<sup>127</sup> Initially, a large part of the ACMS leadership consisted of caste Hindus from outside the labour ranks. Gradually, an 'insider' elite of former labourers replaced those 'outsider' leaders and obtained periodic concessions on issues of wages and benefits.

Over the post-Independence years, the descendants of Assam's indentured labourers adopted new identities in preference to the older, pejorative 'coolie'. These ranged between the state-conferred identity of 'Tea-tribe', the politically charged one of *Adibasi* (literally 'original dweller' which connected with indigenous groups elsewhere in 'tribal' India), or the Asomiya-language label of *baganiya* ('people of the garden'). These new identities often masked the absence of real social and economic change. The growing scarcity of cultivable land and the difficulties of obtaining employment outside the plantation ranks kept most Tea-tribe households dependent upon the plantation sector. After more than half a century, neither the trade union leadership nor successive governments managed to provide adequate opportunities to tea labourers and their families for vertical mobility and systemic change. Since the ACMS retained close links with the Congress party which ruled the state for long periods of time, there was considerable grassroots dissatisfaction with the union leadership's lack-lustre record. In electoral politics, loyalty to the Congress has recently shifted towards the rightwing Hindutva-oriented Bharatiya Janata Party.

In recent years, social and economic stagnation has led to troubling developments such as the creation of the militant Adibasi Cobra Force, which threatens violent reprisals against plantation managements, and seeks to protect the community against violence from other ethnic groups.<sup>128</sup> Assam's Tea-tribes seek inclusion in the state's list of Scheduled Tribes in the hope of obtaining easier access to higher education and government employment. Their demand is hotly contested by local 'tribal' groups such as the Bodos who fear diminution of the small affirmative action pool. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the inexorably falling prices of ever-cheapening primary commodities, the immobility of labour compared to capital,

<sup>127</sup> B.K. Srivastava, 'Trade Union and Politics: A Study of the Assam Chah Mazdoor Sangh,' *Social Research*, January–March (1986), **6(1)**: 101–14.

<sup>128</sup> The Bodo (Kachari) campaign for an autonomous state in Lower Assam has periodically unleashed horrific violence and ethnic cleansing attacks against former tea labourers on the grounds of their occupation of lands that allegedly belong to the indigenous people of Assam.

and the stark realities of a globalized marketplace form the turbulent backdrop to violent altercations between tea plantation workers, their middle-class 'brown sahib' managers, and the Indian industrial houses which have perpetuated the tea industry's hierarchical modes they inherited from British planters and the colonial state.

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