

PRODUCING LABOUR: EN-GENDERING PLANTATION POLITICS IN  
COLONIAL ASSAM VALLEY, 1826-1910

By

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## ABSTRACT

The processes and practices that produced labour in the tea plantations of Assam Valley, India, from 1826-1910 are explored. The production of labour in Assam Valley is understood within the context of British Imperial politics that brought colonial capitalism into Assam Valley in the form of the tea industry. The establishment of tea plantations in Assam was also governed by the geographical and social conditions of the region at the time of its incorporation into the British Indian Empire in 1826. By 1910 the labour force in the plantations of Assam Valley comprised almost wholly of an immigrant labour force of men, women and children, the latter two together outnumbering the male labourers. Relying on documents produced by the colonial government pertaining to the tea industry like immigration records and correspondences between government officials, the demand for labour is understood within the context of immigration that was regulated by indenture laws. An exploration of both discourses and practices of colonial officials provide an understanding of the logic that accompanied the regulation of immigration as well as the politics of producing a labour force for the plantations. The memoirs of white planters and the writings of nationalist Indians are also analyzed and provide insight into their logic and practices. While planters' demands to a large extent pressured the colonial government to create an immigrant indentured labour force, the Indian nationalists criticized the extremely low wages and harsh treatment of the labour force. Colonial officials, planters and nationalists who were embroiled over the question of indentured labour force in contradictory ways were none the less agreed on the tea industry's role in Assam Valley as progressive. This belief in the 'modernizing' role of the tea industry saw the creation of the hegemonic demand for labour for the plantations during the period of the study. The politics of class, race, gender, caste and sexuality of these groups caused poverty stricken populations – men, women and children – from other parts of the British Indian Empire that had already undergone colonial restructuring to immigrate under indentured contracts to the plantations of Assam Valley. An analysis of oral traditions practised by the tea labour community of Assam Valley in conjunction with the written documents of colonial officials, planters and nationalists provide a picture of the harsh working and living conditions that prevailed on the plantations of Assam Valley from 1863 to 1910 – the period of regulated indentured immigration. The survival strategies and resistances of the female workers are tracked and contradict any assumption of passivity on their part and clearly bring out their active role even under the harsh circumstance of indenture. The analysis of the oral traditions also brings out the politics of class, caste, gender, race and sexuality that produced labour in the early years of the tea industry. At the same time these traditions also emphasize the role of historical memory of the period studied in reconstituting the tea labour community of Assam Valley.

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

Growing up in Assam in the Assamese community<sup>1</sup>, I came to accept the familiar sight of women with baskets skilfully picking tea leaves. I also came to understand that “labour women” and sometimes “coolie” referred to a particular group of women, those of the “tea labour community”. When I encountered them outside the plantation, it was most often as domestic workers in private homes or as residents of the Catholic mission that ran the school that I attended. At the mission they had janitorial duties and sometimes made it to the rank of junior teachers. Their position was in contrast to the women I grew up with and knew as ‘mothers’, ‘daughters’, ‘wives’, ‘daughters-in-law’, some of whom had professional careers. At the time I did not give much thought to the social location, or to the contradictory construction of this particular group of women – the “tea labour women” depicted romantically in Assamese literature as “nimble fingered workers from a distant land”<sup>2</sup>, or to the references that were made to their “loose” ways. Now, from my discontinuous location as an immigrant from India in Canada and from the position of a researcher in a Western university, I reflect on the lives of this group of women. My sociological research into their lives and their social location is both ethical and political.

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<sup>1</sup> The Assamese are the dominant group of Assam Valley. In 1947, when India was organised on the basis of linguistic states, Assamese was recognised as the official language in the state of Assam, thereby legitimising the claims of the dominant linguistic group in the region. I use the term “community” broadly to include identities of religion, region, caste and language.

<sup>2</sup> Jyotirachanawali, edited by C.P. Saikia, Guwahati, Publication Board Assam, 1981, 691.

Women in the tea industry in Assam constitute about fifty percent of the workforce on the plantations<sup>3</sup>. Historically too, they have constituted approximately half the labour force on the plantations (RLI 1879-1910, ASA). Now, as in the past, they have primarily occupied the low-paying task of picking tea leaves. How did this particular group of women come to be constituted as plantation labour? What have been their experiences, as women living and working on the plantations? How have their subjectivities been formed by their experience and what has this meant for their collective agency?

### **Literature Review**

The early histories of the tea industry were written by British historians, Antrobus (1957) and Griffiths (1967). Their narratives chronicled the 'pioneering' role of the British industrialists and officials in bringing a 'modern' industry to what they considered to be inaccessible frontier lands, inhabited by 'backward tribes' and ethnic groups dependent on subsistence agriculture. Griffiths wrote about the significant place that the industry came to occupy in world commerce and the benefits it brought to producing countries through "employment, exports and the widespread use of once unproductive lands" (Griffiths 1967, xi). Antrobus too wrote in a paternalistic tone that the Assam Company<sup>4</sup> had a 'modernizing' role and was the *ma-bap* (parents) of the whole tea industry outside China. These histories fit right in with the relations of colonial domination and subordination and reveal the biases of progressivist, racist and sexist discourses. Colonialism is

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<sup>3</sup> Annual statistics of the Tea Board of India.

<sup>4</sup> First joint stock company established in 1839.

seen here as an extension of the metropolitan Western culture, in this case British, and a confirmation of the universalizing tendency of capital (Guha 1997, 13).

Later research conducted by Marxist historians points to the exploitation of the labour force that was employed in the tea plantations. They focus on methods of recruitment of labour, the forms of organisation and control of labour, and are concerned with revealing the 'unfree' nature of plantation labour as opposed to 'free' labour in the capitalist sense of selling labour power in a competitive market. Behal and Mohapatra (1992) in their study examine the indenture system in Assam that was enforced from 1840<sup>5</sup> to 1908 and point to the role of the colonial state in enforcing through its legislative and executive powers a coercive system of recruitment and regulation of labour on the plantation. They conclude that the economic irrationality of indenture system developed its own contradictions that ultimately led to the 'fall of indenture'. This marked what they call a shift from 'physical coercion of labour' to one based on its 'rational exploitation'. (Behal and Mohapatra 1992, 171) Das Gupta also focuses on the essentially 'unfree' forms of labour on the plantations, and describes the movement of labour from 'non-capitalist' economies to the 'command of capital', the maintenance of authority on the plantations, the production and reproduction of labour power and the implications of this for the evolution of the plantation labour force. He concludes that the nature of plantation workers who depended both on 'capitalist' and 'non-capitalist'

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<sup>5</sup> From my research I would place the beginning of the indentured system to 1863, from which year immigration was officially organized by the first Inland Immigration Act, Bengal Act III.



economies created ambiguities in the "process of class formation" (Das Gupta 1994, 169). Given the multi-tribe, multi-caste and multi-lingual labour force, he wonders if the plantation workers can be identified as a "segment of the Indian working class" (*Ibid*: 170).

These studies work within the categories of political economy and do not take into account the role of the colonial state in articulating a capitalist economy with pre-existing economic forms creating a specific type of colonial capitalism and class formation (Omvedt 1978; Breman 1991). Following this, the multi-caste, multi-tribe, multi-lingual and gendered labour force was the basis of the class formation on the Assam plantations.

Historians researching labour movements and protests in Assam have also been primarily concerned with characterizing class struggles, in the process flattening out the complexities of these events. Bose's analysis of the labour movement of Assam, 1920-21, while citing instances of individual and collective protests over incidents, ranging from rape of labour women by their employers and managers, to striking work over insufficient pay, is concerned with identifying a "heightened class consciousness" over "spontaneous events" (Bose 1986, 183).

Behal mentions that racial discrimination on the Assam plantations made the labourers' condition comparable to the slaves in America (Behal 1983, 138-39). He also points to differential wages that were paid to women and children on the plantation who worked the same hours as men. In his study, Behal found that

in the peak seasons women out-numbered men as they were primarily engaged in the plucking of leaves, although it was not unusual for them to be engaged in other tasks (*Ibid*: 185). Commenting on different forms of labour resistance on the tea gardens, he says that labourers fought over a variety of injustices including indignities towards 'their' womenfolk (*Ibid*: 277). His study, however does not understand tea labour as a racialized, ethnicized, caste specific and gendered category.

What all the above mentioned studies pursue, primarily, are class relations which render invisible other dimensions of social relations that also constituted the labour force in the plantations.

Recent studies have also raised this question of existence of 'pre-capitalist' identities with capitalist formations (Chakrabarty 1989; Das Gupta 1994). They indicate the need to question class formation in the context of India's colonial experience and the assumptions behind accepting categories like 'labour' and 'capital'. Chakrabarty in particular pays in-depth attention to ethnicity and religion and draws attention to the subjectivity of the Indian 'working class', in the context of the jute mill workers of colonial Calcutta (Chakrabarty 1989). But he is concerned with the interplay of these dimensions rather than their intersectionality. His study is further limited by neglecting gender as constitutive of the working class.

Historians of plantation labour have pointed out that the 'industrial plantation' that came to be established within the context of eighteenth to

twentieth century colonisation in many parts of Asia, marked a break from the earlier slave plantations (Tinker 1974; Kelly 1992, 246-265; Behal and Mohapatra 1992, 142-172; Kurian 1982). As industrial plantations within the context of a world market, they came to be considered capitalist units of production (Kurian 1982, 5). But conditions did not improve much for the labourers who came to work on these plantations, rationalized in the new context as 'free-wage' labour. Prevented by legislation that put enormous powers in the hands of planters and colonial officers, moved great distances from their homes and often finding themselves in areas where the local people did not view them favourably, they faced tremendous obstacles (Tinker 1974; Potts 1990). Jan Breman (1989) has examined the ways in which imperialist capitalist politics in the colonial plantations were intertwined with racism – biological, moral and economic in the context of Congo and Sumatra (Breman 1989). John Kelly has also documented the racialization of 'coolie' as a labour commodity in the plantations of colonial Fiji (Kelly 1992, 246-265).

A world market for 'coolie' labour from all over Asia, India, China, Indonesia, Indo-China, Japan and also Oceania came to be established in the context of European colonisation and a capitalist economy (Breman and Daniel 1992; Potts 1990). Lydia Potts estimates the total number of men, women and children sent abroad as 'coolies' at twelve million and contends that it could have been as much as thirty seven million (Potts 1990, 72-73). As Breman and Daniel (1992) point out, efforts to generalize about the 'coolie' would likely be undermined by exceptions. They also point to an area that lacks research, the

identity of labourer as 'coolie', which can only be understood as complexly constituted like the identity of anybody else. This must be seen as a construction by those who do not belong to this category as well as self perception in the context of their historical constitution in the matrix of power relations. They point to the possibility of research in that direction. Tapping the literature on this category of labourers, they attempt an understanding of the identity of the 'coolie', recognised as gendered, but admit that the lack of written sources produced by the people in question renders their attempts partial. This in their opinion may be remedied by incorporating the "oral histories, recalled and retold in the languages of the coolies of Asia", work on which has barely begun.

(Bremner and Daniel 1992)

Although male labourers constituted the majority of the labour force that was recruited, the type of labour force recruited seems to have been determined on the basis of the type of crops grown on the plantations. Tea required a large labour force to pick leaves almost year round. For these tasks female labourers were recruited at wages lower than their male counterparts and came to constitute half the labour force in the plantations in Assam and Sri Lanka. The recruitment of impoverished Tamil<sup>6</sup> women of the lowest castes in India for the tea plantations of Sri Lanka has been the subject of a few studies (Samarasinghe 1993, 131-145; Kurian 1982). Kurian's research reveals that women from lower castes enjoyed relative equality vis-à-vis men of the same subcastes. But plantation workers made a conscious effort to preserve caste hierarchy and

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<sup>6</sup> Dominant group of the present Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

reintroduced a pyramid of caste power. This situation was encouraged by and reinforced in the way plantations recruited and supervised their labour force. In a situation where some subcastes experienced upward mobility, inequality between men and women became more apparent. Inequities between men and women and between the different subcastes came to constitute the social structure on these plantations. It is clear that colonial practices articulated with local politics of caste and gender, which accounted for the way in which labour was recruited and managed on the plantations (Kurian 1982).

In the context of colonial Assam, existing literature on the tea industry indicates a similar process by which female labour came to be recruited as tea pickers, but this has not been studied thus far. Chandra Mohanty's reflection on 'Third World Women's' engagement with feminism provides a point of entry to analysing the historically and culturally specific nature of their problems. As she says, "constructing such histories often requires reading against the grain of a number of intersecting progressive discourses (for example, white feminism, third world nationalism and socialism, as well as the politically regressive racist, sexist discourse of slavery, colonialism and contemporary capitalism)" (Mohanty 1991, 10). This means recognising the epistemological break that occurs with the advent of what is regarded as 'modernity'. Following this, the category third world/postcolonial refers to a specific historical identity, politics and method (Mohanty 1991; Sunder Rajan 1993).

Feminist scholars in India have emphasized the centrality of gender to reformulation and restructuring of relations that took place during colonial rule

(Sangari and Vaid 1989). Women's lives existed at the 'interface of caste and class inequality' which were integral in the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality. Colonial rule had its own compulsions in extracting surplus and maintaining its rule which led it to aggravate existing unequal relations within many sections of Indian society (*Ibid*: 5-6). Former landholding groups were re-empowered within a new context of private ownership of land and market relations. This further deteriorated the condition of tenants and agricultural labour, including the females of these groups who actively participated in peasant struggles. Private property rights came to be vested in the hands of individual males. This perpetuated the subordination of women to men and caused many existing matrilineal systems to be eventually converted to patrilineal systems. In cases where females of subordinate classes had control over some land, they were left out of colonial legal and administrative machinery administered by an impersonal bureaucratic 'rule of law', often located in district headquarters. Marginalized in this way they became more dependent on males at every level. Colonial regimes also in many cases codified customs of dominant landowning and other rural groups into law. They thereby sanctioned certain practices regarding marriage, succession and adoption that subordinated women. Often upper caste Hindu norms were privileged that resulted in the disadvantage of all Hindu women, rural and urban (*Ibid*: 6-7).

The restructuring that followed colonial rule created a middle class constituted of urban professionals and trading classes, small landholders and village literati who sought jobs in the colonial administration and related

professions. This class played a significant part in redefining 'Hindu' and 'Indian' womanhood which was tied to their own self definition (*Ibid*: 9). This was most evident in the differential construction of the 'public and 'private' sphere which was always class specific (*Ibid*: 10). Women excluded from the 'private' sphere are those relatively independent and literate - as Sumanta Banerjee points out in the context of nineteenth century Bengal, women who had greater access to the 'public' sphere of street, marketplace, fair and festival (Banerjee 1989). The principle of exclusion is at work here in keeping out women not clearly contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space, and thus appear threatening (Sangari and Vaid 1989,12). While middle class women entered the political arena of nationalist struggle in late nineteenth century, this was not matched by a corresponding entry into the economic sphere. When they did enter the service sector and professions, they carried with them certain constraints of conduct. Poor women who moved from agriculture to the 'modernized' sector had no corresponding 'private' sphere but were sought to be regulated by its norms (*Ibid* :14).

Shobhita Jain's (1988) study, *Sexual Equality: Women in an Asian Plantation System*, is the only one that focuses on the women in the plantations of Assam Valley. An ethnographic study<sup>7</sup>, she seeks to understand gender relations in a "sub-culture of a labouring community" in an Assam tea plantation that pays both females and males equal wages (Jain 1988, 2). Treating the

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<sup>7</sup> The study was conducted during the period October 1977 to February 1982. During this time Jain lived in Nimari, a plantation in the Sibsagar district of Assam, with her family and observed and interviewed the female labourers on the plantation. She also visited some of the *bastis* or villages of ex-tea labourers in the vicinity.

Assam case as an example of the Asian plantation system, Jain is concerned to explain the interaction between industrial and community organisations and the relationship between class and gender (*Ibid*). Taking the industrial organisation and the community organisation as sub-systems of the plantation organisation, Jain concludes that gender equality is a mechanism of survival in the face of overarching control of the plantation authority and therefore is a function of industrial organisation (*Ibid*). While the study is not informed by feminist concerns of women's struggles, and the historically and geographically specific nature of these struggles, its rich documentation of the 'everyday life' on the plantation, provides some direction for further research.

Jain refers to the Assam plantation as typical of other Asian plantations in terms of industrial organisations (*Ibid*) which raises the question of the historical circumstances around which the plantations in Assam were founded. Sexual equality among the labour force on the plantation is described as another typical feature (*Ibid*). In spite of the many commonalities that the female workers on the Assam plantation share with plantation workers in other parts of the world, in comparison with the female workers in Sri Lanka (Kurian 1982), and even Trinidad, West Indies (Reddock 1994), gender relations on the Assam plantation, according to Jain, showed "retention of the traditional status of women"<sup>8</sup> (Jain 1988, 6). Jain links this to the relative isolation of the plantation workers from both the local Assamese population and the mainstream labour movement of

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<sup>8</sup> Although Jain does not explain what she means by "traditional status women", from her study, I surmise this to mean the women's lack of involvement in decision making outside of the family. For instance, in community and union affairs.



India (*Ibid*). This points to a need of researching the lives of the plantation workers by linking up the micro context of everyday lives to macro social, economic, cultural and political processes which might better indicate their exclusion or lack of participation in broader processes and movements.

Jain's concern with gender relations also stems from her need to dwell on the question of "collective action on the part of working women who enjoy a degree of socio-economic independence and decision making ability" (*Ibid.*). The question of collective action raises the question of collective politics. Jain's assumption that the female workers on the plantation could be mobilized into action to change their living and working conditions on the plantations (*Ibid*: 126), does not take into account the subjectivities of the women in question and their identification as a group. From her study, it is apparent that the 'labour identity' of the workers on the plantation is a result of sharing similar conditions of work and status in the plantation hierarchy that has led to cooperative economic and social practices. At the same time, this communal identity seems to be forged through the identities of caste, tribe or regions, from which the forebears of the workforce originally migrated.

From Jain's research, it becomes clear that the struggle between the groups themselves in many ways has influenced the community formation. In the process, the meanings of caste, tribe and other groups seem to have undergone transformation in the context of the plantation. This is best exemplified by Jain's

description of the group who called themselves *Tanti*<sup>9</sup>. In Nimari, where she conducted her study, most workers identified themselves as *Tanti*, making it the largest group. The size of the group has meant political influence in the plantation and in the labour union for those belonging to this group, although they are placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The other workers on the plantation, according to Jain, have a condescending attitude towards the *Tanti*, questioning the 'actual' caste status of the people who called themselves *Tanti* (Jain 1988, 17-29).

Though not a focus of the study, it appears that caste hierarchy and ethnic affiliations are constitutive of social relations on the plantations and influence collective identity and action. Feminist research in the case of Assam is a void waiting to be filled and the above mentioned concerns are yet to be addressed. The complexities of these can only be understood by linking the issues of history, culture and politics. My study will be a step in this direction.

### **Methodology**

I started out seeking an understanding of a particular experience of growing up in postcolonial India – the location of a particular group of women in the lowest rung of the plantation and their social construction that naturalized them as labourers. A perusal of the literature has revealed a complex intersection of the categories of race, gender, caste, class, ethnicity and sexuality in the formation of the plantation labour force in Assam. This articulation was brought

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<sup>9</sup> The term referring to the caste title of hereditary weavers.

about by imperial domination that brought industrial capitalism to Assam, during its period of British colonization, 1826-1947. Because of this complexity of historical formation it seems impossible to understand or explain the dynamics that placed a group of women as low paid tea pickers and still continue to do so, without attending to the processes and practices that constituted the labour force on the plantations. This calls for a 'historical sociology' (Abrams 1982) as the only way to apprehend the 'process of structuring' (Giddens 1979) that is the relationship of human action and structure.

In this study I therefore take the production of the category 'labour' in Assam Valley from 1826-1910 as a point of entry to understand the constitution of a group of women along with a group of men as tea labour in relation to men and women who were differently positioned. Such an understanding follows feminist scholarship that extends the analysis of the sex-gender system beyond much more than simply the history of women, gender and sexuality ( Kelly-Gadol 1987; Parr 1995).

Gender as a useful category of analysis puts women at the centre of any historical reconstruction that seeks to understand how relationships of power are signified in any society (Scott 1986). As feminist historians point out in the case of colonial India, gender was at the centre of colonial politics and must underpin any historical reconstruction. They further assert that the experience of gender in India, implicated as it was with other categories, cannot be separated from its 'intersectionality' (Sangari and Vaid 1989). Therefore, in taking the category of labour as the point of entry, I understand it in terms of its 'overdetermination', or

the point of intersection of a number of nineteenth century ideologies of race, gender, class, religion and sexuality (Althusser 1970). I locate the production of labour in the context of an imperial social formation<sup>10</sup> that included Britain and its colonies, including India. In doing so, I understand this formation in terms of the 'global social analytic' that emphasises a world system created by imperialism and secondly, understands the 'social' as the intersection of political, economic and ideological, none of which are reducible to the other (Hennessy 1993).

However, I understand the production of labour in Assam not in terms of a general or universal colonial condition, but in terms of specific practices that were enacted in institutional discourses and everyday sites, and were especially about the way that hegemonies were created through exclusionary representation of categories that preserved the relations of domination and subordination<sup>11</sup>. I see this politics as involving a continual negotiation of power that produces and reproduces hierarchies which in turn produce and reproduce labour on the plantations of Assam.

In Chapter II, I analyse the politics of the labour market through the hegemonic creation of a 'need for labour' in the first decades of colonial rule in Assam, 1826 to 1910, by the state, planters and Indian elites. I analyse the practices and discourses of these groups within a broader critique of modernity<sup>12</sup>.

I will analyse the project of modernization in Assam as an Orientalist enterprise

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<sup>10</sup> I borrow this idea from Mrinalini Sinha (Sinha 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Such an analysis has been done by Leela Fernandes (1997) in her study of the politics of the jute mills of Calcutta.

<sup>12</sup> I understand modernity as defined by Anthony Giddens (1990), as a mode of social organisation, specific to a particular time and place in Europe, but subsequently becoming more world wide in its influence.

that produced its own contradictions and new forms of subjectivity. The term 'Orientalism' was first used by Edward Said (1978) to bring attention to the discursive aspect of colonial rule that allowed a massive 'reconstruction of knowledge' about the Orient. Subsequent critics have pointed out the generalizing aspect of Said's work and the need to anchor it in historical materialist analysis that would avoid the construction of a timeless and continuous Orient (Mani and Frankenberg 1985; Ahmed 1992). The Orientalist enterprise is now more of a conceptual scheme that makes it susceptible to certain types of management, therefore the need to link the "poetics and politics of colonial discourse, and the practical project of colonial rule" (Breckenridge and Van der Veer 1989: 6). Historical materialist analysis of the way the knowledge was constructed by the colonizers is further expanded by an understanding of how the colonized contributed to and resisted these 'knowledges' (*Ibid*; Sinha 1995).

In the third chapter, I analyze what the processes and practices of producing labour actually meant in the 'everyday' life of those women who were constituted as labour on the plantations of Assam Valley under indenture laws from 1863 to 1910. Drawing on feminist scholarship, I analyse their lives in terms of their location in relation to hegemonic constructions of class, nation, caste, ethnicity, sexuality and gender (Mohanty 1991), and what this meant to them as they struggled to survive the harsh realities of plantation life. My interpretation of women's 'everyday life' on the plantations in the absence of any written evidence left by the women themselves poses a problem, but as Mohanty points out

“resistance inheres in the very gaps, fissures and silences of hegemonic narratives ... agency is thus figured in the minute day to day struggles and practices of third world women” (*Ibid*: 38). In my analysis, experience is not the ground, but the particular social location of the labour women that provides the space for ‘critical practices’ (Hennessy 1993).

In chapter three, apart from the documentary sources of bureaucrats, planters and Indian elites, I also explore the oral traditions that have been passed down, told and retold by the tea labour community. These may be interpreted in relation to the dominant and hegemonic documentary sources as the collective historical tradition of a subordinated community. As a tradition that continues to be practised up to the present time, it can be treated as an interpretation of the past – in this sense, it would mean asking how the past has entered into the present, or what in the community’s memory of the past is significant to them in the present (Popular Memory Group 1982).

In the fourth chapter, I analyze and interpret the historical memory of the tea labour community by exploring their oral tradition, specifically the genre of songs known as *Jhumurgeet*. I situate the *Jhumurgeet* in their ritual context, which I treat as a site of power, both sacred and secular. By doing so, I argue that the labourers’ structural position on the plantation has not led to some form of ‘pure’ class consciousness. Through their oral traditions the tea labour community reveal their history as one where the politics of class, caste, gender, sexuality and ethnicity were enmeshed.

## **Method of research**

Given that the historiography on the plantation labour in Assam has not concerned itself with gender relations, the question of women of particular ethnic and caste groups that constitute plantation labour in Assam, and have continued to do so since the very inception of the tea industry, has also gone unaddressed. Feminist scholarship does not necessarily mean engaging in new methods of research, but using familiar methods to answer new questions by problematising categories of analysis, theories of social change and periodization (Kelly Gadol 1987). As I propose in this study, it is by questioning the formation of 'labour' as a gendered, ethnicized, caste specific category that my study begins to fill the gap in earlier studies. Many of the documentary sources like the immigration reports and a few of the articles written by Bengali nationalists have been quoted in earlier studies without attention to the discursive construction of these documents. My attention and analyses of the discourses in these documents along the use of new sources like the writings of Assamese elites, memoirs of white planters and some correspondence between colonial officials extend these earlier studies.

I faced some practical difficulties in terms of securing primary documents. I did not have financial assistance for my project, but I was confident that I would be able to locate some material in the area where my research was focussed, in the state of Assam, India. Having grown up there, I knew people in government and the tea industry and I hoped that they would provide me with information that might lead me to these sources. Before I left for Assam, India, I did not have a

clear sense of where I might start looking for these. What I had in mind was documents produced by the colonial British government pertaining to the tea industry in Assam. Having grown up there, I knew about *Jhumur* (a genre of song and dance) that is still performed on the plantations of Assam, and in the villages or *bastis* of ex-tea labour and often represented on stage during cultural events in the region. Given the politically troubled times in the region, I did not intend, at this stage of my research, to collect *Jhumurgeet* first hand from the 'community'. I did not think that given the limited time I had there (two months) that this would be enough to engage myself in this type of field work. I hoped to locate transcribed sources and, if possible, meet with people from the 'tea labour community' who would be able to assist me. And so on July 14th, 1998, I left for Assam. I spent a week in Delhi<sup>13</sup>, and visited the Teen Murti Library and the National Archives there. I hoped to locate some documents there that had been quoted by researchers in their studies. Unfortunately, my own efforts and those of the librarians there proved fruitless. I did not have the time to do random searches there. With more time at my disposal, I may have come across some material. In any case, since Assam was my destination, I moved on, not dwelling on the fact that two of the best libraries in the country were not able to locate material that they were supposed to have and what this might bode for institutions in Assam which did not have the funding that these institutions had. Once in Assam, I was able to get down to work almost immediately. Being an 'insider' had its advantages. I was able to negotiate the red-tape, language and

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<sup>13</sup>The first two days of that week were spent getting transcripts that the University of Delhi had failed to send to UBC.



corruption that might have caused a lot of delay to an 'outsider'. Enquiries soon led me to the Assam State Archives, and it is from there that the bulk of my primary documents became available.

The very first day, accompanied by my father, we walked into the Director's office. This seemed to give some legitimacy to my endeavour in a society that still regards a woman by her family and class connections. It also helped avoid harassment from corrupt practices that seem to have become the norm in government offices in Assam. My father's request that he hoped the Director would render all possible help, given the limited time I had, did two things for me. I did not have to wait for the bureaucratic process of getting my application to work there approved (this was supposed to be a week long process) and I was able to begin that very day. Secondly, the staff having received their orders from the Director himself felt some obligation to assist me.

It was only in the process of spending the next six weeks there that I realised how crucial that initial introduction was. Without it I doubt that I would have even half of the material that I have now. It soon became clear to me that awareness of archival and library techniques was non-existent there, and to the people working there it was a much-coveted 'government job' that came with all the benefits and no accountability. It was the Director's request that made them take my work seriously. Almost everyday I arrived at 10am, as soon as the doors opened to find that I had to wait for the staff to get there. Some of them, I discovered, disappeared for the rest of the day, soon after signing their names in. Almost all of the archives holdings were entered into two registers numbered I

and II. These were hand written entries and arbitrarily organised, which meant going through them from the beginning to the end. They were entered by file numbers and accompanied by a short description of what the file might contain. These had to be entered into forms and handed to the staff, who disappeared upstairs and emerged often after long intervals. It appeared that even the organisation of material upstairs was questionable. Often the staff came back to report that some of the files were not available. When I asked what that meant, they explained that some had been lost or damaged, some had been deliberately burnt (one person pointed out the spot where they burnt the files!) because "it was simply not possible to maintain everything." As I comprehended this information, I resigned myself to the fact that I had no choice but to wait and see what became available to me. I also realised that coming back to the archives with bibliographic references did not mean much. In fact, I might be left holding material that might not be available in the future for lack of proper preservation. Very soon I realised that files that were under Home B were not available (and these looked like they had more detailed information). Most of the files that I had were under Home A. I had to scan these files, often in various stages of decay and make a list of what I wanted copied. That again led to more frustrations. The designated copier made rare appearances at the office, which meant the copying was done on his own time. His first excuse was that the machine was not working, and he had no clue when it might be repaired. A request to the Director's office soon settled this. The machine was repaired and by that time a huge pile had collected. Soon the reason for his lethargy came to light; he

decided to tell me straight since I failed to understand his hints. He needed some 'money for tea and refreshments' because the little room he had to work in without fans or windows sapped his energy. This delay meant that I did not have the opportunity to go through the material that I had collected. In fact it was not until the day before I left Assam that I managed to collect most of the material. It was only after arriving back in Canada that I was able to go through the material that I collected in detail. I found that the copy work was far from meticulous - pages had been missed, and page numbers had been cut off and so on. Given the practical difficulties of gathering primary sources and my inability to revisit these sources due to constraints of time, distance and finances, I scoured all the secondary sources available to me here and made use of primary tracts that occur in these sources keeping in view editorial changes that might have been made in the process. Secondary sources from which I have taken primary passages that are quoted are Dutta 1992, Sengupta and Sharma, 1990, Mahato 1990. From Dutta 1992, I have taken the passages quoted from the memoirs of G.M. Barker, and from the other two studies I have taken *Jhumurgeet*.

Most of the material I have include annual immigration reports of 'labour' (which appear to be the most numerous and easily available), a few inter-departmental correspondences between British government offices regarding labour immigration, transportation and inspection reports of tea estates. The Census Bureau was able to provide the reports of the census that were taken in Assam during the period of my study, though not in their complete form. Three censuses in all were taken in this period. The first census done in Assam under

the British administration was in 1881 and thereafter every ten years. I consider the above mentioned documents as embodying the legal and administrative practice of the British Government. Most of these do not deal with women separately, who constituted about half of the immigrants. Institutional records like these, as scholars have pointed out, offer challenges to us in interpreting past lives and experiences of those groups in the population that did not leave behind their own written record and appear only through the objectified lens of those more powerful than them (Iacovetta and Mitchinson 1998, 11). The question is how effectively can these documentary sources be read for reasons other than those for which they were produced? This challenge may be met by recognising their historical context, understanding why they were produced, by whom, under what circumstances and for what purposes they were used. By reading them critically, it is possible to interpret the biases and ideological perspectives in the views and responses by those that produced them, and how they intervened in the lives of those less powerful (*Ibid*). As noted by Sager, "they describe certain people in words and categories that serve the official purposes of other people" (*Ibid*).

Ranajit Guha's comment on the production of colonial texts and their discourses is appropriate here, although he neglects the category of gender (Guha 1997). Colonial texts in India were produced following conquest. Conquest empowered the British (the colonizers) to impose on the Indians (the colonized) a past written from their standpoint. Administrative exigencies forced their way into historical interpretation, as the need to determine the ownership of land and the

nature of social relations in agriculture preoccupied historiography (Guha 1997, 3). In this early stage, colonial discourse is tied to laying the foundations of British rule. Only after it had secured itself did a more mature and sophisticated discourse emerge to consolidate ideological control. Politically, this meant a difference between rulers and ruled, ethnically between whites and blacks; materially between rich and poor subjects, and culturally between higher and lower 'civilisations', between superior Christians and superstitious indigenous beliefs and barbarianism (Guha 1997; 2-3). To this we might add that these distinctions were also gendered. Miles in the context of European representations of the 'Other' says that the process of representing the 'Other' entails a dialectic of representational inclusion and exclusion. By attributing a population with certain characteristics in order to categorize and differentiate it as the 'Other', those who do so also establish criteria by which they themselves are represented. The act of representational exclusion is simultaneously an act of inclusion, whether or not 'Self' is explicitly identified in the discourse (Miles 1989, 38-39). Representations of the 'Other' are holistically neither static nor unitary. They undergo transformations over time, in response to changing circumstances, including the economic and political positions of those producing and reproducing them (*Ibid.*).

Newspaper articles that were published by Indian elites in Assam and Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century also constitute my source material. These have been compiled and published. Liberal minded Indians wrote these in the interests of social reform and anti-colonial nationalist struggle. Of the

articles I have used are a series of articles written in English by a Bengali nationalist/social reformer Dwarkanath Ganguli in the 1880's in the journal *Bengallee*. The Assamese article that I cite, "Our People", appeared in the magazine *Axom Bandhu* in 1885.

The use of oral tradition is central to the methodology of my research. Oral traditions constitute the historical practice of the subordinate (Vansina 1985). In this case, the oral traditions are the only history available of a group of non-literate people who were located at the very bottom of the power structure. Oral tradition is a "body of knowledge which has been transmitted orally over several generations and is the collective property of the members of a given society" (Tosh 1984, 182). Jan Vansina refers to them as "historologies", accumulating over time, during the process undergoing constant change in their messages because only that in the past that seems relevant to the present is passed down (Vansina 1985: 197). Scholars are increasingly becoming aware of the pitfalls of granting immediacy to oral traditions, because the politics of memory renders these to be as much representations of the past as are written sources (Prakash 1990, 35; Skaria 1996, 17-18). They may be more useful as a study of 'collective mentalities', as some scholars have documented (Irwin 1981). Keeping the pitfalls of accepting at face value the 'memories' always within sight, oral traditions can become a rich source for historical construction and interpretation. Although passed through regular repetitions, it is unlikely that all aspects are changed; sometimes what is incidental to the text become significant for the analyst (Tosh 1984, 185-86). Also used in conjunction with written sources, they

can be used to verify, confirm and contextualize an event, place or object and in this way they supplement, complement or oppose written accounts (Prakash 1990; Varma 1996). Thus oral traditions have emerged as a sophisticated source material with their 'own techniques' of study (Vansina 1985).

As Vansina points out, I realise that it is more appropriate to refer to the type of sources I am proposing in this study, as 'recorded tradition' because these were not collected first hand. As published sources they have lost an integral part of oral traditions, their emotional performative aspect. Half of the meaning of these texts is expressed through their emotions and because of this, interpreting recorded traditions is further complicated by the authors' intervention in representing these traditions (Vansina 1985, 56-57). Recognizing all these aspects I still maintain that given the exploratory nature of this study, the complete lack of research on the subject, and the particular period that I focus on, the inclusion of oral traditions would enrich and vastly contribute to my understanding.

Locating the published sources of oral traditions did not prove to be an easy matter. Given that the majority of the people to whom these traditions belong still constitute a non-literate group, they would have to be written for the general public, and this would mean a certain demand for them. A visit to a number of bookstores soon made it apparent that there was no significant demand. Only two small collections were available at a store in Guwahati, Assam, and only after an accommodating salesperson visited the storerooms in the back and retrieved what he said were probably the last copies. One was

published privately and the other by the Publication Board Assam. A visit to the Board's main office did not yield any more material or information. A friend suggested that I meet the local legislative representative of the 'tea labour community', Mr. Prithviraj Majhi, who was interested and knowledgeable about 'cultural' aspects of the community. He was cordial and agreed to meet me when we spoke on the phone. It took three attempts to meet him, as it required that I get a pass to see him at his residence in the highly secured state secretariat complex, where now almost all members of the legislature reside. An extremely busy person, he gave me about twenty minutes of his time, names of a few other publications, as well as people who might be useful. He pointed out that the 'labour community' was constituted of about eighty groups, various castes and tribes, and that he himself belonged to the Santhal community, and was at the time also involved in researching the "Santhal language back to its roots." A second meeting with him did not seem possible as he was leaving town for his constituency. The names he provided also proved elusive and I had to leave India, entrusting the work of collecting more material and sending it, to my family. Much later, my mother and sister managed to get the help from a well known folklorist, Mr. Biren Dutta. Following his advice my sister visited the offices of the *Assam Sahitya Sabha*, or the Assam Literary Association, and it was in their warehouse that the six other publications that I have were found. All these were written by prominent members of the 'tea labour community' at the behest of the Sahitya Sabha in its endeavour to be representative of Assam's cultural diversity. Most of these were recorded fairly recently, from 1977 to 1997 and it is very likely



that these are living traditions and still performed in the community. Though as one author, Dileshwar Tanti, points out, the traditions may be dying out as the present generation is more 'modern' minded (Tanti 1997). The traditions he records are those he heard growing up from members of his family, though we do not know if this was on the plantation.

In my study, I take 'labour community' to be constituted by those living on the plantations as well as in the *bastis*, or villages, often adjoining plantations. And this seems to be the interpretation of the authors recording the traditions. All of the authors of the books on oral traditions at my disposal use the terms *Sah-Janajati*<sup>14</sup>, *Sah-Shramik*<sup>15</sup> and *Sah-Banua*<sup>16</sup> interchangeably to refer to the community. Although all were published in the Assamese language, the folk songs have been recorded in the original Sadani. Sadani, the lingua franca of the 'tea labour community' reveals a wide variation. As the language itself was formed from Bengali, Hindustani, Assamese and some of the other languages that the immigrants spoke, the *Jhumurgeet* show a predominance of one or other of these languages, contingent on the location and composition of the different groups constituting these communities. Written in the Assamese script, I am able to read them. While translating the *Jhumurgeet*, I rely on my own knowledge of Sadani that I grew up hearing<sup>17</sup> as well as the summary of the verses provided by

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<sup>14</sup> *Janajati* refers to the tea labour community as an ethnicity.

<sup>15</sup> *Sramik* is the Hindustani term for worker.

<sup>16</sup> *Banua* is the Assamese term for worker. The prefix *Sah* means tea in Assamese.

<sup>17</sup> I believe that my relationship to *Sadani* fulfils what Spivak (1992) describes as an intimate relationship that is necessary for a translator. I do recognise that this relationship is implicated in a relationship of power and involves taking a risk. (Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty "The Politics of Translation" in Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds., Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates Cambridge, Polity, 1992.)

the authors themselves. The genre of folksongs called *Jhumurgeet* is almost always rendered while performing the *Jhumur* dance, which is especially associated with the ritual of *Karam Puja*, although *Jhumur* is also performed outside this ritual.

As rituals, these traditions are performed with regularity and therefore here I treat them as practices. Raymond Williams has interpreted cultural activity in this way, as both tradition and practice (Williams 1977, 596). Dirks has made the case that traditional sites are often arenas of struggle (Dirks 1992, 483-503). The 'tea labour community' is constituted by these rituals which may be seen as 'everyday' practices. A 'community' constituted from a heterogeneous group of people. I argue that 'community' is constituted through caste/class, ethnic and gendered meanings.

The period that I focus on, 1826 to 1910, is significant. 1826 was the year the British took over political power in Assam and annexed it to their British Indian Dominion. These were also the early years of the establishment of the tea industry in Assam. Most of the research on the tea industry has been done on the period from about 1900. This was the period that the national movement gained some ground. Consequently violent and organised strikes that appear to have become frequent on the plantations are seen as part of this larger movement. This makes it appropriate that I focus on the early years and on 'everyday resistance' that draws out the significance of these forms of resistance that I believe engendered these later struggles and thereby contributes to their fuller understanding. I pick 1910 to delimit my study because around this time

there seems to be an increase in the number of collective violent protests on the plantations of Assam Valley and as I indicated earlier, research that has been done so far has focussed on the period after 1900.

In my study, Assam Valley refers to the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur in Colonial Assam (see map 1). This geographical area coincides with much of modern day Assam Valley though many of these districts have been further subdivided. The north western boundary has also shrunk considerably by the formation of the present state of Arunachal Pradesh.

## CHAPTER II

### **Modernizing Backward Lands: Hegemonic Creation of a Demand for 'Labour' in the Tea Plantations of Assam Valley by the State, Planters and Indian Elites – 1826-1910**

The geographical area that came to be identified as Assam<sup>18</sup> was incorporated into the British Indian Dominion in 1826. It was the first time in history that the central and eastern parts of Assam Valley<sup>19</sup> became politically incorporated into a pan Indian imperial foundation. Following incorporation, it was administrative exigencies and not questions of historical or cultural continuities that preoccupied the minds of (male) colonial agents in Assam, who were entrusted with the work of consolidating British rule and establishing the framework of colonial administration. (Baruah 1999, 21-25)

Even as their colonial projects bore the marks of certain cultural and epistemological predispositions, these were more of a conceptual tool that were continually constructed and reconstructed in the cause of securing the interests of empire. In this chapter, I analyse the discovery of tea growing naturally in Assam as a catalyst for the 'modernizing' project in Assam even as the East India Company became embroiled in the competition of colonial capitalism with

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<sup>18</sup> The colonial province of Assam was formed only in 1875. Until then it was ruled as a part of the British province of Bengal. The British province of Assam included a number of pre-colonial formations. See Sanjib Baruah "Colonial Geography as Destiny: Assam as a Province of British India" in "India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality", University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, Philadelphia.

<sup>19</sup> These areas coincided with the Ahom kingdom (the Assamese heartland) from whom the East India Company took control. Western and some parts of central Assam valley i.e the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup, had come under the influence of the Mughal Empire and after that under the EIC earlier.

China in a race to provide the cheapest tea to Britain. This is best summarized by C.A. Bruce, in his concluding paragraph of the report of tea in Assam that was put before a Tea Committee in 1839.

“In looking forward to the unbounded benefit the discovery of this plant will produce to England, to India - to millions, I cannot but thank God for so great a blessing to our country. When I first discovered it, ... I little thought ... to see it become likely eventually to rival that of China ... Should what I have written on this new and interesting subject be of any benefit to the country, and the community at large, and help a little to impel the tea forward to enrich our own dominion, and pull down the haughty pride of China, I shall feel myself richly repaid for all the perils and dangers and fatigues, that I have undergone in the cause of British India Tea.” (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 476)

This clearly illustrates that Orientalism or the discursive aspects of colonial rule as described by Said (1978), was enmeshed with the politics and practical projects of colonial government (Breckenridge and Van der Veer 1993, 6). Similarly, the project of ‘modernization’ in Assam cannot be separated from the politics of tea, which is best illustrated in the need to produce labour for the tea plantations. The ‘need for labour’ was first articulated by the male colonial agents who made exploratory forays and experimented with tea cultivation. The demand for labour by the 1880s held hegemonic sway over planters, state officials, Bengali social reformers/nationalists and Assamese elites. It is this hegemonic demand for labour that I examine here, that emerged through the politics that marked the discourses and practices of both colonial agents and Indian elites, and that constituted a group of impoverished men, women and children from the

lower castes<sup>20</sup> and 'tribal' populations as tea labour on the plantations of Assam Valley.

Planters and government agents often disagreed on the treatment of labour, specifically the degree of control that should be exercised over them. Bengali upper class/caste males criticized British government for ill-treating the labourers, but at the same time accepted that tea cultivation was contributing to the foundation of a 'modern' society in Assam. Their anti-colonial practices and nationalist discourse revealed the basis of these in class, caste and gendered norms. The Assamese elites, who were nurturing their own incipient nationalism, also accepted the need to 'modernize', and therefore the need to import labour. Many among these elites were beneficiaries of the wasteland grants made by the colonial government (Guha 1977, 341-43). In analysing the hegemonic creation of a demand for labour, I argue that the politics of tea was about the politics of race, class, caste, gender, sexuality and ethnicity which formed the basis on which migration was organised, and labour maintained on the tea plantations of Assam Valley.

### **Developing wastelands, modernizing Assam: The politics of private property**

Assam's incorporation into the British Dominions marked its transformation into a "land frontier" (Baruah 1999, 47). Located next to the densely populated regions of British India, its colonial geography was

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<sup>20</sup> In my study, I understand caste as dependent on relations of power that were constituted in and through history, relations that were culturally constructed. See Nicholas Dirks "Castes of Mind" in Nicholas Dirks Guiltless Spoliations: Picturesque Beauty, Colonial Knowledge.

conceptualised in a way that evolved as a “tool for colonial domination” (*Ibid*: 28).

The picture that emerged was that of a vast “wilderness” that anticipated British “civilisation” (*Ibid*: 44).

The efforts of the colonial state to extract surplus led them to determine ownership of land. They characterized the vast uninhabited tracts “wastelands”, thereby employing English utilitarian categories in a landscape that had its own “social meanings of land”. Operating under the legal fiction that the Ahom kings had owned all the land and the British as their successors had acquired these rights, the colonial state’s designation of “wastelands” enabled then to distribute these to planters.<sup>21</sup> (*Ibid*: 47)

The wasteland policy of the colonial state redistributed lands and transformed the social relations of the region. The predecessors of the British, the Ahom rulers had operated on a system of conscripted labour, given the abundance of land in the region in relation to people. The entire male population was organised into the *paik* system and their labour by rotation was used in cultivating the lands of the king and his officials, as well as in public works. The *paiks* enjoyed rights to their homesteads and gardens and an additional two *puras* (2.2 acres) of wet paddy lands that were allotted to them. In addition they enjoyed access to fishing, grazing and forest produce. They could also reclaim

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<sup>21</sup> This practice is similar to the one that designated James Douglas, chief of the Hudson Bay Company, the Governor of the colony of Vancouver in 1849 empowering him to enter into treaties and negotiations regarding land settlement with the First Nations of British Columbia. By 1760’s the British had established themselves as the dominant colonial power in North America defeating their rivals, the French. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 marked their domination and aboriginal people of present day Canada were brought under their jurisdiction, prohibiting them to negotiate or sell their lands to any party other than the Crown.

as much uncultivated lands as they wanted. (Guha 1991, 45-47; Baruah 1999, 47). These forms of access to land and its produce suggests a “much wider meaning than private ownership entails” (Baruah 1999, 48).

The introduction of private property and a system of recorded land rights by the imperial government changed meanings of land through its gendered and racializing practice, and transformed existing social relations. The Wasteland Rules of 1838 and 1854 were made and remade in the interests of encouraging British private enterprise to invest in tea cultivation. This was different from the rules for the occupation of plots of agricultural lands by peasants (Behal 1983, 15). Tea was not only going to provide the revenue to the state coffers but as the ‘modernizing’ agent par excellence held the key to the ‘progress’ of the region and its people. And no terms were considered liberal enough that would contribute to the establishment of a tea industry in Assam. The project of ‘modernization’ and the colonial government’s need for revenue were intimately tangled. In 1853, H. Vetch, District Commissioner Assam also officiating as the Commissioner of Revenue recommended to the Board of Revenue:

“... some measure for encouraging the culture of the tea plant, so linked with the advancement and prosperity of the Province. I would therefore recommend that a drawback of the entire rent for thirty or even fifty years be made on all land actually under tea. Even 100,000 acres so cultivated would make Assam a most prosperous and thriving Province and the government would eventually gain fourfold by this remission, as I think it may be safely calculated that every acre brought under tea would force four more of waste into cultivation to meet the wants of tea growers and tea makers” (Mills, 1984: 74)



That the 'tea growers' and 'tea makers' referred to by the District Commissioner were male European planters was implicit in the practice of distributing wasteland grants. Colonial rule based as it was on patriarchal ideology, vested individual property rights only on males (Sangari and Vaid 1989, 6). That it was conquest that enabled this practice became clear even as local colonial officials tried to organise and establish the foundations of British rule. The arbitrariness of the Wasteland Rule confused local officials whose comments allude to the *carte blanche* that was given to European planters who were practically free to carve out their own landed properties over any land rights that the native population might have enjoyed. In 1864 the Commissioner of Assam, Henry Hopkinson wrote to the Board of Revenue:

"The present style of applications for grants of wastelands and the so called rough sketches that accompany them, for the most part, fix nothing, identify nothing, appeal to no existing landmarks, and will often be found to suit indifferently all sorts of lands, in all sorts of places." (Letter No. 23½. Commissioner of Assam to Board of Revenue 1864: 6: Assam State Archives (ASA))

Individual European planters, however, were not the primary agents favoured by the colonial government. Those most favoured by the rules were large companies. This becomes clear from the comments made by the Commissioner, referring to the grant made in 1839 to the Assam Company, the first joint stock company backed by the government to enter the field, "the indefinite nature of its boundaries has been supposed to deter persons from taking grants in its neighbourhood" (Letter No. 24½. Commissioner of Assam to Board of Revenue 1864: 25).

These developments indicate a process whereby the colonizers themselves could hardly be viewed through a homogenising lens. The colonizers, although empowered by their racial identity over all 'natives', were themselves

differentiated by class, gender and status differences (Sinha 1995; Stoler 1997). The colonial elite were often racked by internal divisions and conflicting economic and social agendas. Colonial politics of 'exclusion' was contingent on constructing categories – legally and socially classifying who was "white" and who was "native" – thereby deciding who could become 'citizen' rather than 'subject' (Stoler 1997, 345).

The need of the colonial state for revenue did not prohibit wealthy natives from applying for the wasteland grants, and many did. In a report in 1864, the Commissioner stated that, of the 366 proprietors of tea plantations in Assam, 149 were natives. It further reported that in the district of Goalpara, with one exception, the twenty two gardens were all owned by natives, who leased these lands from the zamindars, who appeared to be encouraging tea planting (Letter No. 160, From Commissioner of Assam to Secretary, Government of Bengal, 1865: 208-210, ASA). In the same district, it appeared that, European planters were unable to establish themselves, and in the Commissioner's words, "There is no lack of good soil in this district ... but the permanent settlement of Gowalparah ... debar Europeans from entering the district" (*Ibid.*: 210).

The Commissioner's comment also clearly indicates that the absence of *zamindars*, or large landholders, in Assam Valley, outside of the district of Goalpara, which had come under colonial rule earlier, and had already undergone revenue settlements, in many ways allowed the colonial government to set up a class of wealthy tea planters in Assam Valley, who were to become the agents of colonial capitalism and of 'modernization'. In spite of the enthusiasm shown by the wealthy Indians in acquiring grants and opening out tea plantations, it was the European planters who were recognised as the 'agents of progress'. The colonial state's need for revenue did not stop 'natives' from

acquiring grants of land but at the same time constructed them as 'speculators' of land without the 'capitalist spirit'. The Commissioner's report of 1865 stated of natives who acquired grants in the district of Sibsagar,

"These speculators can have done little to advance the country. Few of them are capitalists and none mean to import labour or spend much money in opening out jungles ... Real tea planters are regretting the abolition of the Old Rules of 1854 which had advantages not existing in the New Rules" (*Ibid.*: 201).

Of grants taken up by Indians in the district of Nowgong, the Commissioner remarked,

"From all I hear of native purchasers themselves, few in the district have any idea of cultivating tea but acquired well situated lands at present low rates to resell them at a profit" (*Ibid.*: 203).

In the same district, it was reported there were seventeen applications made by local people for seven leases of two hundred and seventy acres each. The Commissioner construed the desire of local people to enrich themselves as "proof of their confidence in our rule and of the accumulation of property and growth of intelligence in the district" (*Ibid.*: 205).

For all the enthusiasm shown by the wealthy among the colonized, a racialized planter class emerged. In practice it was European planters who were recognised as 'agents of progress'. With the power of the colonial government behind them, they emerged as a powerful European planter class. Their power often superseded that of local officials who were left confused and slighted by the disregard shown them. In 1864, the Commissioner of Assam on orders of the Board of Revenue in Calcutta, had to forward the petition of ten planters of Darrang district complaining of the District Commissioner's strictness of trying to

stop sale of wastelands on “vague and insufficient sketches” (Letter No. 32 1864: 34). In a correspondence with the Board of Revenue, the complaint made by a planter Mr Wills, on the ‘discourtesy’ shown him by district officials, the Commissioner’s ire is revealed. The Commissioner of Assam asked the Board’s clarification “upon the Rules of Practice in Collector’s Courts”. It appeared that officials were only following the Board’s instructions that “Europeans and natives should be treated alike in the conduct of affairs ... “ when they asked Mr Wills to pay his dues. Mr Wills, it appeared, had tried to correspond with the Collector who refused to be drawn into such communication, and the angry planter “taxed the Collector with discourtesy”. As the Commissioner pointed out, Mr Wills’ attempt to correspond was inappropriate and indicated a desire for preferential treatment where “no native tea planter would communicate by letter with the District Commissioner’s office or receive an answer if he did so”. (Letter No. 72, 1864: 84-86:ASA)

The contradictory and arbitrary working of the Wasteland Rules in Assam was the result of the politics of class, race and gender, both within the colonizers themselves and between coloniser and colonized. These politics were central to the ‘modernization’ of Assam that was characterized by many contradictions. As the Commissioner remarked in 1864, “I do not understand the aim of this policy ... and not for want of studying them ... complicated as it has been by the introduction of so many compromises and expedients” (Letter No. 30, 1864: 33: ASA). The ‘compromises’ and ‘expedients’ became a necessity as the European planter class was created and backed by the colonial state. It was with the full

support of the colonial state that Assam through its tea industry was incorporated into the world market. This development was watched with satisfaction by the colonial government as a sign of success of their 'modernizing' project, even as it became apparent that the destiny of Assam would be influenced by colonial politics in Calcutta and imperial politics in England.

Through the practice of wasteland grants, colonial rule restructured and reconstituted social relations and their meanings in Assam Valley. The practice of wasteland grants, separate from settlements made with peasants or subsistence farmers was designed to create a class of planters that would be conducive to colonial rule and become 'agents of modernization', while at the same time ensuring a steady source of revenue. Although a few wealthy natives, taking advantage of the government's need for revenue, acquired grants, they did not enjoy the power exercised by European planters who were constructed by the colonial government as the 'real tea planters' who would facilitate the process of modernization. The colonial government's racializing practice constructed the native planters as speculators while the desire to enrich themselves was construed as 'growth of intelligence'. While 'modernizing' Assam, colonial rule created a wealthy planter class who emerged as big landholders. This was a racialized and a gendered process.

Colonial rule, based as it was on patriarchal ideology, excluded females from becoming property owners, and thereby agents of 'modernization'. Females only had rights that accrued to them as subordinates (Sangari and Vaid 1989, 6). The land settlements made in Assam Valley, both with big landlords and small

peasants, therefore excluded females from ownership and control of the means of production. European females, although not property owners, because of their racial identity, exercised power over all natives, rich and poor, male and female. The land settlements made with peasants in the Assam Valley recognised their customary rights to their homesteads and constituted them into small landholders. Those completely disempowered and impoverished were the populations, both male and female, that had earned their livelihood by shifting, gathering and hunting on those lands that were now constituted by colonial rule as 'wastelands'.

### **Modernizing opium eaters and indolent peasants: Resisting the industry of tea**

The 'modernizing' project of the colonial state through its patronage of the tea industry and its immediate need for revenue led to contradictory practices. The colonial government's needs for revenue had led them to commute the services of the adult male population that had formed the labour force under Ahom rule for a payment. Individual settlements were also made with the '*Paiks*' that secured to them their customary rights to their homesteads and rice lands. These revenue settlements elevated them to the status of independent small landholders, excluded the females from ownership and subordinated them to the males. The self-sufficiency of peasant families ensured them their survival and they did not seem to be attracted by the low wages of the tea plantations. Colonial officials failed to understand their reluctance to take up these jobs and construed this as their 'indolence'.

The process of 'modernization' was linked to the need for cheap labour in Assam Valley and led the colonial government on the advice of the planters and its own officials to act in an effort to displace the same peasant population or small landholders it had helped constitute. This was done in an effort to make labour available for the plantation. The colonial government raised revenue on agricultural lands owned by the small peasants, prohibited the cultivation of poppy, and abolished slavery in 1843 (Guha 1991). But these efforts failed to create a labour force pliant and easily subordinated so that they could be worked to maximum effect at the cheapest possible rates.

The need for cheap labour was tied to the needs of colonial capitalism to provide the cheapest tea to Britain. Imperial politics embroiled as it was with the development of colonial capitalism had embarked on a path of confrontation with China which had made its tea cheaply available in the world market. The politics of establishing a tea industry in Assam, and thereby the 'modernizing' mission, was linked from the beginning to these developments.

The need for cheap labour was brought to the notice of the government as early as 1839. C. A. Bruce in his report on experimental tea cultivation by the government cited the conditions under which Britain could compete with China in "cheapness of produce". He reported that in order to "undersell" them, each garden needed their own manufacturers and labourers. From the experimental tea tracts in Upper Assam, he observed that the collecting of tea leaves which should not occupy more than twelve days in each crop was taking up to a month. This apparently resulted in loss from spoilage of leaves that were rendered unfit for manufacturing tea, all this entirely for "want of hands to pluck the leaves". To avoid spoilage "the men have often to work until very late .. when labour falls so heavy, and on so very few, it cannot be expected that it can be equally well

executed, as if more had been employed". Given this state of things, his opinion was that it would take another two to three years for the tea experiment to be in a state of "forwardness, so as to be transferable to speculators". But this could only be accomplished, in his opinion, if labour was imported and not dependent on the local population who lacked the motivation to work in this 'modern' industry. (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 466)

The need for cheap labourers to pluck tea leaves as soon as they appeared became the pressing need of the tea industry in order to become competitive with China. The conditions in Assam Valley at the time did not appear to be exploitable for the formation of the type of labour that the tea industry was looking to employ. As the colonial state became embroiled in the politics of producing labour, it embarked on a process of institutionalized proletarianization which simultaneously was an ethnicized and gendered process. The efforts of the government to secure labour and the resistance they encountered were continually constructed in Orientalist categories.

It is clear from the documentary sources that in these early years the Assamese people came to work in the plantations, but did not meet the expectations that would ensure Britain's competitive success over China. As planters and officials calculated the competitiveness of 'Assamese labour', they also 'ethnicized' them through Orientalist categories. Calculating the cost of clearing heavily forested areas for tree planting, Bruce remarked of the Assamese peasants who came to work,

"An extent of 300 by 300 will cost from 200 to 300 rupees, according to the manner in which the miserable opium-smoking Assamese work. This alone ought to point out the utility of introducing a superior race of labourers, who would not only work themselves, but encourage their women and children to do the same; - in plucking and sorting leaves they might be profitably turned to account for both parties. This I have not been



able to instill into the heads of the Assamese, who will not permit their women to come into the tea gardens". (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 466)

As a racialized population (Bremen and Daniel 1992), colonial agents constructed all categories of the Assamese peasant population, men, women and children as natural labour. Their patriarchal bias further constructed women as supplementary workers (Prakash 1992). They were supplementary because they were constructed as 'dependents' of the men that worked. Similarly, children of these groups were constructed as natural labourers because their parents were labourers. Not only the labourers, but the type of work that characterized the tea industry was also imbued with gendered meanings, though in these early years it was the Assamese men that were employed, and were performing all the work that was required. Bruce's reference that women and children could be employed in plucking and sorting leaves constructed these as lighter tasks in relation to clearing jungles, which was constructed as harder and therefore men's work. The contradiction of these gendered meanings that was being attached to plantation work was made apparent by Bruce's own comments,

"The plucking of leaves may appear to many a very easy and light employment, but there are not a few of our coolies who would much rather be employed on any other job; the standing in one position, so many hours, occasions swellings in the legs..." (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 466).

His comments further contradict the naturalizing and gendering of plantation work when he remarks,

"We lie under a great disadvantage in not having regular men to pluck the leaves, those that have been taught to do so, can pluck twice as many as those that have not, and we can seldom get hold of the same men two seasons running" (*Ibid.*).

It was clear that the plucking of tea leaves was a task that had to be learnt and that once the skill was acquired, labourers were able to perform the tasks at

a faster pace. Therefore to have a regular workforce to pluck leaves would remove the disadvantage that the tea industry faced.

These early experiments set the tone that a cheaper, more controllable labour force was needed if the tea industry in Assam was to become more competitive. The resistance of the Assamese peasant population to be constituted as labourers on the plantations was constructed in ways that ethnicized them as inferior labourers and the argument was made in favour of importing labour.

The reluctance of the Assamese peasant population to work on plantations under the exploitative conditions that were set, was attributed to their habit of taking opium, which if put a stop to, it was argued, would make them readily available for plantation work (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 474). The state's need to secure the labour of the Assamese peasants cheaply thus became linked to their 'enlightened' government whose mission was seen to rid the Assamese from the debilitating effects of opium which ostensibly prevented them from seeing the benefits of working in the 'modern' industry of tea. It was argued by Bruce that prohibiting the cultivation of poppy would not only free the Assamese from opium smoking, but would prevent further immigrant labourers to the plantations from taking up the habit. As Bruce argued, opium was the scourge that had degenerated the people of Assam.

"The British government would confer a lasting blessing on the Assamese and the new settlers, if immediate and active measures were taken to put down the cultivation of opium in Assam... If something of this kind is not done quickly too, the thousands that are about to emigrate..., will soon be infected with the Opium mania, - that dreadful plague which has depopulated this beautiful country, turned it into a land of wild beasts, with which it is overrun, and has degenerated the Assamese, from a fine race of people, to the most abject, servile, crafty and demoralised race in India... Few but those who have resided long in this unhappy land know

the dreadful and immoral effects, which the use of Opium produces on the native. He will steal, sell his property, his children, the mother of his children, and finally even commit murder for it. Would it not be the highest of blessings, if our humane government would stop these evils by a single dash of the pen, and save Assam, and all those who are about to emigrate into it as tea cultivators... We should in the end be richly rewarded, by having a fine, healthy race of men growing up for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild beasts, and to plant and cultivate the luxury of the world. This can never be effected by the enfeebled Opium-eaters of Assam, who are more effeminate than women." (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 474).

Bruce constructed the resistance of the male Assamese peasantry by demasculinizing them using the tropes of Orientalist discourse<sup>22</sup>. Constructing them as he did by imbuing them with 'weak' qualities of femininity, he rendered them unfit for the hard work required in the plantation. The Orientalist enterprise in Assam Valley thereby constructed a specific group of the population in relation to others and was deeply implicated in imperial politics.

In the colonial context of Assam Valley, opium itself was implicated in contradictory ways in imperial politics. On the one hand, its use was seen to have led to the degeneration of the male Assamese peasants to a level that the 'modernizing' mission was obstructed by their resistance to be constituted as tea labour. On the other hand, in the context of the government's need for revenue, officials were quick to see opium's potential as a source of revenue. In the latter context, its use was constructed in a contrary way as an agent that could be used to 'stimulate' the industry of the 'indolent' Assamese. Opium in this case, could be termed to be a 'blessing'. As the District Commissioner of Assam reported to Mills in 1853,

"I have already adverted to the ease with which the Assamese can provide for their moderate wants, and their little inclination to exert themselves

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<sup>22</sup> Sinha (1995), in the context of Bengal, has illustrated just such a deployment of the demasculinising tropes of Orientalism.

further. It therefore becomes an object for consideration, as to what can be done to stimulate their industry, either through their present wants or other means. One want they have, and that amounting to a craving, which has hitherto been the bane of Assam, and which if it cannot be turned into a blessing, may at least be mitigated as an evil by using it as a stimulus to industry, this is, I need scarce say, the universal and excessive addiction of the Assamese to opium eating" (Mills 1984, 70).

The Colonial State's intervention in prohibiting the cultivation of poppy therefore in no way lessened the use of opium or 'stimulated industry'. In fact, the use of opium seems to have been widespread and had become an important source of government revenue. In 1864, the Commissioner of Assam reporting to the Board of Revenue "the financial result of excise administration of this province" recorded the increasing revenue from *abkaree*<sup>23</sup> opium from 1862. Net increase during the year of report was Rs.<sup>24</sup> 605,383 of which Rs. 592,057 was derived from *abkaree*" (Letter No. 331/2: 35, 36, ASA).

Even as colonial officials and planters 'ethnicized' and constructed the Assamese as unsuitable for plantation labour, they were aware that it was the material condition of Assam, where land was still abundant in relation to population, that kept people away from the hard and low paying work that was available in the tea plantations. In 1853, George Williamson, Superintendent of the Assam Company, wrote in his report to the secretary of the Company in Calcutta:

"The population of Assam is scanty and scattered over a large area of country, a great proportion of which is unoccupied. Land, being abundant, rent cheap, and the position of an independent cultivator easily attained, there is comparatively little necessity for the people of Assam to engage as labourers, and as such they are as a body, very inferior to Bengallees" (Williamson 1853 in Antrobus 1957, 483).

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<sup>23</sup> Opium imported by the government

<sup>24</sup> At the present rate, Rs 28 = \$1 Canadian.

But from Williamson's report itself, it becomes clear that the Assamese peasantry resisted to being constituted as 'coolie' labour.

In the context of colonial capitalism that relied on primary accumulation, the need for cheap labour was sought to be accomplished through exploiting the labour of a specific population constituted as 'coolie' in colonial documents. These were the populations that had been dispossessed by colonial restructuring to a degree that they had nothing but their labour to offer. Their labour in turn was secured through coercive contracts which did not offer a family wage and forced them to work on the plantations, mines and construction projects of the colonial governments (Prakash 1990; 1992; Bremen 1992; Potts 1990) (map 2). That the very constitution of such a class of labourers was dependent on the intersection of imperial politics with the local politics of particular colonized regions is clearly revealed in the comments made above by Williamson.

### **Indentured migration: Creating a labour force(d)**

In 1859, the planters' association was formed, and successfully pressured the colonial government to import labour. In 1863, the first Inland Immigration Act, Bengal Act III, was passed to control immigration inaugurating a violent phase in the plantations of Assam Valley (Behal 1983, 24; Griffiths 1967, 268). Justifying this piece of legislation as necessary to the fledgling tea industry, the colonial government helped organise and constitute a class of tea labour on the plantations of Assam Valley. Simultaneously, they assumed the contrary position of 'protector of labour' interest and took up a paternalistic role.

The colonial government intervened by instituting a series of enquiry commissions often followed by legislation. The government relied on European planters as those best informed and intelligent to advise them on the operation of the plantations. Often there were disagreements between government officials and planters, especially when the former felt that labour interests needed protection. But these disagreements did not amount to any significant divergence in their practices as the overdetermination of the category of labour by the ideologies of race, ethnicity, gender, class and caste worked against those that were constituted as labourers. Imperial politics and colonial capitalism worked in the interests of the planters and colonial state. The contradiction of colonial capitalism is illustrated in the comment made by the Commissioner of Assam in the report of the Tea Commission of 1869.

"I may here give expression to a reflection which has occurred to me in reading this Report of the Commissioners, that it is very remarkable that in having inspected a considerable number of gardens, and recorded the evidence of numerous gentlemen interested in Tea cultivation, they should have supposed they had done all that their subject required, so far as eliciting information went,.....that for their enquiry to be in any sense exhaustive, they should have addressed themselves to the systematic examination of some of the large class who, as coolies or labourers, have *their* interest in Tea cultivation as much as the 'gentlemen' have theirs. Among the imported labourers in the larger plantations, there are surely to be found shrewd intelligent men, whose statements and disclosures might have thrown a flood of light on many of the points the Commissioners were sent to investigate,...I wonder what would be said of the proceedings of a Commission of Inquiry to an English manufacturing town, where the relations between master and workmen had been troubled, if they closed without hearing what the workmen had to say for themselves". (Letter No. 5999 1869: 2)

In the colonial context of Assam Valley, the opinion of the 'coolie' or labourer was not considered. As a racialized, ethnicized and commoditized category, they were presumed to be ignorant (Kelly 1992; Bremen 1992), although gender bias granted a few exceptions of "shrewd and intelligent" men. While constituting the labour force on the plantation as contractual 'free wage labour', labourers were denied the rationality of capitalist wage workers by colonial agents who then justified state intervention.

The 'coolie' as a category of labour already had an existence. From about the 1830's, 'Indian' labour was being exported to British colonies around the world and also to colonies of other European powers. The majority went to work on plantations replacing slaves. Conditions on many of these plantations had not changed but the legal status of migrants did – they were exported under a contract as 'free' wage labour (Potts 1990, 66-70; Tinker 1974, xv). Constructed as 'coolies' in colonial documents, migrants represented those at the very bottom of the industrial labour market. Mostly adult males, they were drawn from among the most impoverished groups that had been displaced and disempowered by colonial restructuring. Many were from groups that had practised shifting agriculture and were outside the Hindu caste system, documented as 'tribals', others were from landless untouchable castes, or from low castes who had been bonded in relationships of servitude to particular landlords or small landholders, and were deeply indebted (Omvedt 1992, 202; Prakash 1990, 27, 31). They were a heterogeneous group and state supervision facilitated and made possible the constitution of the 'coolie'. The specificity of colonial migration was significant – specific groups of people from specific districts of specific provinces (Omvedt 1992, 187, 198; Tinker 1974, 2, 43, 47; Das Gupta 1994, 17, 81-82). It was the knowledge of this pool of 'coolie labour' that had led to the constant demand by

planters and state officials in Assam for the importation of labour from neighbouring provinces.

The creation of the labour force on the plantations of Assam Valley was not only a racialized process, but from the beginning a gendered and ethnicized one as well. Masculinized and rendered invisible as 'coolies' by the practices of the colonial state and the planters, females constituted an almost equal proportion of the labour force as males. In fact, females and children together constituted the majority of those migrating to the plantations from about the 1880's to 1910 (Annual Immigration Reports 1879: 16; 1880: 6,7; 1881: 9; 1884: 17, 18; 1887: 1,4; 1900: 6,7; 1904-05: 3, 1909-10: 2,3).

The proportion of children, i.e., those between the ages of 2 and 16, kept steadily increasing until by 1910, they constituted the majority of those immigrating and those on the plantations, up to 40% (Annual Immigration Reports 1879 to 1910, ASA). As females and children of lower caste/class groups that had always had a role in agriculture, they were sought as 'wage labourers'. The work on the plantations was 'naturalized' and defined by physiology. Males and females were recruited for different types of work. While males were sought for the 'harder' tasks of clearing forests and hoeing, women were sought for the 'lighter' task of plucking tea leaves (Bengallee, 1886, No. 40, 3). As early as 1839, C.A. Bruce reported from the experimental tea tracts of Upper Assam that tea plucking was not as easy as it looked, as it meant standing for hours in one position (Bruce 1839, 466).

The demand for labour in the plantations of Assam Valley was the demand for the cheapest, most exploitable labour, a demand that was met by state sponsored immigration of 'coolie labour'. The 'coolie' male was paid a wage



that made survival precarious; the 'coolie' female was paid an even lower wage and the 'coolie' child the lowest. From the government's own records, these rates were set at five rupees for the males, four rupees for females and three rupees for children per month and the government's own inspectors consistently found that actual payments made were much below these rates (RLI 1879-1910). In the same period local labourers continued to seek employment in the plantations and commanded higher rates than immigrant labour. In 1890, planters in passing remarked that "Kachari<sup>25</sup> coolies rates had dropped from seven rupees to six rupees" (ABITA, 66). In the 1884 report on operations in the district of Kamrup by Kachari and Bengali "free labourers", an official remarked that no returns were demanded from these gardens, "nor is it necessary to burden the district officers with the task of getting return from labour forces as these" (RLI 1884, 14, ASA). Clearly the colonial government was concerned to document only indentured immigrants.

Although the division of labour on the plantations was gendered and some tasks had come to be defined as men's work and others as women's work, and accordingly individual labourers were recruited, what the planters preferred was the migration of families. With this in mind, they often sent male labourers designated as *sardars*, or leaders, to recruit from amongst their kin and community. This practice of recruiting meant that female labourers were sought, but at the same time, they were not recognised as primary workers. This made for some contradictory practices that reveal the patriarchal biases of colonial agents and planters. Government officials fully supported the planters' efforts at recruiting through the *sardars*.

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<sup>25</sup> A group indigenous to Assam Valley.

Annual reports on immigration noted with satisfaction increasing '*sardari*' recruitment over 'contractors' recruitment and hoped the former, which they termed 'free immigration', would establish itself. In the report of 1881, the increase in the number of females over males relative to 'contractor' recruits and the increasing number of children the expectation was interpreted to mean that the "free immigration would render the existence of a special law unnecessary and that (eventually) immigration would establish itself" (RLI 1881, 1, ASA). Similar observations were made in 1884 on the increase in the number of females and children among the immigrants, which were seen as the success of *sardari* recruitment over contractors' operators. *Sardars* were seen as more influential in persuading females and children to migrate as they often belonged to the same community as those migrating (RLI 1884, 16, ASA). This type of recruitment was preferred by the planters "as he is sure of his lines being kept better, and his coolies being more contented and remaining longer on his garden than when labourers come up singly and have no family ties" (RLI 1884, 18, ASA). Such reasoning implied that female and children were not the primary workers, but were needed to support the husbands and fathers who came to work.

The demand for 'labour' on the plantations of Assam Valley led to a labour force being constituted primarily of females and children and a smaller proportion of males from lower caste/class groups from Chotanagpur, Santhal Parganas, Northwester Provinces, Bihar, Bengal and Orissa that had already been impoverished and displaced by colonial rule (RLI 1879 – 1910). The contradiction of constituting a labour force on the plantations of Assam valley was that imperial politics and colonial capitalism led to the recruitment of males, females and children from the most disempowered castes/classes in India, and constituted

them as 'coolie' labour. While individual contracts constituted the labourers as 'free wage labour', penal sanctions that were put in place allowed them to be tied down to the plantations as commodified 'labour units' (Kelly 1992). The force of colonial government behind this practice in Assam Valley is evident in a remark made by the District Commissioner of Sibsagar on the unsuitability of Act III of 1859 for Assam Valley because it would be fair only

"where employer is allowed the option of deciding whether he shall have his job completed or his more or less equivalent advance returned to him...but here a coolie is never allowed to refund a so called advance; the whole pound of flesh is rigorously exacted even when coolies offer to pay up" (RLI 1884, 23, ASA).

Advances that were made to labourers in times of distress were crucial in getting them to migrate to Assam Valley. Immigration reports, while reporting the migration of families, were fully aware of the distressed conditions under which these choices were made. In 1900 it was reported that 1896, 1897, 1900 being famine years, turned out to be beneficial for *sardari* immigration (RLI 1900, 6 ASA).

In 1901, the Assam Administrative Report (AAR) remarked that on the appearance of famine towards the end of 1899, large numbers of *sardars* were sent to their home districts by planters and their operations were largely successful. Also, the large number of children migrating indicated that the family emigration was satisfactory (AAR 1900, III, 99, ASA).

Although family immigration was encouraged, the plantation did not pay a 'family wage'. The usefulness of the family immigration was that planters were able to utilise women's and children's labour at cheap rates. While racialization and masculinization led to the females being constituted as 'labour units' and not as wives, gendered practices considered them 'dependants'. Their contracts

were always tied to that of a male relative or guardian, and they worked only because their males worked. Although the plantations became dependent on female labour, their labour was seen as supplementary to that of the males. While adult men were recruited as 'Act' labour, most females and all children were recruited as 'non-Act' labour, as 'dependants' of the male labour (RLI 1879, 24; 1881, 9; 1891, 5).

Following a visit to Assam by the Viceroy, Lord Curzon in 1900, and a suggestion that wages should be increased, planters argued in their annual general meeting that the Viceroy had overlooked 'family earnings'.

"The family, and not individual man, woman or child, is the wage earning unit. We are told that the average wage in Assam by Government statistics is much higher than we pay our coolies, this is not correct. It is true that the average rate of pay for the Assam Constable, the process server ... average Rs. 7 to Rs. 8 per mensem, their wives and children earning nothing, but can this be compared with tea garden earnings where the females and children are bread earners and can easily ... contribute ... to the family hoard" (ABITA 1900, 65, ASA).

While denying the labourers a family wage and employing them as individual workers, they were paid the lowest wages possible, but it was the 'family earnings' that were calculated to justify low wages.

During the early years of the tea industry, up to 1910, reproducing labour power on the plantations was dependent on steady immigration. Although females were recruited, and family immigration encouraged, females and children were of use only as 'labour units'. Family immigration did not mean that family members could accompany a worker as dependents. The wages paid to a labourer were not enough to support any dependents. Therefore although family immigration was encouraged, every member was under contract to work for their employer at a fixed wage. This enabled planters to employ women and children

at wages lower than the already low wages paid to male labourers. Given the extremely low wages that were paid, this proved more advantageous to planters who depended on the reproductive power of the females as producers of future labourers. Similarly children were useful as cheap labourers because they were paid only a fraction of adult wages. They were useful to the planters as labourers, not as a reserve force of future labourers. The existence of 'coolie lines', or the barrack style housing that were provided for labourers, attested to the harsh realities of the colonial plantations. While encouraging family immigration, planters denied them family wages, as well as family housing. The 'coolie lines' built from scratch were a reality for a racialized labour force, so that on coming across families that were housed in "detached houses, with verandas and gardens" in one garden, the government inspector reported that "a portion of the coolie lines was simply excellent" (RLI 1884, 42, ASA).

The racialized, ethnicized and gendered practices of the colonial state made possible the constitution of 'coolie' labour. Females of the dispossessed caste/class groups were employed along with males at lower wages. Masculinizing them as 'coolie' led to contradictory practices, because they were made to work as hard as the males under similar conditions but paid lower wages. Children of these groups were treated as adults and naturalized as labourers, while being paid a fraction of adult wages. Denied family wages and family housing, they were packed into barrack style housing called 'coolie lines'. But the practice of masculinization was often at odds with the patriarchal and heterosexual discourses of the colonial state. It was reported in 1897, for instance in regard to 'fraudulent and irregular' recruitment that inspectors ought to be especially vigilant in the cases of "young women or young persons who come unaccompanied by relatives, and who seem hardly capable of looking after

themselves" (RLI 1897, 11, ASA). Single females who held contracts independent of male relatives were constructed as of "loose character" or "bad character" (RLI 1891, 9, 10: ASA). Gendered practices while utilizing the cheaper labour of females, at the same time condemned single women unaccompanied by males as a moral threat (Stoler 1985).

The extremely low wages paid and the harsh conditions of work made for a hard life on the plantations. Annual reports continued to document the high rates of mortality and low birth rates, often lower than the general Indian population among the plantation labour force (RLI 1881, 19; 1897, 30; AAR 1901, 104; 1899; 1900). But these were constructed in ethnic or gendered terms even as colonial officials reported the extremely harsh conditions on the plantations. In the report of 1897, it was stated that the "special conditions of life obtaining among the labouring population" was responsible for the low birth rate (RLI 1897, 30, ASA). While citing hard work, change of climate, food and abortions, the report went on to comment that "single women too frequently refrain from settling down finally with one man till they have been for some time on the garden, and it is an ascertained fact that there is seldom any offspring from temporary and irregular unions" (*Ibid.*). The District Commissioner of Lakhimpur in 1900, thanks the Superintendent of Police for his insight in explaining low birth rates in the district, attributing it to the "the laxity or entire absence of the marriage tie among coolies. A woman is proud of bearing a son to her lawful husband, but if she is only a man's mistress, she finds a child no father owns, an encumbrance" (RLI 1900, 11, ASA).

High rates of mortality were continually blamed on bad batches of 'coolies'. The report of 1884 commenting on the closing of a number of gardens in the Darrang district due to high mortality, commented that the operations were

closed to “low caste Bhuias, Muchis and Kahars” who had skewed the death rate by succumbing to “their filthy habits” (RLI 1884, 39, ASA). The Chief Commissioner blamed bad recruitment and insufficient wages as the primary reasons for the deaths. (RLI 1900, 16, 19, ASA) The high mortality rates for children were blamed on their being neglected by their mothers (RLI 1884, 30). Similarly, the inspector reporting the heavy mortality in Dulahat T.E. in Lakhimpur district commented, “I found *Telis*<sup>26</sup>, *Napits*<sup>27</sup>, *Halwais*<sup>28</sup>, Mohammedans, and others sent up as Gonds<sup>29</sup>” (RLI 1900, 18). In the case of Tingalibari T.E., in the Sibsagar district, the heavy mortality was attributed to “inferior coolies” from Calcutta slums when “first class coolies were ordered” (RLI 1900, 16, ASA). In the case of Amguri T.E. in Sibsagar district, described as one of the “best managed gardens in the district”, the heavy mortality was attributed to an “unsuitable class of labourers” (RLI 1900, 17).

The Lt. Governor’s remarks of 1869 revealed that government officials were well aware of the hardships under which the labour force was migrating and which in turn made them exploitable. But such exploitation was rationalized as part of the growing pains of a fledgling industry (Letter No. 5999, 1869, ASA). Remarks such as the above made by senior agents of the colonial government clearly point to the support that the European planters, and those with interests in tea, had from the colonial state whose power was behind them. This enabled them to avail themselves of the cheapest labour possible. But the very high rates of mortality of men, women and children could not be ignored by the colonial administrators or planters. On occasion the government exercised its paternalistic role by closing down gardens as “unfit for human habitation.” But

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<sup>26</sup> Telis – caste of oil pressers

<sup>27</sup> Napits – caste of barbers

<sup>28</sup> Halwais – caste of sweet makers, all placed low on the caste hierarchy

<sup>29</sup> Gonds were ‘tribals’ from the Central Province

closures in their opinion were the exception, in spite of the fact that by their own estimates almost half had died. More often these deaths were attributed to "bad batches of coolies" or "unhealthiness" of a particular garden. What was meant by "unhealthy" garden was not explained, but apparently these were gardens where even the hardiest 'coolies' could not survive (Letter No. 178T: 1871, 15, ASA). The Lt. Governor referring to one such garden, the Panka Tea Estate, where in 1869 the death rate had been calculated at 35.87%, remarked in 1871,

"... a penal law ought not to .. be enforced against a man to make him remain in a very unhealthy garden where the mortality is 8 or 10% per annum. But the law only provides that, when a garden is declared by a committee to be "unfit for human habitation", it shall be closed for the execution of contracts of labour. That is a most indefinite phrase, in as much as some classes of men, e.g., men of jungle tribes, may be able to live at a garden, or some may be tempted by higher wages to take an excessive risk, and yet the garden may involve a most unfair risk to a man who engaged at Rs. 5 per month, with no knowledge that he was going to a specially unhealthy garden". (*Ibid.*)

But such observations were rare, as there was enormous pressure from the planters to keep the gardens running and more often such decisions were determined by politics.

Reporting on another garden, Diffloo, that was being investigated for high mortality, a committee constituted of European planters and an Indian medical officer and district officials, remarked "the high rate of mortality at this garden is to be found in the very inferior class of coolies imported, and the unhealthiness of the seasons in which they arrived, and that this garden is fit for human habitation" (Letter No. 35J: 1870, 2, ASA). The investigative committee apparently experienced some difficulty as the manager was unable to provide them with records of statistics of previous years. Their conclusions were drawn from a list of questions that was put to the manager. It is significant that one of the questions



asked was "What was the castes of coolies?" (*Ibid.*). It clearly indicates to a grasp of local hierarchies by colonial agents, which were then used to their advantage, in their day to day administration.

That ethnicization was the basis of colonial migration to Assam Valley is clearly revealed from a correspondence between a Calcutta managing agency for tea companies, Messrs Schoene, Kilburn and Company. That Orientalism is implicated in local politics is indicated in the reply that this agency sent in 1872, to the Secretary, Government of Bengal State.

"... to acknowledge receipt of your letter, ... calling for an expression of opinion as to the fitness of "up-country" coolies for employment in the Assam tea gardens as distinguished from *dhangurs*<sup>30</sup> we give it as our opinion that of the two classes of people alluded to, *dhangurs* are the most preferred and the "up-country" men should be avoided, if sufficient numbers of the former class can be procured to meet the demand for labourers for tea gardens. ... First – because the *dhangurs* keep better health at the gardens than the "up-country" men. Secondly – because the *dhangurs* are more tractable and better to deal with than the "up-country" people. The latter as a rule are much more troublesome, and by no means such good workers" (Messrs. Schoene Kilburn and Company, 1872).

The above exchange leaves little doubt that labourers were sought from among those that had the least power to resist. In this, planters, state officials, contractors and middlemen colluded to recruit from amongst groups that had the least bargaining power. The contradiction of 'contractual wage labour' in the colonial context was the use of state power to bolster the constant 'demand for labour' from planters. The collusion of Indian middlemen was crucial to this practice.

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<sup>30</sup> The people most preferred by the planters were the 'tribals' from Chotanagpur and the Santhal Parganas, who also constituted a large proportion of the indentured migration overseas. They were often referred to as 'junglis' or 'Dhangurs', the latter term meaning 'adult' in one of their languages.

The use of native middlemen to procure labour was endorsed by the Commissioner in 1869, when suggesting that private recruiting was preferable to the central system. This was seen as a better alternative to the contractor system where professionals who had come to be known as 'coolie catchers' scouted the regions looking for recruits who they could bind with a contract. The remarks made by the Lt. Governor brings out why the contract and continued government intervention was favoured.

"Private recruiting is, ... infinitely to be preferred to the present mode of obtaining labour, and deserves the utmost encouragement. But I venture to differ with the Commissioners in regard to their wish to exempt the labourers thus obtained from appearing before the Registering Officer, that is to say the Civil Surgeon of the District in which the recruiting takes place. I think that the Commissioners expect greater honesty on the part of garden sirdars than would be found to possess. They are by no means a scrupulous class, and could not be trusted, to recruit only robust healthy men, even supposing them to be capable of judging who are so and who are the reverse ... I also think that the labourers so obtained should be engaged under contract to the employ of the sirdar, otherwise I cannot see wherein would be the advantage to the Planter of the system spoken of; indeed, I do not think that Planter would recruit on any other terms. They must have a stronger hold on their imported labourers than their honour or good will". (Letter No. 5999, 1869, 6, ASA)

The colonial state, in colluding with planters to arm them with the power to control their labour force, brought down the harshest of racist regimes on the plantations of Assam Valley. The penal laws of 1865 had literally made the planters the sole authority on their estates and over their labour force. This was not totally lost on the government officials whose paternalistic concerns sometimes took over. Anxious not to court the displeasure of the planting interests, they did little to alleviate the status quo. The Lt. Governor of Assam in 1869 commenting on the Commissioner's refusal to change the "cancelment of contract for arrears of pay", quotes the Commissioner of Assam,

"I would go even further ... and reduce to two months the terms of which, if the wages of the labourers are in arrears, the contract may be cancelled by the Magistrate on the application of the labourer. The cruelty of leaving a cooly in arrears and the privation and misery he suffers in consequence, are often very great. I think there are on record death from want and starvation from this cause. As a general rule, it is certain that the injury a master does to his cooly by leaving him in arrears is greater than a cooly does his master in deserting him from his services. It is at most a question of 'dividends' on the one side, but on the other, it may be one of life and death; and an equal law and a just appreciation of the rights of the labourer, if it sent him to jail for desertion, most assuredly send his master to jail too for not paying him, unless his master could show that non-payment depended upon some accident altogether beyond his control." (Letter 5999, 15, ASA)

While government officials debated on the 'just application of the law' and 'rights of the labourer', it was the 'logic' of colonial capitalism that did not allow laws to be applied equally, where the 'coolie' had been commodified as a 'labour unit' (Kelly 1992). By constituting the most disempowered groups of people as 'coolie' labour on the plantations of Assam Valley, as contractual wage labourers, penal sanctions at the same time made any breach of a civil contract criminally punishable. The only way out of the contract for the labourer was to 'desert'. Colonial officials tried to rationalize the situation. The Lt. Governor, in 1869, referring to the "vexed question of punishment for desertion and the cancelment of contract" remarked that he was not totally against the idea of criminal punishment for "wilful breaches of civil contract", or even a second or third breach, but he admitted that his sense of justice was conflicted in enforcing such a law against those "who have not knowingly contracted" (Letter No. 5999, 16, ASA).

Racialization of the labour force meant that planters were always in a position of strength in relation to the government, which looked on the planters'

'aberrations' benignly, and justified these as the cost of the 'modernizing process'. The report of 1899 did not differ from earlier ones when it reported that the relation between "employers and the labourers seem to be fairly good". It reported cases of "new managers being mobbed by their coolies on account of some change in method of work or pay". 'Coolies' were constructed as 'naturally' conservative who "strongly resist any change in the system of working in the garden" (RLI 1899, ASA). This, further points to the construction of the 'coolie' as lacking a capitalist rationality, which in turn justified the force that was unleashed on them. The report however viewed the system as self-regulating so that extreme harshness on the planter's part would be checked by the resistance mounted by the 'labourers'. It stated,

"The Chief Commissioner is not so sanguine as to look forward to the days when young Englishmen will altogether abandon the regrettable habit of giving a cuff or even a kick or a blow with a cane to natives of the labourer classes, but this habit among Tea Planters is undoubtedly on the wane, and is probably less common among them than other members of the European community, for their action is tempered by self interest, which enjoins both prudence and patience in dealing with their employees" (RLI 1899, ASA).

It was the government's penal sanctions that regulated the labour force and checked labour resistance. That the planter's physical violence was backed by the colonial state was all too apparent. When cases of ill treatment or resistance were reported, government justified this as a 'natural' and unavoidable consequence of carrying a large operation. In the 1899 report, the Chief Commissioner argued,

“With about 900 gardens employing upwards of 323,000 hands, there must, of course, be a certain proportion of even thoroughly depraved men, both among the employers and among the coolies. There must be a certain amount of harshness and cruelty, on one side, and of turbulence, conspiracies and maliciously concocted charges on the other. This unfortunately is human nature, as displayed among all classes of men, and happily we have criminal courts strong enough to deal with them” (RLI 1899, 42, ASA).

Criminal courts in Assam Valley were kept busy prosecuting ‘absconders’, ‘deserters’, ‘assaults’, ‘conspiracies’ – the acts and actors of resistance. And yet the Chief Commissioner’s view was that the balance of “justice in Assam is not unfairly held”, though by his own admission, “there is a tendency too often to minimise the gravity of an offence when a European is the aggressor” (*Ibid.*) Such a benign view of the judicial system was possible only because of the racialization of the labour force. The power of conquest, the very basis of the colonial state enabled the imposition of a legal system that was directed to creating a labour force on the plantations of Assam Valley, by more often than not acquiescing to the demands of the planters. Government officials continued to rationalize the fairness of their practices by justifying these in Orientalist terms as part of their ‘modernizing’ mission, which they claim to be beneficial to all.

Debating the popularity of Act I of 1882, in the annual report of immigration in 1897, it was stated that it was ‘misleading’ to refer to the Act,

“as though the advantages it conferred were all on the side of the planter. The elaborate provision for the protection of the coolie that are stringently enforced are ignored, and attention is only directed to the fact that a coolie who declines to fulfil his contract without due cause is liable to imprisonment” (RLI 1897, 29 ASA).

But the contradiction of colonial capitalism was that racialization of the labour force did not afford any ‘protection’ to the labourers. This is clearly brought out in the same report wherein it is stated that,

"It is true that the Act confers upon employers the right of arresting without a warrant absconding coolies, subject to certain restrictions, but it is more than doubtful whether the abolition of the Act would put a stop to this practice, which is after all exercised in its avowed form to a very limited extent". (*Ibid.*).

If racialization allowed planter power to be viewed benignly, it disempowered labourers who were judged unable to know and act in their own interests, and made them vulnerable to the paternalistic administration of the colonial state. The annual report of 1884, reporting on the same act, i.e., Act I of 1882 stated, "It is unnecessary to consider the labourer's possible view of the question, if they were able of entertaining one and expressing it" (RLI 1884, 3, ASA). In the view of the paternalistic state, labourers were also beneficiaries of the newly established tea industry and should have no cause for complaints. In the report of 1884, it was considered that labourers had "ready access to courts and judging from the few complaints that have come ...", it was clear that they had no cause for grumbling". (*Ibid.* 4)

While the legal practices of the colonial state disempowered labourers on the plantations of Assam Valley, government officials were of the view that "the condition of the immigrant labourers on tea estates in Assam is far preferable to what it would have been if they had remained in their native districts". The report of 1897 further reported that "in the years 1896 and 1897, many thousands of human beings have, through the instrumentality of the tea industry, been rescued from destitution, and afforded a favourable opportunity of making a fresh start in life" (RLI 1897, 51, ASA). Thus it was that capitalist enterprise in Assam Valley came to be rationalized as "great relief works" in rehabilitating "coolies (that) came up from famine districts in unprecedented numbers with their constituencies enfeebled by want and their power of resisting disease seriously impaired" (*Ibid.*). The report of 1897 in deploring the higher death rates than

1892, considered it “to be expected” (RLI 1897, 31). The ‘modernizing’ mission rationalized the harshest racial regime on the plantations of Assam Valley. The racialized category of ‘coolie’ justified the practices of the colonial state. Inspectors, year after year continued to find nothing unusual about the conditions of plantation life characterized by high rates of mortality, disease and ‘desertion’. The ‘coolie lines’ that were made for the labourers on the plantations, i.e., rows of rooms where large numbers of males, females and children were forced to reside, without any sanitation or drinking water arrangements, continued to be reported as ‘good’ or even ‘excellent’. The inspection of a garden, Cinnamara, where there was drinking water and good construction of ‘coolie lines’ was described by the inspector as having “all that a coolie’s soul can covet” (RLI 1884, 42, ASA). Even in the closing decades of the nineteenth century when annual reports recorded increasing cases of labour resistance, the same reports continued to treat these incidents as insignificant. It was reported in the annual report of 1884, where the District Commissioner of Sibsagar district explained the high rate of desertions thus, “I know no instance where desertion was due to harsh treatment ...(it is) due to personal and private reasons” (RLI 1884, 28, ASA). The report of 1899 also recorded Sibsagar district, among others, as having one of the highest rates of ‘disturbances’ among employers and labourers. But the general comment of the report was that the “majority of these disturbances were, however, very trivial, and affords no indication of the existence of any general dissatisfaction of the coolies with their managers, relations between whom were on the same good footing as in previous years” (RLI 1899, 41, ASA).

Racialization of the labour force in the colonial context of Assam Valley enabled the hegemonic creation of a ‘coolie’ labour force on the plantations.

Government officials treated evidence of harsh conditions on plantations as 'aberrations' and 'irregularities' of some planters, because the racialized 'coolie' was seen as a 'commodity' that was part of the cost of establishing a tea industry, not as a human being. And although there were contradictions that arose from the government's role as the 'protector' of labourers' rights, the racialization of the labour force more often than not put planters and government officials on the same side containing labourers' resistance. Reporting a case that was settled in favour of Mr. Wilcox of Singrimari Tea Estate in Darrang district, Mr. Melitus the Commissioner reported that the three month imprisonment of the 'coolie' prosecuted with threatened but not actual assault was not harsh at all because,

"As between man and man I should consider the sentence excessive, but as between the manager of a garden and his coolies, I am not prepared to say that it is excessive" (AAR 1901, 109, ASA).

As the above comments clarify, the racialized construction of the 'coolie' had resulted in a class of labourers who were commodified. They were constructed as ignorant of their own interests. While checking their resistance, the colonial government, at the same time, assumed a paternalistic role as the agency that knew best what was in the interest of the 'coolie'.

### **'Modernizing' effects of tea? The nationalist elites and anti-colonial struggle**

By the 1880's the role of the tea industry in 'modernizing' Assam had a hegemonic hold over many Indians, especially among the elites. The Assamese elite, many of whom were the beneficiaries of wasteland grants, expressed their belief that British rule and the tea industry had propelled the region towards 'progress'. These elite, who nurtured a nascent Assamese nationalism, were firm



supporters of the migration of people into Assam, who they believed prospered in their 'new jobs and homeland'. An article published in 1885, "Our people", in one of the early literary magazines to be published in Assamese, "*Axom Bandhu*" or "Friend of Assam" stated that,

"British rule has improved the roads and waterways of the land, facilitating communication ... The tea industry, trade and commerce have also contributed greatly to the well being of the land. Tea gardens have led to the creation of a number of government departments paving the way for earning revenue for the land and also for trade and commerce. That is the reason people from outside are coming here in hordes. Although some go back, many continue to live here. This has contributed to an increasing population" (*Axom Bandhu* 1885, 132, translated).

The admiration and support that is expressed in the above passage for the material 'progress' that British rule had brought to Assam is clear. Roads, waterways, the tea industry and commerce were signs of material and economic development that would 'modernize' Assam. Such developments, therefore, in the author's view could only be beneficial to the region and its 'people'.

The literary magazine *Axom Bandhu* was published by a group of middle-class Assamese men led by Gunabhiram Barua, a social reformer, government servant and reformer. The Assamese middle class was strongly influenced by nationalist developments in Bengal that took place in the context of British domination, but was at the same time conscious of the domination of Bengali in Assam which they resisted. The political domination of Assam by the British had brought a strong Bengali presence to the region from 1826. This was the result of imposition of Bengali as the language of the courts and of education in Assam. These developments brought an influx of Bengalis seeking to fill the middle

ranking positions in the bureaucracy as well as the positions of teachers in the educational institutions of Assam. This marginalized and kept the local population of Assam from these positions in the early years of British rule. But a struggle to reinstate the Assamese language and to have its independent status recognized, had been mounted almost simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> This led the British government to recognize the independent status of Assamese in 1871, but Bengali continued to function alongside Assamese in the administration. Most of the Assamese middle-class in the late eighteenth century had their higher education in Bengali, as there were no institutions of higher education established in Assam until much later. Influenced by developments in Bengali nationalist circles, as well as the developments in Assam, the middle-class saw its role in nurturing a modern Assamese language that would mediate nationalist developments in Assam (Guha 1977, 56-57).

It is in the above context that the role of Gunabhiram Barua and his colleagues, the publishers of *Axom Bandhu*, may be placed. The article in *Axom Bandhu*, which I quoted above, is addressed to 'our people', that is to the Assamese speaking population of Assam Valley, whose claim to the province of Assam is implicitly stated. The support of the Assamese middle class for immigration and increasing population was extended in the belief that this would contribute to the material progress of Assam. Many of these Assamese men were beneficiaries of the 'modernizing project' in Assam, through the

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<sup>31</sup> This struggle for the Assamese language was supported by the Western missionaries in Assam, especially the American Baptists, who were instrumental in publishing the first Assamese magazine *Arunodoi* in 1846, as well as the first history of Assam, or *Axom Buronji* (Guha 1977, 1991; Barua and Bhattacharjee 1983).

redistribution of landed properties, appointment to government positions, and expansion of commerce (Guha 1977). Like the Bengali nationalists of the time, they too may be seen to support the Western style 'progress' and 'development' in the material aspects, but this did not extend to the spiritual or inner life of Indians where the superiority of 'Indian' and 'Hindu' culture was maintained. This dichotomy of material/spiritual, outer/inner, masculine/feminine constituted nationalist discourse in Bengal (Chatterjee 1987). The Assamese elite, constituted as they were of middle-class and caste Hindus<sup>32</sup>, also demarcated the material and spiritual aspects of their culture which is clear from the discourse in their writings. In the same article, 'our people', it is further stated,

"Agriculture is preponderant in our land, so that people from castes like *Dhoba*(washerman), *Napit*(barbers), *Chamars*(leatherworkers), *Komars*(ironworkers), *Kumar*(potters) leave their professions and become cultivators." ... "Such people can be brought into the land only through migration." ... "The type of people needed to labour in the tea industry and railways cannot be raised here. These have also to be brought in from outside. Those who need these labourers have enough wealth. People migrate only because they are able to earn a good living, otherwise people would not do so. ... In our land, people like ... coolies earn twice as much a month as they would in their native places" (*Axom Bandhu* 1885, 132, 134. Translated from Assamese).

The author reveals his awareness of the fluidity of caste in Assam, where almost every group had access to arable lands, which tended to provide their subsistence needs. Individuals from service castes did not have to depend on their caste occupations for their livelihood. This made regulations of caste norms in the case of Assam harder. The subsistence economy also made it harder to tie down Assamese peasants to plantations as permanent labourers at low wages.

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<sup>32</sup> As opposed to outcastes.

Therefore the constant 'demand' for labour was maintained. The author's opinion that the type of labour needed for plantation work had to be imported was made in the context of existing social relations in Assam, as he remarked that only those who benefited from working in the plantations would do so. Such was the case of 'coolies', who were constituted of the lower castes, and had a better chance of improving their condition in Assam. In supporting this view, the author also constructed some castes as naturally suited for labour on the plantations of Assam Valley.

While in the late nineteenth century, the migration of tea labour was viewed positively by the Assamese elite, the initial concerns about labourers' conditions were raised by Bengali nationalists and social reformers. Although drawing attention to the harsh conditions the immigrant labourers were working in the plantations, the Bengalis too did not view the tea planters and the tea plantations negatively. They supported the 'modernizing' role that the tea industry had in 'opening up' Assam and providing 'employment' to a large number of people. What they objected to was that the labourers were not treated like wage labourers in a modern industry. In a series of articles published in the journal *Bengallee*, an English language publication that was circulated by the Bengali nationalists and social reformers in Calcutta, the plight of plantation workers in Assam was brought to the public's attention. The following passage is quoted from one of these articles,

"Tea cultivation in Assam is a grand industry, and it has largely contributed to the material prosperity of the province. It has converted a vast wilderness into a prosperous and smiling garden; it has opened out means

of communications with the far interiors of the country; it has increased the population and has added to the wealth of the province by giving employment to nearly 3 lacs of emigrants, including their children. If in securing all hardships, as were not beyond human endurance, we would not probably have raised our voice. But the position of the labourers in many tea gardens is almost as bad, if it is not worse than the condition of the American Negro slaves before their emancipation. We should consider our conduct as perfectly indefensible, if in consideration of the increased material prosperity of the province we did not make an earnest effort to raise the coolies from their present miserable conditions" (Bengalee, No.39 1886, 1).

There was clearly no dispute between the Bengali nationalists and British officials that the 'vast wilderness' of Assam was being converted to a prosperous tea garden, or the fact that migration was adding to the population of the region, and thereby to its wealth, or that it was providing employment to the poorest among the population. But the treatment of these migrants like 'slaves' and not wage labourers was what in the author's opinion seemed to be the contradiction. How was this treatment possible by a government that claimed to adhere to liberal principles? The author endeavoured to demonstrate the contradiction of colonial government not living up to its liberal principles.

As Dwarkanath Ganguli, a committed social reformer and author of the article explained, his articles were not written for political gain but to appeal to "the deepest feelings of the Christian and of the philanthropist; and to them we appeal for help and sympathy in this work" (An appeal by the Indian Association in the Bengalee 1886). The tone of the articles was very much in keeping with the nationalist discourse that was shaping up in Bengal among the elite. Once again in keeping with the distinction of public/private and material/spiritual, the focus now was on the public or material aspect of colonial rule. In this domain the

task of nationalism was to insist on extension of liberal principles to Indians as well. At a time when slavery had been abolished in 1843 by the legislation of the government itself, that slave-like conditions should prevail, not unlike those endured by American slaves in plantations, appalled the nationalist and reformist sentiments of the elites. While they brought the attention of the labourers' conditions to the public, they simultaneously constructed the labourers' illiteracy as ignorance and inability to understand the contractual agreements. In doing so, they reproduced the Orientalism of the colonizers that equated literacy with 'civilization' and 'modernity' (Skaria 1996). Ganguli wrote,

"These immigrants as a rule were recruited from the lowest and most ignorant class of the people. The recruiters do not always deal fairly with the lowest class of emigrants... It is doubtful whether these emigrants who come willingly understand the real nature of their contract" (Bengallee 1886: 2).

After giving a detailed description of the way the contract was drawn under duress or used to bind the labour in the depot where they were brought in batches, Ganguli expressed his concern that the 'simple minded' people remain unaware of conditions that await them on the plantations.

"He thinks that he is going to Indra's<sup>33</sup> Paradise where many a blessing and many a comfort eagerly await him. Alas! ... He rises from a dream; the enchantment has left him; when too late he curses the unhappy fate which has torn him away from home and brought him to Assam" (Bengallee 1886: 5).

By representing the illiteracy of the labourers as their ignorance and lack of intelligence, middle-class nationalists denied the labourers agency and

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<sup>33</sup> In Hindu Mythology, Indra is the king of the gods.

portrayed them as victims of manipulative middle-men, and of some depraved planters. Of the latter he remarked, "It is far from our intention to affirm that the tea planters in Assam are all bad men; on the contrary we are prepared freely to admit that there are some very good men among them who treat their employees with due consideration" (Bengalee 1886, 1).

Even as Ganguli cited instances to illustrate the enormous power of government and planters, which resulted in the labourers' miserable plight, he believed that 'coolies' were unable to know how to escape.

"Very few coolies have sufficient intelligence to be able to escape from their (planters') acts, and the majority of them must therefore live in bondage for life and curse the cruel fate that had reduced them to such a state" (Bengalee 1887, No. 11: 173).

Nationalists, guided by paternalistic reformist concerns, appealed to planters who call themselves 'Christians' and to a 'Christian' government to better the condition of 'coolies' (Bengalee 1886, No. 43, 18-19).

The paternalistic concerns of the middle-class/caste elites are especially revealed in the gendered nature of their nationalist and reformist discourse. Ganguli's description of "child life in the tea garden" draws attention to the high rates of infant mortality and inability of 'coolie' women to take care of their children. He wrote,

"That the earnings of tea-garden labourer are most miserably inadequate, ... that husband and wife working together all year round cannot save such a small amount that would help the wife to stay some months at home after her confinement and look after her infant child" (Bengalee, No 43, 19).

Here the female labourers are constructed by middle-class norms of the private sphere as well as dominant heterosexual norms. For female labourers who did not have the leisure or a private sphere, their construction not as workers, but as 'dependents', and as wives who should be able to take time off to look after their infants, was contradictory to their status on the plantations. The female labourers were also constructed as the primary caregivers of children. Of women who chose abortion through midwives, Ganguli remarked "all coolies are not poor, because some are able to procure abortion by handsomely paying the *dais*<sup>34</sup>" (Bengallee 1886, No. 43, 15). In these latter instances, he expresses shock at the "stoic indifference of planters" and the "unchristian attitudes" of the doctors reporting these high rates of mortality (*Ibid.*). Such criticism reveals the Orientalism that constituted the Indian elite. Their reformist tendencies were firmly rooted in their Orientalism, which they now employed to question the validity of the British government, which had brought Western education to the Indians. As Ganguli put it,

"In these days of enlightenment and civilisation, we have societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals established by the public and helped and patronised by the Government. Does not humanity demand that our benevolence should be stirred, even in a more passionate degree for the benefit of suffering children in the tea-gardens?" (Bengallee 1886, Vol. 43: 19)

Thus nationalist anti-colonial practice demanded the same standard of 'enlightened modernity' for India in the public sphere through its criticism of the harshness of the plantation regime. Even as reformist concerns guided the

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<sup>34</sup> Midwives.



author of the articles in the *Bengallee* to bring to the public's notice the harsh conditions of the plantation life, especially as he constructed the labourers as 'ignorant' to do so themselves, he was not unaware that labourers might have resisted, if not in an organized manner, then at least individually. In fact, he cites that from personal enquiries in tea gardens, it was evident that relations between planters and their employees was not as 'satisfactory' as was reported in the immigration reports, which often neglected cases where labour was the defendant. And until more of these cases were documented, the state of relations between the two would be misrepresented (*Bengallee* 1886: 3). But in bringing such cases to the public's notice, elite discourses were marked by their class, caste and gendered norms, which often served to contain the agency of the very same people they tried to represent.

The 'demand for labour' in Assam during the initial decades of the tea industry (1826-1910) was deeply implicated in imperial politics of consolidating colonial rule in Assam and in the competition of colonial capitalism with China. The politics of race, class, ethnicity and gender was at the heart of the Orientalist project that set out to 'modernize' Assam, and constituted a group of impoverished people from the lower caste/class groups as 'tea labour' in Assam Valley. In the next chapter I turn to this group of people, especially the females who came to be constituted as tea pickers in order to explore their 'everyday lives' on the plantations of Assam Valley.

### **CHAPTER III**

## **Surviving on the Colonial Plantation: Engendering Resistance and Everyday Social Relations on the Plantations of Assam Valley – 1863- 1910**

In this chapter I explore the everyday lives of women in the colonial plantations of Assam Valley (1863 – 1910), in the context of the larger processes and practices of producing labour in the plantations of Assam Valley I discussed in Chapter 1. I am interested to explore how the women on the plantations gave meaning to their 'everyday lives' as they struggled under indenture laws, located as they were at the bottom of the plantation structure. In my analysis I draw on feminist scholarship that emphasises women's agency even under the most constrained situations in order to avoid rendering women as passive victims (Mohanty 1991). At the same time I recognise the need to understand their agency in relation to their location at the intersection of dominant and hegemonic practices so that I guard against a romantic view of resistance (Abu-Lughod 1990).

There are no sources that have been left exclusively by these women, but they appear in the accounts left by the dominant - in government documents, planters' memoirs, and the hegemonic writings of anti-colonial nationalist elites. Female labourers appear here in the discourses of these 'official' groups. By reading against the grain of these accounts, as well as interpreting silences and omissions, I attempt to interpret patterns of women's 'everyday lives' that emerge through these accounts. There is another source that I use here: the oral

traditions of the tea labour community that have been passed down in the form of folksongs called *Jhumurgeet*. Sung by the women along with the other members of the community, though not exclusively produced by them, these constitute the collective tradition of the community. These I take as 'historical memories' of the community (Tosh 1984; Irwin 1981; Vansina 1985). However, as collective 'memories' that are performed, they are open to changes in interpretation and offer a direct link to the present. Because only that which is significant to the community is remembered (Vansina 1985; Popular Memory Group 1982; Portelli 1991), so in this sense it is the significance of these accounts that is important. In relation to the documentary sources I understand this body of oral traditions as a subordinate, oppositional, as well as hegemonic practice<sup>35</sup> of the tea community that will provide insight into the everyday social relations of the community in the past as well as the present.

### **Migrating to a better life? Work and survival on the colonial plantations**

The annual immigration reports of tea labour into Assam Valley from the 1860's, document the migration of female tea pickers from Santhal Parganas, Chotanagpur, Northwest Province, Bengal and Orissa into the plantations of Assam Valley (RLI 1879 to 1910). They also make the connection between famine years in the above mentioned regions that caused large numbers of females and children from impoverished families of lower castes/classes to migrate (RLI 1884, 97, 1900). Female labourers constituted approximately half or

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<sup>35</sup> I borrow this idea from Leela Fernandes 1997.

fifty percent of the indentured labour force and women and children together outnumbered the male labourers by late nineteenth century (RLI 1879 – 1910).

The hegemonic view of the times that Assam was a 'land of promise' seems to have been prevalent in the recruiting districts. This is clearly evoked in a *Jhumurgeet* that is sung on the plantations of Upper Assam even today.

1. *Assam desher chah pat,  
Pani bolibar mitha,  
Chal, sakhi, chal jabo,  
Bagane tulbar pata anand mane.*  
(Sengupta and Sharma 1990, 217)

Assam, the land of tea leaves,  
We hear, has sweet water,  
Come along, friend (feminine), let us go  
To the gardens to pick leaves, free of care.

What is most significant about this folksong is that it evokes a time before migration to Assam, and the main sentiment that is expressed is the hope of being employed as tea pickers on the plantations of Assam Valley. The singers express hope that their lives would be much better in Assam as tea pickers, that their existing troubles would disappear in a land that beckoned with promise of a better future. The verse also establishes the centrality of women's work as tea pickers – they would come to Assam to work as tea pickers on the plantations. As historical memory, it keeps alive the moment of migration, the moment that changed the immigrants' lives, the moment they became tea pickers. Tea garden community singers today, recognize the central role of women as workers, that is, tea pickers in the community. And they establish their agency as workers, thereby denaturalising their position on the plantations as tea pickers by nature.

Yet what is most striking about the colonial immigration reports is the construction of the tea pickers as supplementary workers and as dependent migrants, that is, dependent on male relatives. Although it was women who were sought as cheap labour for plucking tea leaves, planters and government officials did not recognize women as primary workers. Their constant preference was expressed for *Sardari* recruitment over recruiting through professional contractors. *Sardars* or labour leaders from the gardens were sent to recruit in their home districts and given incentives to bring as many "whole families" as they could (RLI 1884, 1897, 1900). This meant the plantation regime did not support dependents and did not pay a family wage, so that except for those under the category of infants, which is below two years, every individual was a potential labourer. Their wages fixed at five rupees for men, four rupees for women and three rupees for children (RLI 1879 to 1910). Constructed as 'coolie family', every member was constituted as a labourer. It is noted in the report of 1884 that a 'coolie family' would always be able to support itself by wages that were earned by "a man, his wife and one child" (RLI 1884, 5, ASA). Even women of classes/castes that did not work in productive labour outside homes, went to the plantations as dependents, and found themselves among the pluckers on the plantations, put to the task of plucking. These cases were usually brought to the notice of the public by middle class/caste nationalists who pressured the government to take action by providing 'protection' against 'fraudulent' practices. They published cases to provide evidence of the occurrence of such practices.

In 1886, the journal *Bengallee* cited the case of two *Rajput*<sup>36</sup> brothers, who travelled from the district of Hazaribagh in Bihar with their aged mother and a widowed sister and eighteen 'coolies' to the Mechaijan Tea Estate in the district of Dibrugarh. They had apparently been promised *Sardarship* in the gardens as a reward for recruiting 'coolies'. But on arrival at the garden with their elderly mother, they were put to work alongside the 'coolies'. They testified in court that although no agreement had been made, their mother was put to the task of plucking tea leaves (*Bengallee* 1886, 30-31).

Similarly, the case of Kessar Singh, a Nepali<sup>37</sup> postpeon<sup>38</sup> was cited. This person had apparently travelled with his mother on the promise of an overseer, who assured him of a higher salaried job in the tea estates. But Kessar Singh's suspicions were aroused when he and his mother were brought to the 'coolie depot', their names registered, they were persuaded to accept 'presents' of a blanket, a tin mug, two shirts and two *dhotis* (lower garment), and were put aboard a steamer for Tezpur in the district of Darrang. They were further outraged when asked to drink water from a water trough, placed in the corner filled by the Mohammedan crew. Being a person of a Hindu caste, Kessar Singh protested and apparently managed to be noticed by a passenger on the steamer who reported the case to the District Commissioner. The recruiter, however, was able to produce contracts that they claimed were signed by the couple to serve as garden labour. Although the contracts bore marks instead of signatures, the

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<sup>36</sup> A martial caste.

<sup>37</sup> Refers to a person from present day Nepal.

<sup>38</sup> Mailworker

registering officer explained this to be the usual practice, as 'coolies' were generally from illiterate classes (*Bengallee* 1887, 49-50).

These cases published by Bengali nationalists and social reformers as evidence of 'fraudulent practices' appear to have put pressure on the government. From about the 1890's immigration reports cited more cases of 'fraudulent practices' by vigilant officials who seemed to have taken the role of 'protectors' seriously. The focus of their attention was especially on single women who came up to work as tea pickers. It was reported in the annual immigration report of 1897 that, as in the previous years, officials had carefully investigated 'irregularities' in connection with recruitment that were reported (RLI 1897, 11). Officials further noted the vigilance of Registering Officers investigating cases even when no complaints were lodged, especially in the case of "women or young persons who came unaccompanied by relatives, and who seem hardly capable of looking after themselves" (*Ibid.*).

If anti-colonial practices of the Indian elites revealed the class, caste and gendered formation of the nationalist discourse deployed in protesting 'fraudulent practices', patriarchal and heterosexual bias pervaded the colonial agents' investigation of such practices.

It seems clear that single women who came to work were subjected to close scrutiny by Registering Officers in depots and by inspectors on plantations, which made it harder for them to come independently without a male guardian. Inspectors in 1891 reported the case of one female who, once rejected came

again with her relatives. Inspectors further reported the cases of two females of 'bad character' and 'loose character', whose relatives failed to recover them. The same report stated a case from Sibsagar district where a married woman was said to have been enticed away from home, but when asked, reported that she had quarrelled with her mother-in-law and did not wish to return. Of 29 cases of 'fraudulent practice' reported from the district of Lakhimpur in the same year, 10 were of single women. (RLI 1891, 9-10)

Even when women came in groups they were scrutinized closely. In 1891, three batches of single women were reported, two groups of three women and another of two women. In one case charges were dropped when it was determined that two of the women were over 16 years of age, another three were allowed to go on after being described as "women of loose character," while in the case of one female from Bengal, the report was pending a reply from officials of that province (*Ibid.*). It was reported in 1900 that 26 contracts of unaccompanied women had been cancelled (RLI 1900, 7). The report of 1903-05 reported 21 contracts cancelled on accounts of 'fraudulent recruitment', 10 were of females unaccompanied by husbands or male guardians (RLI 1903-05, 3).

Not only were single women constructed as incomplete, without the presence of husbands or male guardians, but their agency threatened dominant norms of respectability. Their independence and agency were constructed as 'immoral'. (Breman 1992)



Yet these constructions were contradictory to the racialized practice of constituting the women as 'coolie' labour on the plantations, revealed in the conditions under which they had to travel to and work on the plantations of Assam Valley. It was clearly a struggle just to remain alive as indentured labourer under the harsh plantation regime as the inspection reports indicate by women's high rates of mortality following diseases like cholera, small-pox and diarrhoea, among others. While inspection reports treated these rates as normal, it is in the inter-departmental correspondence of officials that we find a need to rationalize the high rates of mortality on the steamers, as well as on the plantations.

Investigating conditions on crowded flats attached to steamers where cargo, animal and people were huddled together, colonial officials wondered at the "real cause of outbreak" of diseases (Letter No. 93, 1873, ASA). Correspondence on labour transport in 1873, reported the arrival of the "cholera infested steamer, *Progress*, flats *Adjaya* and *Gogra*, with five hundred coolies, men, women and children" (Letter No. 81 1872 ASA). However, officials' concerns seem to have been allayed as it was stated that the "disease was only among the 'coolies', and not among other passengers" (*Ibid.*). The Medical Officer's racializing practice is further indicated by his description of conditions on the flat *Gogra* as "very clean" and that there was "room enough" even as he reported "baskets of potatoes and onions, four horses and some sheep aboard the flat" (*Ibid.*). As a racialized category, 'coolies' were often blamed for the outbreak of diseases that were brought on by overcrowding and the harsh conditions of travel. In a letter in 1872 it was stated that outbreak of cholera aboard the steamer *Punjab* that was

carrying 531 'coolies' aboard its flat *Thibet* licensed to carry 272 was probably the result of the 'coolies' habit of carrying "thrash, rotten fish and bad food" from the bazaars (Letter No. 81, 1872, ASA).

As a racialized category 'coolie' women who came to work as tea pickers were commodified (Kelly 1992) and the conditions of their travel were governed by cost efficiency. Steamer officials and recruiting agents seemed to be able to pressure the government to allow larger and larger numbers of 'coolies' to be transported citing high costs of transportation. The colonial government felt such demands were justified, as the immigration reports note the rules that were relaxed in view of such demands. In 1879, deck space was reduced from twelve to ten feet in November, December and January, deemed to be 'cooler' weather. For the rest of the year deemed to be 'warmer', the deck space allowed per labourer was reduced from fourteen to twelve feet (RLI 1879, 6, ASA). The reduction of deck space by two feet per labourer in both 'warmer' and 'cooler' seasons meant that more labourers could be transported by each steamer, which would relate to an increase in profit to steamer companies as well as recruiting agents. So changes made by the government to existing rules led to further pressure on the authorities for further reductions. In 1884, with the introduction of daily services of smaller mail steamers authorized to transport 'coolies', pressure was mounted to reduce space from ten to eight feet in 'cooler' season and twelve to ten feet in the 'warmer' weather (RLI 1884, 2, ASA).

Government officials appeared to be fully aware of these harsh conditions of travel and sometimes the paternalistic concerns of some were aroused enough to report on these conditions to their superiors. In 1872, a letter from the Civil Surgeon of Dhubri depot in Goalpara district reported that "cholera inevitably appears on every ship arriving at Dhubri from November to May," and remarked on the "despondent, nostalgic conditions in which the immigrant labourers frequently arrived" (Letter 41T, 1872, ASA). In the same year Dr. Curran's vivid description led to a debate as to whether these conditions were "normal for coolies." He wrote of his inspection of the flat 'Hoogly' in 1872,

"they lay in three rows across the breadth of the flat so close together that they looked actually packed; the space that separated the heads of one row and the feet of the other was so narrow, that I was obliged to walk with great caution lest I should stand on some of them. If there was room for more coolies on the flat *Hoogly*, they certainly did not avail themselves of it; I scarcely ever saw a better example of overcrowding.." (Letter No. 35, 1872, ASA).

He further reported,

".. the 36 coolies who were suffering from fever, diarrhoea and dysentery were pointed out to me lying down between healthy coolies; again the sick were collected .. at the end of each row or line. I saw a case of diarrhoea fitting closely between two cases of fever. ... On the upper deck of the flat there was a small space enclosed for a hospital; this was occupied by two cases convalescent from cholera" (*Ibid.*).

But such doubts were countered by other officials, like Dr. Ayers who apparently had more experience with 'coolie labour'. That these were 'normal' conditions under which 'coolies', females, males and children were forced to travel is further clarified by Dr. Ayers, Superintendent and Medical Inspector of Labour Transport to the Superintendent Labour Transport,

"There is nothing surprising in Dr. Curran's writing as he has done about coolies being closely packed, and his being obliged to walk with great precaution. Whether 12 superficial feet or 14 superficial feet ..., the

Government allowance is granted, there is no room to spare, a *man* taking up nearly the whole space, and no one would pass through them without care. Dr. Curran should have satisfied himself that the rules were abided by, as it is in no official's power to force the company to give more space than Government demands. I am perfectly satisfied that this space is sufficient, as I have been to Mauritius and the West Indies in charge of coolies with the same space allowed, and never had reason to complain of overcrowding" (Letter No. 208, 1872, 6 ASA) (emphasis mine).

Under such harsh conditions it is hardly surprising that remarks made in the immigration report suggest that many women preferred death to the harsh realities of indentured migration. A report on the steamer *Progress* mentioned that "one woman jumped to her death" and "another mysteriously disappeared" (Letter no 23, 1873, ASA). Correspondence regarding the steamer *Punjab* also remarked on the deaths of two women by drowning (Letter no 88, 1872, ASA). Officials debated the cause of these deaths. Dr. Ayers remarked in 1872 that drowning likely occurred when the women on the *Punjab* attempted to cross from flat to the steamer as "women are often enticed on board the steamer by crews for immoral purpose" (File BG 1872, ASA). This remark suggests that crew members routinely engaged in sex with the women, although immigration reports are silent on this issue.

Remarks made in the immigration reports of 1903-04 suggest that word of conditions in the plantations of Assam Valley, as well as the hard journey itself, had spread to the recruiting districts. It was reported that the "irksomeness of the journey" had affected immigration greatly as those migrating were turning to alternative means of livelihood rather than travel to the tea estates (RLI 1903-04, ASA). The significance of these remarks can be judged by the fact that in 1908-

09, a Special Officer was deputed to the recruiting districts to encourage immigration and downplay existing prejudice that seemed to be deterring immigration to Assam.

A *Jhumurgeet* sung on the plantations of Assam Valley refers to the harshness of plantation life in Assam Valley, and conflicts with the one I cited earlier (Sengupta and Sharma 1990, 217). Whereas hope was the central theme in the earlier verse, the one I cite below evokes the harsh reality of plantation life where the work is hard and does not even provide the daily meals. The refrain is especially telling, expressing despair that the labourers were misled about Assam.

2. *Kor mara, jamon, tamon*  
*Kalam diya basahe*  
*Pat tula, Gas kor saman*  
*Hai! Nisthur Shyam, Phenki diye anili Assam.*  
*Dutar Pore Ghar jaye*  
*Ghare kichu khate nai*  
*Pashi niye doirih godam*  
*Sawul dekhi dhaner saman*  
*Hai! nisthur Shyam, phankhi diye aanili Assam*  
 (Kurmi 1993, 34)

Hoing is passable  
Pruning too, my child  
Plucking leaves, clearing trees  
Hai! Cruel Shyam (Lord), you lied and brought us to Assam  
Returning home after 2 (PM)  
To find there is nothing to eat  
Running to the warehouse with a basket  
To find rice that is half husk  
Hai! Cruel Shyam (Lord), you lied and brought us to Assam

That plucking leaves did not afford the easy life that the female workers had expected to find in Assam is clearly indicated in the above verse. That the sense of betrayal is strong in the minds of the low paid tea garden labourers

even today is suggested in this piece that recalls in detail a time when jungles had to be cleared by their predecessors to make way for plantations. It also has a direct resonance in their present lives as hoeing, pruning and plucking constitute their work to this day.

Plucking was the mainstay of the tea industry from its earliest times, and everything depended on timely plucking of leaves. This had been stressed as early as 1839 by C.A. Bruce from the government's experimental tea gardens in upper Assam (Bruce 1839 in Antrobus 1957, 466). That this labour intensive part of tea making could be filled by female labourers for maximum economic efficiency had also been suggested. In Bruce's own assessment it was not as easy a task as it appeared, as it required standing for hours in the sun, picking leaves from plants that were often as high as the pickers' chests, which meant stretching out to pick (*Ibid.*).

Indentured female labourers, that is, labourers who were bound by a contract to work for their employers for a specified number of years at a specified rate of pay, made Bruce's suggestion a reality. By the 1880's, women's plucking became established at the centre of plantation activity.

Barker, a planter in Assam in the 1870's wrote in his memoirs that during the plucking or rainy season when the new leaves came out, work for the manager and his assistants began at five o'clock in the morning when the gong sounded. Supervising the pluckers and being present at the weighing in of the leaves were important duties in the morning. After lunch break and a siesta

during the hottest part of the day, planters went out again at two o'clock to supervise the pluckers and were present at the weighing in at six o'clock. The planters made sure that the plucking was adequate so that tea house activity went non-stop throughout the night (Barker 1884 in Dutta 1992, 98).

Barker's description gives us an idea of the long hours that pluckers worked: from five in the morning to perhaps later than six o'clock in the evening, under the constant supervision of the white planters. The picture is of a strictly supervised workforce run by industrial clock time. But it was clearly not the clock or the hours female pickers put in that determined their wages, nor was it the contract that fixed their wage at the very low rate of four rupees per month. As a commodified category - 'coolie labour' (Kelly 1992) – women's wages were paid or not paid depending on the discretion of the planter who exercised unrestricted powers that made him the sole arbitrator on the plantation.

As inspection reports indicated, women were rarely paid the wages they had been contracted at. They were in fact paid by task, or *hazira*, that was allotted to them everyday. Payment depended on completion of the task set, which was done at the absolute discretion of the planters. For all practical purposes, the planter constituted the 'law' on the plantation. (RLI 1879, 1881) Inspectors commented that "contract wage entered is not necessarily the actual wage earned, which can only be ascertained by inspection of pay lists (RLI 1881, 21 ASA).

But the very role of inspectors in the colonial context of Assam Valley was contradictory. While the paternalistic concerns of the colonial government led them to appoint inspectors for the 'protection' of labourers, the racialization of labour force as 'coolie' labour showed the contradiction of such measures. The colonial government was satisfied to rely on the word of European planters, so inspection was lax and few planters took the trouble of sending returns. In Lakhimpur, seven gardens did not send returns and nothing was known. Sibsagar district with the largest number of gardens was the least inspected. The Inspector of Labour in upper Assam was considered redundant and the post was abolished and duties devolved to the Civil Surgeon and District Superintendent of Police (RLI 1881, 4, ASA). When faced with the wages actually earned, officials found ready explanations. In 1884 reporting on the average earned, colonial officials refused to enter the column on "lowest rate" in one month because they felt it would not reflect the sickness, voluntary leave or absence that contributed to it. Officials felt that the column on "highest wages was useful for it proved how much it was possible for one able bodied coolie to earn on the garden" (RLI 1884, 4, ASA). Above all officials were satisfied that a 'coolie family' would be always able to support itself by the wages earned by the members of its family (*Ibid.*).

That labourers were completely at the mercy of the European planters who exercised enormous powers is clearly indicated by the remarks that were made by government officials. The report of 1900 quoted the Civil Surgeon of Sibsagar who candidly remarked after making some inspections in his region,



".. that in all cases the manager's word must be taken for the 'task schedule'. There is absolutely no means of verifying it or ascertaining its possible correctness without a prolonged residence on the garden or a daily supervision of the measuring of the work. Task schedules need never be stuck up, for all the faith that can be placed in them in very many cases" (RLI 1900, 25, ASA).

The report further added that the remark of the Chief Commissioner Hopkinson in 1868 was as true in 1900,

"A minimum wage is perfectly illusory, or a convenient peg for the planter to hang a grievance on, but of no benefit to the coolie, who notwithstanding anything to the contrary, will still find that the amount of wages *he* actually receives depends upon what it pleases the conscience of his employer to allow *him*" (*Ibid.*, emphasis mine).

Women plucking all day might be left to be paid at the discretion of the planters. Even as planter power derived from the penal sanctions that backed their interests above that of the labourer, colonial officials interpreted the lack of evidence brought against the planter as the result of the labourer's inability to know the planter's application of contractual wages. In 1884, it was remarked in the annual report on immigration that the Chief Commissioner had issued a circular order to all District Commissioners of tea districts to inform them of,

" a practice, ... under which employers have entered the period of service in labour contracts under Act I of 1882 in terms of days instead of in months and years. ... (This practice was) obviously unfair to the labourer, because it makes it difficult for *him* to know when *his* contract has expired ...to bring evidence that *he* has worked a greater number of days than those recorded in the hazira book..." (RLI 1884, 22, ASA, emphasis mine).

This was apparently a way to extend the contract indefinitely as long as labour failed to complete stipulated working days (*Ibid.*). In the same year, the District Commissioner of Lakhimpur expressed confusion at the arbitrary laws that planters used to hold and work their labourers, "I have never been able to

understand how Sect III<sup>39</sup> can live alongside of Act XIII of 1859” (RLI 1884, 23, ASA). The District Commissioner of Sibsagar expressed his views on the unsuitability of Act XIII of 1859 to the tea gardens where a ‘coolie’ is hardly ever allowed to refund the ‘so-called advance’ even when they have been known to offer sums greater than the ‘advances’ and are forced to carry out their ‘contracts’ (*Ibid.*). The report of 1900 revealed that increasingly planters resorted to cancelling ‘contracts’ under Act I of 1882 by ‘mutual consent’ only to renew them under Act XIII of 1859 to avoid paying higher wages. Act I of 1882 stipulated that in their fourth year, labourers should be paid a higher monthly rate (RLI 1900, 7, ASA). The Chief Commissioner in 1900 admitted with surprise that the odious practice of allowing only quarter haziris<sup>40</sup> on a daily price of three pice in the case of men, and less in the case of women, appears to be commoner than he had imagined. It led him to conclude that insufficient wages were a major concern and that penal sanctions should be lifted (RLI 1900, 10, ASA).

Such views were in a minority among colonial officers. It is the normalization of the daily struggles of female labourers, their children and families that is suggested by the routine manner in which officials recorded their conditions. It is typical to find inspectors note that no special action was necessary to improve conditions. More often than not inspectors were satisfied with the explanations provided by managers of gardens they were inspecting, which often racialized, ethnicized and masculinized the labour force.

The effect of normalizing such conditions of work seems to have weighed heavier on the female labourers. This is suggested by the records kept in the

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<sup>39</sup> Of Act I of 1882

<sup>40</sup> ‘hazira’ was the daily task allotted to each labourer. Quarter hazira meant that the labourers were assessed to have completed only quarter of the tasks allotted them and therefore paid accordingly.

annual immigration reports. The rate of mortality of female labourers was often as much or more than male labourers (RLI 1879, 8, ASA). Females in the plantations also died at higher rates than the general population did at childbirth (RLI 1899, 27, ASA). The birth rate on the plantations consistently remained low, much lower than that of the general population (RLI 1879-1900-10 ASA). The hard work that was demanded of women under the harsh plantation regime did not afford them the health or the time needed to bear and nurture children. Their energies were focussed on surviving the hard life; long hours of work that did not pay enough to put together a meal for themselves and their children everyday. The District Commissioner of Darrang explaining the low birth rate on the plantations in his district noted that,

"Coolie women, on their first arrival in this province, have not, as a rule sufficient force to enable them to reproduce their species with success. Mortality in childbirth is deplorably high, and there is a marked tendency to miscarriage, either natural or produced by artificial means. The whole of the woman's strength seems to be required to resist the insidious effects of the climate, and conception is too frequently followed by anaemia and dropsy" (RLI 1899, 27 ASA).

The District Commissioner's comments in 1899, not only draw attention to the fact of the low birth rate among the female labourers in his district, but, simultaneously construct the women as belonging to a separate 'species'- 'coolie women'. This categorization of the women indicates the racialized and classed composition of the female labourers. The routine entries in the immigration reports on the low birth rate of this segment of the female population even at the end of the nineteenth century, that is, almost forty years after the introduction of female tea pickers on the plantations, suggests that the plantation owners were not interested in the women for their reproductive potential as the bearers of future labourers. Female labourers were valuable as a cheap source of labour

themselves. As a class of 'coolie women', they were therefore denied the conditions that contributed to a level of physical health that was necessary for any female to become pregnant, carry the pregnancy to term and give birth to a healthy baby. It was remarked in the report of 1899 that while imperfect registration of births also contributed to the low birth rate recorded, "the hard work in which coolie women are employed is not calculated to raise the birth rate" (*Ibid.*). The Chief Commissioner in 1900 concluded that low birth rate was due to hard work among anaemic women who are unable to give birth to healthy children. As a result, many babies were still born or died soon after birth.

"Insufficient consideration bestowed on coolie women while pregnant result in the low birth rate among a class of women, who in their own homes are as prolific as any in India" (RLI 1900, 11, ASA). Similarly it was reported in the report of 1897 that the women in the *bastis* or villages of ex-tea labourers in Assam Valley had much higher birth rates than the women living in the "coolie lines" on the plantations (RLI 1897, 33, ASA).

Female labourers forced to live in the 'coolie' lines with children and male labourers were clearly sought as workers, not as mothers and reproducers of workers on the plantations of Assam Valley. Their living and working environment was not designed to encourage family life, which contradicted the constant demand made in the annual reports on immigration for more 'whole families' to be imported.

The labour of poverty stricken females from lower caste/classes was used to provide the cheapest labour possible on the plantations. At the same time, the report of 1884 attributed the high rates of child mortality to the “neglect on the part of the women”. The report further remarks on the unsuitability of tea garden life for young children.

“A coolie woman gets a variable amount of leave for her confinement. After that if the infant is not strangled at birth, she must either take it out with her to work, or leave it behind, with no one to look after it. In the former case tied to its mother’s back or left in the nearest drain, it is exposed to extremes of heat and cold, to wind and to rain; in the latter the child gets half-starved, and so paves it away to a death from some bowel disorder, or succeeds in cutting short its career by a fall or a roll into the open fire” (RLI 1884, 41 ASA).

It is hardly surprising that under the conditions depicted in the immigration reports of the difficulties of giving birth and nurturing children on the plantation, the record also mentions high rates of abortion on the plantations. It appears that the females on the plantations were able to get abortions performed by *dais*, or midwives, who lived off this practice and usually resided in the *basti*, or village, well out of the reach of the garden manager (RLI 1884: 41 ASA).

The *Jhumurgeet* (verse 2) sung today on the plantation of Assam Valley literally evokes the harsh conditions of plantation life in these early years. The main sentiment expressed is that of promises broken. It conveys the sense of hard work – clearing forests, hoeing, plucking leaves and laments of the betrayal of coming to Assam. It literally evokes the pangs of hunger unmet after a hard day’s labour. The reference to the warehouse, or *godam*, that was supposed to supply rice, was a reference to the terms of the ‘contract’ that promised every

labourer rice at the fixed price of three rupees a *maund*<sup>41</sup>, any extra cost to be paid by the employer (RLI 1879 – 1910 ASA). But this, as the song evokes, was another promise broken. This *Jhumurgeet* is in contrast to the *Jhumurgeet* (verse 1) that evokes the moment of migration. While the former evokes hope at the prospect of migrating to Assam, hope of an easier life in a new land, the latter evokes a sense of betrayal, of hopes that were not met, of a life that is extremely hard.

While the harsh regime is clearly evoked in the *Jhumurgeet*, colonial records of the early years (1879-1910) blamed the high mortality on the labourers themselves. Racializing and ethnicizing the labourers, immigration records routinely recorded the lack of rice supply, and at the same time readily accepted the rationalisation of managers that often put the blame on the labourers themselves (RLI 1884, 39, ASA). Inspectors reported that mortality in the Borchapari T.E. in Sibsagar district had been attributed by the manager to the filthy habits of low caste *Bhuias* who “would eat anything, and what pay they got was spent in drink and ducks and sweetmeats.” Similarly the manager of Cinnemara T.E. also in the Sibsagar district is said to have blamed the high mortality in his garden on other reasons, such as new “coolies from Chotanagpur and North-west provinces (who) ate all kinds of indigestible and unwholesome food and consequently suffered from various debilities, ... and became so sick, no nursing could cure them” (*Ibid.*).

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<sup>41</sup> A *maund* = 40 kgs.

### Planters, overseers and sardars: Violence, sex and power

3. *Sardar bole "Kam, Kam"*  
*Babu bole "Dhari aan"*  
*Sahib bole "Libo pither sam"*  
*Hai! Nisthur Shyam, Phankhi diye aanili Assam*  
(Kurmi 1993, 34)

Work! Work! Says the Sardar (labour gang leader)  
Get them here! Says the Babu (overseer)  
"I will take the skin off your backs", says the sahib (planter)  
Hai! Cruel Shyam (Lord), you lied and brought us to Assam.

The *Jhumurgeet* above performed to this day on the plantations of Assam Valley, recalls to memory physical violence that appears to have been a fact of 'everyday life' on the colonial plantations of Assam Valley. Female labourers documented by immigration reports as constituting almost half the labour force on the colonial plantations (RLI 1879-1910, ASA), appear to have faced the full force of power unleashed by the hierarchical structure of authority on the plantations. Hierarchy as the *Jhumurgeet* above evokes was determined by position occupied in the plantation structure as well as by class, caste, race, ethnicity, and gender. Females on the plantations of Assam Valley were employed only as labourers for the task of picking tea leaves, as I discussed in Chapter One. Situated as they were at the very bottom of the plantation hierarchy, they appeared to have faced the brunt of an all male plantation hierarchy evoked in the *Jhumurgeet* above – *Sahibs*, or white planters, at the very top, below them the *babus*, or clerks and overseers, recruited from among middle class/caste Assamese and Bengali males, and below them the *sardars* or labour gang leaders, directly in charge of a group of labourers, and usually

recruited from among the male labourers themselves (RLI 1879-1910 ASA; Barker 1884, 102).

Flogging appears to have been the customary practice of maintaining authority on the plantations. Bengali nationalists/social reformers who were trying to bring the racializing practices of the plantation authority to the attention of the general public, as part of their anti-colonial practices, published such accounts in a series of articles in the journal *Bengalee*.

"Non-performance of the task entails not only the loss of pay, but other serious consequences. When work is not done to the complete satisfaction of the Manager, it often happens that the labourer is whipped sometimes even to bleeding. A cane is an indispensable accompaniment of the tea garden officials – from the Manager down to the pettiest Sardar. Men and women, old and young, boys and girls all are equally subjected to the lashes of the whip" (Bengalee 1886, No. 49, 44).

"Kicking and cuffing was the 'normal' mode of communicating with the 'coolies' on the plantation, irrespective of gender or age" (*Ibid.*: 42).

These methods, it is indicated, were not only accepted, but considered necessary by the plantation authority to get work done by the 'coolies' on the plantations. Planters considered it their duty and their right to punish their labourers, their racial inferiors, people whom they considered to be shifty, without work ethic and out to create trouble for them. G.M. Barker, describing his experiences in Assam Valley in the 1870's wrote,

"What a host of past troubles that one little word "coolie" conjures up! The climate is not all that one desires, the insects are infamous, and the coolie is worse than either, and makes the two former feeble by comparison with his own powers of inflicting torture" (Barker 1884 in Dutta 1992, 9).

Barker further describes how the manager's duties extend to refereeing over quarrels among his labourers brought to his attention. Closely watched not



only in their work hours but also in the “coolie lines” by watchmen especially appointed, female labourers were not allowed any privacy. Like the males they too were brought by the *jamadar*, or watchman, before the *sahib* for any ‘delinquent’ behaviour. Then as the *sahib* listened to their arguments and the watchman tried to keep order with the stick, the planter arbitrated. These situations were usually tense as the planter acted on the assumption that “it is impossible to believe one word a native mutters”, but also aware that “hasty decisions would cause great dissatisfaction amongst the coolies” (Barker 1884, 92-93). Planters considered themselves benevolent and did not like any interference from the government in their treatment of their labour. As Barker remarked on the government’s appointment of “coolie protector” that it was a totally redundant position, as the planters of his times were very unlike the planters in the initial years of the tea industry. “Quite enough that we should be tarred with the same brush. Now, is it not ridiculous to suppose that owners would wilfully maltreat their servants, knowing that everything depends upon their being in a good state of health, coupled with an amount of willingness, sufficient ... to complete a Governmentally prescribed day’s work?” (Barker 1884, 90).

Flogging, it appears was so normalized as a practice, that it was not considered maltreatment. As planter Barker describes, a typical scene on the plantation that clearly suggests the everyday fact of this practice,

“A sardar’s usual mode of operation was to parade up and down between the rows of tea bushes armed with a small stick, yelling at the top of his voice at the pluckers under his command to move faster – *Che lao, Che lao*<sup>42</sup>” (Barker 1884 in Dutta 1992, 102).

Practices on the plantations of Assam Valley that involved physical violence as part of work discipline were further normalized by the feeble attempts

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<sup>42</sup> Move, move

of the colonial government to manage “isolated incidents” (RLI 1879-1900, ASA). Colonial officials were not unaware that Englishmen were in the habit of cuffing and kicking and caning natives of the labouring classes, but justified this in the case of planters by rationalizing that their interests would temper their behaviour (RLI 1899, 42, ASA). This left planters free to pursue their own methods.

The everyday violence in the lives of female labourers seems to have rarely been made public until they managed to get their cases heard through the intervention of other labourers, usually males. Even then, it appears rare that the perpetrators would face consequences, though on occasion such cases became publicized by anti-colonial nationalists. One such case was brought against Mr. Francis of Dygaroon Tea Estate in 1884. The charge brought against Mr. Francis, the manager, was that he had caned a woman to death. The Civil Surgeon’s report stated that “death was the result of the congestion of the kidneys” which in his opinion had been caused by “violence applied to that part of the body where the kidneys are situated” (*Bengallee* 1886, No. 49, 42). But rarely did the planters face consequences. In the above case Mr. Francis produced a witness to show that he did not strike but only lifted his cane and threatened to strike (*Ibid.*).

Left to face the harsh treatment of plantation life, women resisted alone and joined others in their everyday struggles. Even as colonial officials reported that the plantation system was ‘working well’, they continued to report high rates of ‘desertion’ which was an offence under penal law (RLI 1879-1909-10). If reported and found, ‘deserters’ faced criminal prosecution. But planters who had

been empowered to arrest without warrant often unleashed their own harsh punishment reserved for 'absconders' and 'deserters'. It was reported in the Assam Administrative Report of 1900 that a woman who had 'absconded' from the Phulbari garden of Darrang district was recaptured and brought back to the garden. There, in the presence of the other labourers, the manager, Mr. Walker, had her flogged by three of his employees (AAR 1900, 109, ASA). But under a colonial justice system the matter was settled by a fine of five hundred rupees for the manager and six weeks rigorous imprisonment for the others (*Ibid.*).

If running away or 'desertion' of the plantation seemed one way to escape the plantation, this appears to have been harder for the female labourers, who unless accompanied by a male were viewed with scepticism. Yet annual reports consistently reported female deserters, although in lesser numbers than males (RLI 1879-1909-10). The District Commissioner of Sibsagar remarked that numbers of female deserters had increased and that children often went with their parents (RLI 1884, 26). In 1899, it was reported that inspectors in Nowgong district were forced to close the garden of Barpani and declare it 'unhealthy', because of 'wholesale desertion' of its labour force (RLI 1899, 35, ASA).

The 'everyday life' on the plantations appears to have been one where labourers faced enormous powers that were granted to the planters by the colonial government so that labourers faced prosecution for every act imaginable. But as suggested by the immigration records themselves, the female labourers often with other members of the community resisted the physical violence that was perpetrated on them. From 'absence from work without cause',

'illegal assembly', 'assault', 'insult to planter and his employees', 'habitual drunkenness', 'disregard of sanitary regulations', labourers challenged the powerful plantation regime in their lives (RLI 1879-1909-10). The report of 1904-05 reported the case of an assistant manager who took a woman by her ears to force her to return to work, but was immediately attacked by about 'thirty coolies' (RLI 1904-05, 8, ASA). In 1900, two females among fourteen 'coolies' were found guilty and sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for their part in a riot that led the Europeans to save themselves by escaping through the bathroom window. The incident took place in the Hukanpukhuri tea garden of Lakhimpur district during a routine pay-day at the assistant manager's bungalow where about three hundred labourers were assembled. A male labourer protested the sum paid him. On being asked that he wait till the paying was finished, the man refused to do so. The assistant manager angered by this gave a blow to the man with his fist, which immediately brought a reaction from the crowd. The manager arriving at that moment sensed a riot and asked the man who had been struck to leave. But the labourer's wife and another woman dragged the man back and prevented him from leaving till he was paid. Following this, a riot broke out (AAR 1900, 109). In another similar incident a female was reported to have incited a riot when she sat down in the manager's presence. The manager seized her by the hair with the intention of making her stand up, and was immediately attacked by the labourer's husband and others assembled (*Ibid.*). In yet another incident, the manager of Talap Tea Estate in Lakhimpur, finding fault with the method of

plucking, used some force. A riot followed and the manager escaped. The 'coolies' were sentenced to six months in jail (*Ibid.*).

For the female labourers, not only beatings and floggings, but sexual violence seems to have been part of their everyday lives. Given the masculinization of the female labourers sexual violence finds no place in the detailed statistics that were produced on tea labour annually. On the other hand sexual violence is one area that the annual immigration reports downplayed whenever complaints were brought to the notice of authorities by concerned relatives. The report of 1899 stated that occasionally a 'coolie' got together with few others and assaulted the manager "on suspicion of interference with his women." It further stated, in a dismissive tone, that apart from cases of assault that were brought against managers, the other cases were for 'attempted rape' (RLI 1899, 41, ASA).

Cases of sexual violence were publicized by the anti-colonial nationalists who expressed their moral outrage and were concerned at the low morality of planters. In keeping with their middle class/caste discourse of a spiritualised inner space or private sphere to which nationalist discourse had relegated the women's question (Chatterjee 1987), the cases published may be read as a protest against the violation of this sphere which nationalists considered non-negotiable. The highly publicized case of Shukarmoni that went to court in 1884 was just such an instance.

The case of Shukarmoni reached the courts because her husband filed a complaint in 1884, against Charles Webb, the agent of the steamer company who accompanied the flat in which the couple were being transported to Assam. Shukarmoni's husband complained that his wife was raped and he himself was assaulted when he tried to defend her. Shukarmoni later died on arriving at the plantation, Holoongoori, where they were sent. The case went up for hearing and Webb was tried and fined 100 rupees (Papers of Webb case, 1884, 59-65).

Shukarmoni's rape was in many ways an exception. Firstly it reached the courts because she was a married woman and her husband's intervention made this possible. This was in the context of the times when colonial law courts were unlikely to entertain complaints from single women without a male guardian (Sangari and Vaid 1989). Secondly, the case came to the notice of Bengali nationalists in whose hands it was constructed as the death of a "daughter of India" (Papers of Webb case, 1884). As part of anti-colonial practice the case was publicized and presented to the "Electors of Great Britain and Ireland" under the title "Justice murdered in India" to bring attention to discrimination when a "native of India demands justice" (*Ibid.*). Anti-colonial practice of the Indian elites, while contesting colonial domination, also reveals the gendered character of the nationalist discourse (Chatterjee 1987) and its containment of the agency of women (Visweswaran 1996). By making Shukarmoni, an impoverished labourer, the symbol of 'Indian womanhood', nationalist practice located her within the domestic and private sphere that nationalist discourse had constructed as the spiritualised inner space that was non negotiable – a sphere that was not

available to working women of the poorer classes. As the pamphlet that was published to publicize the case stated, “therefore here is a case more serious than all. Not life but something infinitely more valuable than life, the honour of a helpless woman” (Chatterjee 1987). While representing the case of the plantation labourers, anti-colonial practice served to contain women’s agency and propagated moral regulatory colonial assumptions about women as ‘dependent subjects’ (Visweswaran 1996).

Similarly, in 1887, the case *Khanta Doomini*<sup>43</sup> was published. The woman travelled with her husband to complain to Mr. Holmes, the Chief Manager of the Brahmaputra Tea Company, against Mr. Pinches, the manager of the tea garden where she was raped. Mr. Holmes, it appears, sent them back with the assurance he would look into the case. The case itself worked to the disadvantage of the complainant as she was prosecuted for instituting a false case against Mr. Pinches (*Bengallee* 1887, No. 4, 45).

In another instance, Bengali nationalists wrote about a young woman whose father complained to the District Commissioner of Tezpur to cancel the contract of his daughter because the manager was making an “attempt to seduce her and keep her as his mistress.” But the District Commissioner failed to take a stronger measure than advising the manager to stop molesting the girl. This, as the article concluded, “led to the utter ruin of the girl” (*Ibid.*).

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<sup>43</sup> *Doom* is a fisher’s caste. *Doomini* is a feminised version of the caste name.

Bengali nationalist social reformers who brought these cases deplored that “morality of planters in Assam is rather low” (*Ibid.*). Their concern with sexual violence by “immoral” planters only served to contain the agency of those women who attempted to bring these cases to the attention of the authorities.

Some of the publicized cases also indicate that some women negotiated some power through sexual relations with the planters. In 1884, a *babu* had been forced by Mr. Bone to kiss his “concubine’s” shoes. The woman apparently bore a grudge against the *babu*. The *babu* could not bear the insult of being asked to kiss the feet of a lowly ‘coolie’ woman and was so enraged that he struck Mr. Bone with a bamboo lying close by, which resulted in Bone’s death (*Bengallee* 1887, No. 4, 48). In another case brought against Mr. Francis, a manager, of beating a woman to death, it appeared that the dead woman had a quarrel with Jasoda, ‘Mr. Francis’s woman’. Mr. Francis testified that the two women were making a ‘terrific noise’ and in a bid to make them quiet he had only ‘threatened to strike her’ (*Bengallee* 1887, No. 4, 48).

But, it appears to have mattered little whether a female entered into such relationships willingly, because the facts suggest that in the case of those unwilling, planters routinely sexually assaulted their labourers. If such cases were reported, and especially involved single women, the chances of their stories being taken seriously, appear to have been very slim. If anti-colonial practice of Bengali nationalist/social reformers contained the agency of female labourers with their middle class concerns with ‘morality’ of such cases, colonial officials



dismissed such cases as baseless and blamed the immorality on females themselves.

In the case of Mr. Lea, a planter who was assaulted by a group of his labourers in 1872, the correspondence between the District Commissioner of Darrang's office (in whose district the incident took place) and the Commissioner of Assam's office, was more keen to establish the marital status of the assaulted female. The Commissioner asked for clarification from the District Commissioner as to why he had referred to the woman as 'concubine' and not the married wife of the chief assailant Deboo. The District Commissioner's reply explained that he used the term 'concubine' as a more polite term than 'kept woman'. This exchange between two agents of the colonial government indicates the gendered norms of the colonizers that constructed a relationship outside of marriage as 'immoral'. By referring to the assaulted woman as 'concubine', colonial agents dismissed her as 'immoral' and therefore not credible. This is significant because the word 'concubine' was itself a term used to refer to a wide range of arrangements of cohabitation outside of marriage between European colonizers and Asian women and was not looked upon favourably by metropolitan critics (Stoler 1997). Apparently Deboo had provided the information that his establishment was comprised of three females, one married, referred to as '*shadi awrad*' and two '*rakha awrad*' (which literally translates to 'kept woman') indicating that such practices of cohabiting were common among the labourers. But the District Commissioner's view was that he did not believe the woman's story, because she appeared independent and well able to take care of herself,

while the others had imbibed liquor. Under the above circumstances, he concluded that Mr. Lea was a victim of conspiracy designed to get him into trouble (Letters 796, 3673, 574, 1325JJ, 1872, ASA). It is therefore hardly surprising that in the annual immigration reports, sexual violence in the plantations went largely unreported.

Racial and gendered practices of the planters and colonial officers exploited and oppressed the female labourers by constructing them as 'coolie' labourers. Planters maintained that the "coolie prefers the tea garden system with its family earnings and the general advantages a tea garden gives" (ABITA 1900, 65, ASA). On the whole, colonial officials considered that the system worked well to the credit of the European management and the balance of justice in Assam was fair enough, although the Chief Commissioner remarked "there is a tendency too often to minimise the gravity of an offence when a European is the aggressor" (RLI 1899, 42, ASA). It was remarked in the report of 1897 that "the condition of immigrant labourers on tea estates in Assam is far preferable to what it would have been if they had remained in their native districts". The report also noted that the tea estates were instrumental in rescuing the immigrants from "actual destitution" and given a "favourable opportunity of making a fresh start in life" (RLI 1897, 51, ASA).

But the *Jhumurgeet* evoke a picture very contrary to the dominant view of the times. They evoke a picture of Assam as a land of broken promises. Far from being the land where the women expected to have an easier life picking tea leaves, women learned the brutal reality of becoming indentured labourers in a

violent and exploitative plantation structure. As a class of working women they were masculinized and made to work as hard as their male counterparts on the plantations under similar living and working conditions, while being paid less than the male labourers, or in most cases, nothing. Physical and sexual violence perpetrated by an all male hierarchy on the plantations was the reality of their 'everyday life'.

The historical memory preserved by the community tells a very different story from the dominant version. The significance of the memory is that what is remembered and retold is the injustice perpetrated on labourers by the practice of indentured migration. In the next chapter, I explore further the oral traditions of the community with the view to further exploring this past-present link to investigate the dynamics that are part of 'becoming a community' (Prakash 1992). By doing so I strive to understand how history continues to play a role in the 'everyday life' of the community.

## CHAPTER IV

### Tracing Historical Memory Through Oral Traditions: Constituting Community

In this chapter I analyze and interpret the oral traditions of the tea labour community of Assam Valley. I explore further the genre of folk songs called *Jhumurgeet* that I introduced in Chapter Three, that are performed by the men and women of the labour community, on the plantations as well as *bastis* or villages, of ex-tea labourers. These are rendered in Sadani, the *lingua franca* of the tea labour community and bear the influences of Assamese, Bengali, Hindustani, Mundari, Santhali and some of the other languages spoken by the many groups that constitute the tea labour community. The tea labour community of Assam Valley is composed of about eighty or more groups (Appendix A) identifiable by their caste, ethnic or 'tribal' affiliations. This fact was brought to my notice by Prithviraj Majhi, a member of the community who was also a member of the Assam State Legislative Assembly at the time that I met him in September 1998. He identified himself as belonging to the Santhal group, one of the larger groups of the tea labour community of Assam.

Researchers have noted the wide diversity of groups historically constituting the tea labour community on the plantations of Assam Valley. They have come to the conclusion that although the plantation authority makes no distinction among the groups constituting the labour force in terms of allocating work on the plantations or allocating housing in the labour 'lines', which leads to

a fairly similar 'everyday life' among the plantation labour force, many of the groups, especially those numerically strong have been able to keep alive their distinctive group identity based on their caste, ethnic or 'tribal' affiliations (Kar 1981, 1990; Jain 1988). The picture that emerges is of an 'everyday life' that has come to be historically shared by those constituting the labour force of the plantation, not only because they share similar working conditions, but also because they have nurtured a socio-cultural life in the labour 'lines'.

*Jhumurgeet* is performed today by the tea labour community at almost every event (Sengupta and Sharma 1990; Mahato 1990). Depending on the groups constituting the community on the plantation or *basti*, variations in Sadani are discernable, bearing the influence of the languages spoken by those groups. In my analysis, I treat *Jhumurgeet* as a composite cultural tradition of the tea labour community of Assam Valley.

The tradition of *Jhumur*, the genre of song and dance, reflects the historical connection of the tea labour community of Assam Valley with the people of Jharkhand<sup>44</sup> (map 3), self identified as the *Adivasis* or indigenous inhabitants of that region. In Assam Valley, *Jhumur* is performed during *Karam Puja*, which has special significance as this ritual is claimed to have come to occupy the status of the major festival of the tea garden community (Kurmi 1991, 1993; Tanti 1994; Tasa 1997; Ghatowar 1975). Although *Jhumur* is also

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<sup>44</sup> See map in Appendix B. The state of Jharkhand was created in August 2000 out of the northern regions of the state of Bihar. This brought to fruition the movement for a separate state by *Adivasi* groups whose demands had included not only the Chotanagpur and Santhal parganas of Bihar, but also adjoining areas of the state of West Bengal. The movement had its roots in the British takeover of the Santhal parganas in 1765.

performed outside of this festival, its performance is significantly linked to *Karam Puja*. In this chapter, I analyse the oral tradition of *Jhumurgeet* in this ritual context. My interest in this ritual practice is focussed especially in its role of preserving and transmitting historical memory (1826-1910) (Popular Memory Group 1990; Sangster 1998 and Vansina 1985).

Ritual in the anthropological sense has been associated with shared meanings and social values of a group that fosters solidarity (Geertz 1973). Such a view tends to focus on a certain 'essence' that rituals embody. Further research has explored how these values are constructed and reconstructed in the course of ritual itself (Ortner 1978). More recently, ritual has come to be associated with power and authority, both of a secular and sacred kind, so that it may be seen as a site of hegemony and struggle (Comaroff 1985; Dirks 1992). The recognition that ritual is a site of hegemony and struggle, even as it is actively involved in the construction and reconstruction of the shared meanings of a group, questions notions of a 'natural' community. Community identity is itself created through struggles over meanings in the context of ritual practice (Fernandes 1997). Nicholas Dirks sees ritual as an "important arena for the cultural construction of authority and the dramatic display of the social lineaments of power" (Dirks 1992, 487).

The *Jhumurgeet* that I analyze here have been compiled by members or representatives of the tea labour community. They have been compiled in the Sadani language which shares the same script as Assamese. For my analysis, I translate the verses relying on my fluency with the Assamese language, as well

as my knowledge of Sadani that I grew up hearing. I also pay attention to the summary of each verse that is provided by the authors.

### **Becoming a Community**

In the tradition of *Jhumur*, the genre of folksong and dance, the singing and dancing is performed by the men and women of the community. As a collective performance, the contributors or composers of *Jhumurgeet* remain anonymous. It is perhaps for this reason that *Jhumurgeet* deals with the everyday lives of the community in a direct manner. Through the performance of *Jhumurgeet*, the men and women on the plantations and villages identify themselves as a community with a shared history. The history that the tea labour community transmits through the Jhumur performances reveal a critical consciousness that directly questions the hegemonic versions of the history of labour formation on the plantations. The *Jhumurgeet* below may be interpreted as a collective performance that remembers the early history of migration and recruitment as tea labourers, or a recalling of historical memory.

1. *Paka khatai lekhal nam*  
*Re lampatiya Shyam*  
*Phankhidiyey Bandhu Chalali Assam*  
*Depughare maritari*  
*Uttaile terene kari*  
*Hoogly sahare dekholi Akash*  
*Mane kari Assam jabo*  
*Jora pankha tanabo*  
*Sahab dile kodaleri kam*  
*Dina uday bhane*  
*Akale peter tane*  
*Tipiki tipiki parhe gham*  
Mahato 1990

Our names were written in the permanent book

You deceived us (recruiter) Shyam  
You lied and brought us to Assam  
Beaten at the depots  
Put on trains  
We first saw the sky in Hoogly town  
We thought we were going to Assam  
To pull the fans  
But the sahib gave us the spade  
Now Uday passes the day  
Alone, with his hunger pangs  
And sweat falling drop by drop.

In the context of the written historical record discussed in the previous chapters, that the reference to the 'permanent book' in the verse above is a reference to the written contract is quite clear. By recalling this memory, present day labour community keep alive the historical moment when they came to work as labourers on the colonial plantations. They remember the violent means that were used to transport men, women and children to Assam under colonial domination. By recalling the memory of the power of the colonial government and the force that were unleashed on their forebears to work in conditions they were unprepared for, the tea labour community reveals the historical development of a political, anti-colonial consciousness.

Challenging the written historical record contained in the colonial documents, that 'coolies' were recruited for certain types of labour (Chapters Two and Three), the tea labour community clearly recall the moment their predecessors were bound by a written contract that brought them to 'coolie depots', from where they were forced to go to Assam. By keeping the memory of the contract and journey alive, they keep alive the moment of their becoming tea



labourers under colonial domination, simultaneously challenging their social construction as 'natural' labourers.

Reference to the permanence of the contract clearly evokes the relations of power that were involved in the written contract. For non-literate groups in the colonial context, writing itself was associated with domination (Skaria 1996, 18). The reference to the written contract as the "permanent book" in the *Jhumurgeet* is a clear reference that the contract itself was at the root of labourers' miserable conditions. As a group of illiterate people that did not have access to the contents of the contract even as it was used to justify the force that was applied to ensure their labour on the plantations, the written contract itself embodied domination.

Not only do the tea labour community in the present time recall the moment when their forebears were bound by written contracts under a colonial government to work as tea labourers, but the refrain which keeps occurring in *Jhumurgeet* in Assam Valley, "you lied and brought us to Assam", challenges the hegemonic view that as a group their lives were bettered by migration to Assam Valley, and that the colonial plantations played an instrumental role in this regard. The refrain which may be taken as a core message or cliché, serves as Prakash says as "a mnemonic device to remember, represent, transmit and recall culturally significant historical details" (Prakash 1990, 42). It indicates that coming to Assam had proved to be a disappointment for the early indentured immigrants because their working conditions did not live up to their expectations. The refrain in the *Jhumurgeet* reminds the community that their historical migration is a story of betrayal, of wilful deception on the part of recruiters who led them to believe

that by working in the tea plantations of Assam they would be able to lead an easier life.

### Communicating Narratives of Class and Gender

That the historical migration of the labourers, men, women and children, did not lead to better living conditions not only challenges the hegemonic record that their conditions were bettered, but through their *Jhumurgeet* the tea labour community evokes the sense that their position on the plantations is still not better. In doing so, they reveal a political consciousness of their historically constituted class position as *mazdoor* or labourer. That the community of tea garden labourers is also a class of labourers is suggested in the following *Jhumurgeet*.

*Mazdoori kari kari,  
Basake ghar parhali,  
Tobu keno milena chakar,  
Basa mor more ghuri-ghuri  
Maye bape kore mozduri,  
Beta keno karibo babugiri,  
Amon niti ke karile hari.  
Sahab babu dekha jai jori.*

(Kurmi 1993, 44)

By working as a labourer,  
I gave my son an education,  
Still, why can't he get a job?  
When the mother and father are labourers,  
Why should the son become a *babu*<sup>45</sup>?  
Who made such laws, O Lord?  
The *sahib*<sup>46</sup> and *babu* are a team (against us).

---

<sup>45</sup> Clerical staff.

<sup>46</sup> Planter.

The above *Jhumurgeet* evokes a sense of injustice understood in its historical context. It expresses the critical consciousness of the community in their understanding of the barriers that historically constituted class distinctions. By referring to the *sahib* and *babu* as a team they indicate to a nexus of those who have historically occupied a higher position than themselves in the plantations' socio-economic hierarchy. Simultaneously, the *Jhumurgeet* also reminds the community of their historically constituted class position as tea labourers, where men, women and children were employed as labourers making up the lowest rung of the plantation hierarchy. There is also a suggestion in the above verse that historically, they were employed as labourers because, as a group they were illiterate and therefore considered suitable as labourers. The aspiration of the men and women of the community to rise above their historically constituted class position as labourers by working hard to give their sons an education is often defeated. As the *Jhumurgeet* above suggests this is mainly due to the construction of the tea labour community as a class of 'natural' labourers, so that the offspring of labourers are constructed as labourers and aspirations of attaining a position higher than that of labourers are thwarted by those placed higher in the plantation hierarchy. The *Jhumurgeet* laments the injustice of the situation where even educated sons of labourers find it hard to transcend historically constituted barriers that have led to their systemic exclusion.

Although both males and females of the tea labour community have historically been employed as labourers, the aspirations for sons to become

*babus* (clerks) indicates an awareness in the community of the gendered structure of clerical work on the plantation, where clerical positions have been historically filled by male workers. Therefore, although both males and females of the community are labourers, the desire to transcend historical class divisions at the familial level can only be aspired by preparing the sons for higher positions.

However as the *Jhumurgeet* above suggests, the efforts of the tea labour community to overcome this systemic exclusion by educating sons for higher positions points to a contradiction. While the community reveals its critical consciousness in its understanding of class and gendered hierarchies, it at the same time reinforces the gendered norm by preparing sons for higher education. This can only contribute to the further marginalization of the women of the community by depriving them of the opportunity to be educated.

The ritual practice of *Jhumurgeet*, while recalling the historical memory of the tea labour community also reveals that the identities of class, gender and community are intertwined. This is contrary to research that calls for a separation of class and religion (Scott 1988). Class consciousness here is clearly expressed through ritual participation that remembers a shared history of domination and exclusion.

### **Chah Janajati: A Community Identified By The History of Tea Production in Assam**

*Assam hamanike lage, hamani Assam ke,  
Chah janajati lage, chah bagan ke,  
Chah bagan lage, lage hamanike,  
Chah factory lage, lage hamanike,*

*Khunke pani korili, mati torke bagan banali,  
Hamani habi bhanke, bhul gali hamani apan desh ke,  
Sub kuch samkali Assam desh ke,  
Soch dekh tohoni apan desh ke,  
Kaha jabo hamani ae desh chor ke.  
Jaan lewa tohani, ae bat ke.  
Assam hamani ke lage, hamani Assam ke.*

(Kurmi 1993, 44)

Assam needs us, we need Assam,  
The tea garden needs the tea garden community,  
We need the tea gardens,  
We need the tea factories.  
By turning our blood to water, we dug the earth,  
By clearing jungles, we made tea gardens,  
We forgot our land,  
We gave everything to Assam.  
Think where you belong,  
Where would we go from this land.  
Know well this,  
Assam needs us, we need Assam.

In the above *Jhumurgeet* the historical role of the community as a community of tea labourers is recalled. The community is reminded that they are a group of people whose predecessors migrated to work specifically in the tea plantations which they established by their hard physical labour. The history of the community is inseparable from the history of tea industry in Assam. The verse recounts what was exacted from the earliest labourers - the physical and emotional cost of establishing plantations on land that was dense jungle. Not only did the earliest labourers carve out tea plantations by mustering every bit of physical strength they had, but they at the same time endured the emotional pain of separation from their homelands to which they could not go back.

The verse above evokes a sense whereby the history of the tea industry in Assam is synonymous with the history of the tea labour community's role in

establishing and sustaining this industry. At the same time, the history of the tea labour community is the history of their close association with the tea industry from its earliest years. The historical association of the community with the tea industry has led to mutual dependence – the tea industry is dependent on the community to provide its labourers, while the community has become dependent on the industry for every aspect of their lives. That the historical development of a tea labour community in Assam has led to the formation of a distinct community out of the heterogeneous groups that originally migrated, is suggested by the use of the term *chah janajati* in the *Jhumurgeet* – a term that refers to the tea labour community as an ethnic group.

The ritual practice of *Jhumugeet* reveals the development of a political consciousness in the community that has its roots in the awareness of the role of colonial domination in constituting it as a class of labourers through a gendered, racialized and classed process in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It indicates a nexus of dominant educated males from among both the colonizers and colonized that contributed to the marginalization of labourers. That the illiteracy of the early labourers, both male and female, was used to oppress and exploit them is suggested. That a dominant patriarchal regime exploited the cheap labour of a category of poor women is clear. In an era where women had no place in a male dominated plantation hierarchy except in the lowest rungs as low paid tea pickers indicates an awareness of hierarchical gender relations that were class specific. The *Jhumurgeet* (Kurmi 1993, 44) above, further indicates a critical consciousness of the community that historically created hierarchies have

come to be viewed as 'natural', so that it is still hard for individuals to overcome barriers of class, gender and ethnicity that were created in the earliest days of the tea industry in Assam.

As I argued in the beginning of the chapter, the oral traditions of the tea labour community through its ritual practice continues to constitute and reconstitute community. This reveals ritual itself as a site of power, both sacred and secular (Dirks 1992). The historical memory of the community especially of the early years of its formation, 1826-1910, continues to play a significant role in constituting the identity of the tea labour community.

## CONCLUSION

The historical research on tea labour in colonial Assam has been done either within the framework of modernization or Marxist theory. In the modernization approach, seen in the studies done by British historians (Antrobus 1957, Griffiths 1967), colonization is seen as an extension of the metropolitan western culture that brought the benefits of a progressive tea industry to Assam and to all sections of the population associated with this industry. My research is a critique of this approach that fits in with the relations of colonial domination and subordination and reveals the biases of progressivist, racist and sexist discourses.

In the Marxist approach, seen in the work of Indian historians, the role of the colonial state in recruitment and regulation of the labour force (Behal 1983; Behal and Mohapatra 1992) is recognized. These studies are primarily concerned with class formation, privileging the economy over other aspects of social life. Behal (1983) notes the assumptions in the discourses of the colonial agents – planters and officials - of the inherent inferiority of 'coolies', which he compares to those from the era of American slavery. Behal also points to the lower wages paid to female labourers and cites instances of protests of the labour force over the indignities perpetrated on the female labourers. In spite of these significant insights, his study does not extend the understanding of the tea labour formation as not only a class but also a racialized and gendered formation, which has been my approach in this study. Behal also refers to the



“nationalist press propaganda” (Behal 1983, 142) against living conditions in the plantations, but he does not go into the nationalist politics and its portrayal of the working and living conditions on the plantations. By understanding the tea labour formation as simultaneously a class, gendered, racial, ethnic and class specific formation, I explore the nationalist politics and its relationship with the plantation labour force.

The Marxist historiography on plantation labour in Assam is not only concerned primarily with an analysis of class formation but views it as a universal phenomenon. Das Gupta’s (1994) research while taking into account the multi-caste, multi-ethnic composition of the plantation labour force, views this to be problematic to the formation of an “Indian working class” (Das Gupta 1994, 170). Bose’s (1986) study of the labour movement in Assam, in 1920-21, tries to isolate a pure form of “class consciousness” from other types of protests like those over rape of women (Bose 1986, 183). In my research I argue against assuming that a universal “Indian working class” can be located, or that a pure type of “class consciousness” can be tracked. As I have argued, any analysis of the plantation labour force of Assam Valley must understand class formation in its intersectionality with other social categories, a process which is geographically and culturally specific. Similarly, class consciousness cannot be grasped outside of complex historically constituted identities, understood in their complexities. The absence of gender as a category of analysis in the historiography of plantation labour in Assam also reflects the absence of feminist historiography in the scholarship in Assam. Therefore, my study of the plantation labour force as a

gendered formation that is understood within the context of larger processes of colonialism, capitalism and nationalism, addresses this gap.

Almost all of the research that I refer to here on plantation labour focuses on the later phase of colonial history of Assam, that is, from about 1900 to 1947. By focussing on the establishment of the tea industry in early colonial Assam, 1826 to 1910, I draw attention to the specificity of this early period in the formation of the plantation labour force and the politics that accompanied this process.

The historiography of plantation labour has documented the constitution of 'coolie' labour as a new form of labour that was created in the context of the industrial plantations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that led to the establishment of a world market for this type of labour force (Tinker 1974; Bremen and Daniel 1992; Potts 1990). But such macrological studies are not directed to studying the specificities of geographical and cultural contexts. My research on plantation labour in Assam is also a study of the constitution of 'coolie' labour within that specific context.

Another aspect of the constitution of 'coolie' labour that has not received much attention is the construction of the 'coolie' identity by those who belong to this category as much as by others. My attention to the discourses on the 'coolie' as well as the analysis of oral traditions in Assam Valley is an attempt to understand the 'coolie' identity – as constructed by others as well by the

labourers themselves – within the matrix of the power relations that were involved.

In Chapter Two, my analysis of the politics of the labour market during the early years of the tea industry in colonial Assam Valley, 1826 to 1910, documents a process of racialization, ethnicization and proletarianization, that was simultaneously gendered and caste specific. Those interested in the cultivation of tea in Assam Valley were able to persuade the colonial government to set up a system of indentured recruitment of the labour force, that is, through a contractual agreement that binds the labourer to the employer for a specified number of years at a specified rate of pay. In Assam Valley the contract was made for two to five years but in reality the contractual agreement made it hard for labourers to leave because non-compliance was made liable for criminal prosecution and planters on one pretext or other stretched the contract well beyond the stipulated time. The planters were also armed with the legal powers of a district magistrate which meant that they were often the sole authority on the plantations. Beginning from 1863, officially organized immigration of labourers into the plantations of Assam Valley saw the migration of an impoverished group of people – men, women and children – who were all contracted to work as labourers on the plantations. The indentured system cut into the bargaining power of the local male labourers who until the introduction of the indentured system had been employed as tea labourers – clearing jungles, planting and picking tea leaves. The immigrants were not only paid the lowest wages possible,

but often planters were able to withhold even those meagre wages and literally work them till they dropped dead.

By constructing tea picking as a 'lighter task', therefore suitable for female labourers, planters availed themselves of a female workforce who were paid lower wages than the male labourers. Over time this contributed to the naturalization of tea picking as women's work. Also, the introduction of a group of people of specific caste and ethnicities from outside the region specifically for employment on the plantations under strict supervision and constant surveillance of the plantation hierarchy, contributed to their isolation from the local population of Assam Valley. By the end of the nineteenth century tea labourers in Assam Valley had come to be identified with a particular segment of the population, so that in Assam Valley the identity of those who worked as tea labourers became inseparable from the tasks they were performing. The period of my study, 1826 to 1910, coincides with the period of indentured immigration, 1863 to 1908, in Assam Valley, which was a very violent period in the history of plantation labour. While Bengali nationalists did draw attention to the plight of the plantation labour force, their conditions went almost unnoticed by the native population of Assam Valley.

In Chapter Three, basing my research on both dominant written records as well as oral traditions, that is the *Jhumurgeet* practised to this day on the plantations of Assam Valley, I construct a picture of everyday life on the colonial plantations under indenture laws. Drawing on feminist research that recognizes women as agents rather than passive victims, I document patterns of survival

and resistance of the female labourers on the plantations of Assam Valley under indenture laws from 1863 to 1910. My study finds that female labourers migrated to Assam Valley expecting to have an easier life working as tea pickers. Most of the women came with family members, recruited not as dependents but as individual workers with their own contracts. But because of the hetero-gendered norm of the time, their contracts were tied to that of a male labourer or guardian, as the women were deemed unable to take charge of their lives. This made it more difficult for female labourers to make decisions regarding their contracts which were already oppressive and exploitative under indenture laws and virtually prevented single women from coming to work on plantations. Women who did attempt to migrate on their own faced moral opprobrium as 'loose' and 'immoral' women.

For many of the women the journey itself was an indication of things to come. Crowded into flats that were drawn by steamers like cattle, ravaged by diseases, faced with physical and sexual abuse, starved and faced with the prospect of death, many chose to end their lives by jumping off the steamers, which under the circumstances provided the only escape. Those who made it to the plantations had already lost many of their family with whom they were travelling, either through death or separation.

The everyday life on the plantation was one of long hours of work, from dawn to dusk, every single day without respite. Wages were not paid at all, or sometimes only a fraction of what was due. Starvation, disease and death characterized life on the plantation. Every minute of the labourer's day was

subjected to strict surveillance. At work women were supervised by their male gang leaders, or *sardars*, and by the *sahib* or white planter himself. Flogging as a form of discipline was the norm and every imaginable abuse was perpetrated on them. Barrack houses or 'labour lines' served as residences where females were forced to share quarters with the male labourers. Watchmen known as *line chowkidars* watched their every move in the 'lines'. Family life was not encouraged by the plantation authority in the early years, although from about the end of the nineteenth century some independent huts for families were constructed in a few of the plantations. There is overwhelming evidence that women during the period of indenture, 1863 to 1908, resorted to abortions to avoid bringing children into the harsh realities of plantation life.

Although escape was next to impossible and any attempt if unsuccessful only brought the wrath of the planters upon them, many women did escape and appear in the records as 'absconders'. Often they directly confronted their powerful employers and supervisors when faced with physical and sexual abuse. Such actions in most cases led to charges of 'assault', 'rioting' or some other charge for 'unlawful' conduct. Yet, there is evidence that many women even approached the legal system to bring attention to their cases, even though the chances of redress were next to nothing.

Female labourers did not hesitate to join with their male counterparts in cases of 'rioting' against the plantation authority for non-payment of wages or ill treatment of other labourers, which often brought on serious consequences for themselves through criminal prosecution and imprisonment or the rough and

ready 'justice' of the plantation authority itself. The evidence of cases of 'rioting', 'assaults' and 'insults' on plantation authority increased towards the latter part of the period of my study, that is from about the 1880's. During the period 1863 to 1910 the mortality rate of females on the plantations was often higher than that of their male counterparts – and can in part be explained by high rates of death during childbirth. These harsh conditions of everyday life that were normalized on the plantations of Assam Valley during the period of my study, 1826 to 1910, are preserved in the oral traditions as historical memory that vividly recall the details of the harsh realities on the plantations and lament the injustices that were perpetrated.

In Chapter Four, I have analyzed the *Jhumurgeet* for the historical memory of the period pertaining to my study. The injustices of the era of indentured contract continue to be evoked by the tea garden labourers of the Assam Valley - some of whom are descended from the survivors of this early period. The memory of the indentured contract that bound the early labourers permanently to the plantations, and the physical abuse and emotional pain that was suffered in these early years, is remembered. The institutionalized proletarianization, ethnicization and gendered hierarchy of the plantation workforce that was put in place during the early years of the tea industry are recalled in songs and dance. The memories of the early period play a significant role in continuing to shape the subjectivities of the tea labour community of Assam Valley.

In my study an attempt to understand the location of female tea labourers in Assam Valley led me to processes and practices that located females in a particular task in the plantation structure. This in turn led me to an analysis of the production of labour itself. Although the tea industry in Assam had its genesis in the imperialist politics of colonial capitalism, it was deeply implicated in local politics of caste, class, gender, ethnicity and heterosexuality. By placing the production of labour in an imperial social formation, I show the intersection of the imperial with national and local social formations. This allows for a comparative study of plantation labour by understanding the specificity of a historically constituted labour force in a particular geographical and cultural context. Such an analysis of the historical formation of tea labourers in Assam has allowed for a clearer understanding of the preponderance of female labourers in Assam Valley.

My analysis of the production of tea labourers in Assam Valley also makes the point that identities are historically constituted. Although politics continually keep shaping and reshaping these identities through a struggle to reinstate particular hegemonic representations, these politics are played out on a historical terrain, which in turn is changed by these politics. Therefore my study of the production of labour in Assam Valley is at the same time a study of the politics of social categories and identities that have constituted labour. The politics of gender is at the same time a politics of class, caste and community. My effort to study the location of women in a certain structural position on the plantations led me to analyze the multiple axes of power and their effects on these women. My study, is to my knowledge, the only one to attempt a study of gender relations in



colonial Assam Valley. Through this study I emphasize that gender as a category constitutive of social relations must be central to research, historical or contemporary.

While surveying the literature on the tea industry in Assam Valley from its earliest times up to the present, the only substantive research undertaken that I came across that focussed on gender relations was Shobita Jain's (1988) *Sexual Equality: Workers in an Asian Plantation System*. A significant contribution, her ethnographic account is a detailed study of gender relations in a contemporary plantation in Assam Valley. Although absent in this study, in a later article (1998) "Gender Relations and Plantation System in Assam, India", she tries to provide a historical and cultural context to her discussion of gender relations, which is based on earlier ethnographic research. Her effort also emphasizes the need to understand contemporary studies that are undertaken in their historical context. This approach might address questions of social change and provide a better understanding of subjectivities that are shaped within these contexts. In-depth interviewing of females in the plantations, included in contemporary studies are likely to provide a clearer picture of some very significant trends that Jain (1988) notes in her study, for instance, a disinclination of female labourers to participate in union activity. Conducting interviews with men and children might better explain gender relations on the plantations. Such studies are yet to be undertaken.

In my historical study I have analyzed the oral traditions and dealt with the question of the subjectivity of the community. While I have analyzed the

hegemonic narratives in the oral traditions of the community relating to class, ethnicity and gender, I have not explored ways that members of the labour community either resisted or reinforced these narratives. My study did not allow for an analysis in this direction, based as it is on recorded tradition represented by certain individuals of the community. My inability for the purpose of this study to observe oral tradition in their ritual context and see for myself the dynamics of different groups and interact with the people no doubt remains a gap in the study. This at the same time provides a direction for future study.

I have in this concluding section pointed to the many gaps in the historical research on plantation labour in Assam Valley and tried to build on those research areas that have not been addressed before. I believe I have contributed to an understanding of the social relations of the labour community in Assam Valley by placing them within larger political, economic and cultural processes. By doing so I direct attention to the relationality of feminist, anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and Marxist struggles. That feminist struggles in the 'third world' developed in the context of anti-colonial national struggles, demonstrates the historical links of 'first' and 'third world' politics, as well as the geographical and cultural specificity of these struggles.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **The major groups constituting the tea labour community in Assam Valley**

1. Koya
2. Korua
3. Kondha
4. Kamar
5. Kahar
6. Kalondi
7. Kisan
8. Kurmi
9. Kumhar
10. Keot
11. Koeri
12. Kol
13. Kotowal
14. Kharia
15. Kheruar
16. Khondite
17. Khodal
18. Gor
19. Gorait
20. Gonju
21. Godora
22. Goala
23. Gajolu
24. Ghatowar
25. Ghasi
26. Saora
27. Santhal
28. Chamar
29. Chikbaraik
30. Suri
31. Sowar
32. Joloha
33. Bhom
34. Tasa
35. Tanti
36. Teli
37. Turi
38. Telenga
39. Tonua
40. Napit

41. Dusadh
42. Dhanowar
43. Dhobi
44. Pator
45. Panika
46. Poroja
47. Borike
48. Bauri
49. Bagoti
50. Baiga
51. Bania
52. Barhai
53. Basphor
54. Bedia
55. Bhumij
56. Bhuinya
57. Bhuimali
58. Bhokta
59. Bhil
60. Manki
61. Mahali
62. Malahar
63. Mal
64. Malpaharia
65. Munda
66. Modi
67. Mirdha
68. Mali
69. Malpatra
70. Mahanty
71. Rojok
72. Robidas
73. Rajowar
74. Rajput
75. Lohar
76. Lodhi
77. Hari
78. Hira
79. Oraon
80. Ahir

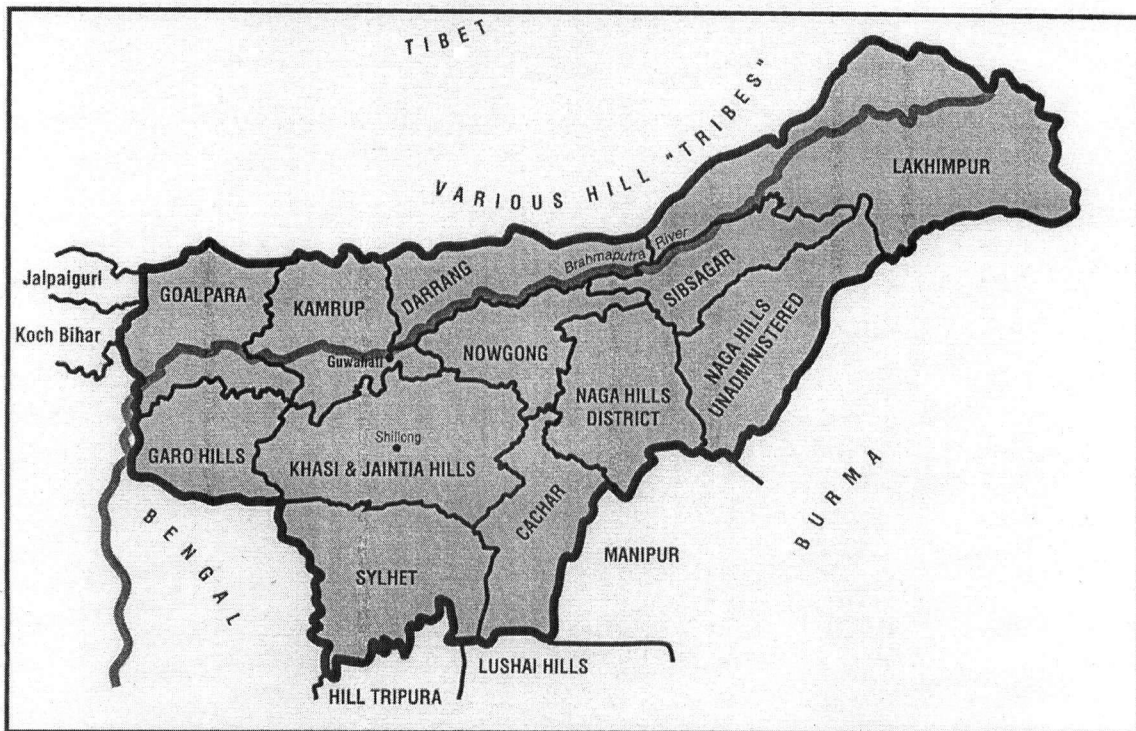
Reproduced from Kurmi 1993, 3.

## APPENDIX B

### Maps

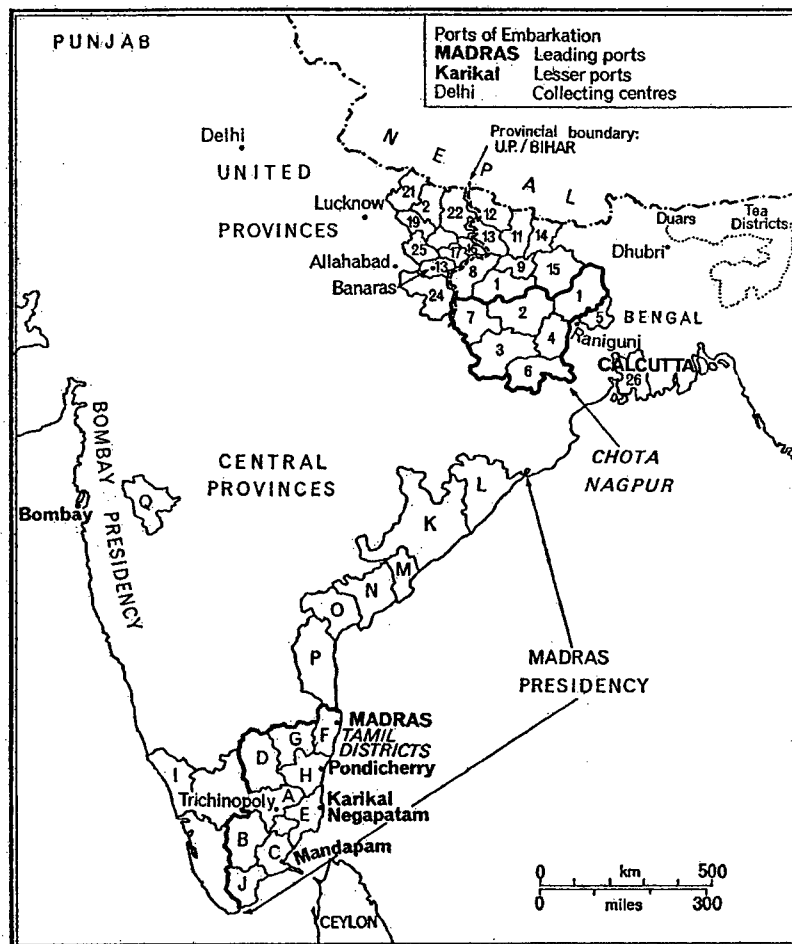
Map 1:

Assam under the jurisdiction of the Chief Commissioner 1875.



Reproduced from Baruah 1999.

Map 2:



### Main Districts of Recruitment

Note: each group is listed in order of concentration of recruitment

#### SOUTH INDIA

##### The Tamil Districts

- A. Trichinopoly
- B. Madura
- C. Ramnad
- D. Salem
- E. Tanjore
- F. Chingleput
- G. North Arcot
- H. South Arcot
- I. Malabar
- J. Tinnevely

##### Telugu Districts

- K. Vizagapatam
- L. Ganjam
- M. East Godavari
- N. West Godavari
- O. Guntur

#### P. Nellore

##### Bombay Presidency

- Q. Ahmadnagar District

#### NORTH INDIA

##### Hill Coolie Districts

1. Santal Parganas
2. Hazaribagh
3. Ranchi
4. Manbhum
5. Birbhum
6. Singhbhum
7. Palamau

##### Bihari Districts

8. Shahabad
9. Patna
10. Gaya
11. Muzaffarpur

#### 12. Champaran

13. Saran
14. Darbhanga
15. Monghyr

##### Districts of the United Provinces

16. Ballia
17. Ghazipur
18. Azamghar
19. Fyzabad
20. Basti
21. Gonda
22. Gorakhpur
23. Banaras
24. Mirzapur
25. Jaunpur

##### Calcutta Metropolitan Area

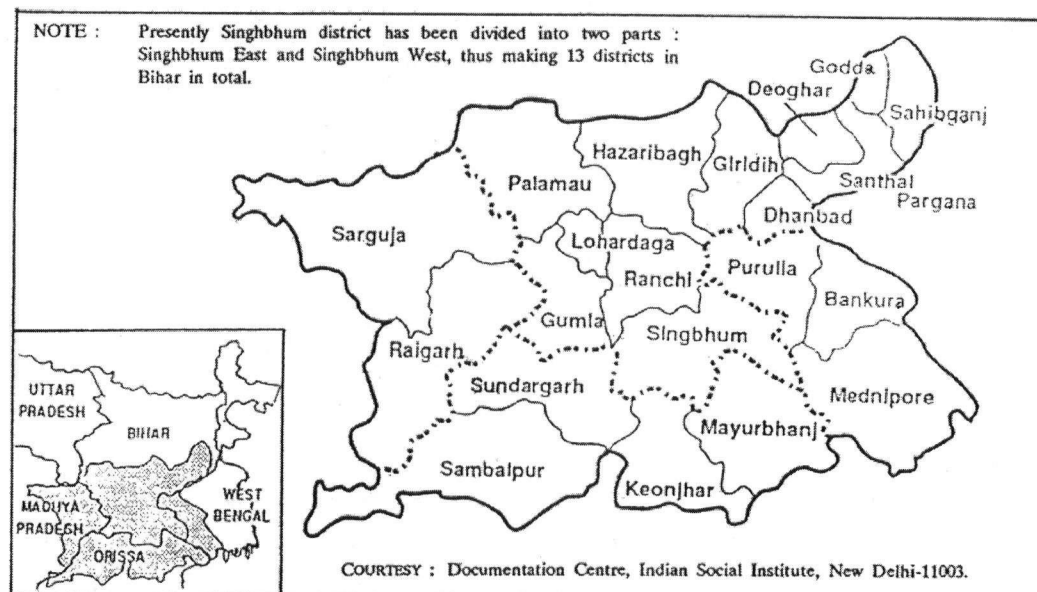
26. Twenty-Four Parganas

Reproduced from Tinker 1974.



Map 3:

The present state of Jharkhand. Reproduced from the Government of Jharkhand web site.



*Area of Jharkhand (Proposed)*

Reproduced from Victor Das Jharkhand: Castle over the graves, New Delhi, Inter India, 1992