

Growing Tea: Lazy Natives and Colonialism's Coolies

Jayeeta Sharma

Introduction: 1. Working Nature's Bounty

In 1834, the British “discovery” of the tea plant induced glowing agrarian visions for newly conquered Assam. Producing and consuming tea could offer the British Empire’s subject peoples “the opportunity of becoming partakers of that civilization, that innocent commerce, that knowledge and that faith with which it has pleased a gracious Providence to bless our own country.”¹ However, such colonial euphoria over a new Eden was diminished by a poor opinion of its inhabitants. While instituting Assam’s plantation regime, British colonialism discovered yet another set of Empire’s “lazy natives” as its main obstacle.²

In this paper, I consider how and why British administrators and planters created a migrant, “coolie” labouring class for the Assam tea industry. The plantation proper developed in colonial Assam as a site for tea “production on a large scale with a division of labour and financial arrangements which are typical of industry rather than agriculture.”³ I show that the British colonial state helped the plantation sector to acquire a racialized, gendered, and uprooted migrant work-force for its needs, while pioneering tea-growers from China and Assam were denigrated and bypassed. I discuss how this tea industry was predominantly a colonial enterprise, but it allowed a small amount of participation, in subordinate and dependent roles, to local middle classes. This meant that even when anti-colonial Indian opinion attacked the tea planter’s policies, the plantation industry itself retained its place in the Indian bourgeois imagination.

2. Chinese Skill, Assam Jungle

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the words China and tea were virtually synonymous. While tea grew wild in different parts of Monsoon Asia, its need for extensive processing meant that use as a beverage was rooted in a particular set of settled agri/cultural mores. The Chinese were cultivating, consuming, and marketing the crop many centuries before the industrializing societies of the “modern West” made it a truly global commodity.⁴ From the seventeenth century onward, tea found new markets through Sino-European commerce. In its subsequent history, tea was a primary commodity within the capitalist world system, produced within a system of

“scientific” tropical cultivation involving large parts of the globe in circulatory flows of knowledge, capital, and labour.

Robert Gardella’s work shows how China’s tea industry relied on mainly on peasant family labour, alongside skilled seasonal workers.⁵ By the mid-Qing period, petty producers were numerous, utilizing family labour to grow and crudely process tea. Wealthy peasants would also hire a few hands, especially at harvesting time, while a few big merchants rented land, planted tea and managed production with wage workers.⁶ Even for the peasants who converted their own raw leaves into crude or semi-processed tea for the market, specialists were usually needed to complete production.⁷ The early phase of tea production in colonial Assam was dominated by British reverence for Chinese expertise in processing and growing tea. British hostility towards the Qing government coexisted with viewing China’s “tea planters” as indispensable. The normally miserly East India Company opened its purse wide to woo Chinese tea-growers. Despite their excitement at locating tea forests, the colonial rulers were not sanguine about the knowledge to be gained from Assam’s “savage” inhabitants. While the East India Company tried to obtain tea leaves through the local population, it also set up a parallel, experimental venture to cultivate tea in nurseries, using smuggled China seeds and plants, supervised by an Englishman, C.A. Bruce. It was felt the cultivated China tea grown in Assam would be accepted by the British palate as its wild cousin might not.

An important supporter was Lord William Bentinck, then British India’s Governor-General. In 1829, his lordship visited the East India Company’s settlements in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore where he observed the Chinese “character”, declaring that their superior energy, their industry, their spirit of speculation and calculation of profit was quite equal to that of any European nation. When the India tea enterprise was launched, Bentinck was enthusiastic for Chinese manpower. He stated, “My idea is that an intelligent agent should go down to Penang and Singapore, and...concert measures for obtaining the *genuine* plant, and the actual cultivators...who shall then be employed, under the promise of liberal remuneration, to carry on the cultivation.”⁸ Although Assam’s Singpho people were already providing tea leaves, the East India Company’s administration was convinced that the region required Chinese tea-growers.

The early documents about Indian tea, collated for the British Parliament in 1839, described the Chinese people as “tea-planters” or “tea-growers”.⁹ This shows respect for their skills, and was strikingly different from the pejorative, all-encompassing epithet of “coolie”

usually applied to the Chinese worker. Although there was more than a whiff of essentialism about the association of Chinese and tea! About the Chinese tea-growers recruited to Assam, little is known. The earliest Chinese “planter” was A-mong, who in 1832, set up the East India Company’s first experimental estate, Chubwa. He purchased the property for Rs 900 when the Company divested itself of its direct producing interests. But he failed to make a sufficient and resold to an East India merchant, James Warren.¹⁰ There is a little more information about Lumqua, a Calcutta physician, whom the Assam Company described as “a kind of Captain with Magisterial powers among his countrymen.”¹¹ His services were valuable, since the Tea Committee proposed to pay him Rs 400 p.a. for his duties as manager and interpreter. The Calcutta government was most reluctant to hire Lumqua at this high salary. Instead, it recommended, in his place, a carpenter from Chinatown who would accept just Rs 40 for interpretation work and other, “practically useful” skills.¹² The Tea Committee did try, but they had to report that the carpenter’s interpretation abilities were non-existent.¹³ Ultimately, the new joint-stock Assam Company, incorporated in London in 1839, inherited the Government’s assets and responsibilities, and appointed Lumqua to oversee its Chinese workers. At his recommendation, the Assam Co. hired E-kan, a “very respectable Chinese merchant” to recruit “volunteer labourers” in Penang and Singapore.¹⁴ Other recruiters were directed to “pick up as many capable hands as can be had from the China junks.”¹⁵ Labourers were to be paid Rs 16, artisans Rs 45, and apprentices Rs 20 p.m. In all, some 300 odd Chinese were sent to Assam, mostly from Malaya and Singapore, following Bentinck’s advocacy. This was against the advice of William Griffith, a well-known botanist. He agreed on getting “first-rate Chinese cultivators and manufacturers,” but disagreed on their provenance, “I found that among all the so-called Chinese at Mogaung, Bamo and Ava... there is not a single genuine Chinaman.”¹⁶

This use of “genuine” is revealing. Bentinck had applied the term only to the plant. This was in keeping with the early anxieties over Assam tea, about the authenticity of the wild variety, the suitability of the land and climate. With Griffith’s objection to the overseas Chinese, we enter a fresh chapter, about labour. The East India Company was the master of vast Indian “wastelands”, and after the Charter Act of 1838, they were thrown open to European enterprise.¹⁷ The Assam tea-plant was deemed suitable to be grown on these lands, but only after careful nurturing. For this, a genuine Chinese tea-grower was essential. But what was the purport of genuine? Was it a racial connotation for the people of the entire China mainland or did it simply

denote the inhabitants of China's tea producing regions, people who were accustomed to cultivating and processing the crop? It is easier if we consider the people whom Griffith explicitly excluded from his understanding of genuine, i.e., the immigrants found outside the country. In Griffith's mind, a genuine Chinaman was one who was racially, ecologically, and climatically, based in China, not one who had left for other shores. This is a crude and early foreshadowing of the late-nineteenth century race science theories which held that migration and exposure to other locations produced racial degeneration. Since the Assam Company obtained Chinese only from the Straits coolie networks, their bona fide status seemed questionable.¹⁸

Griffith's opinion would have better withstood the test of time if he had expressed his doubts in a different idiom, that itinerant Chinese workers might be totally ignorant of tea cultivation. Instead, the elision of Chinese and tea meant that, as an Assam Company employee nastily commented, "Every man with a tail was supposed to be qualified to cultivate, manipulate, and prepare tea."¹⁹ Penang and Singapore entrants were supplemented by a Macao group, claimed to be skilled artisans.²⁰ After various forfeitures of money and effort in finding the right men, the "once mysterious and still curious process" of tea production, seemed well under way, with the first batch made by "our China manufacturers" reaching England in 1838.²¹ But this roseate outlook was short-lived. Lumqua died in August, 1840.²² This marked the beginning of the end, with the desire for Chinese labour abruptly killed off in desertions, death, and disillusionment. Complaints about obstreperous Chinese increased. There was a "riot" by 245 Chinese labourers recruited from Malaya, when they found that the recruiter had cheated them of their promised payment. Subsequently they were involved in a violent confrontation, on the journey. Finding them "turbulent, obstinate and rapacious", the Assam Company sent many back, except the "most experienced tea-makers and the quietest men."²³

It is difficult to unravel the reality faced by these anonymous, voiceless workers from the blanket condemnation of the colonial archive. Paradoxically, the Chinese, previously stereotyped by Europeans as universally possessed of skills and refinement, were now stigmatized as behaving as "too great gentlemen."²⁴ But even our unsympathetic sources admit the dislocation these workers faced, landing in Calcutta after a two-month voyage to find they had to travel a further three months into the interior under arduous conditions, unfamiliar work, climate, and disease, all with very little in the way of proper communication with their employers. This riot can be seen as the result of such men abandoned to their own devices en-route, expected to pay

even for their food from meagre advances. They were a part of long-standing Chinese employment and migration networks in South-east Asia, and had firm expectations of what they were due. Clearly, the Assam Company and its intermediaries were renegeing on customary employer obligations, the payment and work norms set by the Straits credit-ticket system.²⁵ This could explain why so many Chinese demanded the ticket-money for their return at Calcutta port, long before they reached Assam. For the workers who did make the journey to Upper Assam, there was a marked gap between what they signed for, and what their employers expected. The Assam Company fulminated, “[they] object to do anything else but make tea. When spoken to, they threaten to leave the service if they are insulted by being asked to work.”²⁶ What work exactly, was the point. The Chinese were hired for their tea skills, but the scarcity of general labour and the newness of the venture meant that they were called upon for all kinds of gruelling tasks. All this, while physically debilitated in new surroundings, overwhelmed by disease and unfamiliar food, fearing they would never see home or family again.

In this first stage, an essential, but difficult task was to clear the extensive forest undergrowth. Upper Assam’s local inhabitants appeared to suit, particularly since these “wild” people were already accustomed to using fire and axes to clear jungle for shifting cultivation. Near the Naga villages, as Parker reported, “by presents and good treatment, many of these wild people have been induced to help in the labour of clearing the jungle. A few cowrie shells and a buffalo feast have established a very amicable feeling with these people which may be serviceable hereafter.”²⁷ In addition, about 90 men were brought in, mostly Asomiya-speaking peasants from Jorhat, paid at the rate of Rs 4 p.m, since unlike China’s old cultivated tracts, Assam’s jungles required larger inputs of wearisome manual labour.

There is a glaring disparity between the remuneration made to the Chinese and to these locals. For the former, the British had not much choice, given that they were competing with the well-established Straits networks. The Assam Company resented paying “four or five times the local wage rate” to the Straits workers. Partly, this accounts for the spiteful comments about the airs and graces of Chinese gentlemen. No wonder that they were so delighted by the Nagas who had no use for money (given their barter economy) and were content to be paid in “shells, beads, rice &c.”²⁸ But, again, the downside of employing “a wild people” like the Naga was that they could not be induced to work for more than a few days at a time, appearing and disappearing without prior warning. That was why the British were trying their best to recruit from amongst

other local groups, and to bring them under engagement for a fixed term. But it was difficult to keep them, and still more so to trace them, “so as to bring them back to fulfill their engagements when they have once deserted.”²⁹ Assam’s ecology also imposed a high cost, as during the monsoon, many fell ill, of malaria and other ailments. Lacking medical or dietary care, the attrition rate was high. In 1840-1, during June to September, more than half could not work.

Already, we have a simple explanation why the colonial tea enterprise was constantly plagued by desertions. It offered punishing work in inhospitable terrain and climate, for wages kept as low as possible. The Chinese experiment failed miserably, mostly on this account. Not only did local workers leave whenever they could, but they made their feelings heard in other ways. In the midst of the optimistic predictions in the Assam Company’s annual report was the admission that there was “on every payday a general strike among the taklars [local Assamese tea-makers], and some have left the employ, refusing to sign a covenant.”³⁰ Grudgingly enough, Charles Bruce conceded that it had become necessary to promise to the workers “an increase of Rs 1 p.m., on their present salary after they have signed a covenant for 3 years, and have served 1 year, and a further increase of Rs 1 p.m. for each succeeding year.”³¹ Even with this raise, this was far below what the Chinese were charging. Low availability of waged work meant that the Assam Company could get away with paying meagre wages to locals, but never could retain workers for long. Many labourers were there unwillingly, since in a planter’s recollection, “the Gaon Bura [headman] of the local village supplied the labour.”³² Finding they were toiling for a pittance, many of those conscripted voted with their feet. It is a strange irony that after all the effort put into obtaining Chinese labour, the tea establishment did not try too hard to keep the remaining few contented. Partly, this was due to their high cost, especially since it was still possible to keep the tea clearances going, even with the irregular local labour. Once the active role of the East India Company and its scientific experts receded, the economic rationale of the tea capitalists came to the fore, demanding cheap labour, rather than skilled. While the Assam Company condemned the Chinese as obstreperous, it was casting around for alternatives.

The ultimate replacement for the Chinese was another variety of imported worker, again viewed through a racialized prism, but differently. The new “coolie” labour, imported from elsewhere in India, proved the essential element for the Assam garden’s success. But, it is important to note that the tea venture never could totally isolate itself from Assam’s indigenous peoples. It just lost its dependence on them. The later visibility of imported workers has often

obscured the significant participation of various local groups. At different times, participants in the tea venture included the Singpho, Khamti and Naga “hill-tribes” living in and around Upper Assam, the Kachari “plains tribes” who travelled from Lower Assam in search of seasonal wage-work, and the caste-Hindu “Asomiya” peasants settled in villages around the tea tracts. In addition, there were interesting connections between local elites and the tea enterprise. We will discuss how the involvement of Assamese groups, whether as labourers, supervisors or planters, changed over time and fluctuated in scope, based on the shifting needs of colonial capital and changing local Assamese attitudes to the tea industry.

3. Lazy Peasants and Opium Eaters

*If it shines, he prefers shade, If he gets shade, he sleeps, When the season is over, He plants in a plot or two of land. Assam folksong satirizing the local peasant*³³

To understand the relationship between the emerging plantations and the local population, a brief look at Assam’s landscape and economy is in order. The 1901 Gazetteer described Upper Assam as “a wide plain on which there is hardly any jungle to be seen. On the lower levels, the staple crop is transplanted rice, while the higher levels have been planted out with tea.”³⁴ At the turn of the century, this landscape represented the “second nature”³⁵ of ecological transformation, resulting from the introduction of new cultivation on the alluvial slopes of the Brahmaputra valley. In 1858, Sibsagar district, already possessed 15 tea estates, started on 13,977 acres from the district’s estimated 1,612,636 acres of wasteland.³⁶ By 1901, the colonial tea enterprise extended to 164 plantations, which held 244,653 acres.³⁷ The cropped area under rice and other crops was 357,135 acres. Unfortunately, we do not have adequate information about the extent of peasant (rice) cultivation over these years.

For the locals, *bhaat* (cooked rice) denoted food. Rice, fish and *saak* (wild greens), formed an essential part of the diet. For all except the orthodox upper castes, this was supplemented by *lao-pani* (rice beer). Therefore, rice was always the most important crop. The Brahmaputra plain was characterized by small-scale peasant holdings whose inhabitants practiced a multi-tiered system of plough-based cultivation on wet-rice lands, using *faringati* (dry) lands for other, inferior varieties, and collecting timber and other necessities from non-arable, forested commons. The large estates were few, usually religious or notables’ estates,

formerly cultivated with servile labour, now being turned over to tenants or sharecroppers. Noteworthy was that, by the mid-nineteenth century, a non-food crop occupied second place after rice. This was opium, with its great advantage of a rapidly expanding demand. While its average after-harvest price in the 1840s was Rs 5 per *seer*, the retail price could rise to Rs 80 a *seer*, during the lean months. Also, the migrant “Marwari” trader-financiers who had entered Assam alongside the British, were very willing to provide cash advances to peasants, but not for rice.³⁸ In the virtual absence of a rice market, the sales of opium and mustard to these traders enabled Assam peasants to pay cash revenue dues, and buy market necessities like salt.³⁹ The rice crop was necessary to maintain the household, and the opium crop to earn money. This was the situation when the Assam Company was hoping for local labour. Certainly, a good many peasants did respond to tea work, then and later. To meet an urgent need for cash, or as a source of extra income in the slack season, there were few options, since most local work tended to be paid in kind. But, they were not likely to stay over-long and neglect their own fields.

This was how Assam’s lazy native was discovered. Occasionally, colonial observers admitted that given the abundant land availability, the peasant would find wage labour unattractive. One official reported that it was very rare for an Assamese living at a distance to leave his home for the mere inducement of getting work in a tea garden. “Their taking such work at all is generally attributed to temporary necessity, as for instance, inability to pay their revenue, wanting to get married and not having the necessary means, being in debt to a Keya [Marwari migrant trader], or as more commonly happens, pawning their freedom, being in want of a yoke of buffaloes for cultivating purposes.”⁴⁰ Such clear-sightedness became less common as the colonial regime became more entrenched. As the tea venture’s need for a regular, disciplined labour force became more urgent, so did its frustration. British officials began to speculate that it was an innate indolence in Assam’s people, perhaps a climatic or racial trait which made labouring work unpopular. This explanation of indolence gained scientific, medicinal credence when the peasant access to opium was taken into account. Not only were the Assamese peasants lazy, nature compounded their weakness by providing a fertile soil where all crops grew in easy profusion. Captain Rowlatt stated how Nature’s bounty added a fatal element to human failing. “It is the low cost and great ease with which every ryot is able to procure a supply of opium that so thoroughly demoralizes the whole people... This, if it produces no worse consequence, most certainly induces great laziness... the peculiar characteristic of the Assamese people.”⁴¹

Historical evidence on opium use indicates that by the eighteenth century, Ahom notables consumed it in emulation of North Indian elites. When Captain Welsh arrived to aid the Ahom king in 1792, he witnessed it growing abundantly in Lower Assam.⁴² Chroniclers such as Haliram Dhekial Phukan⁴³ and Maniram Dewan⁴⁴ were perturbed that opium use had spread from the aristocracy to the ordinary people. But this was a far cry from the moral outrage emanating from colonial officials, denying the economic logic behind its cultivation, and instead, regarding opium addiction as a congenital Assamese defect. The material meaning behind opium cultivation was completely ignored. Rather than opium as a commercial crop under peasant control, opium was a home-grown, morally dubious luxury. Some medical men felt that it had value in a malarial climate, but the usual reaction castigated local society for sloth and indulgence. Most outrageous was that like the alcohol of the English factory worker, opium was a needless luxury for the peasant. Moral turpitude was even more when this luxury was in such abundance that he could afford to regale even his wife and child with it!⁴⁵ Opium was the definitive sign of the profligate native. Not content with wasting nature's bounty, the peasants were abusing it to reinforce their moral and physical inadequacy. Captain John Butler's memoir magisterially declared, "The utter want of an industrious, enterprising spirit and the general degeneracy of the Assamese people are greatly promoted by the prevalent use of opium."⁴⁶

Notwithstanding such moral rhetoric, the East India Company had a long standing relationship with opium, with a British-Indian monopoly in place since 1773 to service the China trade and send Indian remittances to Britain. After the Opium Wars, the supply of Indian opium smuggled into China rose sharply, but the Company still needed other, closer markets. Accordingly, arrangements were made to sell Bengal opium in Assam in the 1840s and 1850s. But these met with little success, with an abundant local supply grown in the peasants' gardens.⁴⁷ Justice Mills' suggestion was adopted, "Opium they should have, but to get it they should be made to work for it."⁴⁸ Local indolence and tea labour shortage were the two problems facing the British state, and this linked the two very effectively. In 1861, opium growing in Assam was banned. But a wide network of state-licensed opium sellers was set up. Purchasing opium from the market, it was hoped, would forcibly drag the Assamese peasant into a world of wage labour.

4. The Primitive Exception

These labouring discourses and practices in the locality should be seen in the larger context of the colonial construction of racial differences, especially the perceived physicality of race. In India, the race science of Europe found new scope, as British colonial administration ordered and separated groups into tribes and castes. A discursive framework was built around ideas about savages and primitives, and about hunting, pastoralism, agriculture, and commerce. Ajay Skaria has shown how by seizing upon and magnifying racial and cultural differences among different groups of people, an exhaustive list of the “tribes of India” was prepared. In almost all cases, the so-called tribes shared more cultural, social and economic practices with their caste neighbours than with the other distant, Indian “tribes” with whom officials clubbed them. Skaria sees this listing of tribes as the real invention of primitive societies.⁴⁹ Even more importantly, this invention was occurring just when the colonial regime was withdrawing from its earlier promotion of skilled and “civilized” labour for the tea industry. The quest for a more amenable labourer led to a new interest in the “primitive virtues” of India’s “tribal” populations.

Assam, with its “heterogenous” population, provided many additions to the list of Indian tribes. It was not difficult to find a promising group for the colonial tea enterprise. These were the Kacharis, mostly living in the Lower Assam districts of Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Darrang, and Goalpara. Already, in 1841, the Assam Company had attempted to bring in “gangs of Cacharee settlers from Gowhatty” to Upper Assam, but they seemed as prone to desertion as other locals. But we find colonial sources already beginning to distinguish Kachari “tribals” from caste-Hindus and other “Asomiyas” in terms of their primitiveness, and their capacity for toil. By the 1860s, ethnographers described the Kachari as an “aboriginal race of Assam”, just as they praised them as “cheery, good-natured, semi-savage folk.”⁵⁰ The S.P.G. missionary, Sidney Endle, in charge of its new Kachari Mission, described his flock as well fitted for all forms of outdoor labour that required strength rather than skill, indeed, as being the “navvies” of Assam.⁵¹

Writing in the late-nineteenth century, Sidney Endle and other commentators followed an earlier tradition of colonial ethnography which had emphasized distinctions between the “Tamulian” and “Caucasian” races of India. The Kacharis were first studied by the Himalayan explorer Brian Hodgson who by 1839, had written a number of them about the “aboriginal” inhabitants of the Bengal Presidency.⁵² David Arnold has shown us how by the 1830s, once Europeans had acquired greater access to the interiors of the Indian

subcontinent, they began distinguishing between the Indians of the plains, as an Indo-Caucasian race, and indigenous groups inhabiting hilly and forested territories, conceptualized as aboriginal or tribal peoples. Several traits were subsumed in understanding the latter, a minimal use of clothing, hunting and/or shifting cultivation, living in jungle habitats, signifiers marking out tribal from civilized Indians.⁵³ While bodily and ecological habits were seen as important, Hodgson recognized that these were often loosely applied. On his explorations, he made a large collection of vocabularies from the sub-Himalayan regions of India and Nepal. These convinced him that its non-Caucasian inhabitants belonged to a race unique to India. He termed this race the Tamulian, asserting that they were the country's autochthones, forced to flee into the hills and forests by later, racially, and linguistically distinct migrants.⁵⁴ From Hodgson's research on "the Koch, Mech and Dhimals", Endle and others borrowed the notion that these peoples were fragments of a larger Bodo Kachari race, an offshoot of the larger Tamulian. Significantly, Hodgson called attention to the physical suitability of the Tamulians for life and work in territories inhospitable to the Caucasian races. This insight was carried further by subsequent ethnographic work. Thus, it became a matter of common sense for Assam's colonial administrators that the Kacharis possessed a "share in the marvellous freedom from the effects of malaria which characterizes nearly all the Tamulian aborigines of India, as the Kols, the Bheels and the Gonds."⁵⁵ This ethnographic find became an important consideration for Assam's labour recruitment. Reeling with frequent labour losses, the tea industry welcomed this knowledge.

We guard against a too simple focus on European racial ideology when we note that it was the Assam Raja Purandar Singha who drew British attention to the Kacharis. When they asked to use his lands for tea, the king agreed, adding his recommendation that they recruit workers from among the "Cacharees", since they were the labouring class. Certainly, Assam's folklore with its ubiquity of tales about Kachari servants and Brahmin masters bears testimony to a longstanding hierarchical relationship between the high-status caste society of Upper Assam, and the Kachari peasants who eked out a sparse living from the sub-montane lands of their Lower Assam districts. Those Kacharis were probably the nearest that pre-colonial Assam got to agricultural wage-labour. In the labour discourses circulating in colonial Assam, there is a definite similarity between the purity-obsessed superiority of Assam's high-status groups and the British condescension towards primitivity. Francis Jenkins noted that "the Cacharee...consume

so much of their rice in making spirits that they are obliged to labour to pay their rents.”⁵⁶ Unlike the high-status, Hinduized groups who shunned (normatively at least) alcohol, Kacharis, Mishings, Nagas, and other tribal people regarded rice-beer as an essential staple. Colonial observers claimed only did this improvidence force Kacharis into the labour market to meet their rice needs, but it explained their remarkable industry. “Cacharie labourers almost invariably engage on an agreement to receive Rs 6 per month for single task work, and very frequently they stipulate for double task work for double pay.”⁵⁷

Therefore, the same “aboriginal” habits of alcohol consumption and non-settled agriculture that marked off “tribe” from “caste”, and the Kachari from the Assamese, were adduced as proof of an equally “primitive” habit of diligence. Unlike Europe and North America, industriousness in the Orient was increasingly a primitive trait. Indians who lived in the “enervating plains” were lethargic since “fertility of the soil is such that one month’s labour is enough to maintain a family in comfort for a year. This [was] the main reason for the [Assam] province not being prosperous [it] enables natives to live without exertion.”⁵⁸ But since aboriginals were the people supposedly driven out by more civilized peoples into the less productive hills, they usually needed to work hard, to live. There was a lot of inconsistency, for we find, often, the same administrators bemoaning the vagabondage peculiar to “savage” people. But for the Kacharis, and later, for “Tamulian aboriginals” from Central India, industriousness was made their defining attribute. Excited wonder was evinced at their appetite for work as when a British planter commented, “[Kacharis] travel in gangs of ten to twenty, from garden to garden, and will not take a job unless they are assured of being allowed to do at least a double day’s work in one day. After a garden is got into a good condition, and the work falls short, they will frequently pack up and move off to some other place, where their services are in demand.”⁵⁹

Remarkably, our colonial witnesses, despite noting marked differences in technology and resource base between the Kachari labourers and the Upper Assam peasantry, persisted in viewing racial difference as the ultimate determinant of work capacity. Mostly, Kachari labourers recruited by the tea venture hailed from Lower Assam communities that either used hoes or were passing through a hoe to plough shift. They were quite distinct in technology and livelihood from the wet-rice, plough-cultivating, caste Hindus termed as Assamese or Asomiyas. One official description by one official makes this clear. “The population in Dhurmpore are mostly Assamese who cultivate only with the plough, Cacharees and Mikirs who cultivate much

of the lands by the hoe alone, without the assistance of plough cattle, changing their grounds every three to four years and allowing their old fields to run to jungle and remain fallow nine to ten years.”⁶⁰ The Kacharis, a community fairly low down the ladder of pre-colonial status and power, had settled in hilly, less fertile tracts away from the river-banks, for which they did not have to provide the customary services to the Ahom king. Most of these households held land suitable only for dry rice, which yielded less than wet rice, and required fallowing after every three years. It is no wonder that, even before the British entry, these Kacharis laboured for their better-off plains neighbours. It was similar resource constraints that later sent them upon tea migrations, not an innate racial predisposition to hard, manual labour. These were seasonal, male migrants, constrained to enter into plantation wage contracts in a cash-short economy with limited channels. They availed of other earning opportunities when they could, either as “a strong element in the military and police forces”⁶¹ or as “tenants of the Government or on the Gosains’ [religious lords] lakhiraj lands.”⁶² Using multiple earning strategies, they retained links in their home villages. Endle remarked that a family with a number of sons, would have one stay back while the others made their way to tea estates for the manufacturing season, often doing double tasks by day, so as to return to the family fold in the autumn with a supply of rupees.⁶³

The British fascination with the Kacharis already had a dark side. Despite the eulogies lavished on them, the commonest complaint against all local labour was of unpredictability. Whether Asomiyas from neighbouring villages or Kacharis from afar, they tended to come and go as they pleased. The tea industry records are full of complaints about the Kacharis’ unwillingness to start work without a large advance, and how even then, “after working a few days they go home.”⁶⁴ Indeed, this makes clear how deceptive the racial labels of Asomiyas and Kacharis were, when applied to this labouring class. While fully recognizing the different imperatives and lived practices of these groups, it was their common character as local labour that made them unpalatable to the plantation’s needs. Encouraged by the British state, tea firms such as the Assam Company controlled large swathes of land and were discovering the possibilities of subordinating human skills to an industrial regime. Having learnt the basics of tea manufacture from the Chinese, British enterprise was gradually reducing it to a large number of simple yet arduous tasks. The agro-industrial enterprise of tea was taking shape. Once planters had escaped the trap of high wages for Chinese labour, it was low waged workers that they

wanted. Instead of Rs 16 a month, the wage rate had decreased to 2 annas a day! But, low wages alone were not enough to create all the attributes of a proletarian worker.

In 1854, the Assam Company's workforce, "thousands in number, and all Cacharees, went on strike, demanding an increase in pay. It appears that they encouraged by rumours circulating about the end of British rule (which later brought on the "Mutiny" in North India). This strike was resolved after a show of force by Government troops and a promise of increased wages, but even the normally sympathetic Times remarked that the tea employer maintained "rather too strict a control over its rate of wages."⁶⁵ Around this time, Assam Company records and British officials begin making sour remarks about Kachari workers, indicating that the honeymoon was ending. Kachari peasants from Lower Assam took part in 1861, with other local people, in an uprising directed against opium prohibition and a new agricultural tax on garden produce. This earned them the additional attribute of "bloodthirsty" since a British officer was killed. An unruly work-force with a potential for violent resistance was uncomfortably reminiscent of the Chinese. Mostly, it was the inevitable, unscheduled departures of the Kachari labourers which enraged colonial capital. When these men decamped without notice, either from dissatisfaction at low wages or to work their own lands and be with their families, the tea enterprise fulminated. To make matters worse, planters felt they did not yet have enough disciplinary powers. After 1859, plantations were able to invoke the new Workmen's Breach of Contract Act, but it was useless to launch "tedious civil cases" when the defendants had practically no attachable property.⁶⁶ Whether indolent or industrious, Asomiya or Kachari, a local peasant, in a context of abundant land, could never be reduced to a body of wage labour dependent on the capitalist for its very survival. Ultimately, the logic of colonial capitalism would dictate that the simple, hardworking Cacharee and the indolent Assamese were equally inconvenient for its labouring requirements. Primitivity was still in vogue, but it necessitated looking further afield, deeper into the Indian sub-continent.

5. Inventing Coolie

In the first few years of tea enterprise, Charles Bruce and his colleagues had nurtured a Chinese illusion. It concerned the tea-plant, and the grower, and the necessity for both. Quite soon, the grower was dispensed with, once his knowledge was obtained. Over the next few

decades, Assam tea capitalists would puncture the rest of the illusion. The China-Assam hybrid plant, dreamt up by imperial botany, was shown to be ill-suited to the Assam environs, witheringly referred to as the “plague”. While the Chinese expertise was initially necessary, his system of cultivation was not. Rather than perpetuating the indigenous tea forest, or Chinese household production, British colonial capital would discover how to grow tea on an industrial scale. Under the supervision of the colonial planter, its prime requirement was a vast pool of cheap, docile, easily reproducible labour.⁶⁷ To identify this workforce, the Assam tea industry harnessed race science, and the experiences of overseas planter regimes.

Recent scholarship has studied Indian labour recruited on indentured contracts who serviced the Caribbean and Mauritius sugar industries, in the wake of the British Empire’s slave emancipation. The “coolie” typology constructed outside of India was subsequently assimilated into the labouring requirements of South Asian plantations and other colonial enterprises.⁶⁸ Kaushik Ghosh traces how, over the nineteenth century, the British conquest of Bengal’s “wild frontier”, the Chotanagpur-Santal hill territory, dislocated its inhabitants and forced them to become a compliant and hardworking workers on mines, roads, and plantations all over India. British “pacification” in Central India caused communities to be flattened out into a new eponymous population of roving Dhangars, the aborigines praised by colonialism as surpassing all others in their suitability for hard labour. As in the Kachari case, we need to historicize facile, racial explanations to see that it was the Chotanagpur peoples’ dispossession that tamed these once fierce, feared frontier populations into “hill coolies” praised as far as the House of Commons for their primitive traits of obedience, and toil.⁶⁹

Colonial race science revised its views once it assimilated the observations made by the complex contacts with these labouring groups. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Brian Hodgson had classified the tribal inhabitants of Assam and Chotanagpur into a common class of Turanian aboriginals belonging to the Tamulian race. But, some years later, the two groups were separated in ethnographic manuals, in keeping with their differential status as colonial labour. Such reordering was formally established by a Bengal civil servant, George Campbell, later to become the province’s Lieutenant-Governor. He modified Hodgson’s scheme to distinguish between what he now called the Kolarian people of the Chotanagpur areas and the Borderer people of the Northeast Frontier.⁷⁰ Campbell had cogent reasons for finding these Kolarians to be unique, “a simple industrious people” “Unlike most aboriginal tribes in most parts of the world,

Dhangars seem by no means to be dying out, but multiply and supply the labour market. Partly on account of the cheapness of labour in their country, partly on account of their tractable disposition and freedom from all caste and food prejudices, and more especially, I think, because of that want of attachment to the soil which distinguishes the Aboriginal from the Arian, they are much sought after and highly prized as labourers. Many of them are settled in the service of Bengal Indigo-Planters; they are very well known as labourers on the Railways, roads and other works of Western Bengal; and they are now, I believe, the favourite material for emigration to Assam.”⁷¹ Campbell’s work lay in the mainstream of the intellectual terrain for mid-Victorian race science, with the priority it gave to the ordering of nature and human beings into categories. But what it erased was history. Campbell conveniently ignored the impact of colonial policy upon his subjects. The dispossessed Kolarians had little alternative but to migrate, and to labour on whatever terms were held out to them. Despite hardships, the Borderers of the Northeast, i.e., the Kachari peasants, still had some control over the terms of their labour. Therefore, the most popular subjects at this conjuncture of science and political economy were the Kolarians, or Dhangars. The word “coolie” itself, said to originate from the Tamil word for wages “kuli” and long used for workers found at the lowest rung of the Indian Ocean labour market, was acquiring a specific racial attribution, through this recruiting process.⁷² Campbell adroitly suggested that the word “coolie” was in fact, derived from the name “Kol” or “Kolarian”. In his *Ethnology of India*, he mentioned, “Dhangars; that last term being one the proper meaning of which I cannot ascertain, but which, as far as I can learn, is applied generically to the aboriginal labourers in Calcutta.”⁷³ Following his lead, the Anglo-Indian lexicon, *Hobson-Jobson* defined Dhangar as “the name by which member of various tribes of Chutia Nagpur [sic]... are generally known when they go out to distant lands to seek employment as labourers (coolies).”⁷⁴ The Chotanagpur natives had not only lost all other identities in that of coolie or Dhangar, but now they were also inextricably linked with a migratory existence.

The British state worked closely with the Assam planters to establish a penal regime of coolie indenture. Earlier failures were now understood as having been caused by bringing in the wrong sort of labour. Of course, where our colonial sources read aggression, laziness, climatic lassitude, opium addiction, or peasant prosperity as retarding Chinese and local work, we may read forms of resistance. In any case, the colonial regime was realizing that the exact opposite of those workers had been necessary. To tame the jungle, you required “aboriginals” certainly, but

you also needed control and discipline. Neither the Chinese nor the locals, from their different locations, were willing to fall within those parameters. While the Chinese cited their contracts for protection, the locals chose to collect their advances and slip away, or even to keep away altogether. But once the net of colonial legislation was set into place, the migratory workers of Chotanagpur could arrive in Assam, and be made to stay.⁷⁵ For the Dhangar, the same rationality which made indentured Indian coolies from thousands of miles away essential for the culture of sugar, in Mauritius, the Caribbean, Natal, and Fiji, their status as bewildered uprooted migrants, was being employed for the tea gardens of Assam. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Dhangar held the rank of “Class I jungley” among Assam coolies.⁷⁶ The “he” adopted by official documents conceals the large number of women and children included within the eponymous term, “coolie”. As the many manuals for would-be planters tell us, the plantation system was fine-tuning the hundreds of *nirics* (tasks) its production process involved, and differentiating them by gender and age.⁷⁷ Especially, the important task of picking the “two leaves and a bud” was entrusted to women, at lower wages than for men. The highest wages were earned by men in indoor, factory processing work, and by supervisors.

Unhampered by state regulation, colonial capital was able to use semi-feudal methods to an optimal point, subjecting ostensibly free labourers to a kind of serfdom. In the first decades, they were virtually imprisoned in the squalor of the coolie lines, locked in at night, in the middle of remote, forested terrain, and with no contact possible with local inhabitants. Flight was well nigh impossible for the migrants, since their ignorance of local territory, coupled with bounties paid to local hill dwellers to track them with dogs, ensured that the plantation existence had to be borne against all provocation.⁷⁸ This coolie’s body was open to oppression in a way that all earlier recruits had not been. While Bengal’s vernacular press, and even the colonial archive provides us some idea of the floggings, beatings, and even killings of male coolies, it is only through anecdotal, and oral accounts that we get testimony of the many ways in which the female coolie was sexually exploited by Assam’s white masters.⁷⁹ Despite the planters’ complaints of the high cost of importing labour, their ability to impose starvation wages and a draconian work regime upon these migrants was quite unprecedented. As Samita Sen suggests, like other sectors of colonial capital, plantations could keep labour costs down, since the burden of reproduction was more often as not, at least, in the first phase of this recruitment, passed back to the rural hinterland.⁸⁰ The low birth rate and infant survival rate and the high numbers of

abortions among coolie women became a matter of concern only later.⁸¹ The tea industry's success in evading the costs of participation in a truly "free" labour market was obvious. In 1864, while a Public Works Department labourer could earn Rs 7 p.m., the going rate in the Assam Company was only Rs 4-5 and descended as low as Rs 3.50 with some other employers. Behal and Mohapatra point out that the ultimate goal of the indentured and penal contract systems that the colonial state devised was not to provide the coolie with a livelihood, but to enable planters to bypass the wage structures prevalent in the labour market. By the logic of capitalist enterprise, such measures seemed entirely justified, as Indian tea acquired a leading position in the world market, outstripping China in 1888 for the first time, and obtaining 57% of the British market by 1901.⁸² Upper Assam's forests were steadily being replaced by European-owned gardens cultivating tea, and rice-fields to feed the region's growing population. Over 1870-1970, natural vegetation of over 1.5 million hectares was converted for agriculture and settlement.⁸³

6. Coolies, 'Sahibs', and Selling Labour

"Alas, Jaduram, you sent me to Assam with false promises." **Tea labourers' folk-song**⁸⁴

The needs of the colonial tea industry quickened the development of transport infrastructure. During 1867-68, two-thirds of the plantation labour force was already imported into Assam, some 22,800 out of a total of 34,433.⁸⁵ Initially, the river steamer service was still very irregular, but by 1886, two lines of steamers operated weekly from Calcutta. Cholera was the great killer on this long journey, especially from the recruiting depots in the Chotanagpur districts where the sought-after "hill coolies" were located. The high death rates and cholera outbreaks tended to be blamed upon the recruits' dirty habits, rather than the putrid conditions into which they were herded. The ostensible purpose of Act III of 1862, as passed by the Bengal Legislative Council, was the "regulation of emigration...to make sure that the labourers recruited for the tea district had not been deceived by the contractors or their agents; and, to lessen the fearful mortality previous to arrival at the tea districts." But this laudable objective remained a dead letter. Between 1863-6, there were 5500 deaths in the contractors' depots and on the voyage up to Assam, out of a total of about 90,000 labour. In 1873, the Bengal civil servant John Edgar acknowledged that his predecessor's enquiry into coolie conditions in 1868 had only understated the matter when it noted that, "From the time they were recruited till they reached their final

destination, they have been guarded not unlike prisoners. They have been told that they were going to a garden in a country where the means of living were plentiful and cheap, where they would receive very high wages and have little to do. They have found themselves set down in a swampy jungle, far from human habitation, where food was scarce and dear, where they have seen their families and fellow labour struck down by disease and death, and where they themselves, prostrated by sickness, have been able to earn less by far than they could have done in their homes.”⁸⁶ Edgar’s report was unusual in that he at least acknowledged the culpability of the tea-planters. He observed ruefully that it was intensely unpleasant to have to write of these things, especially as “I must reflect unfavourably upon the past conduct of a body of men for whom I have unfeigned respect and esteem, among whom are some intimate personal friends.”⁸⁷ Social ties linking officials and planters, the fellowship incumbent upon white men in an alien land, and the unquestioned importance of the imperial tea industry served as blinkers.

The central importance of the Assam tea industry to the empire is indicated by the large body of legislation enacted to facilitate labour supply. Starting from the Transport of Native Labourers of 1863, it included the Bengal Acts of 1865 and 1870, the Inland Emigration Act of 1893, the Assam Labour and Emigration Acts of 1901 and 1915, and finally, the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act of 1932. As in the case of the overseas sugar industry, this legislation had a dual intent, to make recruitment and retention of labour easier, and also to allay concerns about labouring conditions. The first usually meant giving priority to the Assam tea interests over those of the recruiting districts, especially when the coolie abuses became widely known and induced increased protests from the latter’s officials, missionaries, and general public. Notoriously, planters were helped to retain labour despite atrocious conditions by introducing penal provisions as part of the indentured system of labour recruitment. The supposedly reformist intent trumpeted by the laws was largely confined to paper, particularly since officials knew very well that they had very little chance of enforcing clauses such as those pertaining to a minimum wage, even if they believed they should do so. The most eagerly desired, and indeed the most successful parts of these legislations related to disciplining labour. After all, the difficulty in disciplining them was the original reason why the local coolies were less desired than the migrants. Penal privileges such as the right of private arrest were the most significant way in which the colonial state legislated into being Assam’s Planters’ Raj. The minimum wages of Rs 5, Rs 4, and Rs 3 for men, women, and children (below 12 years) respectively, remained the

same from the Act of 1865 to that of 1901. Low as they were, they existed at that level only in the statutes. Again, other legal provisions, limiting work to 9 hours a day, and 6 days a week, or stipulating a hospital on every estate, were seldom complied with. While the state did not bother to enforce them, the workers had little knowledge of their entitlements, and no way of claiming what they were promised at recruitment. With the isolated, regimented, and illiterate conditions of this labour, the state and planters managed to enforce their writ. While the penal provisions underlying Assam recruitment were removed in 1926, the Royal Commission of Labour, found in 1929, when making enquiries of plantation workers, that they still believed that they could be arrested by their employers for leaving before contracts were up.⁸⁸

The preoccupation with disciplining labour affected not just recruitment and work practices, but also the estate organization. From the late nineteenth century, the tea lore shaped and transmitted by one generation of “tea sahibs” to another, started moving into print as increasing numbers of young men coming out from Britain to seek a berth in India, found their way into tea, and to Assam. It was acknowledged that “tea planting, though a hard life, is eminently a profession which gentlemen’s sons may follow,” but unlike some other colonial business ventures, it involved controlling large, intractable bodies of workers.⁸⁹ A plethora of handbooks discussed the best manner of growing and treating the plant, the proper organization of an estate’s workforce, the minute and detailed division of work by sex and age, the hierarchy of payments and tasks according to a scale of physical difficulty, time, and skill, and also suggested how best to maintain stringent discipline. Their warnings as to the arduousness of a planter’s life did not discourage Britain’s surplus of lower and middle-class young men from seeking out a plantation job. The tone of the advice given to them is apparent from the sadistic suggestion that “sometimes an obstreperous and refractory coolie is given nice hard pieces of wood (such as heart of *nahor* [wood] which is so dense as to sink in water) to cut into firewood for a month or two. He can be made to work from sunrise to sunset at this exhilarating exercise, but as he can never accomplish the full task except by superhuman toil, he draws short pay in consequence, and so his stomach reproaches him for his sins.”⁹⁰ The coolie population on a garden varied from a few hundreds to a few thousands. One and a half to three adult coolies per acres of cultivation were required for outdoor manual work. For optimum supervision, the whole labour force was divided into so many “chillans” or gangs - men’s, women’s, girls and boys; each gang under an overseer. This work-force needed constant surveillance, in and out of hours.

Tea handbooks recommended that two watchmen should be kept for each line of coolie houses, built in straight rows, so that the Chowkeydars could get about easily amongst them.⁹¹ This degree of control was far the planters' situation with locals who were caustically stated to be just "what they term themselves, 'mon khushi' coolies, or labourers who do as they please."⁹²

Sent to Assam in the red jackets that many people associated with degrading prison life, Chotanagpur people regarded Assam as "the end of the world", but the circumstances of their home regions often left them no choice but to migrate.⁹³ The "forced commercialization" of India's countryside was responsible for the crisis of landlessness and indebtedness faced by most of its migratory labour.⁹⁴ They were cheated all the way, first by mendacious recruiters, then by their employers' exploitation in terms of wages, working, and living conditions. As the recruiting by contractors became more controversial, the tea industry began to prefer sending its sardars out to recruit from their own villages whenever possible, or employing its own recruiters, rather than the notorious contractors, many of whom had shifted to recruiting for mines and collieries, from where people could return more easily. The 1906 Enquiry Commission found that the older recruiting districts were becoming aware of the conditions in Assam. "People here tell me that Assam rice cooked over night cannot be taken at the morning meal next day as is done here. They say that the water is saltish, and that they have often to drink it lukewarm, which they think tends to give them bowel complaints."⁹⁵ The term 'selling' was always the word used with regard to Assam. So widespread was it that Santhal school children learnt to look upon Assam as a "death trap" whence their ancestors had never returned. As an outraged tea planter alleged, a reader by John Chandai Marandi stated that "[the Santhals] owing to their poverty are emigrating to Pandua, Baria, Assam and Cachar. And they go to work in the tea gardens, on the agreement of three years, but most of them do not return."⁹⁶ Not only were returning coolies spreading this message about the Assam gardens, but increasingly, they were challenging their oppression. Henry Cotton admitted that "there is a growing tendency in the Coolie class to resent a blow by striking a blow in return and this soon leads to serious results, as the Coolies act in combination among themselves, and armed with formidable weapons, the implements of their industry."⁹⁷ Sometimes, such incidents ended in the burning of the manager's bungalow.⁹⁸ The repercussions were always harsh, but despite them, the marked rise in cases of assaults, rioting and unlawful assembly reported in successive government reports from the 1890s caused the appointment of the 1906 Enquiry. Neither this, nor the subsequent commissions in 1921 and 1929 could do

much in face of planter and state intransigence, and in the countryside, between 1904-05 and 1920-21, there were as many as 141 reported cases of rioting and unlawful assembly, usually looting the planter-sanctioned weekly *hats* (markets).

7. Local Entrepreneurs and Coolie Neighbours

But coolie workers continued to arrive. Apart from impoverishment, one important reason that Assam had some appeal for migrants, and caused many to stay on past their contracts, was the possibility of getting land to cultivate. At the end of the nineteenth century, this was still a region with an expanding agrarian frontier. Already in 1868, it was noted that “The natives...many of them, especially the court officials, are going in for tracts of lands at Rupees 2-8 an acre in the neighbourhood of villages, with a view of leasing them out.”⁹⁹ The Brahmaputra valley’s settled area increased by 15% between 1881-82 and 1891-92. The 1901 census showed up the immense rise in the numbers of cultivating tenants, again attributed to the “practice which is growing up among the Assamese of leasing out the land lying near a tea garden to the coolies.”¹⁰⁰ Tea plantations, too, were renting out much of their surplus land to time-expired labour, called by them as *faltu* (free). Planters testifying before the 1906 Commission acknowledged that available rice-land was an asset while recruiting, and they wanted the state to step in when more land was needed. As numerous village settlements of *faltus* emerged, they served as a useful reservoir to be tapped by the plantations, at times of labour demand.¹⁰¹ Waste land under government too was leased to ex-garden coolies. Largely through these *faltus*, closer contact terms, became possible with local peasants. A number of hamlets emerged where caste Hindus, tribals, and former coolies lived side by side.

Earlier local contact with coolies was mainly through the *mohurirs* and other supervisory staff on the plantations. Education department reports bemoaned that as soon as they learnt the rudiments of the three Rs, many school students left to join such clerical jobs. It became “a general complaint of the Assam valley schoolteachers that many of their pupils, when raised to the higher section, leave in order to get appointments.”¹⁰² While it was less prestigious, and paid less than an equivalent government position, a plantation clerk-ship provided useful, and often necessary income to supplement the small rentals received by rural gentry. The jobs on offer ranged from the burra mohurir whose task was to write letters and keep accounts, the hazrah mohurir, who would in the day, count how many coolies were working and in the evening, give

them their *hazrahs* (pay), and the godown mohurir, who would give out new materials and tools, and also weigh tea leaf.¹⁰³ “Doctor Babus” formed another segment of this class, but they tended to be Bengalis, since Assamese medical students were few, until later.

New planters were cautioned about the difference in social standing between these Assamese and Bengali caste Hindu employees, and their subordinate coolies. Edward Bamber observed that these clerks had “on account of their caste and occupation, a social status to which the pay they are drawing is no guide.” Neophyte managers were warned that these Garden Babus were the “middle classes” of local society, “styled in the vernacular by a phrase which may be translated as ‘respectable classes’ in contradistinction to manual workers.”¹⁰⁴ The plantation managed by A.R. Ramsden employed five mohurirs, all “Assamese and agriculturists by birth,” supervising its three thousand strong coolie force at a pay averaging one rupee a day as well as a monthly commission “on the payment for work done by those they supervise.”¹⁰⁵ Clearly there was concrete distance, and antagonism between the coolie labourers and the caste Hindu gentry who disciplined them on behalf of the garden’s sahibs. One of their number, Someswar Sarma, wrote a traditional style verse panegyric, *Assam Companir Biboron* (Description of the Assam Company), which is notable for its groveling praise of its gardens’ picturesque beauty, in complete disregard of the wretched reality of the coolie lines.¹⁰⁶ Census reports detail how local elites, when sent as enumerators, refused to enter coolies as Hindus, but clumped them as Christians or Animists impartially, for, they said, “they eat anything.”¹⁰⁷

This vocabulary of ritual distaste found an echo in the publicist Bolinarayan Bora’s essay in the Calcutta-based Asomiya-language periodical, *Mau*, on the tea garden coolie. Its language and sentiments graphically show how many among Assam’s “middle classes” felt about these newcomer plantation workers. “Reader, listen, to what manner of creature the coolie is, and how it lives. That whose body hue is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, in whose home are to be found bird, pig, and dog, in whose hand is a *bilayati* [foreign] umbrella, and in whose hands are held a hoe and basket among the tea bushes, that is what is called a coolie.”¹⁰⁸ What Tony Ballantyne and others have called the delusion of Aryanism then overtaking Indian elites is clearly visible in this distancing of Bora’s readers from the darker skinned migrants they encountered in the Assam countryside.¹⁰⁹ The tone of the piece was deliberately crafted so as to delineate the coolie into animal status, by delineating quasi-zoological attributes for him. At the same time, it went on to pour ridicule on the coolie’s

lifestyle, his use of 'Western' attire alongside his unclean living conditions, and his consumption of 'unclean' meats and drink.

Bolinarayan's distasteful invective reflected another strand of opinion among Assamese elites, the faith in the modernity which tea enterprise represented. Well-known publicists such as Gunabhiram Barua remained silent about the "new slavery" linked with tea *unnati*, preferring instead to exalt the "intrinsic egalitarianism" in Assamese society, which the British promotion of achieved over inherited status was advancing.¹¹⁰ Until the early twentieth century, paeans to the colonial tea industry were found not just in locally written school textbooks, such as Padmanath Gohain Barua's *Assam Buranji*.¹¹¹ In contrast, over those same years, the Bengali vernacular public was taking up tea oppression as a successor to the indigo issue, flagellating colonial institutions on irreproachably humanitarian grounds. Until the end of the nineteenth century, most Assamese publicists concurred in the colonial claim that British rule in Assam had replaced pre-colonial corvée slavery with free labour. Ostensibly it was so, but the new reality was an indentured system, which concealed semi-feudal modes of coercion under the guise of capitalist rationality. Tea enterprise claimed to be ameliorating the Indian peasant's life, but gradually, witnesses in the Bengali vernacular press described a plantation system iniquitous in its violence, needing metaphors of bondage to expose it. Dwarkanath Ganguli's *Slavery and British Dominion*, was a pointed rebuttal of British libertarian pretensions.¹¹² Rather than the idyllic picture of Edenic redemption that colonial sources provide, appalling details of coolie oppression comprise the most frequent references to Assam by Calcutta's Bengali public.¹¹³

Given the active connection of the emerging Assamese public sphere to this Calcutta milieu, the silence on the tea coolie is indeed deafening! As yet, the only writing in Asomiya was Bora's piece, whose sentiments we have already discussed. A dissenting note did appear, in the next issue of the Mau, from Lakshminath Bezbarua, but at that time, his was the lone voice acknowledging that the Assam garden was being built upon the migrant labourer's life-blood.¹¹⁴ There was also an absence of an active newspaper culture in Assam. The only paper at that time, the short-lived Assam News, taken out by Hemchandra Barua from Guwahati, did address the coolie issue, but only to protest the inconveniences suffered by locals when they were mistakenly impressed for labour. It was silent on the 'real' coolies.¹¹⁵ Bolinarayan's condemnation of "our newspaper writing friend of the coolie, the Bengali Babu," gave expression to the tension between two sections of the colonial intelligentsia, one of which saw itself as very much the

weaker and the colonial state as still representing its best possibility for progress.¹¹⁶ For now, Assam's elites, far from condemning the plantation system, were seeking a place in the sun.

While many sons of the Assamese gentry were moving into urban employment and residence, their families maintained a base in the countryside. The Brahmin and other non-cultivating proprietors who lost some of their labour force with the end of slavery, mostly made sharecropping arrangements for their lands. As tea fervour spread, lawyers, traders, and retired clerks bought up land with their savings. Some among this gentry ventured into the tea industry, however hampered by lack of capital, and the privileges enjoyed by the big British entrepreneurs. There were a number of setbacks, but given that tea was practically the only outlet for economic entrepreneurship, others stepped in. We only have fragmentary evidence about the total number of local planters until B.C. Allen compiled some information in 1903. Of the 112 estates in the Sibsagar and Jorhat sub-divisions, less than 20 were in "native" hands, usually with individual proprietors rather than joint-stock companies. While the latter, British-controlled firms had an average of 1000 coolies (distributed among their several gardens), the former had usually between 10-150 coolies working for them. The biggest were Jagannath Barua, whose Latekujan estate had over 400 coolies working about 800 acres (out of a total holding of 2811), and Bisturam Datta Barua, who had 173 coolies working 246 acres (out of 823), at Madhapur.¹¹⁷ Many of their workers were Kacharis and other locals, since the small-scale native planters lacked the resources to import coolies. European planters constantly accused their Assamese counterparts of luring away their imported labour.

It is instructive to look at the career of a premier Assamese planter family, the Khongiya Baruas, a still-extant tea dynasty, founded by Bisturam Datta Barua of respectable high caste background. As had other local planters, Bisturam began by supplying seeds to the big colonial firms, using his status as *mauzadar* (state's rent collector) of the Thengal area to make Kachari peasants cultivate tea on his family landholding. A quasi-feudal logic of a different order from the British planters operated here, as Bisturam's biographer tells us how his mauzadari powers allowed him to extract unpaid labour from the peasants under him.¹¹⁸ These native establishments did not have the resources to set up their own factories, they functioned as subsidiary concerns of bigger gardens to whom they supplied leaves for processing. But such a dependent relationship was fraught with risk, since the British planters could arbitrarily increase or decrease quotas, and were free to set prices as they wished. Many local planters went out of

business, and most tried to hedge their risks. But, the Khongiya Baruas managed a way out when they established a long-term, albeit subordinate relationship with the powerful managing agency firm of Williamson, Magor and Co. Bisturam's fortunes took a better turn than most of his compatriots when Williamson's firm helped him set up his own factory with their outdated equipment, sold at a throwaway price. His son Siva Prasad became pre-eminent among Assamese planters, but continued these ties. Indeed, no better instance obtains of the colonial nature of tea entrepreneurship than that Indian Independence made no difference. Only when the tea industry was nationalized in the 1970s could the Khongiya Baruah firm break loose from their patron-client relationship.¹¹⁹

Between 1908 and 1926, the penal contract and indentured labour system gradually came to an end, with its contradictions becoming more visible, and forcing the state to take action to ensure a long term viability of the plantation sector. The high mortality and desertion, coupled with the low fertility rates had served only to raise the real costs of labour, despite the low wages forced upon it. As former coolies settled outside the plantations, their relations with local society were less abrasive with closer contact.¹²⁰ Over the same period, Assam's middle classes' faith in the improving agenda of British knowledge and capital was gradually dissipating, in tune with a growing resentment of the arrogant white man's tea lobby. Its close links with the state gave British tea -planters half of the non-official seats in the local boards and he new legislative assembly.¹²¹ At the ground level, this power expressed itself in a quasi-feudal regime extending beyond the boundaries of the plantations, where natives, irrespective of status, were prohibited from moving freely, or using umbrellas or vehicles in the presence of whites.¹²² In this climate, the local attitude towards the coolie was softening into a patronizing paternalism, illustrated vividly in the heyday of Gandhian mobilization in the 1920s, when the Assamese middle class nationalists ventured into the villages and tea gardens as part of their new nationalist agenda of regeneration.¹²³ Nonetheless, rather than contesting the myth of the lazy peasant and the parallel one of the intemperate coolie, they implicitly accepted those characterizations for the groups that they sought to reclaim. Where both these characterizations were brought together was in that other colonial commodity, opium. This 'curse of Assam' now became the keystone of the Congress campaign, with its eradication a suitable entry point to 'uplift' the garden coolie and the tribal peasant.¹²⁴ While the immediate mastery of the white man came to be contested by a temporary alliance between coolie and local, the logic of the plantation system was not. Tea

enterprise remained the great white hope for economic progress, for the Indian planters who inherited the empire's gardens and coolies, and for Assam's middle classes.

¹ British Parliamentary Papers, 1837; *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, 425, 7, p.76.

² Syed Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, London, 1977.

³ J.S. Furnivall, *An Introduction to the Political Economy of Burma*, (Rangoon, 1931).

⁴ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power. The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985).

⁵ Robert Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains. Fujian and the China Tea Trade, 1757-1937*, (Berkeley, 1994), p.10.

⁶ Peng Zeyi, "The Characteristics of Capitalist Sprouts in the Early Qing Tea Industry" (1982) quoted by Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, pp.45-6.

⁷ Gardella, *Harvesting Mountains*, p.44.

⁸ Anon., *Assam: Sketch of its History, Soil and Productions, with the Discovery of the Tea-Plant, and of the Countries Adjoining Assam*, (London, 1839), p.24.

⁹ Parliamentary Papers, 1839, *Papers Relating to Measures for Introducing Cultivation of Tea Plant in British Possessions in India*, Vol. XXXIX, Paper 63.

¹⁰ W. Kenneth Warren, *Tea Tales of Assam. Recollections of the Early Days in "Tea" as concerned the Warren family* (Hampshire, 1975), p.5. James Warren was one of the original syndicate that founded the Assam Company, and his family continued to be involved in the tea industry until the 1960s.

¹¹ *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42; Assam Company: Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders at a General Meeting held at Calcutta, 11 August, 1841* (Calcutta, 1841), p.8.

¹² Parliamentary Papers, 1839; Paper 63; Letter No. 21, From W.H. MacNaghten, Secretary to the Govt. of India, to the Tea Committee; 4 April, 1836.

¹³ Parliamentary Papers, 1839; Paper 63; From Tea Committee to Secy, 6 August, 1836.

¹⁴ Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42; Report of Bengal Branch, Assam Company (Calcutta, 1840), p.9.

¹⁵ H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company, 1839-1953*, (Edinburgh, 1957), p.376-8.

¹⁶ Parliamentary Papers, 1839; Extract India Revenue Consultations 20 June, 1836; Report on the Tea Plant of Upper Assam, by Mr. Assistant-surgeon William Griffith, Madras Establishment, late Member of Assam Deputation.

¹⁷ The Charter Act of 1833 permitted land ownership in the East India Company's colonies to Europeans and following in its wake, the Wasteland Rules came into force for Assam in 1838. They were revised in 1854 to make them more attractive to European investors.

¹⁸ Letters issued to Government; Vol. 24, 1861, Assam State Archives.

¹⁹ Assam Company Report published in *Friend of India*, 9 September, 1841; quoted in Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967), p.64.

²⁰ *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42; Assam Company: Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, 1841*, p.13

²¹ Anonymous, "The Tea of Assam"; Extract; Letter from Jenkins to Bentinck, 6 May, 1838, p.9.

²² *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42; Assam Company: Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, 1841*, p.8.

²³ H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company, 1839-1953* (Edinburgh, 1957), pp.378-80.

²⁴ Letter from Masters (Superintendent of the Assam Company, 1840); quoted in Griffiths, p.65.

-
- ²⁵ Chen-Tung Chang, "Chinese Coolie Trade in the Straits Settlements in [the] late Nineteenth Century," Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, No. 65, Spring, 1988.
- ²⁶ Letter from Masters.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42*, Appendix D (Replies: Chairman's Queries to Mr Bruce).
- ²⁹ *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42; Assam Company: Report of the Local Directors made to the Shareholders, 1841*, p.7.
- ³⁰ *Reports of the Local Board in Calcutta, 1840-42*, Appendix D (Replies: Chairman's Queries to Mr Bruce).
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Warren, *Tea Tales*, p.8.
- ³³ Prafulladatta Goswami, *Folk Literature of Assam*, (Guwahati, 1954), p.71.
- ³⁴ B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. 7: *Sibsagar*, (Allahabad, 1906), p.2
- ³⁵ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York, 1992).
- ³⁶ *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal, No.37, Papers regarding Tea Cultivation in Assam*, (1859), pp.33 and 812.
- ³⁷ Allen, *Sibsagar*, p.274.
- ³⁸ John Butler, *Travels and Adventures in the Province of Assam during a Residence of Fourteen Years*, (London, 1855), p.244 and pp.258-9.
- ³⁹ Thomas A. Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Traders to Industrialists*, (New Delhi, 1978), p.43.
- ⁴⁰ Foreign Political Consultations, Nos. 106-8, 6 June, 1833-6, NAI.
- ⁴¹ Evidence from District Collectors, in *Papers Relating to Tea Cultivation*.
- ⁴² "Report of Captain Welsh", in H.K. Barpujari, *An Account of Assam and Her Administration*, (Guwahati, 1988), p.86.
- ⁴³ Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, *Assam Buranji*, (Calcutta, 1829), (Reprint, Guwahati, 1962), p.109.
- ⁴⁴ A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, (Calcutta, 1854), (Reprint, Guwahati, 1982); Appendix K.B., Translation of a Petition from Moneeram Borwah Dewan, p.606.
- ⁴⁵ Evidence from District Collectors, in *Papers relating to Tea Cultivation in Assam*, (Calcutta, 1861).
- ⁴⁶ John Butler, *A Sketch of Assam by an Officer in the Hon. East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry*, (London, 1847), p.35.
- ⁴⁷ Mills, *Report*, Memorandum from Captain Matthie, p.75.
- ⁴⁸ Mills, *Report*, p.21.
- ⁴⁹ Ajay Skaria, "Shades of Wildness: Tribe, Caste and Gender in Western India", The Journal of Asian Studies, 56 (3), August 1997.
- ⁵⁰ Introduction by J.D. Anderson to Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis* (London, 1911), (Reprint, Delhi, 1997).
- ⁵¹ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.1.
- ⁵² Brian Houghton Hodgson, "On the Origin, Location, Numbers, Creed, Customs, Character and Condition of the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal People with a general description of the climate they dwell in," in *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects*, (London, 1880), Vol. 1, Section 1, (first printed in Calcutta, 1847), pp.1-160.
- ⁵³ David Arnold, "Race, Place and Bodily Difference in Early Nineteenth Century India," Historical Research, May, 2004.
- ⁵⁴ B.H. Hodgson, "A Brief Note on Indian Ethnology," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, xviii, 1849, pp. 238-9.
- ⁵⁵ J.W. Kaye and J. Forbes Watson ed., *People of India*, (London, 1868), Vol. 1, p. 27.
- ⁵⁶ Francis Jenkins, "Report on the Revenue Administration of the Province of Assam," 1849-50, DHAS Mss.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Home Public Proceedings, Nos. 15-18, 10 September 1858, NAI.
- ⁵⁹ George Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, (Calcutta, 1884), p.126.
- ⁶⁰ Foreign Political Consultations, Nos. 106-8, 6 June, 1833-6, NAI.
- ⁶¹ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, (Calcutta, 1879), p.36
- ⁶² Letters to Govt, Vol 24; from Hopkinson to GG, Assam State Archives; No 80/20 November, 1861.
- ⁶³ Endle, *The Kacharis*, p.14.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ The Times, 25 December, 1841.
- ⁶⁶ Evidence of C. Haxell, Seconie Estate, *Papers Regarding the Tea Industry*. This Act was repealed only in the 1920s, well after the penal contracts had been abolished between 1908 and 1915.

⁶⁷ In comparison with coffee, tea required nearly nine months of diligent attention and a more stable work force, as well as larger investment in terms of factory facilities. This accounted for the late-nineteenth century shift from smaller enterprises to domination by a few managing agency houses.

⁶⁸ See Kaushik Ghosh, "A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India," in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. X, (eds.), Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu, (New Delhi, 1999), pp.8-48. Also Ranajit Das Gupta, "Plantation Labour in Colonial India," in E. Valentine Daniel, Henry Bernstein and Tom Brass (eds.), *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, (London, 1992), pp.180-1.

⁶⁹ Parliamentary Papers, LII No. 180, 1837-38.

⁷⁰ George Campbell, "The Ethnology of India," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Supplementary Number, Vol. 30, Part 2.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Hugh Tinker, *A New Form of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, (London, 1974).

⁷³ Campbell, "The Ethnology of India."

⁷⁴ Arthur Coke Burnell and Henry Yule, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases*, (London, 1883), pp.249-51.

⁷⁵ Relevant laws included the 1863 Transport of Native Labourers Act, the Bengal Acts of 1870 and 1873, the 1882 and 1893 Inland Emigration Acts, the 1901 and 1915 Assam Labour and Emigration Act, the 1926 Assam Recruitment Bill and the 1932 Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act.

⁷⁶ *Report of the Labour Enquiry Commission of Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1896).

⁷⁷ Two influential works in this genre were F.T.R. Deas, *The Young Tea-Planter's Companion: A Practical Treatise on the Management of a Tea-garden in Assam*, (London, 1886) and David Crole, *A Textbook of Tea Planting and Manufacture*, (London, 1897).

⁷⁸ *Papers regarding the Tea Industry*. Jan Breman has similarly shown how the indigenous Batak people on the Sumatran East Coast were coopted into becoming premium hunters, tracking down escaping coolies for the planters. See Jan Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the Colonial Order in Southeast Asia*, (Delhi, 1989), p.157.

⁷⁹ Planters' illegitimate children do not often appear in these records, but they are some of the subjects of my next research project, on mixed-race children in India. Assamese folklore talks openly, and maliciously, of coolie women's sexual relationships with white men.

⁸⁰ Samita Sen, "Questions of Consent: Women's Recruitment for Assam Tea Gardens," 1859-1900, in *Studies in History*, 2, 2002.

⁸¹ See *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906*, (Calcutta, 1906).

⁸² R.P. Behal and P. Mohapatra, "'Tea and Money versus Human Life': the Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations: 1840-1908," in Daniel, Bernstein, Brass (eds.), *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, pp.142-72.

⁸³ John F. Richards and James Hagen, "A Century of Rural Expansion in Assam, 1870-1970," in *Itinerario*, 1987, pp.193-209.

⁸⁴ Pashupati Prasad Mahato, "World-view of the Jharkhand as depicted in Songs of the Tea Garden Labourers of Assam," in *Folklore*, 26, (8), August, 1985.

⁸⁵ Bengal Administrative Report, 1867-68, (Calcutta, 1868), p.204.

⁸⁶ Report of the Commissioners on the Tea Cultivation of Assam, 1868; Papers Regarding the Tea Industry in Bengal, (Calcutta, 1873); Quoted by John Edgar, Papers, p.17.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Vol. 6, Part 1, (London, 1930), p....

⁸⁹ Lees, *Memorandum*, p.62.

⁹⁰ David Crole, *Tea: A Textbook of Tea Planting and Manufacture*, (London, 1897), pp.7-23.

⁹¹ E.F. Bamber, *An Account of the Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in India from Personal Observation*, (Calcutta, 1866), pp.45-6.

⁹² Lees, *Memorandum*, p.43.

⁹³ Proceedings, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee; Evidence, Rev. E. Wuesti, German Lutheran Mission, Govindpur, Ranchi District.

⁹⁴ Refs for forced commercialization...

⁹⁵ Proceedings, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee; Evidence, Rev. A. Logsdail, S.P.G. Mission, Chaibasa.

- ⁹⁶ Proceedings, Assam Labour Enquiry Committee; Evidence, Mr. C.L. Wilkin, Manager, Hautley Tea Estate, Sibsagar District.
- ⁹⁷ 1899 report by Henry Cotton, cited by Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p.46.
- ⁹⁸ Bampfylde J. Fuller, *Some Personal Experiences*, (London, 1930), p.120.
- ⁹⁹ Lees, *Memorandum*, p.34.
- ¹⁰⁰ B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901: Vol. 4: Assam: Part 1, Report*, (Shillong, 1902), pp.162-3.
- ¹⁰¹ Crole, *Tea*, p.80.
- ¹⁰² See *General Reports on Public Instruction in Assam*, (Shillong, 1876-79).
- ¹⁰³ E.F. Bamber, *An Account of the Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea in India, from Personal Observation*, (Calcutta, 1866), pp.55-6.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ramsden, *Assam Planter*, p.24.
- ¹⁰⁶ Someswar Sarma, *Assam Companir Biboron*, Sibsagar, 1875.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Report on the Census of Assam for 1881*, Calcutta 1883, p.10.
- ¹⁰⁸ Bolinarayan Bora, "Sah Bagisar Kuli" ('The Tea Garden Coolie'), in Haranarayan Bora ed., Mau or The Bee, February 1887.
- ¹⁰⁹ Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race*, Hampshire, 2002.
- ¹¹⁰ Gunabhiram Barua, *Assam Buranji*, (Calcutta, 1873), p.169.
- ¹¹¹ Padmanth Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji*, Tezpur, 1899.
- ¹¹² Dwarkanath Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (a collection of thirteen articles first published in the Bengalee, September 1886 to April 1887), Calcutta, 1972.
- ¹¹³ Almost every volume of the RNP for the Bengal Presidency from the 1870s onwards provides such accounts.
- ¹¹⁴ Lakshminath Bezbarua, "Kuli," Mau or The Bee, March, 1887.
- ¹¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁶ See Peter Robb's discussion about the expectation of progress created by the state vis-a-vis colonial elites in "The Colonial State and Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s", Modern Asian Studies, 31 (2), 1997, p.251.
- ¹¹⁷ B.C. Allen, *Sibsagar*, Tables.
- ¹¹⁸ Arup Kumar Dutta, *The Khongiya Baruahs of Thengal*, Guwahati, 1990, pp.27-8 and 42-5.
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹²⁰ I discuss this point elsewhere, but language and religion were important binding issues.
- ¹²¹ *Assam Administrative Report, 1882-3*, Shillong, 1884, ii.
- ¹²² The Reis and Raiyyats, 3 November 1883 and The Mussalman, 14 September 1926; File of newspaper cuttings, ASA.
- ¹²³ Benudhar Sarma's account in *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot*, Guwahati, 1959. Also report in The Mussalman, 25 February 1921 about the Gauhati Pleaders' Association's decision, initiated by the lawyer and planter Nabin Chandra Bordoloi, to suspend practice for three days to protest against the inhuman treatment of coolies at Chandpur.
- ¹²⁴ Benudhar Sarma's *Congressor Kasiyali Rodot* describes such anti-opium propaganda as the main issue they took up in villages and plantations. From the 1920s, the gradual involvement of local intelligentsia with state institutions also allowed this project to be taken up through official channels. For instance, in 1928 the Public Health Department printed three leaflets in Assamese on the evils of opium and circulated them widely through civil surgeons, local boards, municipalities as well as by sending them to the editors of the Assamiya and the Assam Banti papers. Cited in *Proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council*, 12 March 1929, Vol. 9, No. 4, Shillong, 1929, p.400.