

Introduction

On 22nd February 1922 a colonial labour enquiry constituted to investigate perhaps the most militant period on Assam tea plantations in Eastern India interviewed the superintendent (Slimmon) of one of the oldest tea companies (Jorehaut Tea Company). Unlike several other planters who were quizzed by the committee, Slimmon seemed less concerned that the future of the last instrument of Assam indenture system—the master and servant Act (Act XIII)—was at stake. He said that it was merely a piece of paper and what mattered was the ‘power behind the shadow.’¹ Slimmon was alluding to the widespread power and influence the idea of contract had acquired through the hundreds and thousands of “agreements” which workers had “agreed” since the early 1860s as they moved from eastern, central and southern regions of the subcontinent to labour on the establishing plantations. This human movement underwrote a great transformation. Tea cultivation and manufacture which started out as an experiment in the late 1830s (in Assam) had developed into a major agroindustry by the end of the nineteenth century making this region as the leading global exporter of the commodity.²

An original premise of framing an indenture contract in Assam was that the migrant workers came to be perceived as investments made by planters as they had funded their long journeys to the plantations and also paid hefty head money demanded by recruiters and recruiting agencies. The contract guaranteed by the colonial state gave planters the desired protection and right over the recruits to recover such capital inputs through their labour by fixing the duration of service, forcing performance of work and criminalising any effort by them to withdraw their services during that period. This consolidated a sense of ownership revealed in planter discourses where workers were not just described as belonging to planter/plantation, but their absence (desertion and death) was expressed as a loss and even calculated as annual wastage in the company account books. It was therefore not surprising that the “cost” of plantation workers was often expressed not in terms of wages they were paid on plantations but the price of “buying” them in the coolie market. This logic of ownership more deeply manifested in the right to private arrest to establish the planter’s claims to labour and in effect

1 D. Slimmon was an employee of the Jorehaut tea company for more than thirty six years. The company was in operation in Assam since 1859. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 185; H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd, 1859–1946*. (London, 1948) p. 13; For a discussion see P. Mohapatra, ‘Assam and West Indies, 1860–1920: Immobilising Plantation Labor’ in P. Craven and D. Hay (ed.), *Masters, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2004) pp. 478–479.

2 There are various estimates to the number of people who moved to Assam. See H. Tinker , *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974).

the person of the worker. Labour has often been argued as a fictitious commodity as labour is not disembodied and also what employers buy is not merely labour power but the use of worker's body and person.³ The troubled and contested boundary between person and property has also remained less acknowledged and underexplored in the context of Assam plantations.⁴

Plantations employing coolie labour has primarily been seen as a post-slavery innovation to address the labour needs of colonial capitalist enterprises but its relationships to slave plantation and forms of plantation management and discipline are striking and needs to be further probed. The strict distinction often made between slave plantation and coolie plantation does not allow for tracing certain enduring legacies and practices of organisation of work and life. Sidney Mintz had famously argued that the slave plantations in many ways anticipated the industrial work and time discipline of factory labour systems encapsulated in his expression 'factory in the field.'⁵ Further following the powerful thesis of Eric Williams on the deep connections between slavery and capitalism, a renewed interest in exploring these linkages has also provoked a fresh thinking on how slave plantations were providing enduring model and precedents in the development of American capitalist institutions and practices.⁶ Again several recent approaches have insisted on exploring the continuities and connections between different kinds of labour regimes while maintaining than the distinctions between several unfree labour regimes is more of degree rather than of type.⁷

3 K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*; J. Banaji, 'The Fictions of Free Labour: Contract, Coercion, and So-called Unfree Labour', *Historical Materialism* 11, no.3 (2003) p. 70.

4 This issue has also been discussed in relation to indenture servitude in the English Atlantic with respect to the possible relation between servitude and slavery. Donoghue in a recent review of literature suggests that there was colonial custom which allowed the indentured servants on colonial plantations to be considered as the personal property or the "goods and chattels" of the planters. Such references to coolies in Assam as goods, articles and things belonging to planter/plantation could be found in several planter accounts. J. Donoghue, 'Indentured Servitude in the 17th Century English Atlantic: A Brief Survey of the Literature', *History Compass* 11, no.10 (2013).

5 S. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1986) p. 47; M.M. Smith, 'Time, Slavery and Plantation Capitalism in the Ante-Bellum American South', *Past & Present* no. 150 (1996) pp. 142–168.

6 E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944). E.E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014).

7 There is a vast diverse and growing literature on these issues. Robert Steinfeld in a highly influential book argued that unlike the idea of "free labour" (labour which cannot be legally compelled) was undermined by the practices of criminal breach which structured the employment relationships in United States and England well into the nineteenth century. Again the criminal breach inherent in the Master and Servant Act has been investigated in various colonial labour relationships to explore deep linkages, interconnections and also specific manifestations making what has argued as the "empire thinkable". A. Stanziani has recently in a series of es-

The notion of slavery in the abolitionist literature of the nineteenth century perceived the boundaries between contract coolies and plantation slaves as more overlapping than distinct. The “new kind of slavery” approach which has been very prominent in the scholarly literature on indenture was already voiced in contemporary journals, reports, books and pamphlets.⁸ The sense of slavery articulated in this literature largely adhered to the Atlantic paradigm and plantation history of slavery.⁹ The coolies for Assam plantations became another instance of this global story. This became evident from an early period of labour migration (i.e. from the 1860s) which was characterized by high rates of mortality and drew immediate comparison with the middle passage. The metaphor of middle passage—which also emerges in other contexts across time and space—has also been mobilized in some recent scholarship to generally frame movement of

says shown how the metropolitan practices of wage labour was linked to the production of indentured servitude in the colonies. He argues that it would be impossible to develop indenture contract in British and French empires if wage earners were not servants. On the question of indentured coolies in the nineteenth century, Richard Allen has made a case to go beyond the Tinkerian paradigm and acknowledge the long terms connections between the slave trade and coolie trade. Clare Anderson on the other hand places the discourses and practices of indenture in the context of colonial innovations in incarceration and confinement. A field of wide ranging approaches and interests which come be described as ‘Global Labour History’ has been a very productive site to explore these connections and distinction of different kinds of free and unfree labour relationships while insisting their centrality in capitalism. R.J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The Employment Relation in English and American law and culture, 1350–1870* (Chapel Hill, 1991); R.J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2001). R.B. Allen, ‘Slaves, Convicts, Abolitionism and the Global Origins of the Post Emancipation Indentured Labor System’, *Slavery & Abolition* 35, no.2 (2014). R.B. Allen, ‘European Slave Trading, Abolitionism, and “New System of Slavery” in the Indian Ocean’, *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9, no.1 (2012). R.B. Allen, ‘Re-Conceptualizing the “New System of Slavery”’, *Man in India* 92, no. 2 (2012). M. Carter, ‘Slavery and Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean’, *History Compass* 4, no.5 (2006). A. Stanziani, ‘Local Bondage in Global Economies: Servants, wage earners, and indentured migrants in nineteenth-century France, Great Britain, and the Macarne Islands’, *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no.4 (2013); C. Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009); J. Lucassen, *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern, 2008).

8 H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974).

9 See I. Chatterjee and R. Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History*; G. Campbell, *Abolition and its Aftermath in Indian Ocean and Asia* (London, 2005). G. Campbell, *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean and Asia* (London, 2004). R.J. Scott, *Degrees of Freedom: Louisiana and Cuba after Slavery* (Cambridge Mass., 2005); S.L. Engerman, *Slavery, Serfdom, and Free Labour* (Stanford, 1999). G. Prakash, *Bonded Histories: Genealogies of Labour Servitude in Colonial India* (Cambridge 1990). U. Patnaik, M. Dingwaney, *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India* (Madras, 1985). C. DeVito, A. Lichtenstein (ed.), *Global Convict Labour* (Leiden, 2015). D. Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race and Gender in Jamaican State formation, 1780–1870* (Durham, 2004).

people under varying degrees of coercion.¹⁰ Also the invocation of another related term—coolie trade—describing the methods and practices of recruiters (of buying and selling) suggested troubling parallels with the slave trade.¹¹ This comparison found more substance when some reports of flogging and physical abuse of workers came to public knowledge as scandals. The association of Assam coolie system and slavery became a recurrent theme of the Bengali press, at least from the 1870s. A prominent example in this genre was the first hand reports of the workings of Assam tea gardens by a middle-class reformer (Dwarkanath Ganguli) which was later assembled under the title *Slavery in British Dominion*.¹² These reports were also picked up by an anti slavery society and they agreed with the general conclusion which reiterated their long standing position that the ‘coolie is practically a slave for the whole period of contract’.¹³

The legal right allowed to planters to arrest runaway workers privately generated several commentaries on the close kinship between Atlantic slave and Assam coolie. There were suggestions that it was a novelty in Anglo Indian and English law and did not differ widely from the Fugitive Slave Law of America.¹⁴ This association with slavery was defused by a colonial jurist who cited several precedents of statutory powers to arrest runaway servants without warrant. The allusions to slavery and slave like conditions on Assam tea gardens continued well into the twentieth century. A pamphlet titled the labour system of Assam published under the auspices of the Humanitarian committee noted that the rampant practices of trafficking for Assam tea gardens were not only extremely lucrative but bore a close resemblance to traffic in slaves. The report concluded that the Assam coolie system was an object lesson in real and practical slavery.¹⁵ The reports of labour enquiries from the late nineteenth century revealed that the linkages of Assam to slavery, trafficking and bondage was not limited to middle

10 E. Christopher, C. Pybus, M. Rediker (ed.), *Many Middle Passages* (Berkeley, 2007); V.A. Shepherd, ‘The ‘Other Middle Passage’? Nineteenth-Century Bonded Labour Migration and the Legacy of the Slavery Debate in the British-Colonized Carribean’ in V.A. Shepherd, *Working Slavery, Pricing Freedom: Perspectives from the Carribean, Africa and the African Diaspora* (New York, 2002) pp. 343–375.

11 E. Hu-Dehart, ‘Chinese coolie labour in Cuba in the nineteenth century: Free labour or Neo-Slavery?’, *Slavery and Abolition* 14, no. 1 (1993); A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade: The Traffic in Chinese Labourers to Latin America, 1847–1874* (Bloomington, 2008). O.J. Hui, ‘Chinese Indentured Labour: Coolies and Colonies’ in R. Cohen (ed.), *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (Cambridge, 1995).

12 D. Ganguli, *Slavery in the British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972)

13 ‘Flogging of coolies in Assam’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend*, Aug 15th 1867 p. 179.

14 1882 *Assam Labour Report*.

15 H.D. Bonner, *The Labour System of Assam* (London, 1906).

class press, stray colonial officials and local missionaries but had gained a much wider currency.¹⁶ The referencing to buying and selling (as Assam recruitment came to be characterized) with connections to the idea of bondage (also linked to the histories of convict) seem to have overlapped in how Assam tea gardens came to be popularly perceived.¹⁷

Apart from this constant invocation of slavery and bondage, Assam plantations also came to be linked other work and labour regimes. A particular justification for granting the right to arrest workers without warrant (in the early 1860s) was premised by the Chief Commissioner of the province (Hopkinson) with a telling comparison between the ship and the plantation. On receiving several reports from local district officials of the organized practices of plantations for catching deserters and runaways, Hopkinson made a curious remark. He suggested that the ‘plantation is imperiled when they (coolies) abscond or run away, just as that of a ship is when seamen desert.’ This according to him had grave implications as manager of tea garden is entirely at the mercy of his coolies, as the master the ship is at the mercy of his crew. In a rhetorical statement he noted that the planters ‘may be as alone and unprotected as if he were at sea’.¹⁸ The linking up of the nature of emerging plantation in Assam with the authoritarian institution like the ship was not merely a rhetorical device. The ship, as powerfully portrayed by Marcus Rediker, was one of the earliest totalitarian work environments and as Ravi Ahuja further elaborates that ‘the real fiction of separation of labour power from the process of human life was more transpicuous than elsewhere’.¹⁹ The referencing to a total institution was an intention of shaping the nature of social and employment relationships of Assam plantations during its formative years.

The metaphor of ship was again invoked by the newly formed Indian tea association (in the early 1880s) clamouring for harsher contracts and reforms in the existing regulations. A particular demand of the tea association—expressed in a memorandum—was to bind the workers with the plantation (and not the

16 1896 Labour Report, 1906 Assam Labour Report, 1910 Duars Report . The bad name of Assam persisted even at the time of the 1931 Royal Commission of Labour.

17 C. Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009).

18 Letter from H. Hopkinson, Agent to the Governor General and Commissioner of Assam to A. Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal dated 6th October 1864. Home Department, Legislative Branch Proceedings, nos. 30–38, November 1864. NAI.

19 M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 211–212; R. Ahuja, ‘A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly ‘Lascars’ of the *SS City of Manila* or, a Micro-History of the ‘Free Labour’ Problem’ in R. Ahuja (ed.) *Working Lives & Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2013) p. 120.

employer) which could effectively force the workers to remain (on the plantation) even with a change in ownership. To make their case, the association drew a parallel with a scenario of sailors on high sea who if allowed to leave (due to change of ownership) could seriously imperil the safety of the vessel. The Indian association—a platform for native middle class opinion—in response to the memorandum of the tea association noted that the coolies electing to choose to work for new owners cannot be compared to sailors as it did not threaten the safety of the enterprise in the same way.²⁰ Infact, Hopkinson—who had proposed the structural similarities between ship and plantation—when confronted with compelling evidence of planters delaying payments of wages by several months and also of not honouring the fixed rate rice provision of the contract, argued that when wages were fixed, food prices cannot be unregulated. He again based his observation on the fact that coolies were dependent on employers for food in the same way as lascars and sailors for their rations upon the ship.²¹ The ship metaphor was not completely lost even at the beginning twentieth century. A murder of a child coolie came to official notice and it was found out that the death was due to the excessive physical disciplining administered by the plantation staff. A colonial administrator noted that in this case the manager was also to be blamed because they were like the commandeers of ship who were “morally responsible” when the sailors exceeding their instructions beat the culprit to death.²²

A more prominent point of reference, comparison and contrast for the developing plantations in Assam was what came to be described as the colonial plantations employing coolie labour. The systematic attempts to induce migrant workers in the late 1850s Assam was specifically drawing parallels with the other systems of coolie recruitment developing from the 1830s in Mauritius and West Indies. In the late 1850s, the Governor of Bengal in response to the concerns expressed by Assam planters with local labour and their attempts for “migrant” sources of labour supply explicitly suggested that they follow the “Mauritius model”.²³ Infact, Mauritius had already found a prominent mention from the planters and speculators active in Assam interviewed by the committee of colonization in the late 1850s.²⁴ They had infact complained that the state policy towards labour emigration favoured colonial destinations (like Mauritius) hurting the interests

20 Act I of 1882. Legislative Department. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.306, January 1882. NAI.

21 Proposed amendment of Bengal transport of Native Labour Act 1865. Home, Legislative A, March 1867, nos. 13–19. NAI.

22 Death of a coolie from the effects of a beating administered to him on a tea garden in November 1903. Home, Police A, July 1905, nos. 117–122. NAI.

23 *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

24 ‘The Resource of India and its colonization’, *Universal Review* (1859) pp. 343–62.

of inland sites (like Assam).²⁵ This remained a standard refrain from planters and planting interests of Assam throughout the nineteenth century.

The colonial examples also provided resources to establish contrasts and launch criticisms on the emerging nature of Assam plantation. As early as 1863, the British Indian association noted that the Mauritius model based on rationing and reparation was partially applied in Assam where these provisions were not included in the contract. This anomaly was highlighted by the Indian Association during its review of the bills to “reform” the contract system (in 1882 and 1893).²⁶ For instance, the proposal to increase the period of contract from three to five years in 1882 was reasoned (by the tea association) as a natural extension of the principle already in place in the colonial plantations. The Indian association noted that the other corollary principles in place in colonial plantations were not followed in Assam. They argued that the monthly wage did not increase with the number of years spent on the plantation and the cost of the so called ration (fixed price rice). was deducted if supplied by the planters. Again Charles De Renzy, the Sanitary commissioner of the province in the late 1870s, when faced with a rising rates of mortality during transit and on plantations in Assam framed his conclusions and criticism of the Assam system by drawing a comparison with the colonial plantations (especially West Indies).²⁷

These instances and examples clearly reveal that coolie labour in Assam was being drawn into a wider global conversation of labour relationship in various settings—the slave plantations, ships and the colonial plantation (employing coolie labour). These references often provided as powerful comparisons as well as justification to initiate reforms or even launch scathing criticisms. The scholarship on coolie labour in Assam plantations, though very diverse and extensive, have largely remained silent on these connections.²⁸ This becomes even more crucial in light of a literature around what came to be described as coolies in the colo-

25 W. N. Lees, *Tea cultivation, Cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: A review* (London, 1863); W. N. Lees, *Memorandum Written after a Tour through the Tea Districts of Eastern Bengal in 1864–1865* (Calcutta, 1866).

26 Act I of 1882. Legislative Department. Legislative Department Proceedings, no.306, January 1882. NAI.

27 Assam Sanitary Reports 1878 to 1880.

28 R. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam* (New Delhi, 2014); R. Behal, *Some Aspects of the Growth of the Tea Plantation Labour Force and Labour Movements in Assam Valley Districts (Lakhimpur, Sibsagar and Darrang) 1900–1947* (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1983); R. Chattopadhyaya, *Social Perspective of Labour Legislation in India: 1859–1932* (Calcutta University, 1987); M.A.B. Siddique, *Evolution of Land Grants and Labour Policy of Government* (New Delhi, 1990); P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967); H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948); H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957); R. Dasgupta, ‘From Peasant to Tribesmen to

nial world. Coolie emerging from various etymologies predominantly appeared as the archetypical Asiatic labour (Chinese and Indian) in the nineteenth century working under indenture contracts. In an influential essay Breman and Kelly framed coolie labour relationship as a constant process of mobilisation and immobilisation of labour.²⁹ Gopalan Balachandran in a recent article further suggests the coolie labour relationship as the most typical labour and employment relationship outside a very particular Western European context. He insists to see this not as an exception but part and intertwined with what came to be described as free wage labour relationship.³⁰

Drawing from these insights the book explores the making of coolie labour relationship not only as a broader homogenizing project of coerced labour under capitalism but also seek to explain its specific yet varied articulations. Coolie labour relationship in this understanding would therefore appear neither as fixed nor as only structurally produced but deeply shaped by specific practices of migration, work organization and nature of life on colonial plantations. The book therefore makes a case for investigating the making of these relationships to underline how the so called coolies were also intervening and actively informing them. A major departure of this book then is to move away from several studies where coolie labour is seen primarily as an object of research rather than subjects of their own histories. In doing so the approach employed here is neither to privilege the macro scale or micro scale but navigate between different levels of observation and analysis and bring them into a closer dialogue. Such an approach incorporating different scales allows us to construct general patterns but also helps us understand how they were informed and linked to more particular practices, processes and events.³¹

Plantation workers' in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp. 19–23. S. Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian tea Industry*. (Bombay, 1954).

29 J. Breman and E.V. Daniel, 'The Making of a Coolie' in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, Special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3&4 (1992).

30 G. Balachandran, 'Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers: "Globalizing Labour in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 3 (2011) pp. 266–296.

31 The field of "global microhistory" has provided very valuable and useful insights into the discussion of scales of historical research where they identify a more macro structural approach in the recent global turn in history and have suggested ways to bring them in a productive dialogue with earlier insights on microhistory, history of everyday life and the biographical approaches to history. F. Trivellato, 'Is there a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?', *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011); T. Andrade, 'A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Towards a Global Microhistory', *Journal of World History* 21, no.4 (2010) pp. 573–591; A. Stanley, 'Maidservants' Tales: Narrating Domestic and Global History in Eurasia, 1600–1900', *The American Historical Review* 121, no.2 (2016) pp. 437–460.

This is also a proposal to more firmly connect the histories of Assam coolie to the new labour history and recent literature on indenture. The historical interest in labour reflects a broader trend in historiography, where from some predictions of a decline and “end” of labour history has given way to a growing sense of renewal. The new labour history has been very productive in exploring new themes and unsettling older frameworks and certainties.³² A point of departure of recent studies on the “indenture” has been the negotiations and experiences of social groups and even individuals. The wealth of “evidence” generated by an elaborate and intrusive colonial bureaucracy, monitoring and controlling the overseas movements, in contrast to a relatively more “deregulated” and less supervised Assam coolie system, has been critical in this incongruity.³³ The lack of scholarly attention should not imply that a more localised nature of the migration to Assam had less transformative consequences—social, biological and cultural—than the long and hazardous passages across the seas to distant destinations. The historical evidence of Assam coolie migration and settlement, to the contrary, suggests a substantial demographic movement over time, a higher incidence of abuses in recruitment, greater rates of mortality during transit and a largely “permanent” character of the population shift.³⁴

32 P. Mohapatra, *Situating the renewal: reflections on labour studies in India* (New Delhi, 1998). C. Joshi, ‘Histories of Indian Labour: Predicaments and Possibilities’, *History Compass* 6, no. 2 (2008) pp. 439–454.

33 Many recent studies have documented and utilised a variety of sources like letters, petitions, depositions and oral testimonies to “deconstruct” the official view and understand the ‘experiences’ of migration and indentured labour in different contexts. For the Indian migrant in Mauritius M. Carter, *Voices from Indenture: Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London, 1996) and for the Chinese migrant in Cuba see L. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves of Cuba* (Philadelphia, 2008). Some personal and autobiographical writing of indentured and ex-indentured labourers have been recently ‘unearthed’. The cases of Bechu (West Indies) and Munshi Rahman Khan (Surinam) are most well recorded. C. Seecharan, *Bechu: ‘Bound Coolie’ Radical in British Guiana 1894–1901* (Barbados, 1999) and M.R. Khan, *Autobiography of an Indian Indentured Labourer: Munshi Rahman Khan, 1874–1972* (Delhi, 2005). For an analysis of Bechu’s “critique” of the indenture system through his writing in the press see P. Mohapatra, “‘Following Custom’? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880–1920”, *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006) pp. 173–202.

34 R. Dasgupta, ‘Structure of the Labour Market in Colonial India’ *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, no.44–46 pp. 1781–1806; P. Chaudhury, ‘Labour Migration from the United Provinces, 1881–1911’ *Studies in History* 8, no.13 (1992) pp. 13–41; P. Mohapatra, ‘Coolies and Colliers: A Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migration from Chotanagpur’, *Studies in History* 1, no.2 (August 1985) pp. 247–303; S. Chatterjee and R. Das Gupta, Tea-Labour in Assam: Recruitment and Government Policy, 1840–80, *Economic and Political Weekly* 16, nos. 44–46 (November 1981) pp. 1861–1868; R. Shlomowitz & L. Brennan, ‘Mortality and Migrant labour en route to Assam,

This to a large extent has been due to the nature of the material by which these histories are constructed. The colonial archive, and a few company records frame individuals and groups as statistics and numbers migrating, working and even dying on their journeys or in the plantations. The scientific management mode again frames labour as a factor like soil, climate, disease which needs to be controlled and channelized for the interest of the plantation capitalism. A major interest in these practical manuals produced from the 1860s is framed around the question of whether tea will pay?³⁵ This again became the subject of a colonial report anxious to ensure the safety of large amount of British capital being invested.³⁶ The labour reports on migration and on the plantations give fairly detailed statistics on the number of workers migrating, working, absconding and dying but offer little on the experience of migration, work and social life.³⁷ Such issues find mention only from the 1880s in the several colonial enquiries on the large scale abuses in labour recruitment, the perceived reluctance of migration to Assam and the increasing levels of violence on the plantation.³⁸ These themes also started appearing in the Bengali press showing a deepening interest on the Assam tea gardens and where cases of abduction and kidnapping for tea gardens were particularly being reported and passionately discussed. Some contemporary observers like Dwarkanath Ganguli and Charles Dowding offer a fairly critical perspective of Assam plantations of the late nineteenth century though also basing their claims on the available colonial reports and some personal reporting.³⁹

A prominent interest in the new history from below has been to shift the focus from social groups to individuals.⁴⁰ Such an attempt remains very challenging and frustrating as individuals, especially in the early period of plantation, remain

1863–1924' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 27, no.3 (Sep. 1990) pp. 313–330. One such stream of migration from Chotanagpur to the tea plantations of Assam and Bengal is the subject of a recent documentary film *Kora Rajee* (Land of Diggers).

35 E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of Tea* (Calcutta, 1874); G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884, Calcutta).

36 *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the State and Prospects of Tea Cultivation in Assam, Cachar and Sylhet* (Calcutta, 1868).

37 Annual Report of Labour in Assam and Inland Emigration Reports from the mid 1870s.

38 *Government of India Despatch, dated the 22nd day of June 1889, with its enclosures, including Reports by Mr. Tucker; and of Memorial of the Indian Association of Calcutta, dated the 12th day of April 1888* (London, 1889); *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906).

39 C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894). D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972).

40 C. Steedman. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0521697735> *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age*. (Cambridge, 2007); C. Steedman. *An Everyday*

largely obscured. Individuals do appear briefly in a few scandals being reported as victims of systematic torture. The nature of discipline in plantations becoming increasingly privatized implied that though the workers were disciplined by the provision (or rather exception) of law, this hardly left any paper trail. Again the dispensing of justice in a few case through local magistrate did not leave any significant archival traces. Such encounters with law as victims or perpetrators became more prominent from the late nineteenth century as cases were being reported to sessions and high court which also found frequent mention in Bengali press and the contemporary accounts of Dwarkanath Ganguli and Charles Dowding.⁴¹ These cases pertained to the several instances of abuse during recruitment, charges of violence (individual and collective) against the workers and also the excesses of the manager and his subordinates on the plantations.

Working with these traces the book closely reconstructs the experiences of individuals during recruitment, migration and on the plantations. The attempt here is also to simultaneously sketch certain general trends like the growing sense of unpopularity of Assam in the migrating regions and the developing notions of customary, protest and working cultures on plantations. This will help us to understand how such a huge demographic movement linked to the expansion and industrial organization on plantation were being encountered and shaped in lived realities of individuals and social groups. A parallel trend to this large scale movement of individuals was the drives of plantation capitalism towards greater systematisation and routinisation. This changing nature and organization of Assam tea gardens also remains to be conceptualised and historically situated. Such a process marked a shift from a predominantly violent strategy of work intensification and control of workers in the earlier plantations— to strategies of a closer supervision of their work and life—through an elaborate authority structure and newer forms of control on the late nineteenth century. A new ‘time-work-discipline’ was attempted to be formalised and enforced. The “industrial organisation” of work on plantations will seek a reassessment of an overt focus on coercive strategies of labour control in the literature.

A stabilisation of plantations and the planter strategies of routines and supervision also occasioned cultures of work and life taking form on plantations. Culture—which has been a point of emphasis in the “new” labour history—is not taken in its essentialist sense. Culture is neither purely drawn for a pre—plantation past nor is it understood to be completely “derived” and produced from a

Life of the English Working Class. Work, Self and Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century (Cambridge, 2013).

⁴¹ E Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010).

new structural form—plantation. This will require a closer analysis of the quotidian practices of workers—where cultures and routines of work and life were produced, reproduced and transformed.

This emphasis will seek a re-evaluation of the nature and forms of bargaining and worker politics on the plantations. A body of scholarly literature has emphasised that the plantation regime and the system of contracts had deterred the capacity of plantation workers and they chose accommodation and individual acts of passive resistance as a “strategy” appreciating the realities of the plantation system and structures of power in the larger colonial society.⁴² Desertion has often been read as a predominant mode of resistance and an individualised strategy of “escape” from the harsh plantation life. Such understandings do not necessarily appreciate that in colonial classificatory modes desertion was employed as an overarching category—which ranged from individual withdrawal of services, to withdrawal of smaller and even some larger groups of workers. The right to private arrest as empowered by the contract and the elaborate system of policing and tracking down the “absconders” also led to a gross underreporting of the phenomena. There also a tendency of plantation managers conflating worker deaths with desertion, as suspected by some officials and also noted by an Indian investigator. This was a well worked out strategy of keeping the mortality rates within the “acceptable” limits.⁴³

42 See B. V. Lal, “Nonresistance” on Fiji Plantations: The Fiji Indian Experience, 1879–1920’ in B.V. Lal and D. Munro (ed.) *Plantation Workers, Resistance and Accommodation* (Honolulu, 1993) p. 188; M.J. Murray, ‘White Gold’ or ‘White Blood’? The Rubber Plantations of Colonial Indochina’, 1910–40 and P. Ramasamy, ‘Labour Control and Labour Resistance in the Plantations of Colonial Malaya’. Both articles in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos. 3&4 (1992) pp. 56–59, pp. 97–104.

43 There was also a growing tendency to explain the incidence of desertion as a “racial” phenomenon—where the workers from North Western Provinces and Bihar (upcountry) were seen to be particularly prone to “bolt”. The annual labour reports from the early 1870s—working on this principle—classified desertions according to the “racial” background of the workers. The labour and health reports of the late 1870s and early 1880s suggested some connections between desertion and new arrivals having low earnings, and also with plantations having a higher rate of mortality. From the late nineteenth century one can see a greater urge in the colonial administration to generate a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. One of the classifications tried to explain this along three criteria—a. nature of contract b. period of residence, c. supposed cause. Rana Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900–1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 1985) p. PE-20. *Enquiry at inspections of tea gardens in Assam into the causes of desertions among labourers*. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, February 1904. ASA; *The Bengalee* 27, no.40 (Oct 2, 1886) p. 473 cited in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p. 7.

Some recent studies on protest in the nineteenth century Assam plantations, have unsettled a dominant framework—in Indian labour historiography in general and Assam plantation historiography in particular—of an evolutionary transition from individual to collective forms of protest—especially linked with growth of national movement and communist revolution in the twentieth century.⁴⁴ However, these explorations have not adequately conceptualised the nature and forms of bargaining and protest in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The framing of protest has oscillated from an understanding of greater politicization in the twentieth century to remaining as contingencies. A more grounded study will reveal how such immediate contingencies were not divorced from the worker solidarities produced in the practices of life and work on plantations. These collective expressions were informing and were informed by workplace organization, patterns of residence and various new occasions on plantations. The production of the “new” occasions was also marked by the “reproduction” of older cultural and religious occasions.

This will require greater attention on plantations not as given homogeneous structures which reproduce uniformly across time and space. The various conceptualizations of plantation as harbingers of modernity, as total institutions, as abstract spaces, have to be firmly located in different historical, geographical and social settings.⁴⁶

A quest for migrant workers and planter strategies of contracting migrant workers (or *coolies*)—emerge as one of the early resolutions of such plantation aspirations in the so called post-slavery world. These processes were operating in a global framework, but its specific manifestation needs to be carefully mapped.

44 This view of “evolution” forms part of many studies. Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1830–1990* (Calcutta, 1997) p. 60; Sanat Bose, *Capital and Labour in the Indian Tea Industry* (Bombay, 1954) p. 96; Amalendu Guha, ‘Formation of a Working Class in Assam plantations: A Study in Retrospect’ in North East India Council for Social Science Research (ed.) *Problems of Tea Industry in North East India* (Calcutta, 1981); R. Behal, ‘Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Plantations, 1900–1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 1985). See Chapter 6 for a detailed critique and an analysis of the “incident”.

45 N. Varma, ‘Coolie Strikes Back: Collective Protest and Action in the Colonial Tea Plantations of Assam, 1880–1920’, *Indian Historical Review*; R.P. Behal, ‘Power Structure, Discipline, and Labour in Assam Tea Plantations under Colonial Rule’ in R. Behal & M van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi); R. Behal, *Coolie Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture system*, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010); Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam’, in M. D. Dubber and L. Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007); E Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010) pp. 142–184.

46 P. Curtin. *The Rise and Fall of the Plantation Complex* (Cambridge, 1990).

For instance, the framing of a special indenture contract (Assam contract) did not do away a general contract—the Master and Servant contract (Act XIII) in Assam plantations. The contract(s) assumed specialised and overlapping forms in its attempts to immobilise workers in a fairly differentiated plantation landscape. The indenture system in Assam based on the historical experience of Assam contract and Assam valley plantations has to be grounded. This differentiation in the practices of indenturing will also need to be situated in the broadening of the identity of the recruiter.

The first part (first two chapters) situates the emergence of tea cultivation, plantation agriculture, migrant workers and the contract(s) (Assam contract and Act XIII contract) in the changing nature, organization of work and operation scales of production in colonial Assam. How did plantations employing contract coolies develop a relationship with recruiters and how does it change over time? The changes in nature of contracts and modes of recruiting from the 1870s (especially through certain legislative initiatives) created the basis for harsher contracts and facilitated massive migration. The trends also occasioned new modes of plantation organisation and intensification of work. These interlocking processes in analysed in the next part (next three chapters) through an unpacking of the unpopularity of Assam, the planter concerns and the worker practices of drinking and the notions of customary emerging on plantations. Informed by such understandings, the last part (Chapter 6) looks at a moment which stimulated the end of contracts. An episode in the twentieth century (Chargola exodus) is carefully discussed to how it encapsulated processes of continuities and change.