

# 1 Tea in the Colony

## 1.1 Introduction

This chapter situates the notions and practices of work and labour in the context of the introduction of tea cultivation and the inauguration of plantation mode of production in Assam. The first section tracks the shifting concerns and strategies of the East India Company, interested and engaged in the task of producing the valued commodity in its Indian possessions. Here we analyse the changing objectives of the colonial tea project. After the so called “discovery” of the “indigenous” tea plant in Assam in the early 1830s, it moved beyond an exclusive focus on acquiring the “skilled” art of manipulation of leaves (by Chinese tea makers), to organizing the manual work for clearing the forests and procuring the tea leaves (by local tribes and peasants) growing in the wild. Here we examine how the perceived disinclination of the local Assamese to participate in this project was mapped in the qualitative and essentialised binary discourse of labour—the lazy indigenous contrasting to the industrious imported labour.<sup>47</sup> Such anxieties as we go on to discuss, became more pronounced when the “experimental” tracts made way for a more “regular” plantation mode of production which systematically encountered a chronic shortage of workers in the formalising period of tea manufacture.

The valorisation of “imported labour”—as the next sections will discuss—hinged on the assumption of them donning the mantle of the committed and settled workers on plantations, in contrast to the local tribal and peasant groups decried of being perpetually entrapped in the agricultural cycles and their opium smoking habits. The identification of outsider/imported labour was, however, fluid at this stage, where Kacharis—an ethnic group within the province, and the extremely amorphous category of “Bengalis” from outside the province, “settled” and worked on the plantations of the pioneer tea company—the Assam Company.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The cultural construction of lazy native was critical to the ideology of colonial capitalism in several contexts. Alatas shows how the reluctance of the Malays, Indonesians and Filipinos to participate in the colonial economy was read through the stereotype of the “lazy native” in these discourses. S.H. Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism*. (London, 1977).

<sup>48</sup> The category of Bengali was used for workers travelling from Bengal to various inland and overseas destinations. See Chapter 2 for details.

The later sections of the chapter will make a case that it was not until the late 1850s that *coolie*—the much celebrated labour category considered ideal for plantations—was employed to designate the ‘imported labour from outside the province’ in the colonial-capitalist discourses on Assam. Now the referents were the social and regional groups travelling to the overseas plantation colonies as indentured labour. They were now reckoned to be indispensable for accomplishing the amplified labour needs of an industry, expanding much beyond a few companies in select localities of Assam.

The workers demanded from outside the province were not just limited to provide remedy for the short numbers. Tea *coolies* for plantations were ideally imagined to be composed of familial and kin members incessantly travelling as groups. Apart from serving the purpose of being “fixed” and “bound” in/as structures of families, the proposition encapsulated the potential of labour participation of families in accomplishing the differentiated and specialised nature of work in the functioning plantations—organised along the axes of gender and age. The interest of this chapter in tracing and interrogating this transition to migrant workers is also to underline the limits of the strategies of plantation capital and policies of the colonial state in dislocating, immobilising, and depoliticising the local society.

## 1.2 Discovery of Tea and the Skills of Chinese Work

The idea of the ‘introduction of tea cultivation’ in the newly acquired possessions of East India Company in the early part of nineteenth century was tied to larger geopolitical, commercial and scientific developments; where uncertainties of commercial relations with China, the profitability of the tea trade and the partially successful propagation of the plant in other parts of the globe, made the proposition not only urgent and lucrative but increasingly feasible.<sup>49</sup> The immediate point of consideration in this regard—as indicated in the influential minute by the Governor General of India, William Bentinck—was to map, assess and ascertain

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<sup>49</sup> The introduction of plants in the colonised world was a long drawn out process. The Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires in the New World, Africa and Asia had involved in “transaction” and “circulation” of various plants. A more formalised strategy of plant introduction and plantation cultivation was an outcome of a strategy and policy of the colonial empires of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. P. D. Curtin, *The rise and fall of the plantation complex: essays in Atlantic history* (Cambridge, 1998); J. Crawford, ‘On the History and Migration of Cultivated Plants Producing Coffee, Tea, Cocoa, etc.’ *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London* 7 (1869) pp. 197–206; D.R. Headrick, ‘Botany, Chemistry, and Tropical Development’ *Journal of World History* 7, no. 1 (1996).

the various configurations of soil and climate within their vast and diverse possessions in the subcontinent, which could offer the precise combination in which the ‘China plant’ could flourish to an extent to render it commercially viable for private speculation. This would necessitate as he argued, ‘concerted measures for obtaining the genuine plant, and the actual cultivator.’ This underscored at the very outset that the notions of not only the plant and its habitat but also the knowledge and art of its manipulation was patently Chinese.<sup>50</sup> A Tea Committee was duly constituted in February 1834, as the institutional and scientific framework to carry out the “experiment” of exploring and recommending the measures for introduction of tea plant in India.<sup>51</sup>

The essential task of the Tea Committee for initiating measures for the “introduction” of tea was apparently complicated by the reports of “discovery” of tea in Assam. These reports confirmed tea to be ‘beyond all doubt indigenous,’ having received letters and conclusive evidence from the administrative-in-charge of the province Captain Jenkins and his subordinate Lt Charlton. Underlining the significance of the occasion, the Committee waxed eloquent: ‘by far [it is] the most important and valuable discovery that has ever been made on matters connected with the agricultural and commercial resources of this empire.’<sup>52</sup> This, however, did not discourage the Committee and its informants to persist in invoking China tea (the genuine) in validating the credentials of the Assam tea (the indigenous).<sup>53</sup>

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**50** Minute by the Governor-General of India, 24<sup>th</sup> January 1834 in *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant within the British Possessions in India* (British Parliamentary Papers, 1839) pp. 5–6. Hereafter, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

**51** The Tea Committee in its inaugural statement agreed to idea of the necessity of the right (read Chinese) combination of soil and climate for any significant success of its introduction; but admitted that ‘due to lack of statistical inquiries directed to this particular subject’, it knew ‘too little to form an accurate comparison with the tea districts of China’ and India. On a preliminary and extremely limited information, they speculated that the lower hills and valleys of Himalayas, the eastern frontier and the Nilgiris and the mountain tracts in southern and Central India was most likely to fit the bill or in other words resembled the tea countries in China., Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 16. Also see N. Wallich, Observations on the Cultivation of the Tea Plant for Commercial Purposes, in the mountainous parts of Hindustan in *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

**52** Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 32–33.

**53** The committee referred to the place of “discovery” (one month’s march from Suddya and Beesa) ‘to be adjoining the Chinese frontier province of Yunan’. Captain Jenkins detailing the geography of the region indicated that the mountainous region which divides Assam and Cachar to have ‘a direct continuation passing into China into the tea countries of Sechuan and Yunan’

The Committee formally constituted a scientific deputation to map, verify and scientifically assess the claims and nature of Assam tea.<sup>54</sup> In a recent study, Jayeeta Sharma argues that the trope of “wildness” informed the colonial scientific discourses in characterising the tea plant found in Assam and also the practices of its manipulation observed among the local tribes.<sup>55</sup> The colonial civilising mission was sought to be realised through the introduction of “civilized” Chinese tea maker/cultivator and domesticating the “wild” Assam plant by confinement and cultivation.<sup>56</sup>

The necessity of introducing Chinese tea makers revealed the early anxieties about work and workers in achieving the desired objective of producing tea in India. The work, unlike the later *coolie* work on plantations, was portrayed as “skilled”, requiring the “true” yet “jealously guarded” art of processing leaves to produce black and green tea, known only to the Chinese. Jenkins, the administrative head of Assam, requested the scientific deputation for Assam to be accompanied with Chinamen. He expected them to travel through Burma into Yunan to forge and activate networks of contact and facilitate the flows of existing knowledge about tea manufacture.<sup>57</sup> The Tea Committee issued a fresh directive to its

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and that the ‘northern bend in the latitude of Suddya meets a branch of the snowy mountains (the place considered ideal for tea growing in China)’. While Captain Charlton narrated his interactions with couple of natives from the Chinese province of Yunan who assured him that the tea tree growing near Suddya exactly resembled the species they had there and that there can be ‘no doubt of its being bona fide tea’. Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1834; F Jenkins, Agent to the Governor-General North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary of the Committee of Tea Culture, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1834; Letter from Lt Charlton to Captain Jenkins, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1834. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 32–36.

<sup>54</sup> Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> The Singphos and Kamtees were in the habit of drinking an infusion. This was similar to the procedure that was in use with Burmese to prepare tea. J. Sharma, ‘British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43 no.4 (2006); *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 34–35.

<sup>56</sup> Naturalist worked with a different conception of science. Domestication effected changes in the organism, which were partly inherited and intensified these changes by selection during many generations. J. Sharma, ‘British science, Chinese skill and Assam tea’, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 43 no. 4 (2006). For a general discussion on colonialism as a civilising mission, see M. Mann and H. Fischer-Tine, *Colonialism as a Civilising Mission* (London, 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Jenkins further urged the government to take active measures in facilitating and stimulating the trade links between Ava (Burma) and Assam in the hope of attracting Chinese cultivators to reclaim what he described as the wild wastes of Suddya. The scheme of getting the Chinese cultivators through the overland route than directly from China met with the Committee’s approval because of its cost effectiveness, but the scheme was unlikely to bear immediate results. F. Jen-

representative who had returned from China with tea seeds to undertake another trip to recruit qualified Chinamen, who could oversee and supervise the cultivation and manufacture of tea. This, they contented, was the key to the 'successful introduction of tea culture within the British territories'.<sup>58</sup>

Chinese tea makers were not easy to procure and also came at a substantial cost. For instance, the inaugural batches of Chinese tea makers landing in Assam in the late 1830s came under great duress, loss of life and heavy price. Their presence, however, quickly raised hopes among the administrative/scientific circles that the valued art of tea making could now be passed on to the colonised natives. They believed that the tea enterprise would in due course of time liberate itself from the shackles of Chinese skilled workers.<sup>59</sup> Operating along those lines, Robert Bruce decided to employ his entire native staff as apprentices to the Chinese tea makers.<sup>60</sup> To further secure this valued knowledge, he diligently recorded and graphically illustrated the earliest process of manufacture employed by the Chinese, which was published in 1838 as *An Account of Manufacture of the Black Tea as Now Practised at Suddeya in Upper Assam*.<sup>61</sup>

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kins, Agent to the Governor-General North-Eastern Frontier to the Secretary of the Tea Committee, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the cultivation of the Tea Plant within the British Possessions in India* p. 37.

**58** Such a tendency was also evident from Dutch Trading Company (*Nederlandsche Handelsmaatschappij*) sending an employee between the years 1827 and 1833, who travelled around six times to China in order to get the necessary data on cultivation and manufacture, and to fetch skilled Chinese labourers with their tools. The Dutch Government even ordered seeds from Japan through the intermediary, the physician F.V. Siebold in 1825. The first tea gardens were laid out in December 1835. Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1835; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Members of the Tea Committee, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1835. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 46–47; *Bulletin Du Jardin Botanique*, 1 no.4, (1919) p. 196.

**59** Members of the Tea Committee to Secretary to Government, 12<sup>th</sup> January 1837; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to the Tea Committee, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1837; N Wallich to Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1837. Robert Fortune, the incharge of the British tea enterprise in the North Western provinces also regarded the importation of Chinese manipulators at exorbitant wages as a 'temporary measure', the long term objective being the 'instruction of the natives'. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 87–94; *Report upon the Tea Plantations of Deyra, Kumaon and Gurhwal by Robert Fortune, 6th September 1851*, Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces (Agra, 1855).

**60** R Bruce to Jenkins, 20<sup>th</sup> Dec 1836 *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant*.

**61** A recent study argues this to be one of the early examples of expatriation for work purposes in the context of a transfer of technology from an ancient civilization to a modern colony. These expatriate craftsmen were sought after both for their expertise in the tea-making process and for their ability to train others, particularly the local Assamese. Few of the first group of Chinese

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 AS  
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 IN  
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 BY THE CHINAMEN SENT THITHER FOR THAT PURPOSE,  
 WITH  
 SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CULTURE OF THE PLANT  
 IN CHINA,  
 AND ITS GROWTH IN ASSAM.  
 BY C. A. BRUCE,  
 Superintendent of the Culture.  
 CALCUTTA:  
 G. H. HUTCHINGS, HINDUSTANI MILITARY ORPHAN PRESS,  
 1838.

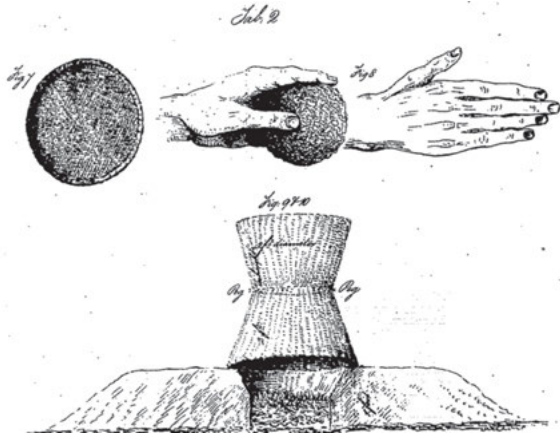


Figure 1.1: Manual and illustration on tea manufacture in Assam, 1838.<sup>62</sup>

The transfer of skills from the civilised to the colonised was one of diminishing returns, especially regarding the wages paid. The trained native black tea maker got only nine percent of what was given to the Chinese counterpart, while the native green tea maker barely received a third of the monthly remuneration of the Chinese colleague.

### 1.3 Framing Plantations and encounters with the Lazy Native Worker

Alongside the acquaintance with the civilising methods of the Chinese tea maker/cultivator, simultaneous attempts were underway to “civilise” the wild Assam Plant. By the middle of 1836, the botanical expert of the deputation Nathan Wallich, having extensively travelled, surveyed and mapped the wild sites in the province, proposed urgent measures for taking possession of the “natural” tea forests.<sup>63</sup> Such an idea was mooted in the contention that the forests holding the

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tea cultivators and processors who moved to Assam in 1837 lasted the full three years of their contract. A. L. Pichon, *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong, 1827–1843* (Oxford, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce of the tea plantations in Assam* (Calcutta, 1839).

<sup>63</sup> The area of tea in Upper Assam was located in three regions namely Singhpo country (Kojoo, Niggroo); Muttoc country (Nuddoa and Tingree) and Gabroo Hills. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 46–47.

valuable plant of potential exploitation, was at the time exposed to the ravages of the nature, native and beast. In what could be described as “proto-plantations” and containing the germs of a prolonged but contested process of dispossession of the forest commons. The creation and systematisation of enclaves was proposed by demarcating, clearing and guarding these sites.<sup>64</sup> This found more explicit expression in a particular order from the central administration instructing the local bureaucracy to take immediate steps to that effect:

1st. To obtain by purchase or otherwise tracts of forests in the Singpho, Muttock, and Gubroo Hills

2nd. That the tracts be placed under a systematic course of management, for establishing tea plantations

3rd. That the Tracts be protected, by a strong fence, from encroachment and depredation of man and beast

4th. That labourers be entertained to dig and level the ground, and drain lands at places where there is fear of severe flooding

5th. That Chowkidars be hired to guard the tracts, to prevent theft of plants and seed.<sup>65</sup>

To realise the desire of taming the forests containing the wild tea into demarcated and ordered “plantations”, the company administration was not in a position to

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<sup>64</sup> This was in further agreement with Wallich’s scientific idea that the wild Assam plant, when placed in circumstances as nearly as possible resembling those in which the cultivated/civilized China plant should yield the best results. At the same time, to conclusively show the feasibility of producing tea in Assam for commercial purposes, for which the committee was explicitly formed, Jenkins strongly recommended that the tea cannot exclusively be picked from the wild and had to be put through the test of cultivation (civilization)—both native and imported. Further elaborating the proposed structure and nature of the “proto-plantations”, he recommended that an appropriate site should be decided (with the Chinese expertise) and the cultivation undertaken in the right earnest. He reassured the government that the whole experiment cannot be too burdensome as the only major expense being the remuneration of European superintendence and the Chinese planters, as the land can be acquired at almost no cost and *coolies* for what he described as ‘little additional charge’. Seeds which arrived from China were sown in Calcutta early in 1835, and the plantlets, 42,000 in number, distributed. Assam and the Himalayan Mountains (Kumaon, Dehra Doon, North West Provinces) got 20,000 each. The remainders 2,000 were transported to Madras. N. Wallich to Francis Jenkins, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1836, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 66. For more details see D. Arnold, ‘Plant capitalism and company science: the Indian career of Nathaniel Wallich’ *Modern Asian Studies* 42 no. 5 (2008) pp. 899–928.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce complained about many tracts being cut down in “ignorance” by the natives, to make room for their rice field and firewood. Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Captain Jenkins, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1836, *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 68–69.

explicitly pursue a policy of acquisition, dispossession and direct control. They largely depended on personal persuasion, inducement, and at times exaggerated and even concocted promises to solicit valued local information and support.<sup>66</sup> Even though he lacked the requisite scientific qualification and training, the elevation of Robert Bruce as the British superintendent of “tea forests” in Assam, was on account of his acquaintance with the local language, custom and terrain and his proven abilities in forging ties with the local groups.<sup>67</sup>

The area of tea exploration in the Singpho country was still tenuously linked to the deepening influence and presence of the Company in the province. The resident tribes of the region, from whom Bruce got hold of the first tea plants, exhibited a degree of reluctance towards the project of clearing the forests.<sup>68</sup> In a letter addressed to Jenkins, Bruce mentioned the earliest ‘resistance’ of the natives to the labour demands of the tea experiment. He lamented that the Singphos ‘work how and when they please’ and they made it clear to him that ‘they would not clear the jungle when it grows.’ After largely unsuccessful attempt to lure their chiefs with guns and opium, Bruce remarked:

Singpho country cannot be available (for tea) unless we import men to make the Singphos more industrious...these men will not work for any long as they have sufficient opium and rice...as long as coolies can get four rupees per mensem at Suddeya, they will never go to Singphos (territory) for that sum.<sup>69</sup>

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**66** For example, the sites at Gubroo hills under the native chief (Raja Purandar Singh) was partially brought under Company’s possession on assurances that the Chinese instructor of tea cultivation and manufacture would train the chief’s men, who still retained possession of half of the hills. The chief of Tingree in the Muttok country initially resisted to the overtures of the company authorities, but later came around the issue and even actively supported with men and material. This was on the understanding that the company would leave the production and manufacture of tea in his control, after the successful execution of the experiment. Captain Jenkins to N. Wallich, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1836; Major White to Lt. Millar, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1836; Lt Millar to Major White, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1836; R Bruce to Lt. Millar, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1836; Raja Purandar Sing to Major White, 13<sup>th</sup> April 1836; Bruce to F. Jenkins, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1836. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* pp. 69–71, 84.

**67** N. Wallich to Francis Jenkins, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1836; Secretary to the Government in the Revenue Department to Captain Jenkins, 23<sup>rd</sup> May, 1836. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 66, pp. 68–69.

**68** Singphos are divided into twelve principal tribes, each having its own chief or *Gaum*. Bisa Gaum had an arrangement to become the ‘organ of communication’ with other chiefs at a monthly allowance of fifty rupees and furnished a contingent of hundred men. J. McCosh, *Topography of Assam* (Calcutta, 1837) p. 151.

**69** C.A. Bruce, Superintendent of Tea to Captain Jenkins, 10<sup>th</sup> February, 1837. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 92.



The demands for imported labour to compel the natives to work, underscored the early attempts to favourably alter the local labour supply situation. A sufficient supply of the chief staple (rice) and the drug of preference (opium) was read as the condition and cause for the native's disinclination to labour. This view failed to take into account that the wages on offer (between 3 and 4 rupees) were an inadequate inducement to work in the tortuous and trying jungle terrain. Nevertheless, the instances of the reluctance caught the attention of the administrative chief of the province, and he raised this issue in a correspondence with a member of the Tea Committee:

... For this evil (native labour) it will not be difficult to find a remedy, I hope, when the tea becomes to be largely worked by encouraging the emigration of more industrious races from Chota Nagpur, or elsewhere; but in the present state of our preparations, in regard to the manufacture of tea, it does not appear immediately necessary to offer any particular suggestions.<sup>70</sup>

Jenkins agreed with the view of the necessity of imported labour and particularly referred to the facilitation of migration of the 'more industrious races of Chota Nagpur or elsewhere' as a potential remedy. This was an apparent allusion to the "labour solution" debates of the 1830s and the formalisation of the *coolie* labour system for overseas plantations, especially recruiting "races" from Chota Nagpur in eastern India. But he maintained that the present incipient stage of experimental operation in Assam did not justify such an organised measure.<sup>71</sup>

#### 1.4 Experimental Plantations and the search for Immobilised Worker

The operationalisation of the experimental plantation, with the arrival of the Chinese tea makers, starkly revealed the logistical inputs, work practices and labour integral to an efficient operation of a plantation. This went beyond a mere technical know-how of the methods of manufacturing tea—black and green. By that time, more than a hundred "natural" tea sites had been already identified and earmarked, and the person in charge (Bruce) boasted of having enough seed

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<sup>70</sup> Bruce procured around 17,000 plants for his "nurseries" in Suddya from the Muttock and received further supplies of 16,000 China plants in 1837 from which the first tea was produced. Captain Jenkins to N. Wallich, 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1837. *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p.92.

<sup>71</sup> *The Measures Adopted for introducing the Cultivation of the Tea Plant* p. 34.

and seedlings to ‘plant whole of Assam’.<sup>72</sup> However, a limited working force at his disposal meant that only five of these tracts could be made operational.<sup>73</sup> It was not just a matter of numbers, but also of permanence and stability of the working force. Apart from his proposal of getting more tea makers with assistants (one tea maker with six assistants for each tract), Bruce noted the indispensability of fixed workers (thirty for each tract), especially pluckers of tea leaves.<sup>74</sup> A cursory glance at the statistics of the working staff of the experimental stations (Table 1.1) reveals that an overwhelming majority of the permanent employees were delegated tasks in the manufacturing/manipulation of tea leaves (tea makers), with the rest engaged in construction (carpenters, sawyers), packaging (canister maker) and transport of tea (*Mahouts*).

**Table 1.1:** Employees of the ‘Experimental Plantations’ in Upper Assam, 1840.<sup>75</sup>

	Number	Wages
Superintendent	1	500-0-0
1 <sup>st</sup> Assistant	1	100-0-0
2 <sup>nd</sup> Assistant	1	70-0-0
Chinese Black Tea Maker	1	55-11-6
Asst Chinese Black Tea Maker	1	11-1-6
Chinese Tea Box Maker	1	45-0-0
Chinese Interpreter	1	45-0-0
Chinese Tea Box maker	1	15-8-6
Chinese Green Tea maker	2	15-8-6
Chinese Tea Box maker	1	33-4-6
Chinese Lead Canister Maker	1	22-3-0
Native Black Tea maker	24	5-0-0
Native Green Tea maker	12	5-0-0
Native Carpenter	1	4-0-0
Coolie Sardar	1	10-0-0
Mahout	4	6-0-0
Mahout mates	4	4-0-0

<sup>72</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 3.

<sup>73</sup> The manufacturing operations could not be carried out at each and every individual site. Leaves plucked, sometimes from great distances, had to be brought at two centrally located sites where the Chinese tea makers resided and worked with native assistance. The quality of the leaves was seriously compromised due to delay in transfer (causing early fermentation) and the damage caused to them due to the excessive amount being carried in every individual transfer. R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 29.

<sup>74</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) pp. 24–25

<sup>75</sup> R Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 12

Sawyers	4	4-0-0
Dak runners	2	3-8-0
Duffadars	4	3-0-0

Agricultural work, at this stage, comprised primarily of clearing of jungle and plucking of leaves. The bulk of leaves was plucked from the wild, because of the limited state of cultivation and immature seedlings on the “experimental” plantations. The work was carried out by locally obtained hands procured through the agency of local labour contractors and the work supervised through the lone supervisor (*coolie sardar*), employed in the ranks.<sup>76</sup> Apart from not having any pluckers on the staff list, there was rarely any regularity in this work. Bruce regretted about ‘seldom getting hold of the same pluckers two seasons running.’<sup>77</sup> This had a bearing on the outturn of plantations, as experience strongly suggested, as regular pluckers were more “efficient” and could pluck twice as fast in comparison to the new recruits. Reflecting on the challenges of running a “proto plantation” and speculating on the nature of the working force desired, Bruce remarked:

This difficulty (of not having regular workers) will be removed when we get regular people attached to the Plantations; or when the natives of these parts become more fixed and settled in their habitations, and do not move off by whole villages from one place to another...when the aversion they have throughout Assam to taking service for payment, has been overcome... there is a gradual change taking place in the minds of the labouring class of people, or *coolies*; for occasionally some good able-bodied men come forward for employment... [During] cold season two or three hundred can be collected; but as soon as rains set in, all those that have no bonds, or are not involved in debt, go off to their cultivations, at the very time when our Tea operations commence...as long as things continue in this state, the price of Tea will be high.<sup>78</sup>

Bruce underlined that the future profitability of a private tea enterprise in Assam and its competitiveness with the Chinese tea hinged on the ability of mobilising groups who would remain regular/attached to plantations. Here a degree of control could be exercised over their life and labour. Though enough working hands could be patched together in the non-agricultural season, the numbers dwindled dramatically with the advent of the rains and the commencement of the agricultural season. Bruce expressed his inability in exercising any substantial

<sup>76</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> There was also a difference in dimensions of bushes in Assam in comparison to China as it was almost double its size. Bruce further observed that unlike the obvious perception, plucking was not ‘a very easy and light employment’ as the pluckers had to stand in an upright position for hours in a difficult terrain to gather the leaves often causing swelling in their legs. R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 21.

<sup>78</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 21.

“influence” on the local society, apart from a handful of individuals immobilised through bonds and debts. He characterised this labour situation as a particular manifestation of the general unsettled state of the local society and a deep-seated popular prejudice against wage-work. He particularly singled out the so-called “opium mania” for the depopulation, degeneration and general condition of laziness of the Assamese society and proposed an immediate ban on it:

Opium mania, that dreadful plague which has depopulated this beautiful country, turned it into a land of wild beasts, with which it is overrun, and has degenerated the Assamese, from a fine race of people, to the most abject, servile, crafty, and demoralized race in India.<sup>79</sup>

Bruce reiterated Jenkins’s solution of the imported worker/ “superior race” of labourers’ presuming their attachment/settlement to the plantation would ensure a degree of control desired over their labour. He portrayed this proposition of imported labour in fairly glowing terms—as a set of people ‘growing up for our plantations, to fell our forests, to clear the land from jungle and wild beasts and to plant and cultivate the luxury of the world’. Such an attachment, he reasoned, could serve another vital purpose of ‘encouraging their women and children to do the same—in plucking and sorting leaves.’ His interactions with the local groups had convinced him that they ‘will not permit their women to come into the Tea gardens.’<sup>80</sup> The distinctive nature of the plantation workforce (of family labour rather than just male workers) and the centrality of female and child labour to the work process was articulated in the “formative” stage of the Assam plantations.

## 1.5 Privatising the discovery and the emergence of the Assam Company

These operational setbacks of the tea experiment could not dampen the excitement and hysteria generated by the news of the “discovery” of tea in Assam, which was receiving rave reviews in contemporary British press. These reactions reflected a sense of anticipation about the evident feasibility of producing tea within the bounds of the Empire, threatening to end the long-standing Chinese monopoly of the drink. This mood was eloquently articulated in a contemporary treatise on the subject:

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<sup>79</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 14

<sup>80</sup> R. Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) pp. 14–15.

Discovery (of tea) has been made of no less importance than that the hand of Nature has planted the shrub within the bounds of the wide dominion of Great Britain: a discovery which must materially influence the destinies of nations; it must change the employment of a vast number of individuals; it must divert the tide of commerce, and awaken to agricultural industry the dormant energies of a mighty country.<sup>81</sup>

The enthusiasm reached a crescendo when the samples of tea produced in the experimental plantations and packaged in around ninety odd chests were forwarded to the tea brokers and dealers of London in 1838. The much publicised ‘First Public Sale’ in the London’s tea market—Mincing Lane, drew substantial public interest and high prices in the market. “Competent judges” were that not only the plant but also the finished product was ‘scarcely to be distinguished from China Tea.’<sup>82</sup>

Having conducted the experiment of cultivation, manufacture and marketability of Assam tea, the East India Company now found itself in the position to realise the founding objective of privatising the venture. Such an idea was ‘popularised’ by the exaggerated pronouncements from “authorities” and “experts” on the ground, whipping up the jubilant mood of the British public and market basking in the success of the “discovery” of tea in the Empire.<sup>83</sup> Bruce’s speculative commentary on the potentialities of transforming Assam into ‘one big tea garden’, and Jenkins’ far-fetched assertion regarding the ‘extent of discovery’ which justified an ‘immediate commencement of manufacture at the largest scale by capitalists’, were generally read as informed opinions on the feasibility and profitability of large-scale investments of private capital, in the contemporary British journals, trade magazines and information manuals. A passage from the topographical/scientific survey of the province, quoted generously in these publications, read more like an “infomercial” targeting the potential European settler, colonizer, and entrepreneur:

Assam’s climate is cold, healthy, and congenial to European constitutions; it’s numerous crystal streams abound in gold dust and masses of the solid metal; it’s mountains are pregnant with precious stones and silver; its atmosphere is perfumed with tea, growing wild and luxuriantly; and its soil is so well adapted to all kinds of agricultural purposes, that it might be converted into one continued garden of silk and cotton, of tea, coffee, and sugar, over an extent of many hundred miles.<sup>84</sup>

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**81** W. Sigmond, *Tea its Medicinal Efforts and Moral* (London, 1839) p. 3.

**82** *Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam* (London, 1839) p. 3.

**83** *Information on the discovery and character of the tea plant in Assam* (London, 1839) p. 10.

**84** J. McCosh *Topography of Assam* (Calcutta, 1837) p. 133.

The relevance of work and workers to fulfil such aspirations remained marginal to these discussions. The anxiety (about work and labour), intermittently surfacing in Bruce's otherwise optimistic rendition of the functioning plantations in Assam, were apparently resolved by the particular solutions he offered—ban of opium, importation of labour and use of machinery. It was widely held that with the sustained injection of British capital and enterprise, tea would become profitable enough to induce the natives from the locality and the overpopulated regions of India to seek remunerative employment on Assam plantations. A common theme underlining these assertions was a belief in the transformative/civilizing potential of British capital, technology and enterprise in inculcating values of industry to the native and simultaneously revolutionising the processes of work and production.<sup>85</sup>

A climate of market frenzy and hopes of fabulous profits culminated in the floating of a joint stock company, Assam Company in London with the explicit intention to acquire the experimental plantations with related establishment and undertake the production of tea for export to the British market.<sup>86</sup> The most decisive incentive and benefit that the colonial state offered to private capital was the institution of the Wasteland Acts. This rendered vast stretches of land—an important “factor of production”—available at throwaway rates in the districts of Upper Assam (Lakhimpur and Sibsagar). The Assam Company initially concentrated their activities in these districts, dividing the operations into three divisions (Northern, Southern and Eastern) and headquartered at a place called Nazira. Yet a characteristic nature of the joint stock companies (like Assam Company), with a decisive control over operation and expenditure with the board of directors and shareholders, removed from the scene of production and often determined by profit and fluctuations of the markets, had a significant bearing in conditioning the nature of management and work on the plantations.

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<sup>85</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of these themes in a different context.

<sup>86</sup> The “excitement” in this project among the mercantile houses trading with India and the leading firms in the tea trade can be gauged from the fact that all the shares were picked up before any public notice of it had appeared. Assam Company was not the lone player in the field. European and Indian men of “capital and repute” in Calcutta had already formed the Bengal Tea Association with a similar intention. The Bengal organisation realising the “junction of interests” agreed to merge under the banner of Assam Company, with offices in London and Calcutta. The monopolistic streak of Assam Company went beyond a mutually beneficial settlement with an emerging rival. They negotiated to acquire two third of the existing plantations of the East India Company, regretting not to possess the remaining one third on the argument that the emerging “competition” could be detrimental to a “pioneering” enterprise. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 37.

The company at the outset vigorously pursued a policy of expansion of operation, investment in the modes of transport and establishment of infrastructure, but continued the existing practices of agricultural work and manufacturing, having inherited a majority of the personnel involved in the “experimental” stage.<sup>87</sup> Unlike the limited scope and intention of the experimental stage, the Assam Company could not rely on collecting the leaves from the wild. They took sustained measures to cultivate the plant systematically. Bruce had earlier demonstrated with some success that tea plants flourished when the forests were burnt down, and the land hoed to be made fit for cultivation. Much of this jungle clearing and hoeing work, like in the experimental plantation, was done in the cold season by locals procured through the prevalent “Gang system”.<sup>88</sup>

Assam Company plantations also experienced a severe “crisis” of workers during the agricultural season. The situation posed grave consequences, as it not only meant a fall in the quantity of the leaves plucked but also due to lack of sustained tending and weeding, the cleared land often fell into disuse. There was a glaring discrepancy in the area of clearance and the land put under cultivation and regularly tended. In 1842, only two hundred odd acres of land was under cultivation out of more than six hundred fifty acres cleared in northern and eastern divisions. Again in 1843, around two thousand five hundred acres cleared land in southern division was left unattended due to “insufficient” supplies of labour.<sup>89</sup> Internal enquiries into the workings of the Company recommended discontinuation of cultivation in the northern and eastern division and concentrate efforts on select tracts in the southern division. Even a system of cultivation by local Assamese peasants through advances was mooted, where the Company would focus exclusively on manufacture.

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**87** Responding to the concerns of tea makers and working hand on the experimental plantations, the Assam Company went overdrive with recruitment even before the actual transfer of establishments in Assam to the Company. The idea of tea makers hinged on getting the Chinese and they requisitioned to companies and private individuals in Singapore and Penang. Batches of Chinese were despatched from November 1839 till the end of 1840. The Chinese experiment was described by London Board in 7<sup>th</sup> May 1841. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 56.

**88** K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839–1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986).

**89** The early plantation practice in Assam had established that the period from March to October to be the manufacturing season when the ground had to be hoed once every two months which believed to have an influence on the capacity of the plants to bear leaves and therefore the overall outturn of the tract. Again when the trees flush, the young leaves should be plucked and even a delay of a day made it ‘deteriorate and unfit for manufacture’. R Bruce, *Report on the manufacture of tea and on the extent and produce* (Calcutta, 1839) p. 21.

The necessity of “imported” labour, which can be “fixed” to plantation, became very evident from the early stage of plantation cultivation. Kacharis, a “mobile” tribal group from the contiguous districts of Nowgong and Darrang and circulating in gangs in these districts were engaged in the company’s gardens, partially fulfilling the demands for ‘regular people attached to the plantations’.<sup>90</sup> Their crucial and growing presence was mentioned in an early report of the company:

In the manufacturing season when the hands are insufficient to pluck the leaves which in short time become too ripe for manufacture and are lost. Endeavours are being made to send up gangs of Kachari...under agreement to serve for a fixed term.<sup>91</sup>

This presence of local groups like the Kacharis, who could be “settled” through agreements and advances, was already acknowledged by some Europeans who had visited Assam through Bengal in search of “profitable” investments. One such speculator writing in 1835 to the Chief Commissioner of the province gave an incredibly favourable impression about the Kacharis and their significance to any European enterprise in the province:

Custom in the country (Assam) which would prove highly advantageous to a European manufacturer, giving themselves out in bondage for a certain time on receiving a small sum. There is only their food to furnish...*Cacharee* families may be engaged for 10 and 15 rupees for four or five years; their women and children work on the fields.<sup>92</sup>

## 1.6 Early Plantation enterprise and Kachari as the Ideal Worker

The “internal “migrant” groups like the Kacharis were potentially appropriate for the labour demands of the Assam plantations. Their mere presence did not satisfactorily answer certain key issues: Were the problems of fixing workers permanently resolved? Did Kacharis become the “ideal workers” of the Assam plantation? Were the early Assam planters successful in immobilising them under trying conditions of life and remuneration?

It is pertinent here to briefly indicate the geographical setting and nature of the initial plantations in Upper Assam. These plantations mostly were dispersed

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<sup>90</sup> *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

<sup>91</sup> Report of Calcutta Board of Assam Company for the year 1840–1841. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 386.

<sup>92</sup> Hugon to Captain Jenkins, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1835. *Transactions of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India*, 2, 1836 p. 166.



clearings in the middle of vast stretches of forest and often at the limits of human habitation, local markets and the networks of transport and communication. Such a fragile living situation obliged the management to arrange food provisions, especially rice for the resident labour population.<sup>93</sup> On some plantations, certain portions of land was set aside for the cultivation of food grains and vegetables. A regular provision of rice often became a subject of contention between Kachari labour and the local management. In July 1843, the superintendent of the southern division expressed his inability in retaining Kacharis because of the failing supplies. Such a situation recurred again in 1845 in the Eastern and Northern divisions. Groups of Kachari workers left work due to “insufficient provisions”. In 1846, the Directors in response to a prolonged lean phase in the Company initiated some efforts to economise and decided to terminate the “rice benefit.” The local superintendents in Assam took strong exceptions to such moves on the fear that it could lead to imminent Kachari backlash.<sup>94</sup>

The Kacharis commitment to the Company’s plantations was also contingent on the wages on offer. A reduction and delay in payment caused discontent, work stoppages and even “strikes”. The management’s decision to “hold” the payment or keep a part of the due amount was often a deliberate strategy to “bind” the Kacharis. This often proved counterproductive. In the year 1848, Kacharis on a Company’s factory (Satsoeh) refused a month’s pay, which was nearly three months’ in arrears and struck work. Their interruption continued for a few days, and they resumed work only after the superintendent gave a written assurance of future payment within fifteen days. There is also evidence of some articulated resentment at times regarding the discriminatory wages paid to the imported Bengali labour. In the year 1846, around two hundred fifty Kacharis left the Company’s gardens for being paid less than their Bengali counterparts.<sup>95</sup>

In the colonial-capitalist narratives, Bengalis alluded to a “generic” rather than an “ethnic” category. This overarching description incorporated a variety of individuals and groups being recruited in the province of Bengal, coming from varied social and regional background. This source of recruitment assumed some importance in the Assam Company’s operations.<sup>96</sup> The “labour agents” of the company conducting their activities in Bengal, tapped into the labour market of

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**93** At the commencement of its operation the Company was importing rice from Bengal (Pabna and Rungpur) and later from the district of Darrang. But it had to supply through its own boats. H.A. Antrobus, *Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 387.

**94** K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839–1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p. M-39

**95** K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839–1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p. M-39

**96** See Chapter 2 for more details.

agricultural workers, seasonal migrants and the developing indentured labour market for the overseas colonies.<sup>97</sup> The elementary infrastructure of travel and communication, prohibitive costs of recruitment and the indifferent results of the company recruiters made this source unreliable, expensive and highly inadequate to the demands of the “fixed” workers. The Bengali “imported” labour was purposefully sustained as the countervailing factor to the Kacharis throughout the early period. After the bitter experience of the 1848 strike, the Superintendent of Assam Company urged the Calcutta Board that the Kacharis should not be depended upon, and a more sustained effort be made to get Bengalis.<sup>98</sup> A relatively successful recruiting operation in Bengal the following year resulted in a further cut of wages of the Kacharis.

There was another parallel trend of Kacharis seeking employment in other European enterprises coming up in the period. For instance, the Assam Coal and Timber Company operating in Naga Hills in the northeastern frontier opened up other opportunities to the Kacharis in late 1840s. There were partially successful attempts by the management of Assam Company to mutually agree with the new enterprise against “enticement” of labour. The discourse of enticement and strategic moves to interfere with the emerging market of labour was evident from the early stages of plantation enterprise in Assam.

The depressed condition of the pioneer tea company, from the early 1850s, was partially halted and reversed through a combined strategy of rationalised practices of business, management of labour and methods of cultivation on the plantations. Certain concerned opinions had earlier expressed surprise that with such “low rate” of wages being paid to the workers (Rs 5 for the leaf manipulators and Rs. 3 for *coolies*), the Assam Company should be embroiled in any serious financial or operational difficulties. It was argued that ‘under a suitable and inexpensive system of management, Assam ought to be able to compete with China in the cultivation of tea’.<sup>99</sup> The official historian of the Company citing this as a significant juncture in the changed fortunes of its tea enterprise mentions that the Board of Directors streamlined the managerial staff on the ground, and went for a further reduction of wages offered to resident workers. A plantation labour regime premised on a clearer description and delegation of work, and stricter

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<sup>97</sup> By the end of 1839, Assam company had eight Europeans recruiters stationed in Bengal. . Campbell (Midnapur), C.T. Reeves (Chittagong), W.S. Stewart (Hazaribagh), F.T. Bandant and J. George (Dacca), W.H.K. Sweetland (Bowsing), H. Busch (Rangpur) and T. Pickett (Mymensingh). They received a commission of Rs. 2 per head for every man landed, Rs 1 for women and children, and Rs 150 monthly for their maintenance. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 384.

<sup>98</sup> *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

<sup>99</sup> S. Ball, *An Account of Cultivation and manufacture Tea in China* (London, 1848) p. 358.

discipline of the resident labour was attempted to be framed and enforced. The cultivation of rice lands, for example, was discontinued as it was now seen as an infringement of the plantation work process. The nature of assignment and assessment of tasks was made particularly more stringent and at times “excessive”. Kachari labour alive to the intensification of the work process and wages on offer were simultaneously seeking alternative employment on the tea plantations which were taking shape in the early 1850s.<sup>100</sup>

The involvement of the new private interest groups and individuals in tea was motivated by the improved fortunes and operational experiences of the Assam Company. The strategies of the ‘colonization of India and its resources’ now perceived tea cultivation as one of ‘the most profitable and agreeable occupation’. It was contended from ‘the most trustworthy evidence, and from personal observation, that in time India will be able to supply not only to Great Britain but also to Australia and America’. The attempts to move away from China as the sole source of tea was paralleled by a “rethinking” of “natural” habitat and the processes of manipulation of tea being peculiarly Chinese. The early tea enterprise in Assam gave enough reasons to believe that the plant could survive and flourish in a much wider range of temperature, soil and elevation than what the Chinese case would allow. The “classical” methods of planting and processing were also being reworked and improvised, in agreement with the specificities and contingencies of the local situation.<sup>101</sup>

The monopoly of Assam Company in the cultivation and production of tea in the province was weakened by the early 1850s with the formation of new plantations in the existing planting districts and the other districts of Assam Valley (Table 1.2).

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**100** In the district of Lakhimpur, the Government garden at *Chaboah* was sold to a Chinaman named Among, which was later purchased by Messrs Warren, Jenkins and Co in 1851. Colonel Hannay who played a part in this transaction started his own plantation near Dibrugarh in 1852. In the district of Sibsagar, plantations were started by R Spears (Nigri Ting, 1853) J.E. Dodd (Noakochoorie, 1854) and George Williamson (Cinamara, 1854). This trend of private European individuals taking up land grants to establish tea gardens was further facilitated by the liberalisation and expansion of the wasteland policy in 1854 and tea gradually found its way into all the districts of Upper Assam (Kamrup, Darrang and Nowgong). By the end of the decade there were 68 “tea factories” in the districts of Assam Valley with more than 54,000 acres of land acquired for the purpose of planting tea. Captain C. Holyroyd, Collector of Sibsagar, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam. No 172, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1859. Captain H.S. Bivar, Principal Assistant Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam. No 71, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

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

**Table 1.2:** Tea Production at the end of the decade of 1850s.<sup>102</sup>

	Tea factories	Land acquired (acres)	Land cleared (acres)	Production 1858–59 (in pounds)
Sibsagar	31	13,796	5,227	8,46,249
Lakhimpur	10	14,038	1,700	2,82,000
Kamrup	10	12,207	297	6,160
Nowgong	14	11,034	...	48,000
Darrang	3	3,783	375	23,280
Total	68 (48 distinct proprietors)	54,859	7,599	12,05,689

The fresh and sustained impetus of plantation expansion coincided with a period of relative agricultural growth in Upper Assam, making the availability of labour scarce and pushing up the wages significantly.<sup>103</sup> This jeopardised the task of mobilising enough working hands that could satisfy the specific requirement of being available in the “manufacturing season”. Commissioner Jenkins reflecting on the expansion of the plantation enterprise in the province and new “problems” of labour stated:

New Planters have been attempting to push on their cultivation to a greater extent than the means of procuring labour in the Province rendered judicious and prudent...more land has been planted, than can be kept thoroughly weeded and attended to, and during the short season of picking leaves, much of the produce is lost for the want of hands.<sup>104</sup>

A distinct outcome of the expansion of tea enterprise and a broadening of the notion of the “ideal” habitat and terrain was the interest of speculators in the southern districts of Cachar and Sylhet (Surma Valley), which were earlier considered to be unsuitable for plant and systematic cultivation. These relatively “populous” districts were perceived as “immune” to the shortages of labour, which had plagued much of

<sup>102</sup> *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

<sup>103</sup> The rising agricultural prices of the time stimulated the cultivation of rice and of several cash crops, such as mustard, jute and tobacco, thus creating an exceptional demand for labour in the old agricultural sector. The District Commissioner of Lakhimpur informed that the wages close to the ‘new’ tea gardens had gone from Rs 3 to close to Rs 5 in the 1850s. *Captain H.S. Bivar, Principal Assistant Commissioner, Lakhimpur, to Colonel F. Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam*. No 71, 8<sup>th</sup> October 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861); D. Kumar (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India* (Vol II) p. 311.

<sup>104</sup> Colonel F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation* (Calcutta, 1861) p. 23.

the enterprise in Assam valley. The natives of Cachar—witness to the initial spurt in tea activity in Surma valley—like their Assam Valley counterparts, found little incentive in switching occupation to plantation labour on a full-time basis. Only a minority offered their services in the non-agricultural season. The strategies of planters to oblige the locals through advances and “job contracts” for the following manufacturing seasons failed to yield the desired results. Many were said to ‘evade’ or ‘partially fulfil’ their obligations. Planters increasingly relied on streams of seasonal labour from Sylhet (about 2/3<sup>rd</sup> of the total), who would leave their homes during the winters to find employment and trek back to their agricultural fields before the advent of rains. This was grossly inadequate for the plantation work cycle as a significant period of their “absence” constituted the tea manufacturing season. The planters tried to attract and ‘settle’ (especially Kacharis) by advancing money, providing loan for cattle and some rent-free land. But without any legal obligation to labour, the employers were unable to compel the ‘settled labour’ to work on the tea gardens as and when they required. There was also a tendency of these settlers of returning the loans and advances and moving on to another location.<sup>105</sup>

The various moves of the Surma Valley planters to attract the Kachari labour had, in fact, put an additional strain on the labour situation in Upper Assam as indicated by the Chief Commissioner of the province:

It was hoped that the commencement of Tea operation in Sylhet and Cachar would have attended some relief to Assam, in drawing off the number of speculators, but that does not seem to have been the case as yet, and it is unfortunate that a considerable extent the planters on that side of the hills have been drawing on Assam for *coolies*, preferring our Kacharis to the ryots of those districts.<sup>106</sup>

A growing consensus about the “insufficiency” of the labouring groups like Kacharis to render the increasing demands of regular/fixed labour was also conditioned by their enhanced capabilities to bargain for wages and conditions of work. Such anxieties of the employers found expression in the reports of the superintendent of the Tea Company who now complained that Kacharis with an ‘increasing intercourse with the Assamese, are gradually acquiring their vices (opium smoking) and becoming less valuable as labourer’.<sup>107</sup> The work they rendered was now described to be ‘deficient in amount and of worst description’ and

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**105** ‘Our tea gardens in Assam and Cachar’, *Calcutta Review* no.35 (September 1860) pp. 56–59.

**106** Col. J Colonel F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) p. 23.

**107** K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839–1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p. M-39.

another serious concern was that they were not ‘under proper discipline, feeling our dependence on them’.<sup>108</sup> Experience had told them that they could leave the garden or even strike at some provocation or grievance. But this labour discontent and mobility, in the context of expanding, rationalising and systematising plantation enterprise was becoming unacceptable. Such apprehensions were exacerbated in the much publicised ‘Kachari disturbance’ of 1859, eliciting strong responses from the planters and the local administration.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 1859, the Kacharis stationed in the headquarters of the Assam Company in Nazira assembled in front of the Superintendent’s bungalow. They complained about a harsh fine imposed on one of their colleagues and demanded higher wages. This was rejected by the management. The next day around six hundred Kacharis from the Satsoeh factory with a concerted demand for a general wage hike. The administration expressed its inability to comply without an explicit permission from their higher authorities in Calcutta. On further persuasion, they ‘discharged’ the dissenting Kacharis from their employment. The following morning the Kacharis returned to continue their demand. A very nervous management now sought help from the local police who marched around 50 *sepoys* making arrests and threatening the protesting Kacharis to get back to work.<sup>109</sup>

The Commissioner of the Province acknowledging the graveness of the situation supported the Magistrate of Sibsagar in establishing a militia guard close to Nazirah to ‘prevent any further breach of peace’. He lamented the almost absolute dependence of planters of Upper Assam (Lakhimpur and Sibsagar) on the ‘whim of Kamrup and Darrang Kacharis’. They were described as ‘a race often difficult to manage, exceedingly jealous of ill-treatment, and who at Nazira, have lately shown a dangerous spirit of combination and mutiny’. The event, he suggested should be a ‘warning to the Assam Company and planters generally not to employ any great masses of Kacharis together’ and make provision against such strikes, ‘by importing other classes of labour, who can prove a check upon the Kacharis’. Such sentiments were reiterated by the directors of the Assam Company who convened a meeting in November 1859 and immediately called for an investigation to ascertain the material conditions of the Kacharis working for the Company. They welcomed the decision to establish a militia guard and also agreed that a lasting

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**108** K.K. Sircar, Labour and management: First Twenty years of Assam Company Limited (1839–1859), *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, no.22 (May 31, 1986) p. M-41–42.

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

solution to prevent a recurrence of such “violent” incidents could only be when there are ‘a larger proportion of *coolies* of another class’.<sup>110</sup>

## 1.7 Assamese peasant as coolie labour

Before coming around to the ‘solution’ of obtaining *coolies* from outside the province which till then had proved to be extremely irregular and expensive, several planters desired that the state play a more active role in producing *coolies* from within. Bruce had earlier observed that the native’s ability to cultivate sufficient rice and opium acted as a deterrent to their participation in the labour process of the proto-plantations. Such sentiments were reinvoked in the changed context of an expanding plantation enterprise and a more regularising work regime. The state was again called upon to discourage the cultivation of opium (as Bruce had earlier suggested) and augment the rent on agricultural land. The administrative in charge of Darrang echoed these sentiments in his report on the tea cultivation in his district:

... Undoubted fact that the ryots have the very greatest objection to exert themselves in the least degree, so long as they have sufficient rice and Opium; and any measure which would raise the Assamese population from the lethargy induced by excessive indulgence in the use of Opium, would unquestionably result in an improved condition of the people both physically and morally, at the same time that an increased rate of taxation would oblige the ryot to work, and thus benefit himself and the Tea Planters.<sup>111</sup>

This discourse of moral and physical improvement of the Assamese peasantry revealed the plantation capitalist anxieties of pushing ‘more couched labour into the market’ (or producing *coolies* working for plantations). This was to be achieved

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**110** By late 1850s, company had around three thousand workers in Sibsagar. A third of the workers were inhabitants of the district and rest were the migrant Kacharis and Bengali labour. In British Guiana following the end of the apprentice system in 1838, ex-slaves organized themselves into task-gangs and went from plantation to plantation bargaining with owners over wages and conditions, a process which culminated in strikes (1842 and 1848). This, and not a labour shortage, was the reason for the dramatic increase in the immigration of Indian indentured workers from 1851 onwards. The introduction of Haitian workers into the Dominican Republic during the 1880s followed the first strike by Dominican labour employed on the sugar plantations against the imposition of wage cuts. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861); T. Brass, *Towards a Comparative Political Economy of Unfree Labour: Case Studies and Debates* (London, 1999) p. 161.

**111** Letter from Captain A.K. Comber, Principal Assissant Commissioner to Darrang to Col. F. Jenkins, dated 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) p. 20

through a significant decrease in incomes from agriculture (by raising assessment of land) and monopolisation and commodification of the drug of local preference—by prohibiting opium cultivation and providing opium through government shops. They believed that this would compel the peasant to work for wages on tea plantations ‘to obtain cash, both to protect himself from the land revenue as well as enable him to purchase *genuine opium* from the Government’. The creation of the necessity for cash to be earned through wage-labour/*coolie* labour was premised not only on the fulfilment of the peasant obligations of revenue but also on the satisfaction of an addiction. Interestingly the supposed reason of Assamese laziness was not desired to be eliminated but controlled and made an obligation to participate in the labour process of the plantations.<sup>112</sup> In this context, the recurring trope of the opium smoking lazy native indicates the failure of planters to immobilise the native (tribals/peasants) in plantations and plantation labour regime as *coolie* labour, under trying conditions of life, work and remuneration. HS Partridge, a tea planter in Nowgong supporting the idea of “monopolisation and manipulation of addiction” in the service of the plantation enterprise remarked:

... Attempts should be made so as to decrease the cultivation of that drug (Opium) in Assam, while the Government Opium could be supplied to be purchased by those who could not do without it. This would cause more labourers to work in the Tea plantations for ready cash.<sup>113</sup>

Simultaneously the plantation capitalists favoured a strategy of pressurising the native peasantry to wage-labour through excessive taxation. Though land revenue was hiked in particular districts, concerns were soon raised that a considerable enhancement of revenue could create a situation of a decreasing quantity of land being cultivated—resulting in a fall of collections in actual terms. The shrinking incomes of the peasantry could further curtail an emerging market for British commodities, particularly ‘English cloth’ and ‘government salt’. There was an argument that the profitability of the tea enterprise was evident from the ever growing number of speculators pouring into the province, and therefore their desires for ‘cheap coolies’ did not justify compromising the larger colonial interests of revenue and market.

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**112** Cuban and Peruvian planters permitted, and even encouraged, the sale, barter and consumption of opium by their *coolies*, in effect creating a mechanism of social control by alternately distributing and withholding this very addictive substance to desperate men. See, ‘Opium and Social Control: Coolies on the Plantations of Peru and Cuba’ *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 1, no. 2 (November 2005) pp. 169–183.

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



## 1.8 The Migrant Worker solution

The limits of producing *coolies* internally marked a growing consensus for procuring imported *coolies* (from outside the province) as the “only remedy” for labour in Assam plantations. This has to be appreciated in a context of the development of internal labour market that had enabled local groups (like Kacharis) bargaining capabilities for wages and living conditions. The failure to significantly dispossess the peasantry could not ultimately alter the dynamics of the internal labour market. Apart from remedying this scarcity, imported *coolie* held the potential to realise the unfulfilled desires of discipline, immobility (living in the neighbourhood of plantations and working throughout the year) and completion of a variety of tasks (employment of family labour of men, women and children) which was essential for the nature of work and the work process of the plantation enterprise in Assam.<sup>114</sup> A similar process has been observed in a different setting where the ‘failure to turn labour power into a commodity left them (planters) to find an alternative and politically acceptable form of unfree labour and a population which could be induced to accept such relations of production’.<sup>115</sup>

In this scenario, the administrative chief of the province reiterated that the existing difficulties and failures to import Bengali *coolies* had to be surmounted ‘before there can be any great extension of our present Tea plantations.’ This he believed was now a question of ‘national importance’ as the land taken up for tea in Assam if rendered productive had the potential of producing up to thirty million pounds of tea or half the tea imports from China to England.<sup>116</sup>

The global framework in which Indian *coolies* were being mobilised for plantation work became a point of reference in the deliberations on the question of labour importation into Assam. The Governor of Bengal suggested that Assam planters imitate the system of hiring adopted by the sugar planters of Mauritius. This was described as ‘a well contrived and equitable system’ where ‘a good selection of immigrants and families, decent wages (5 dollars) and a system of ration’. He wanted the planters to take independent initiative in this regard as he believed

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**114** In one of the contemporary pieces it was argued that the ‘these *coolies* with their families, will appropriate large tracts of rice lands; and in course of some years... may hope to find the Assamese, compelled by the want of land to forsake their “fixed habits” and “gentlemanly” prejudices, gladly work for hire’. ‘Our Tea gardens in Assam and Cachar’, *Calcutta Review* 35 (September 1860) p. 54.

**115** R. Miles, *Capitalism and Unfree Labour: Anomaly Or Necessity* (London, 1987) p. 89.

**116** Col. J. F. Jenkins, Agent to Governor General, North Eastern Frontier to E.H. Lushington, Officiating Secretary to Government of Bengal, 11<sup>th</sup> November 1859. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp. 23–26.

that because to a greater proximity of the principal ‘recruiting grounds,’ a much lower wage and other benefits (land for cultivation instead of rations) could be an adequate inducement for the intending migrant to choose Assam.

On the question of difficulty of labour...see no good reason why labourers or *coolies* should not be imported from the lower districts of Rajmahal, Bheerbhoom, etc. If the colonists of the Mauritius, Demerara, Trinidad etc can obtain labourers from India, it should not be difficult for the planters of Assam to obtain them...imported labourers can bring their families, which is not the case when they go to the Mauritius or the West Indies...profits of tea-planting in Assam have been proved to be so great that planters could easily afford to give such remuneration to imported labourers as would command their services.<sup>117</sup>

The planters and some local officials agreed that this new stage and scale of importation had to be more “organised” and “systematic” to undo the earlier setbacks to ensure the success of the present venture. A tea planter’s association was formed in 1859 to combine resources and efforts in recruiting in the districts of Bengal. There were meetings of planters and grantees of land in the districts Lakhimpur and Sibsagar in early 1860 to deliberate on the recommendations of the Governor and come to some common ground.<sup>118</sup> The systematic and organised demands on imported labour in a sense also reflected the ‘systematisation’ and ‘corporatisation’ of the plantation enterprise in Assam. In the late 1850s, several joint-stock companies were formed with the intention to purchase the smaller private tea gardens.<sup>119</sup> This had a bearing on the magnitude and intensity of the requirement of working hands. While the private planter’s operation usually was contingent on their limited resources and the local labour situation, the compa-

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**117** *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp. 23–26; ‘The Resource of India and its colonization’, *Universal Review* (1859) pp. 343–62.

**118** Proceedings of a meeting of the planters of the Sibsaugor District, held at Cinnamara Factory on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1860, for the purpose of taking into consideration, certain observations and suggestions referring to the importation of labor into the Province of Assam, as contained in an Extract from a letter from the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the General’s Agent, North-Eastern Frontier, No. 203 of the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1860. *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861) pp. 69–71.

**119** By the end of 1861, 160 plantations were held by 62 companies and private individuals. Assam Company owned 24 plantations in Sibsagar, Lakhimpur and Darrang. Jorhat Company owned 2 plantations in Nowgong. The East India Company had 7 plantations in Sibsagar and Lower Assam Company had one plantation in Kamrup. Of the private companies, 15 companies held 19 plantations in Lakhimpur, 3 held 5 plantations in Sibsagar, one held 4 plantations in Kamrup and one held one plantation in Nowgong. Remaining gardens were in hands of private parties, 17 of whom were natives (mostly in Sibsagar and Lakhimpur). *Papers relating to tea cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1861).

nies were obliged to maintain a larger operation and working force. Illustrating this apparent difference a tea proprietor from Cachar remarked:

Private planter may only require labour for 100 acres, as far as his capital will go, but the Company requires labour for many thousands, and probably more...private planters go to clusters of villages, but that will not do for the company.<sup>120</sup>

The Plantation enterprise now showed strong preference to solicit state support in framing a system where large number of *coolies* could be procured economically and also defining some ground rules on which they would labour on the tea gardens. They often argued that the cost and difficulty of getting *coolies* from outside the province was to a great extent due to the poor communication infrastructure of the province and a general indifference of the colonial state towards the plantation enterprise in Assam.<sup>121</sup> There was some criticism of the government support in facilitating the transport of *coolies* to the overseas destinations in Mauritius and West Indies, where the Assam planters were said to be left only to pick the ‘refuse’ rejected by the migration agents of these colonies:

A native will not leave his village except under the protection of the *Sircar* or Government and he will go anywhere with it. The emigration to the Mauritius and the West Indies is under the protection of the Government and they are induced to go and I believe that if the Government gave us the same protection that they afford to the Mauritius and the West Indies we should have no difficulty in getting labour into Cachar and Assam.<sup>122</sup>

There were demands of the supply of *coolies* to be coordinated through an emigration agency in Calcutta, under the control of Planters but worked with Government patronage. Apart from facilitating the recruitment and transit of *coolies*, the patronage of state was desired to frame an “agreement/contract” (for five years) between the *coolie* and the planter which would be binding in the court

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**120** J. B. Barry, a Surgeon by training and proprietor of a tea company in Cachar. *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV* (London,1859) pp. 214–226.

**121** Journey from Calcutta to Upper Assam in steamers took 12–15 days and in native boats it could take upto 6 months. *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol II* (London, 1859) p. 46.

**122** J.B. Barry in *Report of the Select Committee appointed to inquire into the Progress and Prospect, and the best means to be adopted for Promotion of European colonisation and settlement in India, Minutes of Evidence in Reports from Committees, Colonization and Settlement (India) Vol IV* (London,1859) p. 222.

of law. The capitalist plantation discourse of contract and stricter penalisation of breaches was the definite attempt to shape the profile of the imported worker as disciplined and immobilised. The extension of breach of contract to Assam emanated from such concerns. The planters, however, remained evasive on the question of wages, describing the “peculiar” nature of plantation life and work where they contended that “benefits” and “piece-rate” made such clarity irrelevant. The colonial state remained reticent at this stage to define and regulate the system.

The project of “producing *coolies*” was now framed and the means of mobilisation (recruitment and transport) and immobilisation (settlement and conditions of work) of the imported labour on the Assam tea gardens. Plantation capital now required the patronage of colonial state and its juridical and administrative infrastructure to participate in its struggle with labour for “producing *coolie*”.