

3 Unpopular Assam

3.1 Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of labourers from Chota Nagpur working on the Duars tea plantations were persuaded by their manager to join the ranks of a tea garden in Assam, where the manager held business interests. These labourers identified Assam as an *Agreement ka jagah* (place of agreement/contract), where they would never want to go.³⁰³ Around the same time, a colonial official persuaded a labour gang leader from Allahabad (North West Provinces) working on the railroad construction in Assam on the possibility of shifting their services to the tea gardens. The leader feared that even a mere mention of the word “tea garden” would create havoc among his workers.³⁰⁴ The panic took grave proportions in the case of few hundred Gandas, lodged in a district prison of Sambalpur in Orissa when they were proposed to be relocated to Assam as coolies for the tea gardens. The Gandas threatened to slit their throats if forcibly taken there.³⁰⁵

The geographically separated, socially differentiated and seemingly isolated episodes, in fact, hint at a range of anxieties which came to be associated and characterise the Assam tea gardens. This has to be situated in the context of changing nature of work organisation in plantations, and intensified strategies of work.³⁰⁶ Such anxieties, as the incidents suggest, engendered a sense of apprehension, fear and resistance in the people willing to go there. It came to be acknowledged by the colonial officials, tea agents, and missionaries, stationed

303 Perceptions of Assam as a place of agreement (contract) closely resembled the notion of *Girmitiyas* (people with *girmit* or agreement) associated with the indentured migrants to Fiji. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 148. B.V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origin of Fiji Indians* (Canberra, 1983); B.V. Lal, K. Fortune (ed.), *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopaedia* (Honolulu, 2000) pp. 110–111.

304 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906).

305 The Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 even proposed a more “proactive” strategy on the part of Assam plantations to induce the Gandas of Sambalpur who were described as ‘low caste weavers and day labourers addicted to thieving’ and numbering in excess of one hundred thousand. This view was shared by Foley reporting about labour in Bengal, who claimed the Gandas to be excellent workers in tea gardens. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) pp. 37–38; *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 150; *Report of Mr Foley on Labour in Bengal* Emigration A, October 1906, nos 27–32. NAI.

306 See Chapter 5 and 6 for details.

in the recruiting districts that Assam was extremely “unpopular” and had a “bad name”.³⁰⁷ This was a startling admission in light of the positive colonial constructions of Assam tea gardens, throughout the nineteenth century, as an attractive avenue for the overpopulated districts of eastern and northern India, perpetually trapped in the vicious cycle of deprivation, starvation, and famine.³⁰⁸ The realisation, however, was necessitated by the mounting concerns that the reluctance and resistance in the migrating regions could threaten the sustained production of cheap, disciplined labour (*coolie*) for the plantation work process. It had

307 The 1906 Enquiry Commission found a widespread sentiment of unpopularity associated with Assam in the different recruiting districts. A construction engineer from Ranchi (Chotanagpur) opined that it was a way of frightening a person that he could be taken to a tea garden. Such proverbial “bad name” of Assam was noted by an English recruiting agent from Purulia. A labour contractor from Kharagpur (Bengal) felt that any kind of migration to Assam seemed unpopular. This closely resonated the opinion held by a missionary from Sambalpur (Orissa). The District Commissioner of Raipur (Central Provinces) mentioned that the idea of going to Assam was ‘something like being transported’. Some recent scholarship has argued in favour of allowing and exploring a closer connection between convict transportation and indentured migration. Drawing several examples from the overseas indentured migration, Anderson argues that such connection was not only expressed by contemporary colonial officials but ‘Indians also forged their own linkages, most particularly viewing migration through a prism of incarceration and transportation’. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 18, 24, 45, 48, 81. C. Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009); A. Yang, ‘Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries’, *Journal of World History* 14, no.2 (Fall 2003).

308 In light of the impending famine of Bengal in mid 1870s, a lecture delivered before the Society of Arts, the speaker strongly recommended ‘that the populous tracts visited or threatened by distress, unemployed labourers may emigrate to places where food is in comparative plenty... such as tea districts, the Doars, the provinces of Assam.’ One of the main objectives of “free recruiting” of the early 1870s was to tap into this famine distressed population and regions of Bengal and Bihar. In November and December 1873 several attempts were made by the local government in the districts of Saran and Tirhoot to encourage distressed families to go to Assam. This did not yield very positive results. Writing in the late 1880s, the Secretary to the Anglo-Indian Evangelization Society stressed that ‘the overcrowded districts in Bengal and elsewhere should be encouraged and helped to emigrate to Assam, where they might readily find lucrative and easy employment.’ Again the Empire review journal of 1901 mentioned that ‘Assam system has been beneficial to the Central Provinces, from the most famine-stricken portions of which, and from the poorest parts of Bengal, the Assam tea gardens are chiefly recruited.’ Frere, *On the impending Bengal famine: How it will be met and how to prevent future famines in India* (London, 1874) p. 79; *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, 11th February–4th March 1890 pp. 1635–1636 ; *The Empire Review* 2, no.7 (August 1901) p. 471; The Proposed Emigration to the Tea Districts *Times of India* Jan 19, 1874. Also see, S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp. 222–223; V. Damodaran, ‘Famine in a Forest Tract: Ecological Change and the Causes of the 1897 Famine in Chotanagpur, Northern India’, *Environment and History* 1, no. 2 (June 1995) pp. 129–158.

become imperative to comprehend, control and counter it.³⁰⁹ Such comprehensions were predominantly framed in the stereotypical notions of the irrational and ignorant mind-set of the “inferior” castes and “primitive” tribes migrating to Assam, and their gullibility to the disinformation spread by the moneylenders and the local landed elites who deterred them (their creditors and tenants) from migrating. The unscrupulous private recruiters—*arkattis*, were particularly singled out for perpetrating the fear, anxieties and distaste for Assam.

Keeping such issues in mind, this chapter suggests how different concerns regarding Assam tea garden collapsed in the overarching category of “unpopular”. This attests to a general disruptive impact of Assam tea gardens, which became an enduring legacy of the “free system”, accentuated by the abuses in recruiting and intensification of plantation life and work. The notions about *chabagaan* (Assam tea garden) ranged from it being a metaphor of hope and loss to a site of fear and deception.³¹⁰ The subsequent sections specifically focussing on the nature and substance of these perceptions does not suggest that such concerns were “absent” in an earlier period of migration and work on the tea gardens, but argues that it acquired a greater urgency and wider resonance in the late nineteenth century.³¹¹

Understandably, such constructions/negotiations was informed by the geographical, social and economic profile of the migrant groups and the histories of their migration, but points of overlap and intersections came to manifest over a period of time. Here, I find Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s emphasis on a “fuzzy” concept of labouring poor particularly useful. He emphasises a ‘com-

309 One of the earliest systematic attempts was a deputation of residents of Santhal Parganas (Chotanagpur region) being sent to Assam tea gardens under the supervision of the colonial officials and local planters to get a firsthand information of the conditions of work and life. The deputation interviewed around two hundred *coolies* from twenty seven gardens in Assam Valley. Some of the questions posed to the workers were: 1. How is the country?, 2. How is the soil?, 3. How is the water?, 4. Scale of daily work, length and breadth, 5. Rate of monthly wages for daily labour, 6. Rate of wages for contract work excepting Sundays, 7. Gardens whose *coolies* are in good condition, 8. Gardens whose *coolies* are not in good condition. The results of the visit did not give a good impression to the observers and the report was advised by some colonial officials and the chairman of the Indian Tea Association (James Buckingham) to be kept as confidential. Report of the deputation on the conditions of coolies in Assam gardens and Letter from G Toynbee, Commissioner Bhagalpur Division to Secretary of Bengal, General Department, dated 14th July, 1894. Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos. 1–4, NAI.

310 Between 1871 and 1901 around 1, 80,000 individuals moved to Assam from the different districts. Special Causes of mortality of immigrant coolies, 1891–1901 in *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 235; H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery* (London, 1974) p. 50.

311 See chapter 2.

monality among labouring poor in cultural terms, as it tries to cut through the various divides (especially wage/non-wage)'. In the language of this culture, as Bhattacharya argues, 'value is attached to poverty, indigence, destitution and hunger'.³¹²

3.2 Assam as a Lost World

A recurring anxiety associated with the Assam *cha-bagaan* in the recruiting regions was a profound sense of loss. Numerous concerns were voiced regarding the many family members, friends and acquaintances who were taken there and never returned.³¹³ Apart from rampant abduction and kidnapping practised with impunity by the recruiters, the "decision" to move for some seemed to be a "short-term strategy" or even an "act of desperation" induced by an inability to make a living at home or honour their mounting debts. The generous advances made by the recruiter and the hope of earning and saving some money in Assam addressed to that immediate crisis. Unlike some other destinations, where labour often "circulated" in search of employment and earning for varying degrees of time, *cha-bagaan* seemed to be a more permanent change: a point of no return.³¹⁴

This immobility, as already discussed, was induced by the contract regime in Assam and the assumption of magisterial roles by the managers, who "claimed," disciplining and punishing coolies as their "right". Also, repatriation, an integral feature of the overseas indenture contract, was never allowed to be made

312 S. Bhattacharya, *The Labouring Poor and their Notion of Poverty: Late 19th and Early 20th Century Bengal* (Noida, 1998); S. Bhattacharya, 'Introduction' in R.P. Behal & M. Linden (ed.) *India's Labouring Poor: Historical Studies, c.1600–c.2000* (Delhi, 2007) p. 11.

313 The idea and concern of non-return was very evident in the interviews conducted by the 1906 commission in the recruiting districts. This was a process which started from the early phase of Assam migration. For instance, in the late 1860s, around ten thousand people left for Assam tea gardens from Midnapur district in Bengal and they as '...a rule did not return.' Such a state of affairs continued well into the twentieth century. A colonial officer stationed in Bihar mentioned many cases of people coming up to him and saying 'My wife, or daughter or son has been taken off to Assam. How am I to find him?' *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 29, p. 45, p. 48, p. 52, p. 57, p. 58, p. 60; W.W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal, vol.III: Districts of Midnapur and Hugli* (London, 1876) p. 52; *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Royal Commission on Labour in India, Bihar and Orissa* Vol. IV, Part II (London, 1930) p. 45.

314 Saurabh Dube makes a distinction between seasonal and long term migration in Chattisgarh. Assam migration was perceived as if the individual has '...passed beyond their kin.' S. Dube, *Untouchable Past: Religion, Identity, and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780–1950* (Albany, 1998) p. 256.

mandatory in the Assam contract.³¹⁵ Often, the time-expired labour, even if they managed to get a discharge certificate (*hathchit*) or considered “useless” for future engagement by the manager, were left stranded with little means to make the journey back home, even if they wished to.³¹⁶ There were fears of people being forced and kept against their consent and will. Renewal of contract was perceived to be made under duress and threat. Many futile attempts were made by family members to establish contact with their kin in Assam. The repeated assurances of the local tea agents affirming that their relatives were leading a good “settled” life in Assam, rarely calmed apprehensions.³¹⁷

The hope of establishing contact in some regions of coastal Orissa came to be expressed in a faith that the God of Wind (*Ringesum*) would blow pieces of bones of those who were “lost” and died in Assam back to their villages.³¹⁸ A rumour, circulating in the district of Sambalpur (Orissa), visualised the Assam tea managers systematically tying up the *coolies* to trees, lighting a fire beneath, roasting and eating them. On being told by some recruiting agents about the “improbability” of such a practice, the locals reasoned that how could they explain the thousands being taken to Assam without anyone ever coming back and neither the province (Assam) ever “filling up”.³¹⁹ The rumour graphically connected the overlapping anxieties of the loss of family members and acquaintances and the

315 *Report on the Conditions of Tea Garden Labour in the Duars of Bengal, in Madras and in Ceylon*. The position at the turn of the century was stated by the Secretary of State for India (George Hamilton). He categorically suggested that ‘...the contracts entered into by emigrants to Assam have never included any stipulation for repatriation, and none is considered necessary.’ *House of Commons Debates*, 23rd July 1903, vol. 126, c56.

316 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 93.

317 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 81.

318 The anxieties of large scale migration from Orissa crystallised in a belief that the god of wind blew pieces of bones of those who died in Assam back to their villages. These pieces of bones took the form of whirlwinds which blew off house-tops and anyone encountering them would fall ill. V. Elwin, *The Religion of an Indian Tribe* (New York, 1955) cited in B. Pati, *Situating Social History: Orissa, 1800–1997* (Delhi, 2001) p. 9.

319 In 1901, almost twelve thousand persons from Sambalpur were enumerated on Assam tea gardens which was greatly facilitated by the completion of Bengal-Nagpur railway line. The settlement report of the district estimated a much higher figure of migrants (around thirty thousand) to Assam in the last decade of the nineteenth century. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 37–38; L.S.S. O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Sambalpur* (2007, Delhi) p. 54; *Report on the Land Revenue Settlement of the Sambalpur District* Calcutta, 1908) p. 12.

insatiable demands for fresh blood in Assam.³²⁰ Another rumour from the district of Jabalpur (Central Provinces) portrayed *coolies* on tea-gardens being regularly boiled down for oil/oil being extracted from their bodies.³²¹ The symbolism of extraction of oil from the *coolie* paralleled the sapping of the vitality of body and life on account of the grinding machine like work-regime on the tea-gardens. A common perception in the district (Jabalpur, Central Provinces) about the kind of work expected in Assam depicted *coolies* working in waist-deep water which usually resulted in their death in no longer than six months.³²²

The notion of “loss” in these rumours was also an allusion to the rampant sickness and death on the tea garden, agreeing with the idea of “unhealthy” Assam. In contrast to the colonial understandings of “unhealthiness”, which was framed almost exclusively in a climate/race/disease paradigm, these stories hint at the complicated yet connected repercussions of an exacting work-regime and gruelling conditions of life to account for it. The symbolic visualisation of “roasting” and “boiling”, further stressed the excessiveness and unreasonableness of the practices of discipline and work of *cha-bagaan*, were expressed in cultural idioms describing “exceptional” circumstances.

3.3 Problems of Life and Work on the Tea Gardens

The nuanced symbolism of the stories about Assam found resonance in the anxieties of *dukh* (State of unhappiness) and *taklif* (Problems) that animated the various anecdotes about the life on the Assam tea gardens and the “experiences” of people who had been there.³²³ Such accounts do unravel any unmediated sub-altern/*coolie* perspective of plantation life, but indicate to a deepening anxiety in

320 A “version” of this rumour can be traced during the plague panic in the late 1890s, among the mill workers of Bombay. Here it was believed that colonial officials were getting hold of men and boys, hanging them head downwards over a slow fire and preparing a medicine drawn from the head. Another version is found in of the “vampire stories” from East and Central Africa which narrates the capture of humans by the agents of colonialism to be hung upside down, their throats cut and the blood drained into buckets. See D. Arnold, ‘Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague’ in R. Guha and G. Spivak (ed.) *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988) p. 407 and L. White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000).

321 Two versions of this rumour were narrated. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 55, p. 57.

322 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 58.

323 The expressions of *dukh* and *taklif* were apparently made by individuals having spent time in Assam and narrating the circumstances of work and life there. Here, common cultural codes of

these regions, that the conduct of everyday life was outraged and rendered difficult on the tea gardens. *Dukh* and *taklif*, as the perceived condition of life on the tea garden, was not just informed by the “alienness” of Assam but also induced by the strategies of work, life and discipline in place on the plantations.

There were specific issues which were brought about by the circumstances of a new place and the changed climate, as expressed by some time-expired *coolies* from Chota Nagpur. Unlike a usual practice, they were unable to consume the rice cooked overnight for their morning meal. They found the water to be ‘different’ and saltish and believed it to be the reason for the frequent bowel complaints.³²⁴ There was some anxiousness about the persistent rains and excessive fever affecting their health. The leeches were often seen as a nuisance and interference in the field work, and there were demands of boots for protection.³²⁵

Dukh and *taklif*, induced by the changed context of place and climate, were compounded by the certain practices of the *cha-bagaan* being interpreted as a threat to social/cultural norms. For instance, the common boarding and dining between members of different caste/community during the long journeys to Assam (depots and steamers) and on the cramped residential quarters of the tea gardens (barracks and lines) were perceived as conducive for a potential “loss” of status.³²⁶ There were stories circulating in United Provinces about this lack of “caste-consciousness” of *cha-bagaan*—where a single individual was delegated to cook their food during steamer journeys and that “outsiders” were allowed free access to their kitchens on the gardens. The colonial state “responded” by legislating dry rations for some steamer routes, but this did not put an end to these apprehensions. Such fears were primarily but not exclusively voiced by the “upcountry” migrants, who held similar objections during their service in the army and the journeys to the overseas plantations.³²⁷ The threat of social ostrac-

pain and anxiety were invoked to communicate a common sense of despair. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 32, p. 74.

324 The notion that Assam had bad water was the unanimous opinion of two hundred odd workers interviewed by the Sonthali deputation of 1894. One member of the deputation, Sidhanta Desmanjhi attributed a reason to this inferiority where he noted that in Assam people drank well-water whereas back home they preferred water of river or streams. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 32. Translation of Deputation’s Report, Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos 1–4, NAI.

325 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 32, p. 34, pp. 64–65.

326 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 64, p. 66.

327 Carter cites instances of high caste emigrants refusing cooked food on board to Mauritius. They were given ‘dry rations’ instead. M. Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874* (Delhi, 1995) p. 102; S. Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company* (Delhi, 1995).

cism, due the transgressions in Assam, often had to be mitigated through the performance of purification rites. For instance, a ritual called *Jati mandi* among the Ho tribe (Chota Nagpur) was marked by a communal feast arranged by the members of the tribe who had been to Assam to regain their lost status.³²⁸

The nature of tea garden had other possible implications on the conduct of everyday life. Some returnees noted that, on the tea-gardens, they usually had very little time for mid-day meals, except during *chaith* and *baisakh* (i.e. cold season/ non-manufacturing season).³²⁹ Others had to subsist on a single meal against the customary two meals, as they were regularly put to tasks at end of the day.³³⁰

Kamjari, or the daily work routine (literally translated as continued work) of the tea-gardens, systematically flouted the “legally” stipulated nine hour work day with an hour of rest in between.³³¹ There were instances of work being carried from six in the morning till five in the evening, especially in the busy manufacturing season. During this period, the working day in the tea factories usually stretched well into the night, due to the increased pressures of meeting the stipulated production targets.³³² Another peculiar “invention”—garden time—found in many tea-gardens of Upper Assam, extended the *kamjari* by fixing the garden clock ahead of the standard clock.³³³ The practices of prolonging the work day and intensifying the work process, integral to the plantation economy of the late nineteenth century, were generating instances of interference and potential breakdown of “customary” functions (e.g., Meals) of everyday life.

328 L. Burrows, *Ho grammar, with vocabulary* (Calcutta, 1915) p. 164.

329 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 64.

330 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 87.

331 See Chapter 5.

332 A planter’s composition titled ‘The Teahouse Bloke’ is suggestive in this regard: ‘the factory starts at 4 a.m., Oh Lord! Why ever did I come to this wretched job in tea...I have just to carry on and work right up to ten, and start the morning after, at 3 A.M. again’. W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935); M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928) p. 95.

333 An Assam planter from the early twentieth century referred to “Deundi Time” – where he operated the clocks of the garden (Deundi) one hour ahead of the rest of the tea districts, ‘...so that the labour force could work their first hour in the cooler period of the day, before other garden’s labour had roused themselves from bed.’ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935). Also see S. Jain and R. Reddock (ed.) *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p. 127; 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) p. 159.

Wages and remuneration on the *cha-bagaan* raised other concerns pertaining to life and work. The common practice on the tea-gardens of a combination of ‘task-rate’ assessment (daily tasks) and ‘time-rate’ payment (weekly/ fortnightly payment) generated a degree of confusion and many returnees felt that they had been “duped”.³³⁴ The task-work, in particular, open to different “interpretations” was seen with apprehension, and some colonial officials even realised its “unpopularity” during famine-work.³³⁵ Many time-expired labourers narrated their experience of task-work on *cha-bagaan*, describing the amount of work required to achieve a daily wage as “excessive”.³³⁶ An upward revision in tasks, for being much higher than in the past, was also felt by some with the result of a decline in their earnings.³³⁷ Sometimes, tasks were hiked as a mode of disciplining *coolies*.³³⁸ The penalties for falling short (short-work) and even for minor delays in attendance (muster) led to many deductions.³³⁹ There were other apprehensions of being left with hardly any cash after the costs of “rice-benefit” (5 *seers* of rice per week) was charged from their wages.³⁴⁰ At times of absence, due to illness, they were completely deprived of their “cash earnings” being just given a subsistence allowance or diet without any payment. But such periods of absence (*kuthia*) were added to the contract terms.³⁴¹ Also, the cost of recruitment was often recovered from the wages.

334 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 22, p. 64.

335 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 58.

336 A contractor from Jubbulpore mentioned that some returnees told that the hoeing tasks on the garden—20 to 25 *nals* of 12 feet—are excessive. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 57.

337 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 18.

338 In Santali language the origins of the word *Dalil* which connoted extra work as punishment was traced to the tea gardens. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 57; A. Campbell, *A Santali-English dictionary* (Pokhuria, 1899) p. 117.

339 The members of the deputation that if the daily work was not done, a day’s wage (25 annas) was inflicted. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 57, p. 87.

340 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 69.

341 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 64, p. 68. Practices of prolonging the term of agreement (as reported by officers in recruiting districts) by addition of *kuthia* days, or periods of absence was taken by Chota Nagpuri and Santali workers as a breach of faith.

These isolated instances indicate to the doubts and concerns about the “legitimate” possibilities of earning sufficient incomes that the *cha-bagaan* claimed to offer. Not only was the mode of assessment and payment perceived as “puzzling”, but also the work demanded to earn that wage was deemed as “excessive.” Again, these evaluations were open to multiple interpretations and further enhancements. A general trend of increase in tasks with stagnant wages marked the intensifying Assam plantation economy in the late nineteenth century.³⁴² Such limitations in the possibilities to earn were further constrained by the standard practices of deductions in place on the plantations. This only corroborated to the perception of the condition of life and ability to earn on *cha-bagaan* was difficult.

The “extraordinary” nature of the life on the plantations, as notably induced by the practices of policing/disciplining, formed the substance of the “experiences” about the *cha-bagaan*. Various instances of confinement and extreme disciplining, even for “irrelevant” and “unjust” transgressions, raised anxieties and fear about the exceptional place. There were concerns of life being circumscribed in a compound system from where no one was ever permitted to leave.³⁴³ People were arrested and beaten for leaving the “compound”, even when they just wished to visit acquaintances and relatives on other gardens.³⁴⁴ The flogging and corporal punishments meted out by the manager, and the native subordinates was inflicted even for trivial offences.³⁴⁵ The life and activities of *coolies* were said to be at the complete disposal of the manager/tea-garden. *Coolies* were compelled to labour even when they felt unwell, and had to turn out for work during heavy

342 In the year 1900, the Chief Commissioner of Assam demonstrated that the average wages paid (including benefits and overtime) were substantially less than what was prescribed by the inaugural contract Act (1865). The statutory wage at that point (Rs 5) was in fact half of what the daily labourer earned in Assam. Again between 1870s and 1890s, the tasks on tea gardens had generally increased from around twenty five to thirty percent. H. Cotton, *India and Home Memories* (London, 1911) pp. 261–262; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 49. For a discussion of wage trends in the twentieth century see R. Behal, *Wage Structure and Labour: Assam Valley Plantations, 1900–1947* (Noida, 2003).

343 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 69.

344 A report investigating the conditions of labour in Duars tea plantations noted that ‘...there can be no doubt that inter-garden movement of coolies are much commoner in the Duars than under the Assam system of indentured labour. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 76. *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p. 24.

345 The members of the Sonthali deputation noticed a new woman worker being beaten by the assistant manager because she plucked four leaves instead of three. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 87, p. 64, p. 17.

rains.³⁴⁶ The female-*coolies* were not permitted to stay longer than four to five days at home after child-birth.³⁴⁷ During more extended periods of illness *coolies* were encouraged to leave for the nearby *basti* to be tended by their caste/tribe people, but on recovery, the managers compelled them to return to their “original” gardens.³⁴⁸ Some expressed a sense of helplessness in their inability to leave the garden for which they had been contracted, even when they disliked it.³⁴⁹

The practices of control and immobilisation, critical to the production of cheap disciplined labour, were registered as infringements in the conduct of everyday life. The life of a *coolie*, as depicted in these experiences, entailed a loss of control over personal mobility, choice, well-being and a potential breakdown of relationships, interactions and social obligations. *Coolies*, in effect, were seen as not able to move as they wished, could not rest if they felt unwell, and were unable to keep in touch with friends and relatives. This sense of loss was induced and heightened by the practices of physical disciplining (even for irrelevant/minor transgressions) making it “exceptional”, “excessive” and generally “illegitimate”.

3.4 Songs and Oral Traditions of Tea Workers

The perceptions and anxieties about Assam tea gardens were also becoming a part of wider constructions of *cha-bagaan* as a site of “oppression” (places of *dukh* and *taklif*) articulated in other narratives sketching the life on the tea gardens.³⁵⁰ *Jhumur* songs, an essential element in the oral/cultural traditions of tea labour-

346 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 13, p. 87, p. 64.

347 This was again brought up by the Sonthal deputation where they were required to work within six days of birth. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 64.

348 The missionary Dowding observed that contracts were cancelled when it was ‘...more profitable to send them home than treat them and give subsistence allowance.’ A transport fund instituted in the 1870s for such purposes was hardly enough and could fund the repatriation of only a few. C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p. 32.

349 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 74, p. 29.

350 Y. Chattopadhyaya., *Cha-kulir atmakahini. The Experiences of a Coolie in a Tea garden in Assam. A tale founded on fact* (Calcutta, 1901); R. Bidyaratna, *Kuli Kahini (Sketches from Cooly Life)* (Calcutta, 1888).

ers in Assam, indicates to one of the imaginings of the tea-garden. The nature of these songs can be illustrated through some extracts:³⁵¹

1	Assam Desher Chah Pat Pani Boli Bar Mitha Chal Sakhi Chal Jabo Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane	Assam, the land of tea Where the water is supposed to be sweet Friends! Let's go We will pluck leaves on the gardens with joy
2	Chal Mini Assam Jabo Deshe baro dukh re Assam deshe re Mini cha-bagaan horiyal Kodal mara jemon temon Pata tula kam go Hai Jaduram Phanki diye pathali Assam	Mini, let's go to Assam Our land is full of sorrow Mini, Assam is land of greenery and tea I somehow could hoe the fields Oh! The Plucking work Oh! Jaduram You deceived me to Assam
3	Paka khata lekhaeli naam Re Lampatiya Shyam Phanki diey bandu chalali Assam Depughare maritari Uttaiete terene kari Hoogly sahare dekholi Akash Mane kari Assam jab Jora Pankha tanab Sahab dil Kodaleri Kam Dina Udaya bhane Akale peter tane Tipki Tipki parhe gham	Putting my name down in the (Contract) Oh nasty Shyam You deceived me to Assam Depots were marked by commotion Had to swim to come to the shore In Hoogly (Calcutta) could I finally see the sky When I wished to go to Assam I thought I had pull the fan But Sahab gave me hoeing job So says poor Udaya (poet) For the sake of the stomach I sweat in this heat
4	Sardar bole kam kam Babu bole dhori an Sahab bole libo pither chan Re Jaduram Phanki diye bandu pathali Assam	Sardar says work work Babu says nab the fool Sahab threatens to peel the skin of my back Oh Jaduram You deceived us to Assam

351 The *Jhumur* songs represented here are compiled from varied sources. This is particularly drawn from, S. Sengputa & J.L. Sharma, *Jhumur: Folksongs and Dances of Tea Garden Labourers of Assam*, P.P. Mahato, *World View of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand* in S. Karotprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp. 131–142, pp. 214–226; P.P. Mahato & K.C. Mahato, *The Collective Wisdom and Excellences related to world views on Forest, Biodiversity and Nature-Man-Spirit complex of the indigeneous people of Eastern India* in C.K. Paty (ed) *Forest, Government and Tribe* (Delhi, 2007) pp. 36–47. Some of these songs were collected by Kali Dasgupta (1926–2005)—a singer and folk song collector, which was later released in an audio volume. *Folk Songs of North-East India* (Calcutta, 2003).

The songs, in a sense, map the transition of the Assam tea garden from being imagined as sites of hope to becoming the sites of despair and difficulties. During the course of the late nineteenth century, tea gardens had also become a major avenue and opportunity for work and survival for societies during periods of acute scarcity and conditions of deprivation. Large scale migration to tea-gardens during the famine years attests to that process.³⁵²

Song 1 captures this optimism regarding Assam—as a land of hope, opportunity and work. The positive mood is again recreated in the opening lines of Song 2, where the narrator contrasts the greenery of Assam cha-bagaan to the miseries (dukḥ) at home (desh). These hopes are shattered when the “reality” of life on the tea garden is found to be harsh and oppressive. A painful scene is recreated in Song 3—which narrates in graphic details the tortuous journey of a fresh recruit from home through depots, steamers, Calcutta and arrival on tea garden. Again the individual’s experience of life and work is at variance to what s/he was made to believe. Song 4 harps on the agony of the coolie—who is entrapped in the regimented disciplinary regime of the tea garden.

Life in the tea garden, as depicted in these songs, hints at the dukḥ and taklif of the coolie. This was often the realisation of the nature of the work being different from what was anticipated. In song 3, the person was under the impression that he will have to pull fans (Pankha tanab), which was relatively easier than the hoeing work (Kodaleri kam) that he was assigned by the manager (Sahab) in Assam.³⁵³ The perception of relative “easiness” of plantation work was often associated with the plucking of the tea leaves (Pata tulna), the primary occupation of women workers on the plantations, as expressed by the narrator of the Song 1: ‘Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane’ (We will pluck the leaves on the gardens with joy). It alludes to a persistent notion of plucking being “effortless” and “natural” to women as they biologically possessed the ideal nimble fingers essential for it. The essentialization and feminization of plucking work devalued the female labour and legitimised the hierarchical/patriarchal authority and wage structure. Contemporary visual representations of tea plucking show the dominance of such perceptions in the colonial capitalist imaginations.

352 A tour of a famine affected Bilaspur in the late 1890, an observer found that a standard answer to the whereabouts of the husbands of many destitute women was, “...he has gone to Assam to the gardens.” On further enquiries he learnt that the civil doctor of the station was passing around sixteen hundred people per week (for Assam). F.H.S Merewether, *A tour through the famine district of India* (London, 1898) pp. 130–131; Resolution on Surgeon-Major Campbell’s Report on the Arrangements for Transit of Emigrants to Assam. Revenue and Agriculture, Emigration A, June 1897. NAI.

353 For such “task anxieties” in the plantations of 1860s, see chapter 2.



Figure 3.1: Photograph of a tea plucker.³⁵⁴ **Figure 3.2:** Visuals of women tea pluckers.³⁵⁵

These images unabashedly celebrate the “joy” of plucking tea leaves by creating an illusion of it being as simple/pleasurable as picking flowers from a garden and therefore ideal for the women. Apart from the romanticisation/feminization of work, the sexualisation of female labour, by constituting the work in terms of a gendered social identity, indicates to the marginalisation of the female labourer’s position in the plantation work/life hierarchy.³⁵⁶ Such images were particularly influential in conditioning the perceptions about life and work on the Indian plantations of the metropolitan audience and have become the recurrent themes in tea advertisements.³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ The photograph was taken by the “professional” studio Bourne and Shepherd titled ‘Assamese Woman in costume, Picking Tea leaves in a field’ was taken at the end of the nineteenth century. DOE Asia: Assam: General: NM 40922 04423800, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution; M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928).

³⁵⁵ The image of the left is a cover illustration from a book published by a tea manager and the image on the right is a graphic of a tea advertisement. M. P. Hanley, *Tales and Songs on an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta, 1928).

³⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion and criticism see P. Chatterjee, *Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) pp. 112–113.

³⁵⁷ A. Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester, 2003) esp. the section ‘The Orient as female and the representation of the Tamil woman tea picker’ pp. 119–125.

In contrast to this romantic perception/construction of plucking and woman's work, the nature of the work becomes evident in practice (Song 2). This everyday grind of work in the heat and sweat (Tipiki Tipki parhe gham) had to be endured because of the necessity to make a living (Song 3). This intensity of work (kam kam) was driven by threats and systematic physical disciplining by the authorities—Manager-Native Assistant-Overseer (Sahab-Babu-Sardar) in the plantations (Song 4).³⁵⁸

3.5 Deception of Recruiters and the Fear of Assam

The dukh and taklif on the tea gardens, evocatively pictured in these songs, premised on a narrative strategy where the path to the sites of 'oppression' was induced at some stage due to the deception (Phanki) of the recruiter (Shyam/Jaduram), who lured them to contract (Paka khata) and facilitated their passage to Assam in the first place. In anecdotes, stories and experiences about Assam tea garden recruitment, deception (Phanki) and the act of luring (Phuslao) figures, prominently, to characterize the practices of the recruiter.³⁵⁹

A German missionary stationed in Chotanagpur in his entry on Arkati (Arkatyā) defined them as emissary of the labour agents recruiting coolies for tea gardens. The Mundas called them horo akinrinko (men sellers). He observed that the arkatti often presented the Assam tea garden as government concern and they were government officials. They would often wear high pugrees and chaprasses (large oval badges) like the court peons (chaprassis).³⁶⁰ He went to describe the practices of recruiting in another entry called Depots. These were described as places (in Ranchi and other larger towns) as large shed where intending where intending emigrants are kept at the expense of the labour agencies until a sufficient number collected to travel. Depots were subject to government inspection and family members suspecting decoy could obtain a search warrant and check the depots. There was a practice of out of way huts to keep troublesome recruits

358 For a detailed discussion of the work practices and authority structure during field operation, See Chapter 5.

359 The practices of deception was associated with recruiters for other destinations. The Surinam *arkattis* allegedly pronounced it as *Sri Ram* (Lord Ram) or *srinam* ('sublime name') thus suggesting that the trip was in honour of the almighty. R. Hoefte, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville, 1998) p. 36; C.E.S. Choenni, 'From Bharat to Sri Ram Desh: The Emigration of Indian Indentured Labourers to Surinam' in R. Rai & P. Reeves (ed.), *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational networks and changing identities* (2009) p. 112.

360 Hoffman. p. 155. Dictionary 1.

and prepare them for reception into the public depots. Such huts were called *corta dipu* (secret depots) where persons disappeared as ‘effectively as pin in a haystack.’³⁶¹

The strict distinction in the colonial and planter discourses regarding the practices of the recruiters, i.e. the professional (Arkatti) indulging in corrupt practices and the non-professional (Sardar) working through familial and kin networks, is not sustained in these narratives. Though the arkatti had earned a “historical” reputation of fear and hatred built on indiscriminate phankis and phuslaoing compounded with physical threat, kidnapping and other abuses; the sardar hardly aroused any real confidence, and there was a persistent feeling that he always spoke with a “purpose”.³⁶² The exaggerations of the sardar, as narrated by many returnees, could have only reinforced that perception. In effect, fixing the identity of Shyam and Jaduram in these narratives of being an arkatti or a sardar, with absolute certainty, could be a futile exercise.

Apart from the deceptions and exaggerations of the recruiter, the lurking threats of being kidnapped by them were eliciting extreme “pre-emptive” responses. There were stories from the district of Sambalpur (Orissa) of families sleeping roped together to prevent the recruiters from “carrying them off.”³⁶³ Also, unwilling/kidnapped recruits were reported to have jumped off running trains to liberate themselves from the shackles of the recruiter/abductor.³⁶⁴ Such “extraordinary” responses starkly underlined a profound sense of desperation in the face of rampant abusive recruitment practices, and further, accentuated the aversion for Assam recruitment and the “oppressive” cha-bagaan. This fear of Assam recruiter, remarked a magistrate of Hazaribagh district (Chotanagpur), was so acute that people became apprehensive of even visiting their haats and bazaars. He compared the paranoia to the ‘days of thuggee’ when there was such ‘widespread fear of travelling’.³⁶⁵ Even during a year of famine when a missionary tried to distribute loans offered by the local administration there was not a single soul who came forward to take that offer. It was widely believed that if they accepted the money, they would be forced to work in the tea garden for

361 Hoffman. Dictionary 2. pp. 156–157.

362 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 54.

363 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 89, p. 61.

364 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 61.

365 R. Behal and P.P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations, 1840–1908’ in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, Special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, no. 3&4 (1992) p. 155.

that advance.³⁶⁶ Again, in the late 1890s, a district commissioner of Chotanagpur (Chaibassa) was unsuccessful in getting hold of anyone to draw his *pankha* (fan) during a stopover at a local railway station. An individual offering his services after much persuasion refused to wait for payment. On being asked to explain his strange actions, he said that ‘the sarkar would chalan him to Assam.’³⁶⁷ The late nineteenth century India was gripped with this lurking concern to the threat/idea of being taken to the tea-garden. The already cited instances of workers from Duars tea gardens, the upcountry labourers working on railway extensions in Assam and the Gandas lodged in the Sambalpur prison, articulating their grave reservations about going to the tea-gardens, becomes intelligible in this light. Three other cases can be cited in this regard.

First, a “widespread” fear raged in the tribal districts of Bengal in the 1880s during the enumerative drives of the colonial census. The numbering of people, according to some rumours in circulation, was merely a “preparatory stage” for the wholesale deportation of women to work as tea pluckers on the Assam tea gardens.³⁶⁸ The perceived threat of being taken to Assam in large numbers, and the complicity of the colonial state in that process, was also informed by the gendered nature of that demand. In very particular ways, the rumour grasped the grammar of Assam recruitment during the period, where the colonial state was “organising” and “encouraging” large-scale emigration, and the tea planters were stepping up the demands for workers, in general, and women workers, in particular, to rectify the “gender imbalance” of the workforce.³⁶⁹

366 Hoffman p. 155.

367 A local missionary noted ‘...a fear (very strong in this district) that they will be transported sooner or later to the tea gardens of Assam. The popular ignorance is very great and no arguments can overcome it.’ Hoffman Note, Emigration Dept., Financial Branch nos 62–128, April 1899, WBSA cited in I.S. Das Gupta, ‘Agrarian Expansion under Colonial Rule and its impact on a Tribal Economy’ in E. Basile and I. Mukhopadhaya (ed.) *The Changing Identity of Rural India* (Delhi, 2009). *Appendix to the report of the Indian Famine Commission, Vol IV. Central Provinces and Berar* (London, 1898) p. 90.

368 The men were believed to be sent to Afghanistan as camp-followers for the British army. There were several census induced rumours fears expressed in North Bihar during Census operations of men being taken to foreign country, often Afghanistan. *New York Times*, June 1st, 1890; A. Yang, ‘A Conservation of Rumours: The Language of Popular “Mentalities” in Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial India’ *Journal of Social History* 20, no.3 (Spring 1987) pp. 485–505.

369 The threat of the single woman being decoyed to the Assam cha-bagaan became a powerful social anxiety provoking various responses in the late nineteenth century. See, S. Sen, ‘Questions of consent: Women’s recruitment for Assam tea gardens, 1859–1900’ *Studies in History* 18, no.2 (2002) pp. 231–260; S. Sen, ‘Without his consent?’: Marriage and Women’s Migration in Colonial India’ *International Labor and Working-Class History* 65 (Spring 2004) pp. 77–104; S. Sen, ‘Unset-

The fear of Assam tea garden came up frequently during the visit of Foley and Freemantle to the jute mills of Calcutta. The manager of Alliance Jute mill sent a babu to Narainganj to receive sixty workers for the mills. They suddenly all bolted since a rumour arose that they were being taken to a tea garden. A similar case narrated by the manager of Standard Jute mill where he had obtained Madras coolies from Behrampur but the coolies afraid to come as they were afraid to be taken to a tea garden. There were other instances of planters recruiting for tea gardens in Bengal (Duars) having to convince potential recruits that they were not Assam arkatis. In one particular case a coolie from Duars tea garden who brought back his two sisters to the garden complained that his relatives and co-villagers had beaten him saying that he was an Assam arkati. Foley suggested that in many cases a collector could merely give a guarantee that the recruiter was not recruiting for Assam. The fear of being taken to Assam seems in many instances to have prevented recruitment for various industries.³⁷⁰

The invocation of “Assam bogey” sometimes became part of a larger political strategy to “mobilise” popular support, as evident during the Swadeshi activity in the early twentieth century. Addressing a peasant gathering in rural Bengal, some local politicians hinted at the ulterior motive of the British government of introducing “Assam laws” to take over their lands and transport a large number of them to tea-gardens to serve as coolies.³⁷¹ Raising the latent concerns of a population extremely wary of being “recruited” for Assam, a choice offered to them was clear: of either waiting to become the coolies of capitalism or participating in the struggle for becoming the citizens of an emerging nation.³⁷²

The idea and practice of recruitment for tea gardens were registering in other complicated ways in the migrating societies. “Selling” came to be synonymously

ting the Household: Act VI (of 1901) and the Regulation of Women Migrants in Colonial Bengal’ *International Review of Social History* 41 (1996) pp. 135–156.

370 *Report of Mr Foley on Labour in Bengal. Report of Mr Freemantle on Labour in the United Provinces and Bengal.* Letter from C.H. Craven, Subdivisional Officer, Hailakandi to Deputy Commissioner, Cachar dated 7th June 1905 in Emigration A, October 1906, nos 27–32; Appointment of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, Commerce and Industry, Emigration A, nos. 19–28.

371 In a memorial from some residents of the district of Mymensingh addressed to the Governor of Bengal protesting the proposal to transfer the district to the Administration of Assam they mentioned the existence of “wild rumours” that ‘...ordinary *raiya*s will be taken away from their fields and made to work as coolies on the tea gardens of Assam; that they will lose the Bengal Tenancy Act or that the local road cesses of Bengal will be filched away and devoted to making roads in the jungly parts of Assam’. S. Bandyopadhyaya, *Caste, Protest and identity in Colonial India* (Richmond, 1997) p. 68. *Further Papers relating to the Reconstitution of the Provinces of Bengal and Assam* (London, 1905) p. 109.

372 Such a rhetoric becomes even more articulate in the case of Assam plantations in the 1920s. See Chapter 7.

used for Assam recruitment in some regions. A recruiter in Chotanagpur mentioned this in the context of female migrants being hired for tea gardens:

Suppose that a young woman wishes to go to Assam and I produce her father and prove by two witnesses that he is her father and he gives his consent to emigrating, when he goes back to his village he will be reproached by everyone with having “sold” his daughter.³⁷³

Many others mentioned this “loss of respectability” and the disapproval by the community.³⁷⁴ In some regions, it was seen as a prelude to bondage.³⁷⁵ In Mundari language, the word *Chalan* came to signify simultaneously the act of being taken to a depot (to be recruited for Assam) and being imprisoned.³⁷⁶ There was an unmistakable connection made between contract and condition of being bound (in Assam) in the Chotanagpur region, which was one of the “oldest” migrating regions for the Assam *cha-bagaan*. The refusal of the Chotanagpuri labourers of Duars tea garden was because it was a place of agreement/contract (Agreement ka jagah). In the district of Ranchi (Chotanagpur), the local police encountered a “popular” reluctance in hiring constables because the binding three-year contract made the people “suspicious”—as it was strikingly reminiscent of the Assam contract.³⁷⁷

3.6 The ‘Choice’ of Assam

The notions about migration and work on Assam *cha-bagaan* were not always conditioned in “isolation”, but also framed through the changing and emerging possibilities for employment and earning available near “home” and at a

373 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 44.

374 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 15, p. 17, p. 75, p. 44.

375 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 70, p. 18.

376 Anderson notes that colonial enquiries into labour recruitment in north India during the 1880s referred to batches of labourers as *chalan*, which mirrored the use of the word during the first half of the nineteenth century as a mode of reference to chain gangs of transfer prisoners and transportation convicts. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 21; C. Anderson, ‘Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century’, *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009).

377 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 12, p. 20.

“distance”.³⁷⁸ Grierson in his investigation into colonial recruiting in the early 1880s had cited several advantages that Assam had over the colony where the Assam recruiter was said to outbid the colonial recruiter in many respects. The distance is less, there is no sea to cross, access is easier and above all the coolie receives an advance of two month of pay. He even suggested the colonial agents in Calcutta to follow the Assam lead of advances which was seen as “unpopular” and rejected because of recovery.³⁷⁹ At the turn of the century when the agent for Trinidad, Fiji, Jamaica and Mauritius visited the relief camps in Raipur and Bilaspur (Central Provinces) he failed to obtain a single recruit as they refused to believe that he was not recruiting for Assam.³⁸⁰

Chotanagpur, the primary recruiting ground for Assam tea-gardens, witnessed a particular trend of some migrant streams moving towards the tea plantations of Duars (Bengal) during the last decades of the nineteenth century.³⁸¹ The Duars Report claimed that tea gardens of the district ‘...hold a monopoly of the best class of labour from Chota Nagpur and Sonthal Parganas, having beaten Assam out of the market for that class’.³⁸² This shift could be attributed to the nature of the labour demand in Duars, where people could leave after harvest to return in the rainy season after earning some money.³⁸³ The “seasonal” nature of migration allowed some individuals to participate in the agricultural process and accommodate wage-work on the tea-plantations in the non-agricultural season.³⁸⁴ Such “other” opportunities of work in tea-gardens created a comparative impression of the two worksites. A local labour agent from the Chotanagpur mentioned that when ‘you mention “Assam” to a villager it conveys the idea of hardship (*dukh*)...the Duars have no such name’.³⁸⁵ A “favourable” idea about

378 R. Dasgupta, ‘Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply’ in *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994).

379 *Major Pitcher and Mr Grierson’s enquiry into Emigration*. Emigration A, August 1883, nos 9–15.

380 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 110.

381 In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, around 46% of the recruits came from the Chotanagpur. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 235.

382 *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p. 26.

383 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 14.

384 Emigration to Assam were of a more permanent nature, but from the Duars about 10,000 people returned every year, bringing back a saving of approximately 1 lakh rupees. Dufferin Report, no.351R, Ranchi, 31 May 1888.

385 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 30.

Duars was noted by a missionary who said that a strong opinion was that in Duars one stays ‘as long as they like’, and further, ‘one can go to another garden if they wish to.’³⁸⁶ Such a comparative view was also narrated by another missionary who said that Assam was not as healthy as Duars and that they are ‘better treated on the Duars garden.’³⁸⁷ A tea manager having experience of working in Assam and Duars tea plantations mentioned that ‘...coolies come to Duars because they have no fear that they may be placed on contract’.³⁸⁸

The choice for Duars plantations, as being apparently expressed by the people of the region, cannot be simply read through the dichotomy of Freedom (Duars)/Unfreedom (Assam), as the plantation labour regime of Duars was also characterised by various excesses, coercion and strategies of immobilisation. Such dichotomies simplify the fluidity and complexities in which such migrating decisions were made. The difficulties induced by the Assam labour regime of contract(s) and the abusive practices of recruitment to sustain it, more seriously, threatened the conduct of individual and social life, and generated a comparatively “favourable” notion about the Duars plantations. *Dukh* of Assam was greater than the *dukh* of Duars. Such choices did not exclude different work situations within the province of Assam. A labour agent in Calcutta summed up this sentiment:

In a few cases I have offered *coolies* a choice between the Assam railway and Trading Company’s one-year contract for its coal mines (in Assam) with Rs. 7 wage and a four year contract on Rs. 5 on a tea garden. The *coolies* invariably chose the former, and I understood that the choice was determined as much by the shorter term as by the higher wage.³⁸⁹

3.7 Conclusions

The “popular” constructions of the *cha-bagaan* was premised on an “awareness” of the plantation system in the recruiting regions, stemming from personal/familiar experiences and the wider circulation of information— through rumours, stories and anecdotes about Assam. This, again, alludes to the ways the *cha-bagaan* was being comprehended and “negotiated” in the recruiting regions, where the strategies and practices mobilised in the production of *coolies* (for the

386 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 13.

387 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 14.

388 *Report of the Duars Committee* (Shillong, 1910) p. 63.

389 *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 89.

tea-gardens) came to be perceived as disruptive, excessive and unreasonable; engendering various anxieties. Such negotiations did not necessarily imply that the exploitative practices and abuses, integral to the “free” labour system, were collectively “resisted” and eliminated or “voluntary” migration to Assam tea-garden completely ceased over time. It rather undermines the notion of ignorance and gullibility of the social groups migrating to Assam, emphasising on how the “knowledge” of tea garden— recruitment practices, conditions of life and nature of work in plantation, were being registered and articulated in the context of their lived realities.