

4 Drink and Work

4.1 Introduction

The notions of the unpopularity of Assam was not just premised on the excesses in recruitment, but articulated as a deepening concern about the nature of plantation work and the ways in which it was intensified. Such processes were apparently facilitated by a growing number of *coolies* made available by “relaxation” in recruitment and further alterations to the contracts.

In this backdrop, consider a “curious” letter published on May 31st, 1880 edition of the daily Englishman termed as ‘The Planter’s Grievance.’ In this piece, the writer (planter) voiced grave concerns regarding the “grog shops” sprouting up near the proverbial ‘gates of every tea garden of Assam’, resulting in the ‘introduction of drunkenness, crime and disease in factories, collecting bad characters in the neighbourhood of tea-gardens, attracting *coolies* away from their work, increasing sickness and a general difficulty in the management of labour’. The text of letter goes:

... grave and serious evils resulting from some measures lately taken here by the local govt. for the encouragement of drunkenness, by the forced establishment of shops for the sale of native spirits in the immediate vicinity of all important tea gardens. I suppose our mission in no heathen country is complete till we have taught the benighted native the delights of drunkenness, but I think the sacred imported labourer might have been spared the enlightenment. Since the commencement of the tea industry, the bodily welfare of the imported labourer has been the chief delight of the Bengal Government ...for years the blameless *coolie* has led a sober, peaceful and industrious existence, drinking harmless fermented liquor manufactured by himself, only getting drunk on proper occasions, and beating his wife in a reasonable and moderate degree...In an evil moment, it occurred to the Chief Commissioner that more money might be raised by the sale of spirit licenses.³⁹⁰

Such serious concerns about the consequences of “coolie drinking” did not square up with an assertion made by another tea planter named George Barker. In his long experience of managing a tea garden, Barker notes ‘(that) at times of a heavy flush, or backward state of cultivation, when something must be done to increase the labour power of the garden, brandy or rum—the more, the better—is the only inducement’.³⁹¹ Barker’s assertion was reiterated by a colonial excise official

390 Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7–8, Part B.

391 G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp. 174–75.

writing in the 1880s. He remarked that it had become a custom (*dustoor*) with *coolies* to get rum as *bakshish* for extra work, and also for good and satisfactory work.³⁹² This seems to go in the direction of a “strategy” proposed in the 1850s by Assam tea planters: of inducing the reluctant “opium smoking Assamese” for plantation work through control over opium purchase.³⁹³ Here, rather being a detriment, the stimulant and even the addictive attributes of alcohol/drugs are mobilised to encourage social groups to participate in the work process of plantations. That alcohol/drugs were perceived as stimulating or, even, inducement to work (especially under trying adverse circumstances) was not a colonial or even capitalist invention, and references to this can be found in a range of settings across time and space.³⁹⁴

Taking this contradiction as an entry point, this chapter will contend that the conflicting positions on *coolie* drinking were rooted in the shift from the “unsettled” plantations of the 1860s—disciplined (by planters) through violence and coercion—to more “systematised” plantations taking roots from the late 1860s and early 1870s. This further reveals how new forms of organisation of life and work of the plantations were generating new concerns for the control of the work process and workers.

4.2 Colonial Policy and Taxing the “Coolie Drink.”

The genesis of the debate has to be situated in the changing colonial excise policy of the province. Assam, till the year 1874, when it was made a separate province, formed a part of the province of Bengal and the Excise revenue was raised on the principles applicable to Bengal. Until the year 1868–69, the excise revenue amounted to just over 8,000 rupees yearly. After 1868–69, revenues increased

³⁹² *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1884–85.*

³⁹³ See Chapter 1.

³⁹⁴ Jankowiak and Bradburd argue that historically, stimulants have been used to enhance physical and mental performance by increasing endurance, concentration, and the intensity of physical and mental work. That labour-enhancing drugs (including alcohol) were employed well before the advent of merchantilism or market capitalism and are by no means a European contribution to world culture. Even the upcountry *coolies* (from North-west Provinces and Bihar) working in the tea gardens of Assam, claimed that they could not keep their health in these eastern districts without *Ganja*. The drug they argued improved digestion, the use of it kept off coughs and colds, and for those who had to work outside in the rains it is invaluable, as it prevented rain and exposure from affecting the body. See ‘Drugs, Desire, and European Economic Expansion’, by Daniel Bradburd and William Jankowiak in Bradburd and Jankowiak (ed) *Drugs, Labour and Colonial Expansion* (Tucson, 2003) and *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1882–83.*

with surprising rapidity. Collections in 1869–70 were half more than of the previous year, while in 1873–74 the collections were double of the 1870–71 figures.³⁹⁵

This “spectacular” growth mirrored the rise of the tea industry in the wake of the 1868 crisis —showing a pattern of steady growth of working population on more “settled” plantations. But these figures of excise growth did not impress the colonial administration, and they consistently maintained that they were “meagre” considering the large and growing drinking/working population in the province. The relatively high consumption of the home-brewed rice beer—*Pachwai*, by the plantation *coolies* was the major object of their concern. Their policy, throughout the late nineteenth century, was geared to “check” the consumption of this “illicit” liquor (home-brewed rice beer) and offer opportunities for the *coolies* to buy the “licit” liquor (country liquor from the licensed shops) instead.

The inauguration of the outstill system in Assam in the late 1870s grew out of such concerns. Under the terms of this system, the manufacture and sale of country spirits were auctioned out to the highest bidder, for individual liquor shops. The initiation of such an excise policy anticipated a change in the *coolie*’s drink of preference, from beer to country spirits, or more precisely, from untaxed alcohol to taxed alcohol. These figures of growth became a major source of criticism, and planters took this as an evidence of facilitating and promoting the “disease” of drunkenness among the *coolie* population—they being the primary consumers of country liquor in the province.

4.3 Drink as Work Stimulant

The association of alcohol and hard manual work in trying circumstances, a prevalent idea in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was not lost upon the Assam tea managers of the 1870s. In fact, the planters of Assam were one major importer of Rum into the province for their *coolies*.³⁹⁶ There was a general belief that Rum was essential for the health and stimulation of the *coolies* in the ‘unhealthy and feverish’ province of Assam. In the words of a doctor of a tea garden: ‘little stimulating drink after a week’s hard toil is beneficial to the health

³⁹⁵ *Report on the Excise Administration of British India* (Simla, 1882) p. 22.

³⁹⁶ Upto the year 1878–79, all rum consumed in the Province was obtained from Calcutta, where duty was realised and credited to the Bengal government. In 1878, however, a distillery was opened at Dibrughar with a monopoly of manufacture within the Lakhimpur District for a period of five years. R Logan, *Report on the Excise Administration of British India* (Simla, 1882) p. 24.

of *coolies* in damp, moist and malarial climate in Assam'.³⁹⁷ The findings of the enquiry into the excise administration in the tea districts of Assam and Bengal in 1889 made an observation extremely instructive in this regard:

... it is remarkable fact that 31 out of 35 planters admit that they distribute rum to *coolie*'s after a hard days' work or a long journey. Even many of those who are strongly opposed to their *coolies* getting any liquor supply them with rum, saying it is good for them, makes them work better and more cheerfully, gives them heart during epidemics of cholera and sickness, such as fever. It is curious that the enquiries made by the Excise Commission in 1884 showed that there was a widespread belief that rum and spirits made by European process of manufacture did not generally agree with the people of this country. Be this as it may, it is odd to find planters who virtually oppose the consumption by their *coolies* of out-still liquor, yet freely giving as a substitute on occasions strong and raw spirit like rum.³⁹⁸

Alcohol and specifically rum started appearing and acquiring a new function in the plantation life and work process. It has been argued that linking sanctioned access to alcohol to labour (like giving alcohol at the end of communal labour and at particular significant moments) was a powerful incentive to participate in the work process.³⁹⁹ However, this act of giving out rum by planters to the workers was not just a simple case of "monopolisation and manipulation of addiction" or creation of "liquor-debts" but, also, hinted at their participation in the circulation of a 'cultural artefact'⁴⁰⁰ with great symbolic and ritualistic value. Such gesture,

397 There was also a widespread practice of giving 'rum-rations' to the British army in the 18th century, for it was widely believed and confirmed by the current medical opinion that liquor protected the body against heat and cold alike and it was essential in situations that prompted fatigue or were thought to be unhealthy. Especially in America, considered to be a rough and tough terrain, the British soldiers were regularly provisioned with rum. Generally, the ration was about a gill of rum per day- about a gallon per month. An army officer stationed in America in the 1780s writes, '...This is a bad country, this America, where you always have to drink, either to get warm, or to get cool.' Paul E. Kopperman, "The Cheapest Pay": Alcohol Abuse in the Eighteenth Century British Army, *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 3 (July 1996) pp. 446–448.

398 Report to her Majesty's Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, nos. 993–1020.

399 Michael Angrosino argues that such process of "monopolisation" and "manipulation" of addiction is evident in the case of Carribean planters, who compelled their Indian indentured workers to consume rum rather than marijuana, as their drug of choice, enhancing the economic return on their labourers as well as the intensity of their labour. 'Rum and Ganja: Indenture, Drug Foods, Labor Motivation, and the Evolution of the Modern Sugar Industry in Trinidad', by M. V. Angrosino in Bradburd and Jankoviak (ed) *Drugs, Labour and Colonial Expansion* (University of Arizona Press, 2003).

400 This usage is derived from Mandelbaum's seminal work on the relationship between alcohol and culture. He argues that alcohol is a cultural artifact because the forms and meanings of

as we will argue later, alludes to the shifting authority of managers, which could no longer be premised exclusively on violent strategies of work and control.⁴⁰¹

The dispensation of alcohol by planters points to the emerging transactions and new moments in the organisation of work and life on tea gardens. Planters gave alcohol as “reward” (*bakhshish*) for extra labour or a job well done. Renewals of contracts by workers were confirmed by a mark of thumb and a bottle of rum. The religious occasions on the tea gardens (Karam Puja and Holi) did not just mean some leave from work but also a supply of rum.⁴⁰² Such transactions of a “culturally valued” object appeared at moments in the rhythms of work (extra work, good work, end of work or renewal of contracts) and also at moments in the rhythms of life and culture being produced and reproduced on plantations (festival, marriage, birth, etc.). These rhythms hinted at patterns and routines of work and life culture taking some “form” on Assam plantations.⁴⁰³

alcoholic beverages are culturally defined and consequently has cultural implications. Where alcohol is known, patterns for its use are prescribed usually in fine detail. Alcohol may be tabooed, it is not ignored. Traditionally, it has been most widespread ‘intoxicant’ in use, the most widely valued as a ritual and societal artefact. In some languages, as in English and also in Hindi, ‘drink’ and ‘*peena*’ takes on the connotation of drinking alcoholic liquids. D. G. Mandelbaum, Alcohol and Culture, *Current Anthropology* 6, no. 3 (June 1965).

401 See Chapter 5.

402 *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1881–82, 1882–83 and 1884–85; Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 177.

403 These special circumstances of discharge of rum to *coolies* also baffled the provincial administration. In the late 1870s, there was a lot of debate in the official circles about the nature of this rum supply to *coolies* by the planters, which was said to be a loss to the excise revenue of the province. For the planters got this rum tax-free, under section 49 of Act XXI of 1856, which exempted persons importing spirits for private use and not for sale. However it was felt that the circumstances of issue constituted a sale because it was issued for a consideration, which the planter received in the shape, either of more work, or in lieu of the additional wages it would otherwise be necessary to give. In the words of a District Commissioner in Assam valley, ‘...they (planters) do sell rum. They, of course, do not get cash for it. They give it in place of wages where they give it at all.’ However, in 1877 an application asking permission to make planters take out license for selling rum was rejected by the financial department. Rum supplied to coolies in Assam not subject to license duties. Separate Revenue, August 1877, Nos 27–28; Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7–8, Part B and *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1883–84*.

4.4 Industrial Tea, Intensification of Work and the Intoxicant Drink

From around the late 1870s and early 1880s, the growing relevance of Assam/Indian tea in the British market found resonance in several articles and books published in Britain and India.



Figure 4.1: Comparative Consumption of Indian and Chinese Tea, 1867 and 1907.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰⁴ J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts About Indian Tea* (London, 1910).

In a book celebrating such a development, a colonial official firmly asserted that ‘no comparison can be drawn between tea manufacture as followed out in China and India (in this year 1881)’. He went on to elaborate his point:

We (British) have done a great deal since the indigenous plant was discovered in the jungles of Assam, now nearly fifty years ago.. The Chinaman grows tea and makes tea as he taught us to do it twenty or thirty years ago. The pupil in this case has certainly beaten his master.. but where we have left our teacher far behind is in manufacture. All is hand labour; machinery to them is unknown. The most primitive ideas in tea manufacture are still adhered to.. The former is as crude as it was two or five hundred years ago; the latter (though still far from perfection) in its many details, in its numerous machines cleverly contrived to save labour and better the teas, is a striking illustration of the activity, the energy, the inventive genius of the Anglo-Saxon race.⁴⁰⁵

Apart from marking a shift in the discourse from civilised skilled Chinese art of tea making to the primitive handmade Chinese tea; the use of machinery in tea manufacture was now gaining greater currency. This process of mechanisation continued with a great fervour until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁰⁶ This was also the period of unprecedented growth (both in terms of acreage and production), and by the turn of the century, Assam overtook China as the leading tea exporting region in the world. A parallel trend to this was the rising productivity of the Assam tea plantations.

Table 4.1: Productivity (Pound/Acre) 1885–1914.⁴⁰⁷

Period	Productivity (Pounds/acre)
1885–1889	316
1890–1894	358
1895–1899	361
1900–1904	416
1905–1909	477
1910–1914	531

⁴⁰⁵ I. L Hauser, *Tea: Its Origin, Cultivation, Manufacture and Use* (Chicago, 1890) p. 11.

⁴⁰⁶ This becomes evident from the scientific publications on tea compiled in this period. See, *The Tea Cyclopedia* (Calcutta, 1881); *The Tea Planter’s Vade Mecum: A volume of important articles and information of permanent interest and value regarding tea, tea blight, tea cultivation and manufacture, tea machinery* (Calcutta, 1885); E. Money, *The Cultivation and Manufacture of Tea* (London, 1883). Money’s book had four editions published in 1870, 1874, 1878 and 1883. Only in the fourth edition the book had a separate section on tea machinery.

⁴⁰⁷ H. Mann, ‘The Indian Tea Industry in its Scientific Aspects’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol 79 No. 4089 (Apr 1931) p. 475.

The rising scale of production and, especially, the substantial enhancement in “productivity levels” were not logical outcomes of greater use of machinery in manufacture or better methods of cultivation. The technological innovations and mechanisation, which transformed the nature and capability of tea manufacturing, did not comprehensively affect the cultivation methods.⁴⁰⁸ The field work and plucking of leaves were carried out manually and even required a greater human input to keep pace with the mechanising and quickening production process.⁴⁰⁹ A missionary stationed in a tea district described a ‘machine-like organisation’ in the tea fields, which worked under extremely high pressure to supply leaves to the factory. Such an organisation of work and increased demands work outputs was attempted to be achieved through a greater and closer supervision of work and life in a plantation context. Specialisation and intensification of work became an integral part of this routinizing plantation regime. A planter’s account of the routines of work hinted at the ‘tyranny of the clock’ which seemed to have conditioned the life and work-discipline on the plantations:

At six in the morning, and sometimes half an hour earlier, the gongs are beaten in different *coolie* lines...Steam whistle attached to the boiler shrieks out the unwelcome news that another day’s labour is to commence at once; and every one turns out to work—the women to pluck and the men to hoe and the skilled workmen and children to the factory...at noon the gongs and whistle are again sounded when the women take the leaf they have plucked to the factory.⁴¹⁰

In the same vein, a recent author calls this period as the beginning of “industrial tea”—where the ‘tea workers were assembled in lines and subjected to absolutely rigid time-discipline’.⁴¹¹

In this context of formalisation and attempts for a strict enforcement of time work discipline, the looming threat of liquor shops at the ‘gates of every tea garden’, where workers could theoretically buy alcohol whenever they wanted, became a new concern for planters. The stimulant in this shifting plantation context held the potential to become an intoxicant.⁴¹²

408 J. Weatherstone, *The Pioneers, 1825–1900: The early British tea and coffee Planters and their way of life* (London, 1986).

409 E. Money, *The cultivation and manufacture of tea* (London, 1883) pp.222–271; C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p. 14.

410 D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 60.

411 A. Macfarlane & I. Macfarlane, *The Empire of Tea; The remarkable history of the plant that took over the world* (London, 2004) pp. 192–194.

412 In the context of Western Europe and United States, scholars have argued that the ‘drink question’ and growing wave of temperance becomes relevant in the socio-economic context of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century with the rapid pace of industrialisation and the

Such planter's anxieties were manifesting at different levels. Apart from the 'Planter's letter' published in an English daily in the early 1880s, virtually opening the Pandora's box, there were major criticisms and joint memorandum from the planters and the tea companies in the late 1880s and even a debate in the British House of Commons about the system of Excise in India in which the 'drink question' in Assam figured prominently. A detailed enquiry followed this into the systems of excise in the tea districts of Assam and Bengal. These planter's concerns were epitomised and, in certain senses, reached its apogee with the pamphlet published in 1903 entitled 'Liquor Shops and the Outstill System in Assam'. In this pamphlet, also submitted as a memorandum to the government, the author, J. Buckingham—the person chairing the Assam Branch of the tea association, made a scathing criticism of the system of excise in Assam.⁴¹³ Tea managers, doctors, and missionaries were interviewed, and the point emphatically made that the question of drink and the threat of drunkenness was a detriment to the health of *coolies*/tea garden.⁴¹⁴

The anxiety of loss of labour (rising case of absenteeism, poor performance, sickness from drink, drinking brawls and injured *coolies*) and consequent difficulties posed to the work-discipline was the underlying theme of the planter

growth of middle class as a social force. At one level there was "revolution" in the production of the distilled spirits further aggravated in the late nineteenth and the twentieth century with the ability of a modern industrialized chemical industry to isolate, mass produce and deliver large quantities of alcohol. At the same time the '...Champions of the larger processes of social change (the middle classes) with a material and moral stake in sobriety called traditional habits of consumption into question as they undertook the enormous task of remaking popular traditions to suit their own values and interests.' The stigmatization of beverage alcohol was set into motion, with coffee and tea increasingly seen as the more preferred socially accepted choices. See the Introduction: Temperance History in Comparative Perspective in James S. Roberts *Drink, Temperance and the Working Class in 19th century Germany* (Boston, 1984).

413 In order to gauge the medical opinion on this question Buckingham sent out a circular and got the response of around a dozen doctors, medical officers stationed in the tea districts of Assam and Surma Valley.

414 Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, nos. 7–8, Part B, Correspondence regarding liquor traffic in Darjeeling and Questions in the House of Commons concerning the Liquor shops near tea gardens, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos. 204–218, Correspondence regarding the Liquor Traffic and alleged prevalence of drunkenness in Assam and the Tea districts of Bengal, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos 219–227, Report to her Majesty's Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, Nos 993–1020. J Buckingham, *Liquor shops and the excise administration in Assam, with medical reports and correspondance showing abuses of present outstill system* (Shillong, 1902).

representations.⁴¹⁵ Summarising the nature of complaints made by the garden managers of Cachar, the District Commissioner writes:

The complaints from garden managers were numerous and came from all directions. ...The nature of complaints is as follows:- (1) *Coolies* become unruly, (2) Assaults result, (3) Violent excesses on the part of the *coolies*, (4) much sickness, (5) temporary wildness verging on madness, (6) great drunkenness, (7) indebtedness as liquor is got on credit, (8) absconding when unable to pay these debts, (9) idleness and absence from work, (10) loss of labour owing to serious evil effects after drinking abominable stuff, (11) demoralisation of *coolies* who lie drunk outside the shops, (12) attempts to suicide when mad from drink, (13) constant rows on bazaar nights, (14) on pay days offensive.⁴¹⁶

These concerns for the loss of individual worker integral to a more inter-dependant work process was more clearly revealed in the report submitted by one Winchester, Medical officer of the Assam Company, stationed in Sibsagar:

Case 1. Boglai, male, age 32, got drunk at Sonari, and fell into a drain on August 19th, 1901. From this accident he was unable to work until September 3rd, 1901.

2. One Etawari, male, age 40, got drunk at Sonari on August 19th, 1901, and in consequence was off work till 21st August 1901.

3. Tara, female, age 44, got drunk at Sonari on 18th August 1901 and was unfit for work for 6 days

4. Chailton, male, age 28, got drunk at Sonari on 1st Sep 1901, quarrelled with some other *coolies*, and in the affray had his metacarpal bone broken. He was off work nearly 3 weeks.

5. Rosona, female, was admitted into hospital on 8th Sep 1901, for injuries inflicted by her husband. She was ill ten days.

6. Haroo, male, age 28, got drunk at Sonari, and got into a quarrel. He received a large incised scalp wound for which he was detained in hospital ten days

7. Bhoondia, female, age 27, was admitted to hospital on 29th Sep 1901, for an injury to knee joint inflicted by her husband while drunk. She was off work 14 days.

8. Dhanee, female, age 30, was admitted into Hospital on 6th December 1901, having been severely assaulted by her drunken husband. She was discharged on nineteenth October 1901.

9. Horua, male, age 30, was admitted to Hospital on 21st October 1901 having been assaulted when drunk...He was unfit for work until 28th October 1901.

10. Lohi, male, age 36, was admitted to Hospital 15th Dec 1901 suffering from a lacerated wound of the foot, received while drunk. He was discharged on 25th Dec 1901.

415 All the references to the 'loss of labour' in the planter and medical discourses are drawn from the Buckingham enquiry, unless otherwise mentioned.

416 *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1883–84.*

11. Gonga, female, age 18, off work 2 days from drunkenness
12. Giridhary, male, age 35, was admitted into Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, suffering from choleraic diarrhoea which followed a bout of drinking. He was discharged on 23rd December 1901.
13. One Bhondoo, male, age 48, was admitted into Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, with Pneumonia following upon exposure while drunk. He is still in hospital (24th Jan, 1902)
14. Mongtin, female, age 28, was admitted to Hospital on 15th Dec 1901, having been assaulted badly by her drunken husband. She was discharged cured on 22nd Dec 1901.

The mode of this reporting [Incident (drinking)—effect (state of drunkenness/accidents/quarrels)—consequence (individual absence from work)], and in some ways typical of this whole pamphlet. For it is not just about drinking and its effects *per se*, but the ways in which it interfered with the specialising work process, which becomes the object of concern and enquiry. This becomes more apparent in the later part of this report, when the doctor discusses the case of Sooklal, who died after a drunken brawl with three other *coolies*. This case says the doctor resulted for the garden not just the ‘...loss of Sooklal but also ...the loss of three other coolies who were sentenced to 4 years imprisonment for causing the death to Sooklal’.

In a similar tone, Swinley, the manager of Kalapani tea garden in Assam Valley, reports his ‘drinking losses’ to the Buckingham enquiry:

On Sunday, 18th August, owing to excessive drinking at the grog shop at Charali (a distance of 6 miles from the gardens in this division) a brawl took place which resulted in two men being killed...Two Kalapani *coolies* were found guilty and sentenced under Sec 304 to 12 months imprisonment. All were old hands and most well behaved and never gave any trouble. *With the aid of a Government grog shop, however, I lose one cooly entirely, and the services of two for a whole year.*

At the same time, the degree of complaints regarding the time-work-discipline at the work-place got shriller. Planters started complaining about a rising level of *absenteeism*, especially on Mondays, Saturdays (being the day of weekly payment) and Sunday (the day of weekly *haats*, where the *coolies* purchased their drink). The findings of the excise enquiries into the tea districts of Assam and Bengal indicated to a ‘...five to ten percent of absence after hat days, and this absence is in a great measure (were)...due to the effects of drink’. Certain managers interviewed claimed this figure to be as high as 20 to 25 percent. Again the

‘St. Monday effect’⁴¹⁷ was a recurrent grievance with the managers interviewed in the Buckingham enquiry. For instance Evans, the Manager of the Suntok garden reported that on Monday, January 13th, 1902, half his factory was off work from the effects of alcohol. Godfrey, another manager of one Dole Bagaun tea garden complained:

This factory suffers very much by the liquor shop being only about 80 yards away from the *coolie* lines. Every Monday about 15 to 20 *coolies* are entirely off work being drunk, and about another 20 who go to work and cannot complete their full tasks, besides about 5 or 6 daily drunk and incapable: as for rows in the lines through drink there are several cases; some requiring medical treatment for two weeks.

Another phenomena was noted by a doctor (Sital Chundra Ghosh) of a garden in Assam Valley, where he claimed that ‘sick-list’ showed an alarming rise after the haat-days (Sundays), but infact starts going up after the ‘pay days’ (Saturdays). And on Monday mornings, ‘one in twenty comes to the hospital, pretending illness, after over drinking’. Wright, the manager of a tea garden in Lakhimpur pointed out to, ‘(that) there is more sickness (among the *coolie* population) after a hat day or a *coolie* festival’. Dr. Price confirmed this practice in the case of Nowgong tea gardens, ‘..(where) there are usually more application for sick leave after hat day than any other day during the week. The bulk of these cases are due to the consumption of alcohol’.

It was not just the low muster on Mondays which concerned the managers, but also the *inefficiency* arising at the work-place, out of the after-effects of the drink. It was observed that the majority of *coolies* were not able to complete their prescribed daily tasks (*nirikh*) on Mondays.⁴¹⁸ Fitzgerald, the manager of Chubwa tea garden in a reply to a circular regarding the working of outstill

417 St. Monday, a practice of taking Monday off to recover from the weekend was almost universally observed among the English working people, until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and probably survived into the second half of the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth century, in several specific work situations. However, with the rise of capitalism with its changed notions of time and the concomitant rise for the work discipline, such practices were disciplined in a larger attempt to discipline labour and the production process. See, E..P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past & Present* 38 (December 1967) pp. 72-76 and D. A. Reid, ‘The Decline of Saint Monday’, *Past & Present* 71 (May 1976).

418 In order to earn their daily wage (*hazira*) the *coolies* had to complete a standard daily task (*nirikh*) the payment for work over and above the standard task, amounted to what was called as *ticca* (or overtime work). The *nirikh* was not determined by a fixed amounts of hours put in daily by the *coolie*, but by the work assigned by the supervising authorities as constituting a reasonable day labour. There was an understanding in the planter-official circle that the *coolies* worked on a primitive, natural notion of time which effected this shift from a time-wage to a task-wage. The 1865 labour act fixed a minimum wage, subject to the completion of 9 hours daily and

system in Assam in 1888, observed that, ‘...On Mondays, the *coolies* take longer over their work, and some of them fail to accomplish their moderate tasks at all’. The unvarying and stereotyped excuse of the *Mohurirs* (native work supervisor) to this was, ‘They were drunk yesterday; they are feeling it to-day’. The manager of Suntok tea garden in his testimony also attests to this fact:

... I have to report that on Monday last only 111 men out of 151 on hoeing were able to do full tasks. This shortage was entirely due to drunkenness on the previous day. On Saturday evening I paid the factory, and on the following day a quantity of liquor was brought at the grog shops and brought into the lines. Some of the men were still drunk when they went to work on the Monday morning, and incapable of any attempt at work whatever.

Stewart, the manager of Athkel tea garden relates to a similar incident in his garden:

... Last Tuesday morning, I had brought up to me no less than 25 good strong healthy coolies, who were unable to finish their *nirikh* at hoeing on the previous day, owing to the after effects from drinking on Sunday. All these coolies are good workers and as a rule finish their *nirikh* early in the day and the majority of them owned up to the fact of not being able to finish their *nirikh* on account of having been drunk on Sunday.

The new anxieties of ‘work stoppages’, ‘absences’ and ‘general inefficiency’ of labour were apparently magnified during festivals, said to be marked by prolonged drinking bouts and the *coolies* not joining work in time. Begg, the Manager of Hoolungooree in a graphic description of the celebrations during the *Durga Puja* writes, ‘...the entertainment started this year (1901) on Saturday evening the nineteenth October’. On that evening his *line chowkidar* reported, ‘We are unable to tell correctly who are in the lines and who are not, as many have gone to Moriani and Debra put’ (the places with liquor shops). On Sunday evening, the report was, ‘We have not the least idea who are in the lines and who are not, but there are fewer people in the lines than out of them. We trust, however, they will all return in due course’. But the *coolies* did not live up to their ‘trust’ and on Monday (the supposed day of joining work) at 11 o’ clock AM, The report went ‘Many have not returned yet, but are coming in gradually and many are drunk and unfit for work.’ At 5, the same evening the report was ‘All have returned barring 3 (2 women and a man). They were last seen at Moriani. The two women were sober, but the man was left lying drunk in a drain’.

Again, Grimston, the manager of Balijan tea garden in Dibrugarh district recounts his ‘horror-story’ experience on giving leave on a major religious festival:

6 days work in a week. But the 1882 Act, made the payment of wage subject to the completion of a daily task.

There have been various minor cases of drunkenness at various times, which have temporarily incapacitated coolies from work...I may also mention that, for three years, at the request of the native establishment of the garden, I gave leave for the Doorga Poojah festivals, to enable them to hold a big festival on the garden, but a good proportion of the coolies, owing to drunkenness, were unable to turn out to work the day following that on which their leave expired, and some of them were absent for several days.

This practice claimed Grimston, ‘...disorganised the labour force to such an extent that I had to stop giving leave’. That drink facilitated such indiscipline, so crucial to continuation of the authority structure is attested to by a planter:

... While apart from the moral deterioration that ensues, from the Planters’ point of view, there is an equally serious result, namely, that this demoralization nullifies the effect of “moral persuasion” and “personal respect,” on which a Manager of a Tea Estate has in a great measure to rely to secure obedience, and the due observance of garden discipline and control, on which the existence of the estates as such depends.

That the planters desired such controls becomes evident from the ‘Westland note’:

... they (managers) often prefer that the shops (liquor shops) should be near their gardens rather than far away. In the first place, they can often in this way secure some sort of control over the shop and its doing; in the second place, they disapprove of their coolies going away to a distance, both because it involves loss of time, and because it sometimes gives opportunities for their being tempted away to other employers.⁴¹⁹

A colonial official of a tea district, writing in the late 1880s makes a telling observation about the growing criticism of the planters:

Their (planters) objection to liquor shops near their gardens are in no way based upon moral grounds, and there is no reason to suppose that they have any sort of regard for the spiritual welfare of the cooly, or take the smallest interest in temperance propaganda. What they do dislike is interference with their work, and the disturbances in the local bazaars, which many estates have established with the object of retaining *coolies*.⁴²⁰

419 Westland was the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the late 1880s, and in a official reply called the Westland note written in August 1889, discussed the various issues regarding the excise administration of Assam, in context of the specific charges brought by the planters. Report to her Majesty’s Secretary of State of the results of the enquiry into the excise administration of the Tea districts of Assam and Darjeeling, Separate Revenue, October 1890, Nos 993–1020. NAI.

420 Correspondence regarding liquor traffic in Darjeeling and Questions in the House of Commons concerning the Liquor shops near tea gardens, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos. 204–218. NAI.

This managerial discourse of ‘indiscipline and inefficiency’ and the attendant ‘loss of labour’ increasingly drew upon the growing moral (missionaries/ temperance societies) and medical-scientific discourse (doctors of tea gardens) emphasising the injuriousness caused by alcohol to the body and soul of the *coolie*/tea gardens. The doctor-medical discourse as the planter-managerial discourse was primarily concerned about the problems posed by drink and drinking to the process of work and its ability to extract surplus labour. This is made evident in a statement of a tea manager of Assam, where he says, ‘...Work (in the tea gardens) is often impeded by *coolies being incapacitated for labour by the over indulgence in these spurious spirits, thereby rendering an injury not only to the coolies but to the planter* (also)’.⁴²¹ It was not the health (physical/moral) of the *coolie* perse, but the uninterrupted reproduction of the intensified labour process of the late nineteenth plantations, which underpinned these anxieties.

4.5 Drink and the Emerging Working Culture

From the last decades of the nineteenth century, the change in the policies of excise and nature of the plantations in Assam had a bearing on the meanings of drink and its relation to work organisation of plantations. The culture and meaning of drink, for the plantation *coolies* also showed signs of dynamism in this changed context of life and work in the colonial plantations of Assam.

The tea gardens of Assam from the middle decades of the nineteenth century had relied entirely on an immigrant labour population recruited through the agency of contractors and sardars and ‘settled’ on the plantations by contracts. The imported workers from the tribal regions of Chotanagpur and Central Provinces soon assumed a particular importance and preference among the employers in Assam tea gardens. Like in other tribal societies, alcohol for the tribal *coolies* (Mundas, Santhals, and Oraons, etc.) had a particular social, cultural and religious significance. Drinking formed a crucial part of festivals and religious occasions. The Bengal excise commission of 1884, made detailed observations of the festivals and rituals of the tribals of Chotanagpur. Talking about six major festivals (Bandua, Sarul, Horul Charok, Bhansing Puja, Chhata and Kuramgar), it observed that it was a ‘religious duty’ for all persons, male and female, to drink the home-brewed *handia*. Libations of *handia* were offered to the gods, followed

⁴²¹ W. Henderson, a tea manager (Assam valley) in a letter dated 8th October, 1888 to Messrs. Finlay, Muir & Co. In Correspondence regarding the Liquor Traffic and alleged prevalence of drunkenness in Assam and the Tea districts of Bengal, Separate Revenue, March 1889, Nos 219–227. Emphasis mine. NAI.

by dancing and celebration in which ‘both sexes indulge freely in *handia*.’ Again drink was said to important during social occasions of birth, marriage and death:

... In social ceremonies also drinking takes an important place. In marriages the bridegroom’s party come to the house of the bride and bring with them provisions consisting of rice, fowls, kids, and about 4 seers of handia a head...A few days after the death of any person a ceremony is observed, the principal feature in which is a feast of the relatives, the same takes place at a birth, and about 4 seers of handia to each person is considered a fair allowance...The operation of brewing is carried on solely by the women.⁴²²

The home-brewed rice beer (*pachwai*) was the drink of preference and essential during moments of cultural and religious significance. This was confirmed by a religious missionary, Stevenson, stationed in Chotanagpur, in his testimony to the Bengal Excise Commission, when he commented on the drinking behaviour of Santhals (a prominent tribe in the tea gardens of Assam):

Sonthals are a drinking people, but did not as a rule drink distilled liquor, their drink being rice-beer...*Pachwai* is used by Sonthals at their feasts, when they would not use spirits.⁴²³

The commission made this observation:

They (Sonthals) prefer *handia*, but when they cannot get it they will drink shop-made *pachwai*, and even in some cases outstill spirits; the women, however, who observe their tribal customs more strictly than the men, will not drink anything but *handia* home-brewed.⁴²⁴

The patterns, occasions and meanings of drink for *coolies* were alive to the changed context of life and work in the tea gardens of Assam. Home-brewed rice beer remained the drink of preference of the tribal *coolies* in the plantations of

422 In an anthropological survey of the alcoholic beverages among tribals in India, J.K. Roy argues that not only are the alcoholic beverages (especially home-brewed rice beer) important in social, cultural, occasions, but also that it formed a part of the diet, having significant nutritive value. He cites the case of the tribals from certain regions of north eastern India, Madhya Pradesh and in Great Nicobar, who meet 5 to 10% of their requirements of essential nutrients like calories, protein, calcium and vitamin B-1 from home fermented beers or from the fermented toddies. See *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883–84. Vol I.* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 340 and J..K. Roy, Alcoholic Beverages in Tribal India and their Nutritional Role. *Man in India* (December, 1978.) pp. 312–322.

423 *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883–84, Vol II, Evidence of witnesses* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 183.

424 *Report of the Commission appointed by the Government of Bengal to enquire into the excise of country spirit in Bengal, 1883–84. Vol I* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 340.

Assam throughout, and the administrative attempts to ‘assess’ ‘check’ and ‘tax’ it met with little success. But there was also a growing trend of not always brewing the beer at home but also buying it. But, at least from the last decades of the nineteenth century, the consumption of distilled spirits by the *coolie* population showed a pattern of steady growth. One could not miss the close correlation between the increasing number of *coolie* from the tribal districts of Chotanagpur and Central Provinces and the rising excise revenue from country spirits in the province of Assam.⁴²⁵

Table 4.2: Migration from Central Provinces and Chota Nagpur related to growing Excise revenue 1881–1900

Year	Average annual importation of <i>coolies</i> from the Central Provinces and Chota Nagpur	Average annual increase in excise revenue from country spirits
1881–85	10,704	...
1886–90	16,967	22,101
1891–95	20,121	30,146
1896–1900	32,002	38,779

This pattern argued a colonial official, was borne out of the shift in the setting of life and work (agricultural sector to plantations) of the *coolies*:

It is, no doubt, probably true that *coolies* generally drink more distilled spirit after coming to Assam than they did before they left their homes, and the reason is not far to seek. While rice-beer can be prepared by the aboriginal labourer or peasant without difficulty in his home, the only apparatus required being a earthen pot, and the only materials rice, - his staple food, -and some herbs, distilled spirit if not illicitly prepared, must be purchased with cash, and, whatever may have been the condition of life of the *coolie* before he was recruited, there can be no doubt that more cash passes through his hands after he has taken service on a tea garden than before. If he was an agricultural labourer in his native district, he probably received a large portion of his wages in kind, or if a peasant farmer, he subsisted partly on the produce of his fields.⁴²⁶

He argued that, ‘...it would probably be found on enquiry throughout India that *coolies* employed in factories, mills, and mines consume more spirits than they did before they left their native districts to take up such employment’.

⁴²⁵ *Papers relating to the excise administration in Assam* (London, 1904) p. 2.

⁴²⁶ *Papers relating to the excise administration in Assam* (London, 1904) p. 2.

It was not just the type of alcoholic drink which was undergoing a process of change (home brewed beer to distilled country spirits), but the rhythms of drink were also responding to the changed circumstances. Drinking, and the occasions for a drink, now was not just dependant on rhythms of tradition and culture (religious ceremonies, festivals, marriage, birth and death) but also to the emerging rhythms of work.

This has to be situated in the context of the establishment and systematisation of routines of life and work on plantations observed in this period. There was a greater incidence of plantations working on a 'weekly-cycle' of work from Monday to Saturday, with Sunday being the weekly holiday. Salaries (*hazira*), assessed on the basis of task work, were paid on a weekly basis (on Saturdays generally), in time before the weekly markets (*haats*). The culture of 'weekend drinking', therefore gradually assumed a frequent practice in the plantations of Assam. Workers at the end of their weekly toil, with cash in hand, indulged in long drinking sprees with their fellow workers.

The low muster on Monday, the very general complaint of managers, was the after effects of these long drinking bouts. Garden *Haats*, from where the *coolies* purchased their weekly necessities, and often where the liquor shops were located, became the site of these weekly drinking occasions. Drink, and the weekend drinks in particular, became a crucial axis of sociability of plantation workers, cutting across lines region, language and ethnicity.⁴²⁷ It assumed all the more significance because the patterns of work and life within the plantation were attempted to be drawn on the lines of race and ethnicity.⁴²⁸

The gendering of such spaces and especially of drink, a feature of the contemporary plantations, was not so evident during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The tribal practice of communal drinking did not make a distinction between men and women, and this was continued in the plantations also. However, the gendering of work in the plantation where the males did the 'hard' manual work of hoeing, digging, clearing etc and the females 'nimble'

427 A recent anthropological/sociological study of the plantation workers in Assam argues that, '...though they (plantation workers) are ethnically different in their homeland yet by virtue of their sharing common world-view, folklore, songs, dance, food and drink, like 'Handia,' these scattered people formed 'drinking clusters' which ultimately lead to form social clusters, again in Assam tea gardens. 'World view of the Assam Tea garden labourers from Jharkhand' by P.P. Mahato in *In Tea Garden Labourers Of North East India: A Multidimensional Study on the Adivasis of the Tea gardens of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) p. 133.

428 That such patterns and rhythms of drink in the tea gardens of Assam, survive till this day, is confirmed by the findings of an anthropological survey in the tea gardens of Assam under the People of India series. See K.S. Singh (General ed.) and B.K. Bordoloi and R.K. Athaparia (ed.) *People of India, Assam, Vol XV (Part I and II)* (Calcutta, 2003) pp. 143, 565, 573, 651, 658, and 678.

plucking and the related construction of drink as source of stimulation and masculinity had its implications on drink and drinking patterns in the late twentieth century.⁴²⁹

4.6 The Controls of Drink and Drinking Workers

Colonial state was alive to such changed circumstances of drink on the tea gardens and the new critiques of drinking (planters, doctors, missionaries and the native middle class). It attempted a balancing act between its right to tax the drink and the manager's right to control the drink. Acknowledging to such changed concerns of the planters, the Chief Commissioner of the province in the late nineteenth century writes:

When there is a shop in the neighbourhood the men drink when they like, and their time is often a very inconvenient time to the person who has to make them work. When rum is issued by the planter, he takes care to issue it only when he thinks it is wanted for health or as a stimulant to work.⁴³⁰

There was a distinct policy from the 1880s to offer the manager's the licenses of country liquor shops in tea districts at reduced rates. Also the sites of liquor shops in the tea districts were often reviewed and changed when the local opinion (read planter opinion) went against it.⁴³¹ Such 'privileges' bestowed on the manag-

429 In the contemporary tea gardens of Dooars (West Bengal) Piya Chatterjee, locates the presence of the alcoholic worker- *Matal*, as typically male and as an archetype of working class masculinity with its proclivity to alcohol. Also she argues that it justifies the gendered order of the plantations' regime, where this figure is pitted against the docile, disciplined feminine labour. P. Chatterjee, *An Empire of Drink: Gender, Labor and the Historical economies of Alcohol*. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 16, no. 2 (June 2003).

430 Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7-8, Part B.

431 Till the late 1870s, the provincial administration keen on increasing its low returns on excise was against such policies of closure. In a circular dated July, 1877, from the Excise Commissioner, Williamson to all the District Commissioners of the plain districts, it was mentioned that, '... (the administration) can see no sufficient reason for the sacrifice of the excise revenue in closing or removing the shops under such circumstances (of complaints by tea managers)... If it should appear that, owing to any breach of the conditions of the license, annoyance is caused to the planter, or greater facilities are given in any way than those sanctioned by law for the sale of liquor to garden coolies, the Deputy Commissioner should take measures to punish the license-holders in the prescribed manner... Shops cannot be closed merely to suited the convenience of neighbouring land-owners.' This policy was reworked in the 1880s, and the planter's opinion was invari-

ers became as a new avenue of making some ‘fast and easy money’. Attempts at monopolisation and killing competition, something they were so used to, and at times even subletting was blatantly practiced. Importantly, such practices were not just was not profitable from the monetary sense, but allowed new controls for managers over their working population, which the new system was so obviously threatening.

In 1883, the District Commissioner of Cachar in his report complained that the managers were refusing to allow any liquor shops within their grants, and in four cases the licensees had to resign their licenses to the garden *muhaarir*.⁴³² Again, in the year 1885, a manager of the Assam valley tea garden made objections to the location of a liquor shop and got it cancelled. Subsequently, he himself took up the license at a reduced fee (The licensee had got the license for Rs. 125, while the manager paid only Rs. 100 for the same).⁴³³ That such objections made by the planters regarding the location of liquor shops were often motivated, can also be illustrated from the case of a Cachar tea manager who made a similar objection. The shop in question was located for several years on the estate any complaints. Infact the license to the shop till the previous year was held by the manager and was only cancelled, when he was found to have sublet the shop to a local firm of liquor dealers. His objection initially was not entertained by the local administration. But on a further objection received from the manager of a neighbouring garden, the shop was closed.⁴³⁴

There were reports of planters demanding exorbitant fees from licensees for ‘prime location’ (*haats*) within the tea gardens.⁴³⁵ Cases of getting licenses at reduced rates and subletting it to the liquor dealers at a higher rate were also in abundance. For example in year 1902, in Cachar, out of the five liquor shops settled by the local administration with the planters, four were sublet to the very people they were initially objecting to. The Deputy Commissioner of the district from his experience was of the opinion that, ‘unless the shops are not taken over by the respective tea companies and worked as a part of their business, settlement should not be made with planters, as most of them are quite incapable of resisting the combined temptation of being freed from trouble and responsibility and making a handsome profit by subletting’.⁴³⁶

ably sought. Increase in the number of liquor shops in the immediate vicinity of the tea-gardens in Assam, and the consequent increase in drunkenness among the coolies employed therein. Revenue and Agriculture Department, Emigration Branch, June 1881, Nos. 7–8, Part B.

⁴³² *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1883–84.

⁴³³ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1885–86

⁴³⁴ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1902–03.

⁴³⁵ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1884–85 and 1888–89.

⁴³⁶ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam*, 1902–03.

In his enquiry into the excise system of Assam in 1889, the Excise Commissioner talked about such tendencies of the plantation managers regarding liquor shops:

In districts of Sylhet and Cachar, and more particularly so in the latter district, many shops are situated on tea-gardens, and the abkars are under the patronage of the managers...they pay comparatively large sums as rents to the managers for small plots...managers are naturally anxious to support, and are urged by their native employees (sometimes these are interested in the shops) to support. If a new shop is opened, or any attempt made to open one, and there is a probability of any of the customers of the old shop being induced to patronize it, strong objections are urged, and every possible ground is brought forward, and the matter is then looked at from a moral aspect, and the charge is made that we are augmenting the number of shops and inducing *coolies* to drink by putting temptation in their way. The question of the loss to the existing shop is kept back...as a rule, planters do not object to liquor shops, but to any act that will injure the shops which they are interested in maintaining.⁴³⁷

The attempts to control the drink gained a particular urgency and purpose in the first decade of the twentieth century. There were reports of managers strictly controlling the issue of rice to the coolies.⁴³⁸ A concept of the 'ticket system' was mooted by some planters and even recommended by the Buckingham enquiry. It suggested that the sale of liquor from the shops to the coolies should be made only on the production of 'liquor tickets', issued by the garden management. The idea of 'canteen system' floated by a superintendent of a tea company in Jorhat (Mr. Showers) in 1902, attracted a lot of attention in the planter-official circles, as an innovative idea of controlling the coolie drink. The man in question, in consultation with the managers of neighbouring garden took out the license for the local liquor shop (at a much reduced rate), and opened a liquor canteen in each of the five gardens served by this shop. This made the controls on the timing and amount of the drink in accordance with the work schedule of the plantations possible. The shops served by this canteen were open only for two hours in the afternoon on week-days and in the mornings on Sundays.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ J.J.S. Driberg, *Report on the Special Enquiry into the Excise on Country Spirits in Assam* (Shillong, 1890) pp. 24–25.

⁴³⁸ *Report of the Indian Excise Committee, 1905–06* (Madras, 1907) p. 73.

⁴³⁹ *Report on the Excise Administration in Assam, 1902–03, 1903–04 & 1904–05*.

4.7 Conclusions

The drink question in the tea gardens of Assam, as it were, was a product of convergence of various processes and changes undergoing in the colonial context of the late nineteenth century. The colonial state claiming to work under the policy of 'maximum revenue from minimum consumption' asserted its right of taxing the 'coolie drink', by checking his home brewed stuff and offering them with opportunities to buy the 'legal liquor' instead. Again a stabilization of plantation since had several implications. A degree of mechanization of the production process necessitated the work process in the fields to be reconstituted. Specialization of tasks and closer supervision of workers attended the changing work organization in search for an ever greater efficiency and productivity. This suggested a move from an exclusive violent strategy of work intensification rampant in the 1860s; but it did not mark a clear departure from these disciplinary practices. The problem of drinking was rooted in this shift where a new demand for 'time work discipline' produced the anxieties of plantation capitalism of drinking coolies. Yet the stigma of drink was not desired to be eradicated, for planters knew its ritualistic and stimulative roles in a working population which valued it socially and culturally; but had to be controlled and channelized to fuel the engine of plantation capitalism.

Again the planter concerns and strategies alluded to the cultures of work and leisure of coolies being produced and reproduced in a changing and stabilizing plantation context. From a ritualistic, religious, it now also conveyed other purposes and meanings in a changed context of life and work. Such a changed manifested not just in what one drank (home made rice-beer / distilled spirits from shops) but also when one drank. The occasions to drink were now not just contingent on the social and cultural rhythms (religious occasions, festivities, birth, marriage, death) but also on rhythms of work (weekend drinking). Drinking became a crucial axis of sociability and haats, the sites of such consolidations.