

5 Dustoor of Plantations

5.1 Introduction

A process of “stabilisation” of the plantation structure in Assam (since the 1870s) marked a shift from the isolated and unsustainable clearance sites (of the early 1860s). The early sites characterised by a remarkable degree of labour “unsettlement” and counteracted by planters through privatised punishment and violent disciplining—as made feasible by Assam contract.⁴⁴⁰ A relatively “settled” and “systematising” nature of plantations revealed other modes of intensifying the specialising work process and controlling the workers but, at the same time, there was no clear break from earlier patterns of labour settlement and control.⁴⁴¹

Such “novel” strategies seemed to have occasioned the change of managers of Jellupur (Cachar), Bhagaicherra (Sylhet) and Barjan (Sibsagar) in the year 1896.⁴⁴² Within the space of a few days, there were assaults and organised attacks directed towards the new sets of authority. In one instance, the bungalow of the manager was torched. In an incident reported from Madhabpur garden (Sylhet, 1902), the workers attacked the manager who had come to their residential lines to take their hoes, which they were used to retain.⁴⁴³ A more glaring instance of “reaction” occurred on the Rowmari tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1903). Workers of this garden used to umbrellas while working in the rain, were being compelled to switch to *Jhampis* (a wide-brimmed hat). This followed a sequence of assaults targeting the management and a “mass walkout” of workers from the plantation.⁴⁴⁴

These incidents of “coolie violence”, appearing with greater frequency in the colonial archives of the late nineteenth century, hinted at the deepening colonial

440 For details see Chapter 2.

441 For instance, the question of coolie drinking was perceived an infringement to the work process was sought to be controlled and mobilised by the Assam planters. This was reminiscent of the opium question of the late 1830s, where the perceived addiction of the Assamese was to be channelized to the plantation project through a ban of cultivation and making them available only through government shops. This planters believed would compel the Assamese peasant to offer services to tea gardens for cash payments, not only to pay their revenue but also to serve an addiction. Such a strategy did not find an approval of the colonial state at that point. For details see Chapter 1 and 4.

442 List of serious cases of assault on tea gardens of Assam, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

443 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

444 House of Commons question on a coolie riot at a tea garden in Assam as a result of which, 42 coolies have been sentenced to various terms of imprisonment 22nd July, 1903. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

concerns about the “deteriorating” relationship between managers and *coolies* on the tea gardens.⁴⁴⁵ Like the “unpopularity” of *cha-bagaan* and the escalating incidence of *coolie* drinking, the overt “friction” within the tea-gardens posed a threat to the plantation work process.⁴⁴⁶ Colonial reporting and reasoning had for long subscribed to the stereotype of the “ignorant” “primitive” *coolies* responding to their elementary instincts of passion and violence.⁴⁴⁷ One of earliest provincial labour reports, mentioning the ‘nature of relations between managers and *coolie*,’ framed the instances of conflict as purely “isolated,” which did not reveal

445 This was a change in language in comparison to the 1860s—seen exclusively through the prism of desertion/unsettlement. In the early 1870s, a manager from Cachar narrating the labour difficulties purely characterised the workers as ‘insolent, defiant and insubordinate.’ An exclusive concern with desertion/unsettlement and personalised defiance became untenable in light of the systematic “abuses” reported in recruiting and widespread “unpopularity” of Assam tea gardens. In the late 1880s, the colonial establishment in Fort William in a communication for preparation of a special report on the workings of the 1882 Act instructed the provincial establishment in Assam to ‘supply more definite and fuller information on the following points...i.e. relations between the coolies and planters’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 47; *Government of India Despatch, dated the 22nd day of June 1889, with its enclosures, including Reports by Mr. Tucker; and of Memorial of the Indian Association of Calcutta, dated the 12th day of April 1888* (London, 1889) p. 7.

446 According to a colonial communication circulated in 1897, the cases of conflict on Assam plantations had now to be “specially” reported. The colonial anxieties can further be gauged by the increasing volume of correspondence relating to “assaults” “collisions” and “disturbances” on Assam tea gardens in this period. The Secretary to Government of India in a letter dated 1903 to the Chief Commissioner of Assam noted that the production of tea under European supervision occurred in other parts of India but from the none of them with rarest exceptions are events reported such as appear to be of yearly occurrence in Assam. Home A, Dec 1897, nos. 86–87, ASA; List of serious cases of assault on tea gardens of Assam, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA; Collisions between Managers and Coolies on tea gardens of Assam. Home A, nos. 33–34, Sep 1899, ASA; Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.30–34, June 1903, ASA; Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos. 98–112, January 1904, ASA. The cases here are drawn from these sources unless otherwise mentioned.

447 For instance, in the late 1880s, the Chief Commissioner of Assam (Dennis Fitzpatrick) reacting to the reported cases of conflicts reasoned that ‘with about nine hundred tea gardens employing upwards of 300,000 *primitive ignorant coolies*, such a state of matter was inevitable’. He was extremely critical of the native vernacular press for ‘sensationalising’ these minor instances and thereby ‘detering’ the distressed people from going to Assam. Approximately a decade later, another Chief Commissioner (Henry Cotton) in a similar vein contended that ‘it can hardly be expected that such an enormous population of *absolutely uneducated and in many cases, semi savage labourers*, occasional instances of friction and collision should not occur.’ Collisions between Managers and Coolies on tea gardens of Assam. Home A, nos. 33–34, Sep 1899. ASA.

any ‘determined or premeditated resistance.’⁴⁴⁸ The exceptional “brutal planter” perpetrating tough methods of disciplining was often seen as that provocation.⁴⁴⁹

Protest action assuming a collective form has a much longer presence on the Assam plantations. The Kacharis, who worked on the Assam company plantations in the 1840s and 1850s, exhibited a degree of concert and purpose around issues of wages, the timing of payment and supply of rice—leading to several work stoppages and strikes. The initial reason for the planters to contract (through Act XIII) and introduce another class of *coolies* (i.e. the so-called imported Bengalis) was deeply embedded in such labour difficulties.⁴⁵⁰

The planter anxieties of “unsettlement” of migrant workers (in the 1860s) were not limited to the incidence of high mortality and individual desertions but was informed by a degree of “collective” response to the deplorable conditions of work and life on the new clearances. There were several instances of workers moving en masse out of these sites, making complaints to the magistrate stationed at the district headquarters for acts of abuse, difficult nature of work, misrepresentation of the recruiters, and non-payment of the due wages.⁴⁵¹ The

448 This view was shared by the Bengali investigator who argued that ‘...it is scarcely possible for ignorant and timid coolies to resist such oppression by organised opposition’. *Assam Labour Report*, 1884, p. 4; *The Bengalee* 27, no.48 (Dec 11, 1886) p. 569 reprinted in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p. 35.

449 The brutal planter image having strong lineages from the slave plantations came to be invoked in Assam plantations, when violence and especially flogging started being reported from the 1860s. The colonial invocation was individualised and purely seen as isolated and exceptional as was the case of Dunn—an Assam company manager who was found guilty of flogging the workers (See Chapter 2). This was in contrast to a more general representation of Assam planters as excessive and brutal—in the writings and literary productions of the local intelligentsia (especially Bengal). In a strong rebuttal to this growing trend, a planter writing in the early 1880s suggests that ‘...It (Brutal planter) has been sounded and maintained in India by people who were in English nurseries at the time that the Indian press gave the preliminary howl; the howl, strange to say, that has been applied to the various communities of planters all the world over—West Indian, South American, Tirhoot, Wynaad....because, many years ago, a few isolated cases of ill-treatment came before the public notice in India, tea-planters have ever since been stamped with the mark of the beast, and officially looked upon almost in the light of quasi-slave-drivers.’ Such a line of reasoning was furthered by an ex-Chief Commissioner of Assam who claimed that, ‘...in the midst the many hundreds of managers that are employed there must be some who are unworthy, and scandals have not been unknown.’ *Papers relating to coolie trade in Assam* (London, 1867); N. Bhatia, *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Michigan, 2004) pp. 35–37; D. Ganguli, *Slavery in the British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972); S. Baildon, *The Tea Industry of India* p. 150; B. Fuller, *The Empire of India* (London, 1913) p. 204.

450 See Chapter 2.

451 See Chapter 2.

formalisation of Assam contract, with explicit powers for planters to privately arrest and implicit approval to privately discipline, was unleashed to counteract the responsiveness of workers to the circumstances of employment and life on the plantations.

Keeping such qualifications in mind, the present chapter does not intend to posit that worker protest only makes an appearance at a given “moment” in the history of Assam plantations. It rather seeks to explore its shifting form and nature and how it was embedded in the changing practices of plantation life and work. The first section will firmly situate the particular context of this interrogation. A primary concern in such an exercise is to explore the idioms gaining currency like—*dustoor* (customary)—through which collective anxiety and action came to be framed and articulated. *Dustoor*, as elucidated by a provincial official, were ‘certain local practices varying from garden to garden and on particular points possibly even conflicting with rules...the details of which *coolies* are intimately acquainted’. Resentment and unrest on tea-gardens, he went on to suggest, was the consequence ‘of departure from (*dustoor*s) in a direction unfavourable to them (*coolies*).’⁴⁵² The episodes of “unrest”, cited at the outset, seem to confirm this observation. The workers on the different gardens used to a *dustoor*—a particular manager, a particular practice (keeping the hoes, using umbrellas) or broadly a particular custom—were resisting its change.

Recognising the analytical purchase of the notion of *dustoor*, the discussion will refrain from employing it in this restricted sense. *Dustoor*, as I will argue, does not imply a yearning for a reified culture or an unchanging custom, but alludes to a developing expression of an “acceptable” conduct of a tea garden—

⁴⁵² This statement was made in response to an assertion made in a provincial labour report. The report suggested that the ‘*coolies* have a degree of awareness that the *conditions of their employment are regulated by rules, not by the bargaining of the market*; the rules are unfavourable to them in some respects, but favourable to them in other and they resent any attempt to exact more labour than the rules warrant.’ The allusion to custom hinted at the domain beyond the strict framework of contract. This revealed the limitations of the overbearing contract and its rules in framing the conditions of life and work on the plantations. The ‘custom of the garden’ did not always agree with the ‘rule of contract’. This goes in line with assertion made by Anderson who argues that in India contract did not become a common reference point for constituting mutual obligations. These derived instead from relationship of hierarchy and deference, which were constantly being remade in the workplace. Assam Labour Report, 1902–1903, p. 12; Letter from P.G. Meltius, Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam dated 6th May, 1904, Rev A, 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA. M. Anderson, ‘India, 1858–1930: The Illusion of free labour’ in Craven and Hay (ed.) *Master, Servants and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire* (Chapel Hill, 2004) p. 451.

an “unwritten contract” between workers and managers.⁴⁵³ This expression (of what was acceptable) did become a site of bargaining between workers and managers.⁴⁵⁴ This contest, at times, assumed an episodic “collective” nature. *Coolies* participated in the process of ascertaining the boundaries of what was acceptable, by acting in a context of its perceived outrage. The instances of the “serious disturbances” (read collective forms of protest) on tea gardens as explained by another officer from the Assam colonial establishment:

Was often due to the idea (well founded or otherwise) that wages are too low, the introduction of some new *dustoor* or some indiscretion on the part of the manager. Some act of the manager may in itself be sufficient cause for the disturbance, but it is generally not sufficient in itself to account for the *serious disturbance that sometimes occur, in which the majority of a labour force take part.*⁴⁵⁵

The anxieties, and the necessity to act collectively, as emanating from the material and social life on the tea garden, will be detailed and discussed in the subsequent sections. This ranges from a breakdown of cultural norms, violence on the part of managers, payment of short wages, and stoppage of fixed price rice. At times,

453 This draws from the notion of ‘moral economy’ as conceptualised by Thompson and Scott. Thompson’s reading of the food riots of eighteenth century England situates certain “legitimising notions” emanating out of a desire to defend “traditional rights or customs.’ The notion of moral economy in Scott’s analysis develops how the norm of reciprocity and the rights to subsistence informs the peasant action in South East Asia under colonial rule. These ideas are further reinforced by Bhattacharya’s discussion of labouring poor, where he argues a common a commonality in ‘cultural terms’ where ‘reference point is not wage slavery under capital, but poverty and the life of labour in everyday experience. E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present*, no.50 (Feb, 1971) pp. 76–136; J. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven, 1974).

454 Such bargaining has been argued in the context of Calcutta jute mill workers in the colonial period. For instance, Chakrabarty argues that the notions of ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’ informed the worker’s protest and action, ‘where the worker reacted when he saw himself being deprived of something that he thinks is justly his’. Again Basu reads the jute workers’ politics as being strongly influenced by notions of customary rights based on mutuality of shared interests at workplaces. D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton, 1989) p. 178; S. Basu, ‘The Paradox of Peasant-Worker: Re-Conceptualizing workers’ Politics in Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no.1 (2007) pp. 47–74.

455 These incidents which were unreported earlier were later collapsed under overarching categories of “unlawful assemblies’ and “rioting”. Just in the period from 1885–1890, there were 416 cases of unlawful assemblies and 529 incidents of rioting on the tea gardens of Assam. H.L. Thomas, Sub divisional officer, South Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet dated 23rd January 1904. Rev A, 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA; *Assam Labour Report* for the years, 1884 pp. 6–7; 1885 p. 5; 1887 pp. 8–9; 1888 p. 34; 1889 pp. 19–20; 1890 p. 20; S. Bose, Indian Labour Historiography and its Historiography in the Pre-Independence Period, *Social Scientist* 13, no. 4 (April 1985) p. 9.

it was considered as illegitimate to “wrong” a woman as to arbitrarily increase the tasks. Here, “collective” is not used as a shorthand for an “undifferentiated *coolie* community” residing in the garden, nor implied to be the “pre-existing” identities of ethnicity/caste/religion within them. The discussion will be attentive to ascertain how the recurring contingencies to act “collectively” related to the “solidarities” constituted, reconstituted and transformed in the practices of work and life on the plantations.⁴⁵⁶

Before engaging with these lines of enquiry, two preliminary caveats are in order. First, this exercise does not intend to imply that the conditions of operation of life and work of tea *coolies* in the plantations were favourably “negotiated” and coercion/violence was always resisted. The interest in such an exercise is not to qualify the notion of “oppressive tea garden” by the practices of “resisting *coolies*”. This is more to foreground the forms of protest—assuming a collective nature, as embedded in the practices of plantation life and work of the period. Secondly, this is not to construct a hierarchy between the confrontational collective and non-confrontational individualised modes of protest, valorising in effect the “flashes of outbursts” in neglect to the “everyday forms of protest”.⁴⁵⁷

5.2 Dustoor and Assam Tea Gardens in the late nineteenth century

Workers on the late nineteenth century plantations, apart from their daily tasks on the fields and factories, also carried out agricultural activities on the rice-lands, which the managers selectively rented out to them. The management promoted it, as a part of the cost of reproduction of the workforce was shifted to the agricultural sector, making a below subsistence remuneration and a flexible working

⁴⁵⁶ The “solidarities” formed during the process of migration, work and life and “contingencies” to collectively act emerging to address overlapping concerns, rather being exclusive, in effect reinforce each other. This moves away from a unilinear process of “class formation” towards greater politicization as observed in some other contexts. See, S. Bhowmick, *Class Formation in the Plantation System* (Delhi, 1981).

⁴⁵⁷ M. Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World that Slaves Made*. (New York, 1972) 285–324; D.E. Haynes and G. Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (1991) pp. 1–22. Also see M. Adas, ‘From Foot-dragging to Flight: The Evasive History of Peasant Avoidance Protest in South and South-east Asia. and A.L. Stoler, *Plantation Politics and Protest on Sumatra Coast* in J.C.Scott and B.J.T. Kerkvliet (ed.) *Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance in South East Asia*(New Haven,1984) pp. 64–86; pp. 124–143.

force possible.⁴⁵⁸ This was also a planter's strategy of "settlement" beyond the contract, which was assuming some consequence during this period, especially in the district of Sylhet in Surma Valley.⁴⁵⁹ However, during the tea manufacturing season, when the demands for working hands were at its peak, the worker's participation in her/his agricultural activities was deemed as interference.⁴⁶⁰ A tea manager (Sylhet, 1902), operating along those lines, arrived at the residential quarters of the workers (*coolie lines*) to collect the hoes, which they were using for their farming activities. Workers used to the *dustoor* (of keeping their hoes)—that contributed to their material subsistence (agriculture)—could not come to terms with the legitimacy of its "change", and made an organised attack on the offending manager.⁴⁶¹

Such modifications were symptomatic of an intensified work process, most visibly manifested in the case of introduction of hats (*Jhampis*) in Rowmari (Lakhimpur, 1903). Investigation of the incident revealed that the garden, of late, was practising harsher work discipline and production speedups.⁴⁶² Among the numerous amendments initiated, it was also realised that the *coolies* using hats made them more "productive," by allowing the use of both the hands for plucking work. This flexibility was not feasible in the prevailing mode of holding an umbrella during work. The "unpopular" move manifested in assaults on the

458 R. Dasgupta, 'From Peasant to Tribesmen to Plantation workers' in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp. 19–23.

459 In the late 1880s, the ceiling for plantations leasing out land to workers without special permission was up to ten percent of the total grant of land or a maximum of two hundred acres. The 1906 enquiry particularly favoured the positive results in Surma valley of planters settling their workers on the garden rice lands and they did not show resentment (as Assam valley planters) for allowing the time-expired workers some land outside the garden grant. This was the outcome of different strategies of settlement in the two valleys. Citing the case of the district of Sylhet, the report mentioned that the rice lands given to workers formed an integral part of their income and workers tended to move to gardens giving rice land. One garden of the district parcelled out five hundred acres of land for a working population of about three thousand. *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906); R. Dasgupta, *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994) p. 158; K. Dasgupta, 'Wasteland Colonization Policy and Peasantization of ex-Plantation Labour in the Brahmaputra Valley' in S. Karotemprel, B.D. Roy (ed.) *Tea Garden Labourers of North East India* (Shillong, 1990) pp. 35–50.

460 There were managers interviewed by the 1906 enquiry who favoured a strategy of land settlement but also felt that the cultivation work on these land often takes workers off work during the manufacturing season. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 155.

461 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904. ASA.

462 R. Behal and P. Mohapatra: 'Tea and Money versus Human Life': The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840–1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos. 3&4 (1992) pp. 165–166.

manager, the assistant manager, and the head clerk. The protesting party (about two hundred) marched on to Dibrugarh (district headquarters) and assembled in front of the Magistrate's office (*Kutcherry*) ventilating their concerns to the colonial authorities. Military force had to be called in to disperse the crowd. It was a moment of unusual success for the workers. The colonial report on the incident concluded that 'they (*coolies*) will use umbrellas, and the managers have generally had to give in.'⁴⁶³

The Rowmari affair was not an isolated case and some other incidents in this period alluded to similar concerns. For instance, determined action directed at the management transpired on Joyhing tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1896) when the manager tried to extend the "working week" by forcing work on Sundays. Again, when the manager of Adabari garden (Sylhet, 1897) compelled the workers to the fields on a particular Sunday, there was a general feeling of discontent. Shortly after, the women workers working in the tea-house (factory) attacked the European assistant with their umbrellas and threw him over into a ditch. Several male workers, who were present in the scene, stood looking on, encouraging the women.⁴⁶⁴

Such a process can also be illustrated by a photograph from the early twentieth century depicting the daily operation of field work on a tea garden. The practices of employing water carriers (*Pani-wallah*), especially during the peak season—as shown in the photograph—was not merely instituted to "benefit" the workers, but were usually sporadic measure to minimise breaks and sustain the continuous process of work.⁴⁶⁵ This becomes evident in a "hypothetical" dialogue

463 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

464 John Kelly in a study on Fiji plantations cites a similar report by an overseer of Fiji plantation of work-gangs of women *coolies* disciplining their European overseers by capturing them, beating them, immobilising them and urinating on them. Such an act argues Kelly, had a sexual dimension to it, for the 'dignity of the overseer, his masculine, sexual, controlling persona could not survive it.' Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA; J. D. Kelly 'Coolie' as a Labour Commodity: Race, Sex, and European Dignity in Colonial Fiji in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos.3&4 (1992) pp. 259–263.

465 Photograph titled *Carrying water for tea coolies* is roughly from the later decades of the nineteenth century and forms part of a private collection of W. Pratt who is the great grand-daughter of an ex Cachar planter named Samuel Davidson (1846–1921). Davidson was the manager of Burkhola tea garden in the late 1860s till the late 1870s, and has also been credited for several innovations in tea manufacture and machinery. W. Pratt, *Life with Tea and India: Diaries of Family life in the Cachar area*, Spring Lecture meeting, Families in British India Society, 22nd May 2010. See <http://www.koi-hai.com>; <http://www.new.fibis.org/?s=tea>.

noted in the planter language handbook, where the worker on telling a manager that s/he was thirsty, is promptly told by him that ‘*Paniwallah* is bringing water.’⁴⁶⁶

The intensification of the working day became the theme of many confrontations. For instance, the workers (numbering 150–200) of Khorikotia garden (Sibsagar, 1899), went up to the manager and complained that they are deprived of a longer “break” during the work day. It led to an animated exchange with the manager, who caught a worker by his hair and threw him down. Soon, the assembled workers turned on the manager, and he received several blows from their *lathis* (sticks). Some sixty workers of Sephanjuri (Sylhet, 1902) made a combined demonstration on the refusal of the manager to give them leave. A quantity of plucked leaf was thrown away, and a large body of *coolies* left the garden. The report of an altercation from a South Sylhet tea garden (Sylhet, 1903) mentioned, ‘(that the) disturbance was due to a general reduction in wages and a consistent refusal to grant leave during the busy season.’⁴⁶⁷

A modification in the rhythms of work and enforcement of stricter discipline were manifesting in the change of *dustoor*—from keeping hoes to giving up hoes, from umbrellas to hats, and from Sunday being a holiday to becoming a working day. Revisions of *dustoor*, in these cases, encoded moves to restructure the organisation and conduct of work. It generated a collective sense of outrage and a growing necessity to act.

The manufacturing season, when the workers were expected to turn up earlier, was often marked by the absence of a rest day (especially Sunday), as obligated by the contract.⁴⁶⁸ Moreover, workers were habitually allocated overtime work, which according to some contemporary was not entirely voluntary.⁴⁶⁹ These tendencies were facilitated by the contract(s) and many specific plantation practices, which empowered the managers to induce workers to toil harder and

⁴⁶⁶ *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927).

⁴⁶⁷ HL Thomas, Subdivisional officer, South Sylhet to the Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet dated 23rd January 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁴⁶⁸ The protective clauses of Assam contract which ensured a paid weekly holiday became largely irrelevant because of the establishing remuneration methods based daily earnings according to ‘tasks’ completed. Such revisions and especially forcing labour on Sundays found some resonance in the ideas of “unpopularity” of work on Assam plantations. An early and typical planter concern for Sundays being deemed a holiday was voiced in 1872 where a manager from Upper Assam suggested that, ‘...Sundays where mostly no work is done, is alone an item of most serious moment to us all (planters).’ He went to statistically suggest that this ‘arbitrarily increases all expenditure by some fourteen percent’ This “saving” as he further mentioned ‘would enable all of us who cannot now import (workers)’. *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 105.

⁴⁶⁹ C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p. 47.

longer, affecting the health and well-being of the workers.⁴⁷⁰ An Assam Valley manager felt that the arrest rights were necessary and essential because it ‘prevented the *coolie* from sitting idle.’⁴⁷¹

Alluding to the general pervasiveness of such work intensification strategies and practices, a colonial official from Assam Valley noted, ‘that in order to secure economy, a stricter discipline has been enforced on many gardens and owing to the shortage of labour *coolies* are turned out to work willy nilly. Work on the tea gardens has become more irksome’. At the same time, he also perceived certain “limits” to these drives. He went on to suggest ‘that the *coolies* being better acquainted with their rights are more disinclined to endure the strict discipline under which they are kept’.⁴⁷²

5.3 The Shifting Authority of Manager

The execution of tea garden discipline was often attributed to the methods and functioning of the manager—the *Sahib*.⁴⁷³ This, as already discussed, was con-

470 The relationship between overwork and sickness came to ‘scientifically’ defined and medically identified in the late nineteenth century Assam plantations. An instance of the effects of “overwork” was exemplified in the case of Dinkari tea garden (Assam Valley) by a sanitary investigation to “explain” the high rates of mortality—which in the period from 1884 to 1887 consistently maintained annual rates of higher than 8%. The investigation revealed that this one hundred and eighty acres large estate, producing an average yield of 550 pounds of tea per acre, had a working population of one hundred sixty. This was deemed as an “unhealthy” condition of work according to the current scientific/medical opinion. It was argued that gardens producing more than 300 pounds of tea per acre required a minimum of one adult *coolie* per acre of working force. The medical report concluded that the, ‘*coolies* were often put to overtime and extra work, to prevent a waste of growing leaf. Insufficient labour was one of the main causes of sicknesses. *Assam Labour Report*, 1887, p. 32; R. Behal and P. Mohapatra, ‘Tea and Money versus Human Life’: The Rise and Fall of the Indenture System in the Assam Tea Plantations 1840–1908 in *Plantations, Proletarians and Peasants in Colonial Asia*, special edition, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 19, nos.3&4 (1992) p. 160.

471 *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 153.

472 Apart from the changes in productivity (See Chapter 5) there was a general decline in the working population of Assam valley by four percent between 1900 and 1903. In the same period the area under tea cultivation however increased by ten percent. D.H. Lees, Deputy Commissioner, Darrang to the Commissioner of Assam Valley in a letter dated 21st April 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

473 The manager of a tea garden (*Sahib*) in the late nineteenth century ranged from a sole European (and sometimes Indian) in charge of a smaller tea garden, to larger establishments (1000 acres and above) employing a head European in charge (*Burra Sahib*) above one or more assistants (*Chota Sahib*). The assistants often had distinct roles. One of them was delegated to oversee

ditioned by the constructions of his “exceptional” authority, and its consequent bearing on the social and work relations of the plantations. Writing in the late nineteenth century, an Assam manager asserted with this confidence ‘that he (planter) is vested with a good deal of power and authority—partly by law, but mostly by *coolie* tradition and his own self-assertion’, where in all events, ‘he is generally quite able to cope with any tendency to kick over the traces’.⁴⁷⁴ Another manager, fairly competent in stamping his writ, was being recollected with a sense of admiration by his assistant (Sylhet, the 1890s):

Charlie (the Manager) was a first-class planter who ruled with a rod of iron. He was not loved by his labour, but feared, and the discipline at Chandpore (tea garden) was unique even for Sylhet (the district). No detail was too small for his attention. Each operation, plucking, pruning, or planting, was carried out with the maximum of efficiency.⁴⁷⁵

A persistent invocation of fear and punishment did not take away from the fact that the deep linkages between violent planter practices and the execution of work/control objectives were being reconstituted in a period of relative settlement and continuity. Now the idioms of “approval” were also assuming some relevance.⁴⁷⁶ This is not to deny the continued bearing of coercion and physical violence in the constitution of managerial authority, but rather to emphasise the elements of “reciprocity” in the manifestation of that authority.⁴⁷⁷ In such a

field work and the other, generally a mechanical engineer, looked after the work in the factory and was responsible for the quality and quantity of tea manufactured. The manager earned anything between Rs. 450 and Rs. 600 and some larger companies (like Assam and Jorehaut Company) even allowed them a share in the profits. The assistants’ salary could range from anything between Rs. 50 and Rs.250 with a pony allowance, a house, and one or two servants. ‘Life in an Indian Tea District’, *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, no. 772 (Oct 12, 1878) p. 653; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 8; H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948) p. 273; S. Ward, *A Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 115; J. Weatherstone, *The Pioneers, 1825–1900: The Early British Tea and Coffee Planters and their way of Life* (London, 1986) pp. 78–80; T. Kinney, *Old Times in Assam* (Calcutta, 1896) p. 26.

⁴⁷⁴ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 206.

⁴⁷⁵ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁴⁷⁶ A shift from an unrestrained ‘violent’ strategy of work discipline is noted in a planter textbook of the period. The author advising the managers suggests that ‘it should be made an absolute and unbending rule at all times that no assistant is allowed to lift his hand’. It went on to recommend that ‘there are other ways of punishing offenders, and it is manager’s business to allot such punishment.’ C. Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1922) p. 318.

⁴⁷⁷ For instance, the desire of the managers to regulate and dispense the drink of the *coolie* was not just driven by the urge to limit its interference to the work process. It was also founded on

framework, it is futile to personify the Assam planters as either “*coolie*-drivers” or “benevolent paternalists”.⁴⁷⁸



Figure 5.1: Assam Tea Managers and Assistants.⁴⁷⁹

Also, the aspirations of managers to wield the “rod of iron”, could not be homogeneously and consistently realised, being contingent on spatial and contextual variables. The rhythms and routines of plantation did become an arena of acceptance, negotiation, and even overt resistance.⁴⁸⁰ A colonial district commissioner noted a general “tempering” of planter power:

In former years, the planter was supreme on his garden, *he maintained discipline by his own methods, and untrammelled by law*...nowadays the *coolie* has a fair knowledge of the labour laws, gained by his experience, and is usually well capable of looking after his interest.⁴⁸¹

such reciprocal ties—which the circulation of such an object entailed. See Chapter 4. Also see S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp. 159–160.

478 R. Behal, ‘*Coolie* Drivers or Benevolent Paternalists? British Tea Planters in Assam and the Indenture system’, *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no.1 (2010).

479 Group of European tea managers and assistants (Photo 1903 or before). NAA INV 04423501, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

480 This is very much in agreement with what has been argued in the context of Kanpur Jute mill workers ‘where the work culture and discipline were not created by state regulations and managerial strategies alone; these are constituted through sedimented practices, through acts of resistance, through conformity with rules.’ C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds* (London, 2005) p. 143.

481 H.W.G. Cole, Deputy Commissioner, Lakhimpur to the Commissioner of Assam valley Districts. Letter dated 9th March 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904. ASA. Emphasis mine.

The shift (in planter power) has also to be situated in the changing stance of colonial authorities on the unilateral arrogations of magisterial privileges by managers, which they broadly endorsed in practice. A colonial district officer, writing in 1904, observed that ‘any affray between a planter and *coolie* (now) is viewed through a magnifying glass, whereas formerly many occurrences of this kind altogether escaped notice.’⁴⁸² A closer attention to the planter “excesses” was also a manifestation of the many scandals of Assam tea gardens— like cases of kidnapping, oppression, and torture—being debated in the press, public forums, books, and becoming a theme of numerous official and non-official writings.⁴⁸³ In such a charged climate, the colonial state’s “rethinking” of the Assam contract system and particularly the right of private arrest, at least tolerated an impression of incorporating the “spaces of exception” within the “jurisdiction of law.”⁴⁸⁴ Apart

482 Ann Stoler presents a striking shift in the perceptions of “protest” of the Dutch administrative and plantation elite of colonial Sumatra. The labour violence was largely personalized and downplayed in the 1870s. By the 1920s, it came to be construed as a politically motivated prelude to communist revolution. DC Sylhet to Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sylhet 16th March 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA; A. Stoler, ‘Perceptions of Protest: Defining the dangerous in colonial Sumatra’, *American Ethnologist* 12, no.4 (Nov. 1985) pp. 642–658.

483 As far back as the late 1880s, the Indian Associations’ memorial detailing the abuses in free recruitment and the harsh life of *coolies* on plantations received a fairly widespread media attention. For instance, just in the year 1888, the following newspapers sympathetically covered the issue: *Hindoo Patriot*, Calcutta, May 21st; *The East*, Dacca, May 26th; *Anand Bazar Patrika*, Calcutta, May 24th; *The Tribune*, Lahore, May 23rd; *Mahratta*, Poona, May 27th; *Hindu*, Madras, May 30th; *Peoples’ Friend*, Madras, May 30th; *National Guardian*, Calcutta, June 1st. The Anti-slavery reporter had reported the incidents of violence and flogging in Assam tea gardens in the late 1860s. It stepped up its attention on the Assam *coolie* system—especially since the 1890s. See, ‘Coolie Labour in the Tea Gardens of India’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend* 13, no.6 (November 1893.) pp. 346–348; ‘Contract Labour in Assam’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend* 21, no.2 (March 1901) pp. 64–66; ‘The Labour System in Assam’, *The Anti-Slavery Reporter and Aborigines’ Friend* 24, no.4 (Aug 1904) pp. 134–135. Again the Assam *coolie* question found place in the “national” economic histories being written in the period and was seen as another instance of the exploitation of British rule. See, G.S. Aiyar, *Some Economic Aspects of British Rule in India* (Madras, 1903) pp. 180–181; R.C. Dutt, *India in the Victorian Age; An Economic History of the People* (London, 1904) p. 352. Also see D. Ganguli, *Slavery in the British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972); A. Sen, *Notes on the Bengal Renaissance* (1946, Bombay) pp. 50–51; T. Mishra, ‘The Image of West in Asamiya Literature’ in C. Vijayasree (ed.) *Writing the West, 1750–1947: Representations from Indian Languages* (Delhi, 2004) pp. 18–19.

484 For instance, since the year 1904 there was a more comprehensive and extensive tabulation of incidents of “rioting”, “unlawful” assembly etc. in the annual labour reports of Assam. This was the outcome of a greater concern of the colonial state with respect to these incidents which were deemed earlier to be the private affair of planters and tea gardens. The 1902–1903 labour report in light of reported riots suggested that it ‘throws upon state some responsibility for pre-

from a much-publicised criticism made by the Chief Commissioner of the province, there were concerns raised by other authorities.⁴⁸⁵ For instance, the Commissioner of Assam valley districts opined that ‘the original justification for the grant of the power (of private arrest) to the planters was because courts were difficult to access.’ This premise, he argued ‘owing to the improved communications, has to a great extent been removed.’⁴⁸⁶ Chief Commissioner Cotton had noted that the numerous cases of “disturbances” on tea gardens could not be ‘effectively ascertained in court.’ He strongly recommended that the ‘proceedings of a trying magistrate should, wherever possible, include a local investigation to be held upon the garden.’⁴⁸⁷ He duly issued a circular calling for ‘on the spot’ enquiry by the Inspector of labourer or any other European official of the district.⁴⁸⁸ Such state intervention was systematically despised by planters from the inception of the contract system. This was again questioned in a planter textbook where the author advised his readers (planters) that ‘no appeal should be made to the law except in extreme need. Police officers are best kept off the estate if possible’.⁴⁸⁹ The premises of such “exceptions” were no longer as persuasive, and the rationale for their protection was no longer so compelling. It further gave impetus to other modes of generating “knowledge” about the conditions of life and work on

venting any injustice as would give the *coolies* a substantial grievance.’ R. Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900–1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 26th 1985) p. PE-20; P. Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p. 378; E. Kolsky, ‘Crime and Punishment on the Tea plantations of Assam’, in M. D. Dubber and L. Framer (ed.) *Modern Histories of Crime and Punishment* (Stanford, 2007) p. 287.

485 Henry Cotton was the Chief Commissioner of Assam from 1896 till 1902. In the 1900 labour report for Cottons’ views showed a strong departure from the positions held by him and other Chief Commissioners on the *coolie* labour question. Cotton cited specific instances of low wages and state of indebtedness of workers on tea gardens. He further showed the inefficacy of inspections and the depressing effect of hard work on birth rate. In cases of conflict between the managers and workers, he noted that the magistrates had often proven themselves for giving biased verdicts. The Indian Tea association lodged a strong protest to the Government of India arguing that Cotton’s case was not ‘warranted by facts’. Yet, the allegations voiced by individuals in significant official position only reinforced the idea of “unpopular” Assam tea gardens—where every instance of manager-worker conflict was seen with increased scepticism as a commentary on the system as a whole.

486 F.J. Mohanan, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts, *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 199.

487 Letter from Secretary to Chief Com of Assam to Registrar, High Court Calcutta dated 6th Oct 1902. Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, no. 31, June 1903, ASA.

488 Investigation into cases of disturbances on tea gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos. 30–34, June 1903, ASA. Assault on Mr A Lea-Tucker, Manager of Sephanguri Tea Estate by some coolies. Home, Public A, April 1903, no.27. NAI.

489 C. Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1908) p. 319.

plantations beyond the sanitary gaze—which was the predominant grid of the nineteenth colonial state’s intervention.⁴⁹⁰

The shifting dynamics of absolute authority of managers was also echoed in the gestures of managers to “familiarise” themselves with the culturally and linguistically diverse working population. Following in the spirit of Robert Bruce, who felt the necessity to note copiously and graphically demonstrate the Chinese methods of tea manufacture in the 1840s, the managers and tea companies were finding some value in compiling and consulting language handbooks.⁴⁹¹ A striking evidence of an endeavour to comprehend the *coolie bat* (*coolie* talk) was a handwritten language guide composed by a new assistant in the early twentieth century.

These manuals did not merely serve the purpose of a cultural/language grounding for the intending managers and assistants, but also came in handy for achieving the diverse objectives of work and discipline on the plantations. For instance, a young European assistant learning the “tricks of the trade” was passed on with “native” phrases by the manager, which he diligently scribbled down in a notebook. He recounted how he would direct workers during field work by shouting phrases like: *Ek angle se lumba; aurney* (Just the size of one finger; not more) and *Sub beyfahida dhal nikaldo* (Remove the useless sticks).⁴⁹² This is also characteristic of Charlesons’ handwritten phrase book, where tasks like to prune (*Khatum katna*) and pluck (*toolna*) find a prominent mention.

490 Till the late 1890s, the routine inspection reports of tea gardens made by the Civil Surgeon of district primarily supplied information under the heads like the nature of house accommodation, water-supply, medical attendance, hospital accommodation, general sanitary arrangements, and food supply. The inspectors were merely advised to notice the ‘general’ treatment and condition of labourers. The police manuals from early twentieth century mentioned the procedure of supervision and control of bad characters in tea gardens. *Physical and Political geography of the province of Assam* (Shillong, 1896) p. 131; *Compilation of the Circulars and General Orders of the Chief Commissioner of Assam* (Shillong, 1885) pp. 79–93. *Eastern Bengal and Assam Police Manual, Part V Inspectors and Police Stations* (Calcutta, 1911) pp. 67–68.

491 The joint stock company Finlay Muir in its “standing instructions” to their representative visiting the tea gardens mentioned that they should assess and make notes of any new assistant (manager) engaged by the company for their knowledge of the vernacular. This formed a crucial basis for the increase in salary the fourth year, and the bonus for such knowledge. At the same time, it mentioned that the number of labour absconding was to be ‘carefully noted against a manager’. *Standing instructions for the Tea Estates Department of Messrs Finlay Muir & Co. Calcutta* (Glasgow, 1900).

492 W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

At times, a change of manager familiar with such nuances precipitated a “crisis” because it brought in its wake new symmetries of work and discipline.⁴⁹³ This was reiterated by a colonial official, who felt that a new charge lacked ‘(an) intimate knowledge of their *coolies* and their wants which is necessary for the successful working of a garden in the Assam system under which an employer directly deals with the *coolies*’.⁴⁹⁴ This seems to have been the case in an episode of collective action directed at the management of Tehapara garden (Sylhet, 1916). Investigations revealed that the workers were gravely disgruntled with certain rules and the practices of discipline initiated by the new manager. After an incident of assault by the manager, the entire *coolie*-labour population of the garden consisting of hundreds of men, women and children collected near the dispensary and confined the manager, his assistant, head *babu*, native doctor and a *sardar* in a stable. Bricks and bamboo sticks were pelted on the detained party.⁴⁹⁵ Another “unpopular” new manager showing excessive zeal in direction of “reform” caned one of the workers; whereupon the workers beat him severely.⁴⁹⁶ The concerted actions of workers targeting the management in Jellupur (Cachar), Bhagaicherra (Sylhet) and Barjan (Sibsagar), in the year 1896, was occasioned by a new manager assuming office on these gardens.⁴⁹⁷

493 For instance, Antrobus mentions in his book *Jorehaut tea Company* that it favoured a policy of ‘continuity of management, not only because of its maintenance of a consistent policy of cultivation, upkeep and manufacture, but by reason of the contented labour force’. H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948) p. 269.

494 This view was most emphatically made in 1906 Assam Labour enquiry commission report, which they emphasised a ‘direct’ organisation of work and management in Assam in comparison to the other tea growing regions (Duars and Ceylon)—which worked through different intermediaries. In this particular instance, the commissioner of Cachar underlined this point through an example of contrasts of two tea gardens in the district—Dolu and Barkhola—showing differential rates of desertion (7 and 46 respectively) after a new manager had assumed office. While the manager of Dolu (Milne) had spent a greater part of his working life in Cachar and appreciated the “specificities” of Cachar, the manager of Barkhola had ‘acquired his experience in Darjeeling and Terai’ and adopted a new system of management. The change in management was seen as more “excessive” because the manager tried to implement the Assam contract and also ‘raised the hoeing task, and made other changes...such as compelling all to appear at muster’. *Assam Labour Report*, 1890, p. 188.

495 Letter from BC Allen Chief Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India. Home Department, Police Branch, No 103, Part B, March 1916. NAI.

496 *Assam Labour Report*, 1884, p. 4.

497 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

5.4 The Rice Question

The significance of rice in the everyday life of the working population was critical, as it was the main cereal consumed by a vast majority of the workers.⁴⁹⁸ A regular provision of rice was an overriding concern for the Kacharis residing on the isolated Assam Company plantations in the 1840s and 1850s. The ability of the Company gardens to hold Kachari labour depended on its capacity to sustain its rice supplies.⁴⁹⁹ The provision of rice for the workers was “institutionalised” through these early struggles and a notion of entitlement which materialised with a discourse of *coolie* protection in the contract. A certain quantity of rice, at a predetermined price, was made available to the *coolies*, which constituted an integral part of the “non-wage benefit”. There was no standardised practice and quantity of dispensing rice “benefits”, and it varied from district to district, and even from one garden to the other.⁵⁰⁰

The reconstitution of the “protection” of *coolie*, made through amendments to the Assam contract in the late nineteenth century, also made such provisions exceedingly irregular.⁵⁰¹ Planters often rationalised these “cuts” by claiming that the changing dietary profile of the workers did not necessitate a fixation with rice. A colonial officer noted that the ‘quantity of rice imported by the tea gardens in Assam (around 1900) was much less than twenty or thirty years ago.’⁵⁰² The logic

498 Rice was the staple cereal for migrants coming from ‘tribal’ regions of Chotanagpur, Central Provinces and Orissa. The growing relevance of the recruiting region like North West Provinces and Bihar (especially in Sylhet district) generated a view in planter-official circles, that wheat (flour) rather than rice constituted their main diet of the new migrants. A theory offered for the high rates of mortality—often associated with upcountry *coolies*—was said to have been a consequence of this change of diet (from wheat to rice). There were several official steps to change the nature of food allowances during transit and even the “fixed price rice” on the tea gardens. See Chapter 2 for details.

499 For concerns around rice leading to work stoppages and strikes in the Assam company plantations, see chapter 1.

500 The rice supplied to the workers was generically called ‘*coolie* rice’ in the Calcutta market, which many contemporary observers noted for generally being of an inferior and poor quality. One scientific investigator mentioned some of the names (with different qualities) of *coolie* rice supplied in different gardens: *Kazla no.1, Kazla no. 2, Jhabra* and *Kalachitu*. H. Mann, ‘Note on the Diet of Tea Garden *Coolies* in Upper Assam and its Nutritive Value’, *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* 3, no.2 (Feb. 1907) p. 104; C. Dowding, *Tea-Garden Coolies in Assam* (Calcutta, 1894) p. 29.

501 *Assam Labour Report*, 1888, p. 70.

502 Such a sentiment is reflected in a statement made by the manager of Assam Company, where he described the ‘fixed price rice’ as a ‘loss’ which drained the company of one thousand rupees every year. *Enquiry into the causes of friction between the planters and coolies*, August 1904, no.98. ASA; *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p. 164. Also see, D. Crole, *Tea: A text*

of reductions and apprehensions regarding the necessity of dispensing rice found “voice” in a planter language manual:

Do you eat all the rice you buy from the garden store?

Do you resell it at a higher price?

Do you make liquor from it?⁵⁰³

However, another planter bitterly grumbled that the ‘clause (of contract) concerning the sale of rice has always proved the most difficult to deal with.’ He particularly observed that the ‘coolies did not trouble the garden when prices rule low, but when prices are high the garden is at once requisitioned and no matter whether there is stock or not, rice has to be forthcoming at the stipulated price.’⁵⁰⁴ The question of rice-supplies figured prominently in the official interrogation of the new recruits proceeding to Assam, to gauge their awareness of the circumstances of their employment. The “stereotyped” queries posed by the registering officer were allegedly responded by answers “tutored” by the recruiters and contractors:

Recruiting officer: At what price will rice be supplied to you?

Coolie: At three rupees a maund.

Recruiting officer: If the price of rice be more than three rupees who will pay the difference?

Coolie: The sirkar (employer).⁵⁰⁵

Contrary to many such apprehensions, the price of rice and the deductions made on account of rice advanced, suggested a commissioner of a tea district, was one of most recurring issues of dispute between managers and coolies.⁵⁰⁶

For instance, when the manager of Bardeobam tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1900) terminated the *dustoor* of allowing rice advances, the coolies of the garden made a collective demonstration and declined to work.⁵⁰⁷ Again, in Kharbon garden (Lakhimpur, 1904), the usual allotment of rice given to female-coolies under contract was downscaled. The manager (Macnidoe) after giving out the reduced amount on the day of distribution was assaulted by the coolies of the garden with

book of tea planting and manufacture (London, 1897) p. 48; S. R. Ward, *Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp. 125–126.

503 *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p. 60.

504 G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp. 159–160.

505 *Assam Labour Report*, 1888, p. 12; *The Bengalee* 27, no.39 (Sep. 25, 1886) p. 461 cited in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p. 3.

506 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

507 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

bricks and bamboos.⁵⁰⁸ Similarly, the workers of Towkok garden (Sibsagar, 1894) came in a body and demanded rice from the garden store on a day which was not the customary rice distribution day. On being denied the “exception,” the agitated *coolies* made a charge towards the store and confronted the men guarding it.⁵⁰⁹

In these separate episodes, the alteration of *dustoor* of rice (discontinuation of advances and reduction of amount) could have adversely impacted the general material condition and the food-security of the plantation’s population.⁵¹⁰ The rice procurable at the weekly market (*haats*) was usually priced higher and also affected by the geographical setting of the garden.⁵¹¹ The gardens located in the “interiors” obtained food grains at a much higher rate and the supplies were extremely irregular due to indifferent communication networks.⁵¹² These insecurities induced by the uneven nature of rice supplies were expressed in a general refusal of work and coordinated action targeting the offending manager.

The relevance of rice in the changing material circumstances of the resident population was also articulated in the demand for a change in the timings of its discharge. *Coolies* did not merely resent to the stoppage or reduction on the rice concessions (*dustoor*) but expected the garden management to respond to the situations of want and scarcity. The newer coolies particularly felt such discrepancies. Some new *coolies* of Bordubi garden (Lakhimpur, 1902) refused to work alleging that they were not allotted enough rice. When the manager tried to force them to get back to work, he was attacked. Eventually, he had to use his revolver to scare them off.⁵¹³ A colonial report noted that the so called “non-Act” *coolies* (not contracted under Assam contract), who were “legally” not entitled to the

508 Ibid.

509 Ibid.

510 Such dependence of plantation population on importation and discharge is not specific to Assam. For instance in colonial Sumatra, the estate industry were almost wholly dependent on imported rice. A. Stoler, *Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt* (Ann Arbor, 1995) p. 41.

511 These variations of such markets was noted by the colonial observers who particularly observed that in some districts the weekly markets were the immediate vicinity of tea gardens, and were of great convenience to the garden labourers. W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical account of Assam*, Vol. 1 (London, 1879) p. 143.

512 The Sanitary Commissioner of Assam made a survey of the “food situation” on the tea gardens in the late 1870s. He found the centrality of rice in the diet of workers was also because of the expensiveness of other food items procured in the open market. *Assam Sanitary Report 1878 and 1879*, pp. 7–10, pp. 15–18.

513 The practice of dieting the new arrivals as regulated by ordinances in the colonies was never regulated by legal enactments on Assam tea gardens. The practice of giving rice to new *coolies* was suggested in Ceylon plantations, where the language handbook mentions: The *Kangani* addressing the planter says: ‘Sir, the two new *coolies* have arrived, please issue them rice and cash.’ Assam Sec-

fixed price rice (like Assam contracted workers), would “expect” the managers to make some rice available at a reduced price when the market rates went up. The “rights” of control (like private arrest), which managers frequently claimed over the Act XIII contracted workers, generated complimentary obligations of protection (like fixed price rice).⁵¹⁴ Further, the centrality of rice in the daily subsistence of the resident workers made such claims “legitimate”.

5.5 The Occasions of Tea Garden

The emergence and institutionalisation of occasions like rice distribution day has to be situated in the milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century life on plantations. On this day, the workers would collect in front of the rice godown to receive their supplies. The manager positioned himself at the gate of the godown and distributed the rice according to the individual allotments and the nature of their contracts.

An analogous occasion taking shape on late nineteenth-century plantations was the pay-day. This was the occasion when workers would get remunerated for their work. They assembled at an assigned place at a pre-given time which is depicted in the next photograph.

In this scene, the manager conducts the payment. The assessment of *Kamjari* (outdoor work) and *Haziri* book (attendance register) was placed on the table.⁵¹⁵ The gathered *coolies* waited for their turn to receive wages. A manager recounted the occasion of payment in some detail:

On pay-day...men, women, and children—in fact, all the *coolies* present themselves, attired in the best, outside the bungalow or wherever the ceremony of paying is to be performed. They are called up by name and in rotation to receive their wages; a few have part of their money cut for idleness and insubordination, but with these exceptions all receive their pay in full and depart happily.⁵¹⁶

retariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA; W.G.B. Wells, *Cooly Tamil, as understood by Labourers on Tea and Rubber estates* (Colombo, 1915) p. 68; *Assam Labour Report*, 1889, p. 80.

⁵¹⁴ The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p. 146.

⁵¹⁵ The managing agents and the visiting agents to see that managers pay their own *coolies*, and, in their absence, their European assistants. *Standing instructions for the Tea Estates Department of Messrs Finlay Muir & Co. Calcutta* (Glasgow, 1900).

⁵¹⁶ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 176.



Figure 5.2: Pay Day.⁵¹⁷

The days of rice distribution, payment and muster emerging from the culture of work and remuneration, assumed the nature of rituals on the plantations—to be participated at a recurring moment (daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly) depending on the prevailing *dustoor* of the garden.⁵¹⁸ These occasions held the potential of “collecting” the entire *coolie*-labour population of the garden at one place and at a given time.

⁵¹⁷ Assamese Tea receiving payment from a man at a table n.d. NAA INV 04423002, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵¹⁸ This also seems to have some lineages from slave plantations where the weekly distribution of provisions were treated as paternalistic rituals. ‘..By dramatizing a sense of mutual obligations between masters and slaves, the ritual was designed to help promote a sense of community on the plantation. The ceremonial giving in itself served to emphasize the master’s reputed benevolence and promote the slaves’ gratitude.’ C.W. Joyner *Shared Traditions: Southern History and Folk Culture* (Urbana, 1999) pp.94–95.

The presence of the manager/management made these occasions particularly conducive for the organisation and collective expression of concerns, emanating from overlapping anxieties.⁵¹⁹ This was manifest in the case of Kharbon garden (Lakhimpur, 1904), where the rice distribution day became the occasion for such a contest when the manager arbitrarily reduced the rice quota of the women workers.⁵²⁰



Figure 5.3: Mustering the *coolies*⁵²¹

Again, on one pay-day in Barhalla tea garden (Sibsagar, 1892), the manager declined to pay a *coolie* (Harilas) and had him forcibly removed from the scene when he raised objections for being denied his dues. The aggrieved individual

⁵¹⁹ Pay days often became sites of conflict in other plantation contexts. For the sugar plantations of Trinidad, see K. Haraksingh, 'The Worker & the Wage in a Plantation Economy' in M. Turner (ed.) *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (Kingston, 1995) pp. 224–240.

⁵²⁰ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵²¹ Mustering Assamese Tea Coolies at Factory. NAA INV 04422901, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

called out the other assembled *coolies* to seize the manager. The *coolies* acted together and attacked the manager and his assistants with broken bricks and clay.⁵²²

On a particular pay day in Hukanpukri garden (Lakhimpur, 1900), a *coolie* protested that his overtime work (*ticca*) was under assessed. The assistant manager making the payments hit the dissenting man with his fist. The three hundred assembled workers then made a charge towards him. The assistant had to flee from the scene and take asylum in his bungalow, which was encircled by the *coolies*. They later broke inside the building, but the assistant along with the other European staff managed to flee. The party of *coolies* then proceeded to assault the native establishment of the garden, as they fancied that they had assisted the *sahibs* to get away.⁵²³

These cases of “individuals” being disciplined for conveying her/his grievance on the estimation and payment of wages (non-payment, underassessment) took the nature of a collective response directed at the management. The events of pay-day had occasioned the larger solidarities to address the concerns. Such concerted action did not always materialize from grievances in the pressing context of the occasion, but could become avenues for the articulation of older persisting concerns.

For instance, on the Khawang garden (Lakhimpur, 1914), the manager, during the daily inspection of field work, had reprimanded a female *coolie* (Durapati) for the quality of leaves being plucked. Later in the day when the women workers were being paid for their daily tasks, the manager kept Durapati waiting. She suspected that the manager would refuse to pay because of the “objections” during the day, and therefore urged the other assembled women to wait until her dues were paid. On finding such apprehensions coming true the women attacked the manager, who had to take refuge inside the office along with his head clerk. The *coolies* then laid a siege on the office and kept the manager confined for three hours. Windows were broken, abuses were hurled, and broken bricks and like were thrown.⁵²⁴

The “new” occasions of payment (rice or wages) have to be situated in a context where there was a simultaneous process of production and reproduction of apparently “older” cultural/religious occasions in the changed milieu of the plantation.

522 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.; E. Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2010) pp. 176–177.

523 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

524 King Emperor versus Durapati and nine others. Home Department, Police Branch, September 1914, No 139. NAI.

David Crole, an ex-Assam planter, mentioning the most prominent of the “coolie festivities” on his garden (*Fagua*) remarked:

... coolies are given three or four days holiday...they enjoy themselves to the top of their bent, which end they attain by setting on foot a horrible debauch...abetted thereto by an old garden custom (still unfortunately kept up by many planters), according to which each coolie is supplied with a bottle of rum to commemorate the festive occasion...coolie often receives a certain amount of *baksheesh* from the planter.⁵²⁵

In the context of Ceylon plantations, James Duncan argues that the production of docile bodies (coolies) in the colonial plantations would ideally have necessitated the production of de-cultured workers. However, the strategies to produce rationalized bodies were continually undermined as elements of worker’s networks and ways of life remained intact. This also becomes relevant in the Assam plantations where occasions like drinking and festivities suggested that the decultured and docile bodies, as ideally required by the plantations, was not completely realised. However, Duncan’s emphasis on ‘remaining intact’ does not fully appreciate the shifts such practices and “traditions” undergo in a dynamic context.⁵²⁶

Cultural/religious occasions being reproduced and produced in the plantation context also became sites where the legitimacy of discipline were tested and break from routines were negotiated.⁵²⁷ The managers on such occasions would usually allow leave to the coolies, gave them some additional cash and even made provisions of alcohol. The planter’s language handbook underscoring the significance of these occasions duly included a separate section on *Poojah and Gods*.

⁵²⁵ D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 199.

⁵²⁶ A fascinating instance of this is Hosay festival in colonial Trinidad, where Hindus and Sunnis apparently celebrated a Shia festival. Such a dynamic can also be located in the case of indentured labourers in Fiji, where the principal religious festival shifted from Holi to Diwali. James Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) p. 69; P. Mohapatra, “Following Custom”? Representations of Community among Indian Immigrant Labour in the West Indies, 1880–1920” in R. Behal & M. van der Linden (ed.) *Coolies, Capital and Colonialism: Studies in India Labour History* (2006, Delhi) p. 181–188; J. D. Kelly, ‘From Holi to Diwali in Fiji: An Essay on Ritual and History’ *Man* 23, no.1 (Mar.1988) pp. 40–55.

⁵²⁷ Religious occasions have been read in different contexts as a site for defining work time and festive time. Festivals are sometimes seen as a time and space in which the everyday is temporarily replaced by interactions of a different sort. In the context of contemporary Jute mill workers, Fernandes argues that Durga Puja festival served both to legitimize and subvert the authority of union and managers. C. Joshi, *Lost Worlds* (London, 2005) p. 242; G. De Neve, *The Everyday Politics of Labour: Working lives in Indias’ Informal Economy* (Delhi, 2005) p. 239; L. Fernandes, *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (Philidelphia, 1997) p. 93.

The potential themes of conservation between the managers and *coolies* with respect to such occasions are very suggestive:

Coolie: In five day's time is our Big *Pooja*, Sahib. May we have two day's leave?

Coolie: We want half day's leave for Kali *Pooja*.

Manager: To enable you to make purchases you will get daily cash payment for the work you do during three days preceding the *Pooja*.⁵²⁸

The exchanges between manager and *coolies* indicating to a general “acceptable” conduct, did not always hold true in practice. Three incidents, to that effect, can be cited. In the first case from Holonguri garden (Sibsagar, 1900), a demand of a holiday on *Kali puja* made by the Santhali workers was turned down. When the manager went down the lines on a horseback to induce them to work, a group of workers surrounded him with sticks in hands.⁵²⁹ In the other incident from Barjuli garden (Darrang, 1891), the workers resented on being forced to get back to work on the very next day of an important religious festival— *Karam puja*.⁵³⁰ The assistant manager on his daily rounds of the lines to turn the *coolies* out for work tried to pressurize some of them and assaulted a resisting *sardar*. The incensed *coolies* made a collective offensive on the assistant manager, chasing him out of the lines until his bungalow. Again, the manager and the assistant of Kellyden garden (Nowgong, 1898) forced the *coolies* to turn out for work, after three days' holiday given for *Fagua/Holi*. They encountered a general opposition. On the attempt of the assistant to hold a woman by the hand and induce her to go back to work, the *coolies* attacked him and the manager with sticks.⁵³¹

These instances form part of a larger body of incidents of enforcement of harsh discipline and resistance to such moves. The *coolies* being turned out for work was attempted to be “routinised” in the daily life on the plantations.

528 *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p. 83–84.

529 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

530 Festivals like *Karampuja* seem to have had strains of communitarian solidarity being reconstituted in the plantation context. During our fieldwork in the Duars plantation region (May–June 2000) we found that this was a festival practised by a majority of the labour population of the tea gardens. In this yearly ritual the branch of the tree *karam* is buried. This is further circulated throughout the labour line stopping at each quarter in which vermilion (this act of application of *sindur* is symbolic of the transfer of the evil spirits in the vicinity into the branch) was applied to the branch. Subsequently it is taken to a nearby river or stream where it was immersed. S. Chaudhury and N. Varma, ‘Between Gods/Goddesses/ Demons and ‘Science’: Perceptions of Health and Medicine among Plantation Labourers in Jalpaiguri District, Bengal’, *Social Scientist* 30, nos 5–6 (May–June 2002) p. 32.

531 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

The contracts bestowed the authority to deem absences as illegal, and permit a degree of force and coercion to make the reluctant coolies comply—as and when required. This encouraged the systematic attempts of the unhealthy, unpopular and undermanned gardens to put a greater proportion of coolies under contract(s), not merely to curb “desertion”, but also enforce this daily work routine (Kamjari). But a sense of a general illegitimacy on being forced/ disciplined for their absence/leave from work was heightened by the significance of the moment, where shared cultural and communal practices were invoked. Again, the customs of leave and other benefits (dustoor) during such events, which varied according to the gardens/occasions, was negotiated.

5.6 Coolie Lines

Residential patterns of *coolie*-labour assume a particular relevance in the production of solidarities on the tea garden. However, these patterns were not uniformly consistent. A colonial medical investigator observed that ‘no condition that varies more widely than this (residence patterns) does in different gardens’.⁵³² The organization of *coolie* dwellings in barracks and lines and its policing (*chaukidaring*) was embedded in the strategies of immobilisation and spatial surveillance. They also became a focal point of the sanitary policing of the unhealthy plantations.⁵³³ The evidence of “*coolie* lines” appears from the early years of plantations in search for “settled” workers. A greater “systematisation” of the lines was desired in the late nineteenth century:

(*Coolie*) lines should be numbered, and there should be a *line-chokidar* for each double row of houses (or lines); also, each *sirdar*'s gang of men should, as many as possible, be housed in one line; of course, the women must go with their husbands..By this arrangement of having a *chokidar* and a *sirdar* responsible for the way each line is kept, and also for conduct

⁵³² G.M. Giles, *A Report of an Investigation into the Causes of the Diseases known in Assam as Kala Azar and Beri Beri* (Shillong, 1890) p. 145.

⁵³³ The high rates of mortality observed on tea plantations was often attributed to the sites of the lines. For instance, the high death rates (above 20 percent) observed in Borkhala tea garden (Darrang, 1879) and Shakomotho (Darrang, 1881), was said to be satisfactorily resolved by a change in location of respective *coolie* lines. A general template for the *coolie* lines was offered by a colonial medical officer (G.M. Giles) in the late 1890s, keeping in mind these ‘sanitary principles.’ *Assam Labour Report*, 1879 p. 19; *Assam Labour Report*, 1881 p. 21–22. G. M. Giles, *Tea garden sanitation, being a few remarks on the construction and sanitary arrangement of coolie lines, with special reference to the prevention of the disease known as anaemia of coolies, beri-beri, and anchylostomiasis* (Shillong, 1891).

of the *coolies* in that line will be kept in better order...less trouble will be experienced by those *chokidars* and *sardars* in turning the *coolies* out to work in the morning.⁵³⁴



Figure 5.4: Coolie Lines.⁵³⁵

Apart from being firmly located with the framework of the plantation policy of settling and controlling workers, the *coolie* lines functioned as critical sites for socialization, “festivities” and the new occasions like “weekend drinking”. Managers mostly required the ‘outsiders’ visiting the lines to be reported by the *chowkidars*. Though, they often expressed an inability to completely stop some

⁵³⁴ A degree of systematisation of *coolie* lines is also observed in the coffee plantations of Ceylon from the 1860s, in comparison to the 1840s and 1850s. Crole further noted that large plantations in Assam (with more than one thousand souls) had approximately half dozen *coolie* lines. These houses were thatched bamboo huts, each partitioned to hold four or sometimes more families. F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p. 68; J. Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) pp. 84–85; D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) pp. 196–197.

⁵³⁵ Living Quarters of Assamese Tea Coolies. NAA INV 04423702, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

visitors who were, generally, family and friends.⁵³⁶ The next photograph depicts an everyday scene of the *coolie* lines.

There was a distinctive attempt to organize the lines along ethnic/racial axes. A contemporary observed that the different tribes were housed on ‘separate rows of huts, as these people never mingle’.⁵³⁷ A planter described the everyday scene on the lines where ‘the *tom tom* sounds; men chaunt, and women dance’.⁵³⁸ In a similar tone, another planter narrated that ‘rarely a night passes in the lines but there is some form of festivity going on and in the season of the native holidays and on Sunday the din is terrific, five or six tum-tums all going at once’.⁵³⁹ Here, a clear identification of the different tribes and caste cannot be decisively established. Also, the recruited batches (arkatti and sardari) being housed together were not always clusters of “family and kins”, but were groups being forged during the process of recruitment, settlement and work. The reproduction of older identities through an “ethnicised” recruitment and residential strategy competed with the production of new identities in the processes of mobilisation, work and life on the plantations.⁵⁴⁰ A strict cordoning of the different *coolie lines* and *bastis* could not always be sustained, and there was a measure of traffic between them. Time-expired workers frequently moved between the garden and the *basti*, retaining familial and social ties with workers on the garden. Markets and *Haats*—emerging within the confines or in the vicinity of plantations—also became the sites for such interactions.⁵⁴¹

536 S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) pp. 172–173.

537 Such a strategy of organising lines on basis of caste and village origins was also practised on Ceylon coffee plantations. S. R. Ward, *Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 115; J. Duncan, *Climate, Race and Bio power in nineteenth century Ceylon* (Aldershot, 2007) pp. 84–85.

538 S. Baildon, *Tea Industry in India* (London, 1882) p. 165.

539 G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 175.

540 The Sonthali deputation after visiting Assam noted that ‘the manner and customs of our Sonthals have been altogether spoilt’. This was due to the fact their kinsmen were found to have married their daughters with other castes. Revenue & Agriculture, Emigration B, nos 1–4, NAI.

541 The presence of markets was much differentiated across the geographical space in the two valleys. A commissioner in charge of a tea district in Assam valley observed in the late 1880s that weekly *haats* were mostly situated in central places, and served a group of gardens, and usually held on Sundays. The 1906 Report specifically citing the case of Surma Valley plantations (Sylhet in particular) noted that ‘...besides the public markets nearly every tea garden has its weekly or bi-weekly *hat*, to which crowds of villagers and tea garden *coolies* may be streaming either to make purchases ...or goods for sale’. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886–1889* (Calcutta, 1890); *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee*, 1906 in S.D. Punekar and R. Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India*, Vol. I (1989, Delhi) p. 144.

5.7 Work Place, Authority Structure and Issues of Tasks and Wages

The processes of socialisation had a bearing on the articulation of anxieties at the workplace, where other associations were being produced in the operation of work. Here, it is crucial to reiterate the practices of work and wage assessment in place on Assam plantations of the period. The workers, in order to earn her/his daily wage (*hazira*), had to complete a daily task (*nirikh*). The payment for work over and above this amounted to what was the overtime (*ticca*).⁵⁴² The task was not determined by a fixed amount of hours put in daily, but by the work characterized as constituting a reasonable day's labour. Such "flexibility" was allowed by the contracts, which stopped enforcing a defined work schedule for tea gardens.⁵⁴³

The nature, availability and intensity of tasks were contingent on the tea plant cycle and the state and demands of the industry. During the manufacturing season, when the work-process was intensified and the tasks increased, the *coolies* were hard-pressed for time. In contrast, during winters a sharp drop in employment meant a general decline in earning.⁵⁴⁴ These seasonal variations were mentioned in several provincial labour reports. It was noted that the remuneration during the manufacturing season could be as much as 'two or three times the contract rates', but most other times the *coolies* 'never earns their contract wage'.⁵⁴⁵

A local District Commissioner, in order to get a general sense of such variations, issued a circular addressed to the managers to submit their schedule of tasks. The "knowledge" of the prevailing rates was not very enlightening as 'in one part of a garden hoeing was heavier than another part. In some weathers it was easier than in other weathers, and so on. Plucking was heavier in a weak than in a full flush'.⁵⁴⁶ Another district commissioner in a similar zeal to get this logic ended up suggesting that 'it is a perfect waste of time to make managers put up a schedule of task. On a large garden the tasks vary according to season and the quality of *coolie*'.⁵⁴⁷

542 D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 64.

543 See Chapter 2 for details.

544 The managers often "encouraged" the laid off workforce to go back "home" to 'recruit' during this period as *sardars*. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 204.

545 Again a commissioner of a tea district (Darrang) observed that the minimum wages for men (Rs5) women (Rs.4) and child (Rs.3) were seldom earned except busy the 'tea season'. He further expressed his reservations regarding these earnings being sufficient. *Assam Labour Report, 1879; Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 94.

546 Deputy Commissioner, Sylhet, *Assam Labour Report 1882*, p. 36.

547 Deputy Commissioner, Darrang, *Assam Labour Report 1883*, p. 6.

A comparison of the rates of field tasks from four tea gardens of a single district in Assam valley reveals a variation in rates and also considerable differentiation in the nature of tasks.

Table 5.1: Field Tasks on Tea gardens in late nineteenth century.⁵⁴⁸

Work	Garden 1 Dijoo (78 acres under tea)	Garden 2 Lilabari (280 acres under tea)	Garden 3 Hulmari (342 acres under tea)	Garden 4 Silanibari (350 acres under tea)
Hoeing (deep)	15 nals	20 nals (men) 15 nals (women)	8, 10, 12 nals According to class of work	---
Hoeing (light)	25–30 nals According to state of ground	30–40 (men) 20–30 (women)	25–40 nals According to condi- tions	25–40 nals According to condi- tions
Hoeing (double)	12	15 (men) 10 (women)	---	16–20 nals
Plucking	4–8 seers According to season	6–10 seers According to flush and quality	6–8 seers According to season and flush	3–8 seers According to season and flush
Forking				
Pruning (top)			300 plants	
Pruning (stick)			50 plants	40–80 plants According to style and age of plants

The modes of assessing work was either by a measuring device (called *nal*) or counting the rows of tea bushes (*gallis*). As planting was not uniform everywhere, the two measurements did not always coincide. Also, these tasks varied according to the nature of the soil, time of the operation, and intensity of work—deep or light.⁵⁴⁹

Plucking tasks measured by weight of the leaves collected was also influenced by the local, seasonal and the method of operation.⁵⁵⁰ The shifting nature

⁵⁴⁸ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886–1889* (Calcutta, 1890).

⁵⁴⁹ Hoeing essentially done by men was carried out five to seven times a year. A deep hoe was usually done once a year. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 65; *The Report of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee, 1906* in S.D. Punekar and R Varickayil, *Labour Movement in India, Vol. I* (1989, Delhi) p. 151.

⁵⁵⁰ The nature plucking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had significantly improvised from the early tea plantations of East India Company working under the supervision of Bruce and the advice of the “skilled” Chinese. In the 1860, Lees observed that the tea bushes

of the Assam/Indian tea, competing with the Chinese tea as a “superior” drink in the global tea market, was not just achieved by the application of modern technology and greater mechanisation of production process, but, also, facilitated by the methods of plucking practised in the late nineteenth century plantations. This was plucking the top part of the tea flush—buds with two leaves (fine plucking)—which was supposed to yield a superior quality tea during manufacturing.⁵⁵¹

This shift had a bearing on the plucking abilities of workers as observed by a tea manager in the 1890s:

Under the old regime, when coarse plucking was universally practised, an industrious woman has been known to bring in over a maund (80 pounds) of leaf in a day; but she can rarely manage to pluck a third of that amount with strict “two and a bud.”⁵⁵²

Such a change is suggested in the language handbook where the planter coaxing the workers to ‘pluck with both hands’ (to intensify the work process) made it very apparent that they had to concentrate on ‘plucking two leaves and one bud’.⁵⁵³ This distinction (coarse or fine) was often rigorously enforced. This was narrated by an assistant who said that the manager ‘would occasionally search the baskets

flushed from twenty to thirty times a year and if the leaves were plucked immediately as it tended to harden on the bushes and became unfit for production. A more ‘scientific’ and ‘systematic’ approach to plucking was attempted from 1870s which identified three general variables—the season, the method of plucking and the species of tea bush. But on the same garden, there were other variables to contend with. The flush could have been full or weak, plucking might have to be carried on from behind the flush or by getting in front of it. Distance was also a factor, as planted areas of some gardens were close to the *coolie* lines and tea houses, while in some others it could be as far as a mile. Around the turn of the century plucking usually began in March and April and is continued till the beginning of December. There were six to seven full flushes in a year, but each bush was plucked approximately every ten days. W.N. Lees, *Tea Cultivation, cotton and other agricultural experiments in India: a review* (Calcutta, 1863) p. 369; T.G. Stoker, *Notes on the Management of Tea Plant* (Calcutta, 1874) pp 6–12; J.C. Kydd, *The Tea Industry* (London, 1921) pp. 17–10; P Griffiths, *The History of Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) pp. 484–485; H.A. Antrobus, *A History of the Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd* (London, 1948) pp. 99–101; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sibsagar* (Allahabad, 1906) p. 149; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet* (Allahabad, 1906) p. 141.

551 A tea planter from Darjeeling mentioned a similar change where the practice of plucking three or sometimes more leaves shifted to two leaves and a bud method and sometimes just one leaf and the bud. Antrobus citing an Annual meeting of Assam Company (1902) described ‘fine plucking’ as plucking of two leaves and a bud taken at seven days old, and the coarser plucking was ten to twelve days old leaf, taking the third leaf when available. A.J. Wallis-Tayler, *Tea Machinery and Tea Factories* (London, 1900) p. 33; J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910) p. 24; Antrobus, *A History of Assam Company* (Edinburgh, 1957) p. 190.

552 D. Cole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 58.

553 *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) p. 45.

(of the pluckers) and added to the threats of what would happen to a woman and her forbears if she plucked an extra leaf'.⁵⁵⁴ Such practices of 'plucking surveillance' have become a recurrent theme in *Jhumur* songs. In one of the songs, the worker is sternly instructed to pluck *Ekti koli duiti paat* (one bud and two leaves) in order to earn her *bhaat* (rice/food).⁵⁵⁵

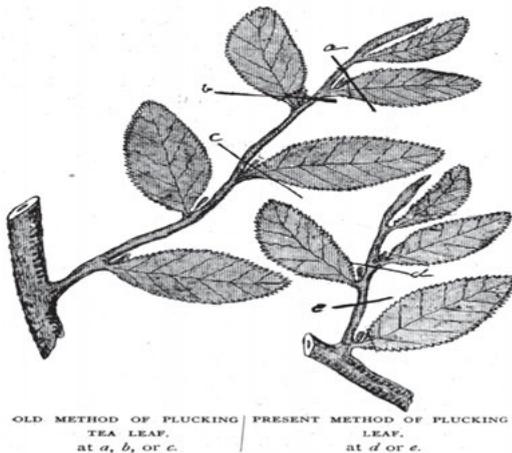


Figure 5.5: Old and New Methods of Plucking⁵⁵⁶

The rigorous demands for precision and accuracy stood in stark contrast to the claims of “easiness” of plucking and “naturalness” of nimble finger of women. The time required to master these skills was observed by a planter when he suggested that, ‘the difference between an old hand and a beginner was transparent in the quality and quantity of leaf brought to scale’.⁵⁵⁷ The value of an “old hand” in plucking was apparent from the experiences of “experimental” plantations as described by Bruce.⁵⁵⁸ A sustained yearning for settled workers was, therefore,

⁵⁵⁴ W M Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁵⁵⁵ Kali Dasgupta, *Folk Songs of Bengal and Assam* (Calcutta, 2003) in <http://kalidasgupta.com/kalid2.html>; P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) pp. 193–196.

⁵⁵⁶ J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910) p. 14.

⁵⁵⁷ G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 137.

⁵⁵⁸ See Chapter 1.

apparent from the inauguration of tea cultivation and production in Assam. As this was becoming more feasible in this period, one could argue that it not only addressed the chronic “shortages” of labour, but also allowed the acquisition of specialised skills—to attain the different tasks with greater efficiency.

Again, the variation and lack of regularity in the amount of work constituting a “reasonable” rate led to different customs (*dustoor*) in a particular garden constituting the schedule (for the different tasks) at any one time.⁵⁵⁹ Such rates were often excessive and tough to accomplish, as narrated by some returnees.⁵⁶⁰ On certain occasions, some planters on finding that the cultivation was falling into arrears would even reduce the task to induce the *coolies* to earn a double *hazira*.⁵⁶¹ The “flexibility” to define tasks could not always inscribe the will of the manager/work supervisor. At times, these unilateral moves were resisted by the solidarities forged in the context of life and work and the urgent contingencies emanating from these shared anxieties.

For instance, on the increase in the pruning task (25 *nals* to 30 *nals*) in Kharjan tea estate (Lakhimpur, 1901), all the *coolies* refused to recognize the change and kept working according to the older rates (25 *nals*). The manager summoned the *coolies* to his bungalow and enquired a man, Gulali, whether he had accomplished his task. Gulali replied in an affirmative according to the *dustoor*. This was immediately contradicted by the field overseer (*muharir*). The manager then slapped Gulali, on which the assembled *coolies* attacked him with sticks. The manager took refuge inside his bungalow, where he was held up with his assistants for nearly two hours.⁵⁶² After a “unilateral” augmentation of the hoeing task in Bangaon garden (Darrang, 1903), the *coolies* reluctantly carried on under the new rates for few days but eventually struck work. When the native assistants tried to get them back to work, the workers refused to submit. Later they assembled outside the manager’s office with hoes in hand, addressing their complaints to the manager.⁵⁶³ The workers of Puthiacherra (Sylhet, 1902) struck work when the hoeing task of the garden was augmented. Later, they assaulted a sardar for

559 A Deputy Commissioner of a tea district (Sylhet) noted the futility of comparison of tasks of different gardens. He argued that such a comparison ‘is more of an arbitrary presumption than a genuine searching of truth’. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886–1889* (Calcutta, 1890).

560 See Chapter 3.

561 The District Commissioner of Kamrup observed that the planters would sometimes reduce the task from say thirty *nals* to twenty *nals* to encourage the *coolies* to earn double *hazira* by hoeing 40 *nals*. *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886–1889* (Calcutta, 1890) pp. 217–226.

562 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

563 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

compelling them to get back to work.⁵⁶⁴ A general refusal to work due to the tasks being “excessive” occurred on the Sessa tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1901). Around sixty *coolies* left the garden and appeared before the district commissioner to complain about their tasks.⁵⁶⁵

The increase in tasks was often used as a “strategy” to discipline the workers for delays, absences and work deemed as “bad” or “short”. At times, not just the degree of tasks, but its nature was altered to discipline the “erring” *coolies*. For instance, when the women workers of Sapataki garden (Sibsagar, 1892) arrived late for plucking one afternoon, their *sardars* were ordered (by the manager) to put them to hoeing—a more physically punishing work. The manager was attacked and left unconscious.⁵⁶⁶ Again, when fines were inflicted by the manager of Mozemga garden (Sibsagar, 1879) on some women as a punishment for “short-work”, he was severely assaulted by them.⁵⁶⁷ A textbook on tea management advised the managers in such circumstances ‘to not fine the whole lot as they have a common cause of resentment’, but rather to ‘select the worst of them and fine them a lot’.⁵⁶⁸

The assessment of an individual’s task was ‘theoretically’ open to the ‘interpretations’ of the supervising authorities regulating and registering the work.⁵⁶⁹ Contesting this view that ‘the subordinate staff has as a general too much power in this respect (in the measurement of work)’. A colonial report emphatically asserted that ‘there was no ground for supposing that measurements generally are not supervised by the managers’. Gardens, as it went on to depict, ‘are marked

564 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

565 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

566 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

567 Annual Report of Police Administration of Assam, 1879, p. 23.

568 C Bald, *Indian tea: Its culture and manufacture* (Calcutta, 1922) p. 319.

569 In case of Chinese *coolies* in Cuba the law demanded that they completed five “tasks” a week. In most instances, the “task” was determined by the overseer, who could arbitrarily declare any work as unsatisfactory and withhold wages. This became one of the most frequent complaints of labourers. Again in the plantations of Fiji, the guideline supposedly defining tasks was work which an average, able-bodied male worker could complete in six hours steady work. The definition and allotment of tasks in the field was however left to discretion of the overseer who was ‘to all intents and purposes the sole judge of the fair limits of the task work.’ A.J. Meagher, *Coolie trade: The traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America* (Philadelphia, 2008) p. 255; K. Saunders, *Indentured labour in the British Empire, 1834–1920*, p. 133; Shaista Shameen, ‘Migration, Labour and Plantation Labour in Fiji’ in S. Jain and R.Reddock, *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p. 55; D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p. 4.

in blocks, and the manager knows exactly and the *coolies* too have a fair idea of how many are required for a particular task'.⁵⁷⁰

This was very much in line with a growing sentiment towards “scientific management” of plantations, where every aspect of plantation life and work process was attempted to be carefully defined to obtain maximum efficiency through documentation, control and intensification. The limits of such strategies becomes evident in everyday practices.

The next couple of photographs depict the operation of daily field work carried (early 20th century).



Figure 5.6: Plucking Tea Leaves.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷⁰ *Special Report on the Working of Act I of 1882 in The Province of Assam during the years 1886–1889* (Calcutta, 1890) p. 164.

⁵⁷¹ Assamese Women in Costume, Picking Tea Leaves. NAA INV 04423401, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 5.7: Hoeing the Field⁵⁷²

The images of plucking work being conducted by women and hoeing task done by the men reveals the dominating presence of supervisors (*sardar* and *muharrir*) organising, controlling and verifying the work. In the first image, the *sardar* (at the back with a turban) was directing a group of female pluckers working on a few designated rows (*gallis*) of the tea bushes. In the second image, the overseers (with *kurta* or shirt) were supervising and recording the male *coolies* hoeing along certain rows of the bushes.

Supervision at the workplace operated through varying layers of control with diverse and overlapping functions in the conduct of work. The work supervisor, or *Sardars*, were placed over batches (*Chillan*) of men or women and apparently received general directions from the manager regarding the work to be achieved on a daily basis.⁵⁷³ They were accountable for their batch turning out for work at the designated hour, and also the attainment of a quantity of work by them.⁵⁷⁴ The ‘sardar’s mode of management’, as a planter portrayed, ‘was to parade up and down between the rows of the bushes, armed with a small stick and the

572 J. Buckingham, *A Few Facts about Indian Tea* (London, 1910).

573 The necessity of overseers was immediately realised by the colonial government with the arrival of Chinese workers in Cuba, and the emerging “labour difficulties”. They recommended the planters to appoint overseers to ‘guide, watch over, and assist the labourers in their work.’ A.J. Meagher, *The Coolie Trade: The traffic in Chinese Laborers to Latin America, 1847–1874* (Philadelphia, 2008) p. 208.

574 W M Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

dignity that his position of authority gave him' and where he constantly 'incited them (*coolies*) to make haste and get along faster (Che lao! Che lao!)'.⁵⁷⁵

The authority of *sardar*, contrary to many allusions in the planter narratives, was not necessarily derived, but was also constituted and reconstituted by their location in the work hierarchy and social life on the tea gardens.⁵⁷⁶ Some *sardars* were the recruiters (recruiting *sardar*), who managed to persuade and bring a fairly large number of people with them. While others were older "respected" men of the garden and even the nearby *bastis*. A manager (H Grant, Ainakhal Tea Garden) from Cachar referred to three "prominent" *sardars* on his garden to the 1906 Labour Commission. This gives a sense of the broad variation of this category. One of them, named Manniram Das, was a native of Sylhet and owned property close to the garden. He controlled over two hundred *coolies* of the garden for which he received one *anna* per *rupee* worth of work executed (twenty five percent of the wages). The other *sardar*, Ismail, was born on the garden, while the third, Ramsha Kurmi (a native from Azamgarh), had worked on the plantation for more than thirty years. They commanded over fifty *coolies* individually and received the wages of the workers. These *sardars* shared social and work ties with their gang, which were articulating in extremely complex ways.⁵⁷⁷

When a *sardar* was severely abused by the manager of Talap tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1898) for taking a 'break' during work and chatting with other *sardars*, the *coolies* attacked the manager and his three assistants. Two years later, on the same garden, a riot occurred under fairly comparable circumstances. The Assistant manager (Jameson) while "disciplining" the *coolies* for the way work was being conducted 'took hold of the *sardar* and ran him up to the place where the plucking was to begin'. He was attacked with sticks.⁵⁷⁸ The incident which tran-

575 The intensity of the work that the *Sardar* demanded (Come on! Come on) had interesting parallels with the *Jhumur* song *Sardar Bole Kaam Kaam* (Sardar says Work! Work). G. Barker, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) pp. 135–136. For such practices in contemporary tea plantations in North Bengal P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) p. 201.

576 In the case of Surinam plantations, the equivalent of *Sardar* called *Mandur* was seen as an crucial link in the chain of command as they could speak in the native language. But the 'threat' of demotion, as Hoeft argues, kept them on the side of the employers. Shobita Jains' study of the contemporary Assam plantation shows a degree of mutuality existing between the *sardars* and their gangs. R. Hoeft, *In Place of Slavery: A Social History of British Indian and Javanese Laborers in Suriname* (Gainesville, 1998) p. 23; S. Jain, 'Gender Relations and the Plantation System in Assam', in S. Jain and R. Reddock, *Women Plantation Workers: International Experiences* (Oxford, 1998) p. 55.

577 Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906) pp. 148–149.

578 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

spired in Barjuli garden (1891, Darrang), where the manager forced the *coolies* to turn out for work on a day after a festival, started when a *sardar*, representing the worker's case, was assaulted by the manager.⁵⁷⁹

These incidents, signifying the ties of deference and mutuality of interests between the *sardars* and *coolies*, has also to be appreciated in the background of several other incidents where the *sardar* becomes the target, as an exemplar of perverse and coercive authority.

Apart from their role in supervising field work, the *sardars* also assisted in the measurement of the individual's task which was documented by the *mohurir*—the native supervisors—and entered in books.⁵⁸⁰ Later, they were supposed to appear before the manager to give an account of the day's work, complain against any defaulters, and receive the instructions for the subsequent day's work.⁵⁸¹



Figure 5.8: Native Supervisors.⁵⁸²

The relentless goading of managers, overseers and *sardars* to drive the workers hard on the fields, as the following phrases from a language handbook suggested, was not always effective.⁵⁸³

⁵⁷⁹ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁵⁸⁰ Crole makes a case for a “chain of hierarchy” in place during field work. The *sardars* were said to be supervised by *mohurir* and who in turn was under a head or *burra muharrir*—who was answerable to the manager for the whole conduct of the work. D. Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 8.

⁵⁸¹ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters' Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p. 81.

⁵⁸² *Assamese Tea Overseers and Writers in Costume Outside Wood-Slat Building*. NAA INV 04423600, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵⁸³ *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927) pp. 44–48.

Why have you not finished your work? Others can finish, why cannot you?

The quicker you pluck the more the pice you will make

Make the hoe deeper

You must finish it. Else you would be short paid.

The extremely strenuous deep hoeing, mentioned a manager, was the occasion for the ‘coolies to shirk and get better of his employer’. He found this impossible to check because by ‘dexterous manipulation the *coolie* cuts the top earth in such a way to present the appearance of a good deep cut’.⁵⁸⁴ Such shirking was interpreted by another manager as a ‘trick is to make the manager think that he has given a wrong order and give them easier work in consequence’.⁵⁸⁵

The quality and the quantity of individual’s work was recorded in the ‘books’—which was becoming a stable feature in the task assessment practices of the late nineteenth century tea gardens.⁵⁸⁶The sense of empowerment of the *mohurir* was not just his clothes, umbrella, stick but also the pen and book.

There were instances of discrepancies and corrupt practices in assessment (by *sardars*) and recording (by *mohurir*), leading to serious anxieties among the field workers.⁵⁸⁷ Even the work in the tea-house/factory was marked by the presence of work supervisors (as in the next two photographs) evaluating and recording the work.

There was a feeling that the books kept in the local vernacular (Assamese and sometimes Bengali) meant that the ‘imported labourers (as well as the managers) were pretty much in the hands of *mohurir* who writes these accounts’.⁵⁸⁸ Absences marked in books were not always intentional and often used as a means of fining work deemed as short or bad. Some other practices of not keeping a ‘record’, but

584 G. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (1884, Calcutta) pp. 81–82.

585 F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters’ Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p. 13.

586 F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters’ Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p. 44, p. 46.

587 Chakrabarty argues that such ‘falsification of documents’ was integral to the operation of power and authority that the sardar wielded over the *coolie*. A contemporary observer alluding to the fact that ‘coolies are often cheated out of a portion of their wages’ suggested that to prevent this fraud the ‘planters often oblige the *muharrir* to pay in their presence, or what is better, pay them personally.’ D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History* (Princeton, 1989) p. 108; S Ward, *A Glimpse of Assam* (Calcutta, 1884) p. 125.

588 Major Graham (Deputy Commissioner, Darrang) *Reports on the Tea and Tobacco Industries in India* (London, 1874) p. 81.

merely giving the workers a token with a value ‘commensurate’ with the portion of the task achieved.⁵⁸⁹ The dimension of the tokens from Mertinga tea garden

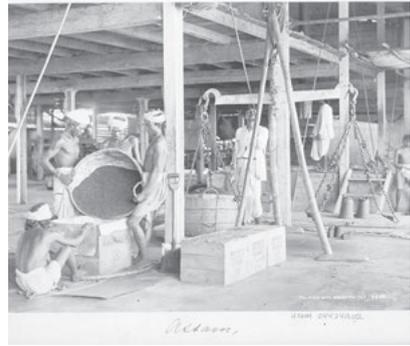


Figure 5.9 and 5.10: Working in Tea Factory.⁵⁹⁰

589 This practice was reported by the Commissioner of a tea district in the late 1870s. The official efforts to conduct an enquiry in to causes of mortality on a garden in Cachar were hampered because of the absence of any books showing the earnings of each *worker* separately. The system on this garden (followed by other gardens of the area) was to pay in “tokens”, which were cashed on a weekly or monthly basis. These token did not always have a cash value, but sometimes merely mentioned the quality of tasks achieved—half haziri, quarter haziri. The master of Calcutta mint in a letter dated 26th February 1877 to the financial department mentioned an order to produce haziri tickets for Assam tea gardens ranging from 3 annas down to $\frac{1}{4}$ anna. He mentioned that these “certificates of work” were objectionable on may accounts. If a particular shop would accept them for goods it would have a practical monopoly of the dealings of the plantation coolie. The more serious objection was that it would be in lieu of the coin provided by the government which alone was the legal tender by law and it would therefore be a reversal of the policy of making coinage more uniform. The response of the government was not restrain the manufacture of token coins. Das in his study of plantation labour noted that daily payment made by brass tokens which were not only cashed by the gardens management but sometimes commissioned to a shop. The 1906 Commission found this as a general practice in the district of Sylhet. *Assam Labour Report*, 1880, p. 5; *Manufacture in the Calcutta Mint of token coins for use in the Tea gardens* Financial Department A, Mint and Paper currency, April 1877, nos 15–16. *Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts* (Calcutta, 1906) p. 137, pp. 139–140. R.K. Das, *Plantation Labour in India* (Calcutta, 1931) p. 143.

590 *Assamese women sorting tea n.d* and *Assamese men packing and weighing tea n.d*. NAA INV 04423202 and NAA INV 04424002, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

(Sylhet, 1896) varied according to the fraction of the task concluded.⁵⁹¹ This was also seen as an effective tactic to discourage ‘absenteeism’, as the tokens were collected at the *ghunti* (muster) the day after. A manager (Sylhet, 1902) permitted an ‘established’ garden *chowkidar* (who also owned a shop in the garden) to cash these tokens. He took a percent commission for his “services” and *coolies* often ended up surrendering the tokens earned during the course of the month, just in exchange for food. A riot was reported from this garden with the *coolies* complaining that their wages were low.

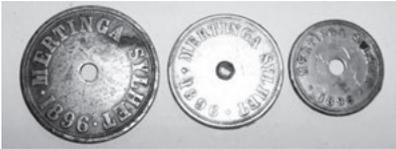


Figure 5.11: Garden Token. ⁵⁹²

The pervasiveness of grievances against such ‘excesses’ is borne out by a ‘practical treatise’ on the ‘management of Assam tea gardens’ where the author observed that the ‘*coolies* are continually complaining that their sirdar is cheating them’. He strongly recommended his readers (young tea planters) that ‘though a manager should never take a *coolie*’s part against his sirdar...but he would not be acting fairly to let such a complaint pass unexamined into’. He went on to propose a ‘way out of the difficulty’:

Bring the coolie and his sirdar face to face. Say to the coolie. “Now, then, you say this sirdar has cheated you out of some land? Answer, “Yes.” “All right, then! I shall measure your land myself; and if you are wrong, you forfeit your day’s hazira, for complaining unjustly of your superior. If you are right, then I shall punish your sirdar...Most likely one of them will give in.”⁵⁹³

Notwithstanding the effectiveness of such a strategy, there were instances when the workers could not be so easily placated. Workers of Rema garden (Sylhet, 1898) refused to join work because their previous day’s tasks were arbitrarily deemed as ‘short’, without the overseers actually measuring it on the excuse of

⁵⁹¹ These brass tokens are from a private collection. The first image illustrates distinct tokens used by the gardens belonging to different tea companies—mostly in Sylhet. For details see <http://www.koi-hai.com>.

⁵⁹² H L Thomas, Sub Divisional Officer, South Sylhet to Deputy Commissioner Sylhet, 23rd January 1904. Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904. ASA.

⁵⁹³ F.T.R Deas, *The Young Tea-Planters’ Companion: A Practical Treatise on the management of a tea-garden in Assam* (London, 1886) p. 41.

persistent rains.⁵⁹⁴ On being paid short wages, the workers of Khobang tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1892) assaulted the overseers who were perceived as the “reason” for the faulty assessment of their tasks.⁵⁹⁵ There was a strike in Amrailcherra tea garden (Sylhet, 1902) and workers declined to get back to work because they had issues with the overseers for habitually making under assessments. On being physically coerced by the manager to comply, they assaulted him.⁵⁹⁶

There were complaints made by workers of Balipara tea garden (Sylhet, 1890) for being paid less than what they felt they had actually earned during the month. When the manager tried to arbitrate, he was assaulted.⁵⁹⁷ The intervention of a manager of Kalacherra (Cachar, 1892) to “protect” the garden *babu* from being assaulted by workers for an existing objection was resented. A large group followed the manager on his way back to the bungalow. He was later stopped and assaulted.⁵⁹⁸ Again, when the management of Mirtinga tea garden (Sylhet, 1903) stopped the pay of some individuals on account of bad work, they collected in front of the garden office and vented their concerns.⁵⁹⁹ The “disquiet” that took place on the pay day on Hukanpukri garden (Lakhimpur, 1900), which led to a group of three hundred workers combining against the manager, started with an individual complaining about the faulty assessment of their overtime work.⁶⁰⁰

Such anxieties were not limited to the field. In a case reported from the tea-house of Joboka garden (Sibsagar, 1902), the “factory workers” assembled as they were seriously aggrieved about their overtime assessment. When the manager attempted to ‘disarm’ them, he was challenged and severely beaten along with his assistant.⁶⁰¹

The practices of assessment on the fields for plucking, accomplished by the women workers, had to undergo another stage of assessment: the verification and weighing of the leaves plucked.

The photograph (Fig 5.17) from Jorehaut tea company garden was of a ‘weighing booth’ for plucked leaves brought by the female *coolies*.⁶⁰² The European manager was assessing the quality of the leaves (fine or coarse), while one of the

594 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

595 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

596 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

597 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

598 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

599 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

600 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

601 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

602 W.A.B. Nicholetts, served in the Jorehaut Tea Company from 1898–1937 and this photograph is taken from one of the tea gardens around 1905–1910. H.A. Antrobus, *The Jorehaut Tea Company Ltd.* (London, 1948).

native assistant weighed it and the other kept a record of the weight in the books. The weighing scene was detailed by a tea manager from another garden:

There were three weighing booths (for plucked leaves)...The head babu wrote up the hazris (attendance), and we (European manager/assistants) searched each basket before it was put on the scale. When a fault in leaf was found...the woman with her basket was turned out of the line into a large pen alongside...by the time the weighing was finished there would be forty or fifty women waiting...clearing out the offending shoots from their baskets.⁶⁰³



Figure 5.12: Weighing Leaves in the absence of manager⁶⁰⁴

These practices of ‘disciplining’ for the quality of leaves plucked and other suspicions of cheating during weighing also figures prominently in the language handbook.⁶⁰⁵

What is the brick doing in your basket? You are trying to get extra weight.

Your leaf is hot and red.

Your leaf is very coarse.

You must pick out the coarse leaves before I can weigh it.

⁶⁰³ W. M. Fraser, *The Recollections of a Tea Planter* (London, 1935).

⁶⁰⁴ *Assamese Women in Costume, Bringing Baskets of Tea Leaves to Be Weighed* n.d. NAA INV 04423402, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁶⁰⁵ *Tea Districts Labour Association Language Handbook, Santhali* (Calcutta, 1929) pp. 40–41. For a similar practice in Ceylon see *Cooly Tamil, as understood by Labourers on Tea and Rubber estates* (Colombo, 1915) pp. 50–52.

The claims of authority and complete control of the European managers and assistants was exaggerated, as the *sardars* and *mohurir* were also relevant in conducting the operation (Figure 5.17).

Durapati (Khawang garden, Lakhimpur, 1914) was subject to a similar probing and disciplining and later denied payment on account of the “poor” quality of leaves she had plucked. The assembled workers assaulted and confined the manager in his office.

The discrepancy in the timing and non-payment of wages was also a potent tactic to “bind” the *coolies*, compel them into debt and, at times, discipline the “offenders”. Such practices of labour control were employed on the Assam Company plantations in the late 1840s. This stimulated serious disturbances and contributed to the ‘militant’ image of the Kacharis—who consistently and collectively thwarted these moves.⁶⁰⁶ These practices apparently persevered in the changed milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century plantations. Even after the establishment of ‘occasions’ like the pay-day and ‘protective’ claims of the contracts for legislating a ‘minimum wage’—which was rarely enforced.

On the non-payment of wages on the customary pay-day, the workers of Scottpur garden (Cachar, 1896) declined to work. Again, when the wages were not paid to the workers of the Rema tea estate (Sylhet, 1898), they refused to join work. On the use of physical intimidation by the manager to comply, the *coolies* made a collective assault on him. They were later ordered to the muster ground where they again attacked the manager, and struck him several blows with sticks and stones.

A clear purpose in the modification of pay day was manifest in a case reported from Powai tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1917), which was briefly noted earlier. On a particular Monday, the assistant manager (Grant) of this garden arrived at his office to pay the workers their weekly earnings. The assembled group seemed to be in agitated mood and Grant sensing danger made a rush for his bungalow, but was struck several times on the way. The workers later ransacked the office premises. The following morning, despite the presence of police in the garden, about five hundred workers came out in a “festive” mood with sticks, knives and drums and marched round the lines in procession. Later they wrecked the local trader’s (*kaya*) shop. The investigations into the incident revealed that there was general discontentment on account of the garden authorities changing the pay day from Saturdays to Mondays. The workers did not have ready cash for the weekly Sunday market which forced them to take loans from the local *kaya* (trader), whose prices they considered extortionate. There were simultaneous attacks on the symbols representing the garden authorities and the local trader. It was out of the appre-

⁶⁰⁶ See Chapter 1.

hension that there was a collusion between the two parties and the change in the *dustoor* of payment was made to benefit the traders.⁶⁰⁷

5.8 Notions of Honour

A strike was reported in Alinagar garden (Sylhet, 1900). When the assistant manager went to make enquiries, he was assaulted. A curious remark was made in the official report on the incident. It read as follows: ‘the case appears to have originated in some violence on the part of the assistant manager of the estate, who as the accused said took their *izzat* from them’. What was this *izzat* that the workers of Alinagar claimed was being taken from them? *Izzat*, or honour, has been variously argued to have been reposed in women—who were being potentially threatened in these circumstances.⁶⁰⁸

The role and presence of women, as has been argued earlier, was central to the work process of plantations, since its very inception. An early interest in migrant workers was also premised on the perceived necessity of women (and even children) for plucking work, which was not being “satisfactorily” rendered by the local Assamese society. The early contract Acts (1863) specified a percentage of females (15%) in each batch being transported to Assam. The entrenchment and spread of a specialising work process from late 1870s, with a more precise definition of different “jobs” on a plantation (often organised along lines of gender and age), was also a strong reason for the continued reliance on contactors, who could redress any gender imbalance on tea gardens. The competence of contractors in “delivering to order” could potentially fulfil such gendered requirements. There was also a strong predilection to perceive women as “settling” the workforce. The contractors frequently forged such conjugal unions in depots (depot marriage) and, thereby, offering to tea gardens happy couples, who were more likely stay.

607 Again when the prices demanded by the traders were found to be unjustifiably high, there were cases of *hat* looting in Bindukhuri and Balipara gardens (Darrang, 1901). *Letter from JC Webster, Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India dated 23rd April 1917*. Home Department, Police Branch, June 1917, 115, NAI. R. Behal, ‘Forms of Labour protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900–1930’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no.4 (Jan 26th 1985) p. PE 21.

608 For a discourse of *izzat* in the contemporary plantations. See P. Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and post/colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, 2002) p. 160.

The patriarchal authority of managers also claimed to “influence” matrimonial alliances on the plantations, reaffirming their clout and hold on the workers.⁶⁰⁹ A planter handbook clearly makes that allusion:

Manager: Could you not marry your son/daughter to a girl/boy on this garden?

Manager: Longa’s daughter/son will not make a good wife/husband to your son/daughter. She is a lazy girl/boy

Manager: I agree to let your son/daughter marry the person you have selected.⁶¹⁰

The power to frame matrimonial unions merely to ‘suit the interests of the industry’ and enforce the ‘will of the planters’ could not render it as completely notional. A planter suggested that ‘the relations between husband and wife, I think, will bear comparison with those existing amongst our peasantry. The relations between parents and children are even closer and fonder’. The colonial state appeared to uphold the sanctity of marriage. The 1893 amendment to the Assam contract made the provision that the contracts of husband and wife should be synchronised. But the patriarchal intents of the colonial law was made explicit in the 1901 Act which deemed that “single woman” could not travel to Assam without the consent of a lawful guardian (husband/father).

The differentiation of wages and deskilling of woman’s work in the plantation reaffirmed the roles of men as the “breadwinner”—where women of family/community needed care and protection. But in conjunction to the production of family and its associated norms of honour and protection, there were the stereotypes of the promiscuous *coolie*-woman and the rampant practices of managers keeping female *coolies* as mistresses and concubines.⁶¹¹ In addition, instances of sexual abuse on the ‘isolated’ enclaves were not infrequent. The manager of Kacharigaon (Darrang, 1902), assaulted two *coolies*, which according to the official report, ‘had improper intimacy with a girl, who was kept by the manager as his mistress’. A *coolie* girl from Maduri garden (Sibsagar, 1892) was confined and assaulted by the manager when she snubbed his overtures. This lurking threat of the abuse of the woman was articulated in the anxieties over *izzat*.

609 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. 162.

610 *Tea District labour Association Language Hand-Book, Savara* (Calcutta, 1927).

611 In a book on European in India a section on the planter mentions that ‘you occasionally come across a bachelor Planter whose views on a certain form of mortality are somewhat lax. This is he who fits himself with a partner of his loneliness, generally a daughter of the soil.’ A Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj* (New Delhi, 1977) p. 45; H. Hervey, *The European in India* (London, 1913) p. 53.

When a native assistant manager ‘insulted’ the women of a garden, the *coolies* caught hold of him, tied him on his pony, and took him through a distance of eleven miles to the bungalow of the superintendent to make complaints.⁶¹² Again, when the manager of Nadua tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1899) attempted to “outrage” a *coolie* girl, he was assaulted by the workers. There was a “riot” of Rangajan tea garden (Sibsagar, 1899) which was due to the ‘ill feeling against the assistant manager in regard to a woman on the garden’.⁶¹³

The Assistant of Hatikuri tea estate (Cachar, 1913) continued, despite objections, inspecting the leaves plucked by the women *coolies* collected in clothes worn round their waists. He was severely assaulted by the *coolies*. Six of them were charged and arrested for rioting and assault. The legitimacy of the act of assault and the general approval to it was more clearly revealed when an attack was made on the police and the arrested men were released. On further enquiries of the incident it was found that the *coolies* were gravely dissatisfied with this mode of examination of leaves and had made several complaints to the head *babu* of the garden.⁶¹⁴

In a case reported from Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905), one can more clearly notice the dynamics of how a “small” act of disciplining of a *coolie* girl could provoke communal anxieties of honour being threatened and snowball into a general grievance. The manager of the garden in question (Mangin), on his daily inspection of the pruning tasks, took a *coolie* girl (Durgi) by her ear to a place where he felt that she should have been working. Around five men working in the vicinity immediately came rushing up to him, and one among them (Gambhir) in a very agitated mood questioned the manager— “*Ki katri maike marile?*” (Why did you beat up the girl?). Soon, around thirty other field workers approached the scene and assaulted the manager with their clods and sticks. The fleeing manager was chased and held hostage in his bungalow by a group which had grown to around one hundred and fifty. Later in the day, the Koliapani workers—men and women numbering around two hundred—marched for Jorhat (the subdivisional headquarters), and lodged a complaint to the Deputy Commissioner that the *sahib* had threatened their *izzat*.⁶¹⁵

612 *Assam Labour Report* 1884, p. 4.

613 Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

614 Letter from WJ Reid to Secretary to Government of India. Home Department, Police Branch, No 67, Part B, July 1914. NAI.

615 Case 22 G.R. of 1905, PC Mangin versus Tulsi Kairi, Kamal Kairi, Ramcharan Ganju, Arjun Goala, Bhandari Ganju, Jagua Bhumiz, Lachman Muchi, Sibchoran.; Sections 147, 148 IPC, Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 105–107, Part B, July 1905. NAI.

5.9 Violence as Protest, Protest as Violence

A degree of violence, as we have noticed in our cases, is a recurring facet of protest action of plantation workers. Apart from physical attack, appliances used in plantation work like hoes, *kodalis*, sticks and *daos* became weapons at these moments of conflict. It needs to be restated that physical disciplining was a vital element in the perpetuation of planter authority as they had “arrogated” to themselves the right to private discipline. A shift from practices of systematic and excessive use of violence, rampant in the “unsettled” plantations of 1860s, did not imply that violent disciplining was purged. It was more in the lines of what Merry suggests in the context of colonial Hawaii ‘that the (planters’) image of paternal power enabled violence to be thought as discipline, justifying the use of flogging and whips on the plantations’. But as she goes to point that there were ‘forms of violence that were thought to be excessive just as paternal authority in the home required violence to establish and maintain discipline, but not excessive violence’.⁶¹⁶

Such a tendency comes to the fore in the cases of assault on individuals, which at times were deemed disproportionate and met with organised opposition. A *coolie* in the Apin tea garden (Cachar, 1895) was ordered by the manager to bring back certain individuals who had absconded. While returning back to the garden, two of the apprehended *coolies* escaped. He was severely disciplined by the manager, who beat him up with a stick. Later in the day when the manager was making the rounds of the garden, the *coolies* expressed their dissent. One worker caught hold of the bridle of his pony and others threatened him with *kodalis* (hoes). On the public caning of a worker from Bokel tea garden (Lakhimpur, 1893), the *coolies* attacked the manager on whose orders such an act was carried out. An aggravated assault with hoes was committed by a number of *coolies* of Laskarpur (Sylhet, 1897) on the manager who had given three strokes with a stick to one of the *coolies* in chastisement for assaulting a *sardar*.

Often it was not merely the nature of violence, but the individual targeted which led to it being perceived as “illegitimate”. This becomes evident in the disciplining of Durgi (a young girl who the manager “mildly” took by the ear), which led to assaults and mass withdrawal of workers from the garden.

With regard to the numerous “incidents” of violence of tea gardens, consider three cases which can be detailed at some greater length:

In the first incident, Aghna, a *chaukidar* at the bungalow of Dr. Patherson (Moran tea garden, Lakhimpur, 1902) was brutally whipped by him. This assault

⁶¹⁶ S.E. Merry, *Colonizing Hawaii: The cultural power of law* (Princeton, 2000) p. 140. J. Breman, *Taming the Coolie Beast: Plantation Society and the colonial order in Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 1989)

caused some disenchantment and ill-feeling in the garden. The colonial investigation report of the incident read:

Dr Patherson of Moran tea estate found fault with a *coolie* named Aghna and slapped him; this enraged him and his relations. Aghna and three other *coolies* brought a number of *coolies* and formed an unlawful assembly, with the common object of insulting and intimidating Dr. Patherson and Mr. Harroks (the manager).⁶¹⁷

The “personal” annoyance of Aghna and his relations, which the report suggests, grossly underestimated the antipathy the incident provoked. The “unlawful assembly” consisted of around sixty workers of the garden who pursued the carriage of the manager and doctor, as they were driving home through the coolie lines, using defiant language.

In the next instance, a series of assaults were made on Matadin, a *coolie* of Monai garden (1914) by the manager, assistant manager and their orderlies. The battered and bruised Matadin had to be taken to the “coolie hospital” in fairly critical circumstances. Later, a group of about two hundred workers took the ailing Matadin from the hospital and decided to leave the garden. The manager tried to halt this “exodus” and make the group return by pursuing them on a horseback. One of workers—Ramadin, (possibly a relative of Matadin)—grabbed the manager’s horse by the bridle and forced him to dismount. The manager then drew out his revolver and fired. On this the workers assaulted the manager with sticks till he fell unconscious. The group then broke into two parties, one of which administered a severe thrashing to a Sikh *havildar* (police constable), and the other party went searching for a particular *jamadar* (native staff).⁶¹⁸

The third incident occurred on 27th July 1901. This subsequently went to court. This allowed two versions of the same episode to appear, which, as we will see, is very instructive. The first account was apparently based on the witnesses of some workers of the garden. It was told that the whole incident started when a worker named Hiroa had requested a *babu* (Rajoni Cant Ghose) leave, as he was feeling unwell. The *babu* refused to accept this request. Shortly afterwards, while Hiroa was working on the field, he again happened to meet the *babu* and repeated his appeal. He was again denied, but in an extremely offensive tone. On this, the brother of Hiroa pushed the *babu*, wherein two *sardars* quickly rushed to stop him. Later in the day a group of around twelve men struck work, and proceeded to the residential lines announcing that they intend to leave for *Zillah* (district

⁶¹⁷ Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

⁶¹⁸ Letter from BC Allen, Offg Chief Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 20th June, 1914. Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 120–22, August 1914. NAI.

headquarters) to lodge a complaint. One of the members was then despatched to bring the families to join them in their mission. When the news reached the manager (Lyall), he repeatedly sent a garden staff to communicate an order to the striking party to immediately report to him. The party consistently refused to comply. Describing the same episode, the garden doctor claimed that ‘they (the striking workers) accompanied their refusal with threat’. However, the court in its judgement observed that ‘there is not the slightest evidence to support this, and the man who himself went to bring them, does not say so’. Lyall later proceeded to the scene (with the *babu*) to personally stop these workers from leaving. On the refusal of the workers to comply, he ordered a group of coolies (described as old *coolies*) to thrash the striking party.

The manager, in a written statement to the court, had a different story to tell. He claimed that on hearing the news of some workers leaving, he decided to go to their residential quarters to pacify them and was “unexpectedly assaulted” with sticks and knocked down by two men—Nauhu and Sriram. The garden doctor added further detail to this assault. He went to the extent of quoting Lyall, who he claimed to have pleaded the workers approaching to attack him: ‘What has happened? Leave your *lathies* and come to me to see what I shall do’.⁶¹⁹

These relatively detailed and slightly contesting accounts indicate how the workers anxieties regarding work, discipline and violence, manifesting in myriad ways (including through violence), could very easily have been reduced into “one violent act” in the colonial reporting. The vicious assaults on Matadin did not necessarily lead to counter violence, but workers at first chose to leave the garden with the intent to, perhaps, take Matadin to a better equipped hospital at the district headquarters, or register a complaint with the colonial authorities stationed there. The ensuing action of the manager to prevent this group from leaving, by force and fire, led to a string of assaults on him and the garden authorities. Similarly, Hiroa and his fellow workers initially decided to go to the *Zillah* after Hiroa’s repeated requests for leave went unheeded. The manager’s attempts to “personally” stop them, by possibly supervising a “collective” attack, led to scuffles and severe fights on the garden. This resonated with another instance of coolie violence and riot reported from a Sylhet garden in 1903. The Chief Commissioner while reviewing the magistrate’s judgement of conviction in this case rejected the formulaic approach taken by him in arriving at his decision. The Commissioner noted that the magistrate had made no attempt to investigate the merits of the original complaint of *haziri* made by the accused Dayal on the pay day. There was little cross examination of the witnesses to elicit some intelligible explanation for

619 Emperor vs Lyall And Ors. on 2/12/190. (1902) ILR 29 Cal 128, <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/842423/>.

Dayal's violent conduct. It seemed very likely that when the aggrieved Dayal was forced and even physically disciplined by manager when he refused to join work did he turn violent. There was no evidence whatever to support the magistrate's theory that Dayal brought a dao to the occasion with the intention of attacking.⁶²⁰ These instances remind us about the nature and limits of our "material" (from the colonial archives), which foregrounds violence as the necessary reason and condition of coolies' "reaction". Such a narrative strategy is particularly employed to empty agency from the worker's actions, where very different motivations and modes of protest are conveniently collapsed into the overarching category of violence and quickly read as "instinctive" and almost "compulsive". Again, this is not to deny the significance of violence in coolie labour protest, but to suggest a degree of scepticism regarding its overrepresentation.

A feature which comes out at these moments of violent conflicts is that the point of attack is not restricted to the manager himself but also other symbolic manifestations of his authority. Here it is useful to see the representation of managerial authority through a contemporary photograph.



Figure 5.13: Tea Manager Bungalow, European Assistants and Native Staff.⁶²¹

The bungalow, the figure of him riding the horse, the other individuals identified with this authority structure (European assistants, native staff and even the colonial policemen) became potential targets during such conflicts.

⁶²⁰ Home, Public (Assault), June 1902, Part B, no.336. NAI.

⁶²¹ *Tea Managers' Thatch Roof Bungalow in Assam n.d.* NAA INV 04423502, Photo lot 161, Emma A. Koch photograph collection of India, South Asia, and Australia, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

5.10 A Collective Will to Leave

A very distinctive practice that emerges from our survey is the phenomena of workers withdrawing “collectively” from gardens and presenting themselves before the colonial authorities stationed at the district headquarters. This propensity was confirmed by a colonial commissioner in the early twentieth century when he opined that ‘tea coolies have a pretty clear idea that they are somehow under the special protection of the *sarkar*’, and he went to suggest that ‘our court records will show that they are ready enough to complain’.⁶²² This “erroneous idea”, as characterised by another official of the time, ‘has been formed by the *coolies* that in cases against the managers, they have the sympathy of the authorities’.⁶²³

These practices can simply be read as “outcomes” of the opportunities made possible by the “protective” contracts. Before the concepts of protector, protection and the “rights to complain” were codified in the 1865 Act, cases can be cited of coolies collectively going up to the district authorities to ventilate their concerns. In the year 1864, a violent punishment meted out by a plantation manager (Schoneman) resulted in the death of a worker named Summon. The subsequent disciplining of some dissenting fellow workers precipitated in a collective act targeting the manager, where he and other members of the management were disarmed and bound up. The coolies then marched on to the district headquarters to lodge a complaint. During the same period (early 1860s), a group of hundred workers from a Cachar tea garden marched up to the district headquarters to complain about the work (*Kodalir kaam* i.e digging work) assigned to them.⁶²⁴

In fact, the “rights of coolies to complain” (encoded in the 1865 Act, and subsequently affected by the 1882 Act) clearly mentioned a “proper procedure” to be followed: the objections made had to be routed through the manager to the District Commissioner/Protector for further action.⁶²⁵ This rendered other modes of complaining largely illegal. Apart from the explicit rights of managers to arrest, paradoxically, the coolie’s “rights to complain” criminalised worker’s practices of leaving the gardens for the headquarters to address their urgent, yet, grave concerns. Such “illegality”, as defined by law and contract, failed to erode the “legitimacy” of the right to complain when the manager and management were

⁶²² Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.98–112, January 1904, ASA.

⁶²³ Enquiry into causes of friction between planters and their coolies on tea-gardens, Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Home A, nos.98–112, January 1904, ASA.

⁶²⁴ See Chapter 2 for details.

⁶²⁵ See Chapter 2 for details.

perceived to have seriously violated the “codes of conduct”. In such cases of breakdown, relief was sought from another authority.

For instance, in an incident called ‘Mesaijan affair’ (Lakhimpur, 1888), drawing some publicity, a group of *coolies* left the garden and marched up to the district headquarters. The colonial commissioner gives the following account of the case:

A large body of coolies left the garden and came to the station, complaining of ill-treatment. They stated that both men and women had been flogged; in the case of women that they had been tied to a post in the porch of the manager’s house, their clothes lifted up to their waists, and that they had been beaten on the bare buttocks with a stirrup leather by the orders of the Assistant manager, Anding. The Deputy Superintendent of Police went out and enquired, and found that two women, Panoo and Khumti, had been assaulted in the way described. I myself went out, and, on further enquiring ascertained that a woman named Sukni had also been beaten some three or four times. The women Panoo and Khumti had been flogged for desertion and Sukni for short work.⁶²⁶

The flogging of Khumti, Panoo and Sukni was reminiscent of the Chera-jolie incident of the 1860s, where the violence was routinely and systematically employed. A later report on the ‘Messiajan affair’ revealed that the death rate on this particular garden was around twenty five percent.⁶²⁷ An acute shortage of workers made the managers employ violent practices to force work. This incident brutally reminds us that apart from “closer supervision” of workers, violence as a strategy to discipline and force work was not abandoned.⁶²⁸ The act of disciplining could not have been but considered extremely unreasonable. It was not only made into a spectacle (tied in front of the manager’s house where the other *coolies* could see it) and was brutal (flogged with leather stirrups on their buttocks) but also persistent (one individual beaten three or four times) and repeated (the treatment was meted out to three different women). That it was inflicted on the women *coolies* of the garden, could also have provoked the anxieties of honour (*izzat*) and the threats to it.

The case cited of *coolies* leaving the Monai garden (1914), after an assault was made on one of the *coolies* (Matadin), can also be seen in this light. The unrea-

626 India: Coolies in Assam Tea gardens. House of Commons Debates. 03 March 1890 vol 341 cc1632–6. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1890/mar/03/india-coolies-in-assam-tea-gardens>; Assam Secretariat Proceedings, Revenue A, nos. 77–117, Aug 1904, ASA.

627 *Assam Labour Report*, 1889 p. 46.

628 In an incident reported from Sibsagar in 1886 around 110 left the garden to complain to the Assistant Commissioner. They mentioned the existence of a dungeon, where absconders and recalcitrant coolies were confined and tied with ropes. *The Bengalee* 27, no.49 (December 1886), p. 587 in D. Ganguli, *Slavery in British Dominion* (Calcutta, 1972) p. 44.

sonableness of the act was not only because of the disciplining that Matadin was subject to. But the fact that he was punished for the same charge on three different occasions: by the manager, the assistant manager and by the garden staff, which made it highly excessive and illegitimate.⁶²⁹

The “moments” of complete breakdown of faith in the manager and management was not restricted to cases of excessive and persistent violence, but other overriding and grave concerns also informed these “marches”. For instance, some workers of Khabang garden (Lakhimpur, 1891) presented themselves before the district commissioner complaining about the misrepresentation made to them. Their issue was that they were made to understand that their “contract” ran for a period of four months. The coolies were “persuaded” by the commissioner to return to their garden. Such a return was again suggested” by the same commissioner when another batch of workers came to complain about overwork and insufficient food. A planter recounting the same incident observed that their return failed to ‘instil a new nature into them’.⁶³⁰

The instances already mentioned in which coolies marched upto to the district authorities reveal a range of concerns. The sixty *coolies* of Sessa garden (Lakhimpur, 1901) alleged their tasks were excessive. The two hundred *coolies* of Rowmari (Lakhimpur, 1904) were aggrieved regarding the introduction of a new practice (of using *Jhampis* instead of umbrellas). The entire labour population of Koliapani garden (Sibsagar, 1905) presented themselves before the commissioner accusing the *sahib* of threatening their *izzat*..⁶³¹

At least three other cases can be cited of *coolies* leaving plantations in the first two decades of twentieth century. In 1910, the *coolies* of Denan tea garden (Cachar) marched out of the garden in a body to complain that they had been short paid.⁶³² In 1911, Namrup tea garden (Lakhimpur) coolies left to complain that the manager had refused a bonus of ten rupees per head, which they argued was the *dustoor*.⁶³³ In the year 1917, *coolies* from Karimganj Subdivision (Pathini tea garden, Sylhet) struck work demanding a higher wage, which was refused by

629 Home Department, Police Branch, nos. 120–22, August 1914. NAI.

630 D Crole, *Tea: A text book of tea planting and manufacture* (London, 1897) p. 196.

631 Home Department, Police Branch, July 1905, nos 105–107, Part B. NAI.

632 Letter from LJ Kershaw, Financial Secretary to the Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department dated 2nd March 1910. Home Department, Police Branch, March 1910, no. 20, Part B. NAI.

633 W.J. Reid Financial Secretary to Government of India to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, 17th July, 1911. Home Department, Police Branch, July 1911, no. 172, Part B and Home Department, Police Branch, April 1911, no. 55, Part B. NAI.

the manager. This followed a withdrawal of around six hundred workers making their way to the district headquarters.⁶³⁴

5.11 Conclusions

The nature of Assam plantations in the late nineteenth century, showing a degree of continuity and stability, allowed a notion of customary (*Dustoor*)—a new form of “contract”—to emerge between the managers and the coolies. *Dustoor*, here, was not taken as an unchanging *custom*, but rather, an “acceptable conduct” of the garden, which was unwritten but legitimate. The legitimate conduct, rather being static, was alive to the changes, and therefore, open to further negotiation and bargaining. This qualifies a strong tendency in literature to characterize the nature of labour regime to be exclusively defined by the rules (of the contract) and unilateral excesses of the planter and closed to any bargaining (with the coolies). Such a framework has most fundamentally characterised the nature of “collective” protest of coolies—where life and emerging forms of protest within plantations remains largely curbed, individualised, or turned violent.

The shifting nature of managerial authority alluded to the fact that an exclusively violent strategy of control was no longer sustainable, and it had to be informed by elements of “reciprocity” and “approval”. The contingencies when *dustoor*s were perceived to be gravely violated and “collectivities” forged to address such violations were not removed from the “solidarities” produced and reproduced during the process of migration, life and work on plantations. Such an understanding allowed us to place these fragmentary “episodes” in the plantation practices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The anxieties informing collective action ranged from rice, tasks and earnings to issues of discipline, social life and *izzat*. These expressions were conditioning and was conditioned by the nature of workplace organisation, remuneration practices, patterns of residence and garden “occasions” like pay day, weekend drinking and rice distribution day. The production of these “new” occasions was also marked by the “reproduction” of “older” occasions like *Karam Puja*, *Kali Puja* and *Holi* acquiring new roles, without losing their earlier significance. The forms of protest ranging from violence to collective withdrawal was argued to have had a longer presence on plantations and beyond, but were assuming new meanings, purposes and resonance in a rapidly changing context.

⁶³⁴ Home Department, Police Branch, April 1917, no. 26, Part B, NAI.

