

# 6 Gandhi baba ka Hookum

## 6.1 Introduction

In the year 1921 (May), *coolies* from Karimganj subdivision (Sylhet, Chargola valley) struck work demanding a higher wage, which was refused by the managers. This followed a sequence of withdrawal of coolie in batches. They now seemed resolved to go back to their home districts, shouting victory cries to Mahatma Gandhi and claiming to work under his orders. By the middle of the first week itself, already a thousand *coolies* had left and many others were reportedly on strike.

The local planters were extremely concerned about this state of affairs. Warrants were issued on certain *coolies* under Act XIII contract, and a few of them arrested. However, these *coolies* were bailed out and garlanded by nationalist activists in Karimganj, and on the advice of the local officials the further issue of warrants was stopped.<sup>635</sup> An emergency meeting of the Chargola valley managers and colonial officials was convened at a local club on 6<sup>th</sup> May.<sup>636</sup> They expressed grave concern over the coolie unrest in the valley citing the hike in *hazira* (daily wages) as their primary demand; apprehended more strikes in the forthcoming days, and also repeated the usual fears of these incidents turning violent. There was a general “consensus” to offer new rates, which amounted to an increase of thirty to fifty percent.<sup>637</sup> This had reverberations in the higher echelons of the powerful and highly organised tea lobbies of the twentieth century. Representatives of the Tea Association from Calcutta and Surma Valley met the Governor and Chief Secretary of Assam on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May and discussed the issue of wage hikes. The Calcutta representative maintained that if the increased wages were persisted with, then the gardens would be compelled to close down.<sup>638</sup> By the middle of June, the valley was beginning to have a “deserted look” with two gardens reported to have “lost” almost the entire labour force, and most of the gardens suffering “losses” of around thirty to sixty percent.<sup>639</sup>

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**635** *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 57.

**636** Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6<sup>th</sup> May. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922).

**637** This position however was retraced by the planters during the course of the enquiry suggesting that they accepted the stand because of the awe of the officials present! *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 12.

**638** Fortnightly Report 2<sup>nd</sup> half of May for the Province of Assam and Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government officials, 6<sup>th</sup> May. NAI.

**639** Fortnightly report of second half of May for the province of Assam; Communiqué issued by Government of Assam on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1921. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) pp 116–118; *Report on the administration of Assam for the year 1921–22*; N.N. Mitra,

Meanwhile, the “passive” stance of local colonial establishment in repatriation of the *coolies* was coming under relentless attack from the nationalist press of Calcutta, which was closely observing the dramatic turn of events.<sup>640</sup> The situation became all the more critical after the so called ‘*Gurkha Outrage*’.<sup>641</sup> C.F. Andrews, a close associate of Gandhi, who on his way to Assam stopped in Bengal. He was particularly derisive of the Bengal government’s position of not involving itself in the repatriation of the *coolies* and thereby taking a “pro-capitalist” stance—expressed in his writings in newspapers and the public speeches that he made.<sup>642</sup> The official enquiry committee into the incident under Montgomery Wheeler led to heated debates in the Bengal legislative assembly in July 1921. Meanwhile, the situation was becoming more critical in Assam with the “strike wave” spreading to the Assam valley plantations. A Labour Enquiry Committee was set up in late 1921 with politicians, colonial officials and tea representatives on board, to understand this new and extraordinary moment of crisis in Assam.<sup>643</sup>

The exodus of Chargola holds a particular significance in the contemporary nationalist writings and later regional histories. Most of these writings picture this as “moment” when the plantation enclaves—demarcated and guarded in the forests of Assam—were finally breached by “outside” ideas and influences.

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*India Annual Register 1922* and P. C. Bamford, *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat* (Delhi, 1925). Though strikes were showing a sharp upward trend in the Assam Valley plantations during this period but it did not see a mass exodus of the scale witnessed in Chargola Valley and to some extent the adjoining Longai valley area.

**640** The attention that the Calcutta Press gave to this episode can be gauged from the increase in the articles published on the Assam tea gardens. See the *Report on Native Newspapers of Bengal* for the years 1921 and 1922.

**641** On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, a large body of *coolies* waiting to be repatriated was brutally assaulted by fifty men of Gurkha Rifles, under the personal supervision of the Assistant Deputy Commissioner KC De, at the Chandpur railway station. The official position on the incident was that a threat of cholera epidemic, due to the insanitary conditions in the vicinity of the station, had induced the action, where force was used “minimally”. The public ire over the incident could be gauged from the series of hartals, which followed in the wake of the event. There was hartal in the town of Chandpur, Karimganj and steamer strikes etc. A prominent instance was the “sympathetic” Assam Bengal Railway strike led by C.R. Das. For details see R. Chatterji, ‘C.R. Das and the Chandpur strikes of 1921’, *Bengal Past and Present*, 1974 and D. Banerjee, ‘Historic Assam-Bengal Railway Worker’s Strike (1921): A Survey’, *Proceedings of North East India History Association* (Barapani, 1983).

**642** C.F. Andrews’s role in the whole incident is carefully documented in P.C. Roychaudhury, *CF Andrews: His Life and Times*, (Bombay, 1971). Especially Chapter 4, pp. 78–95.

**643** The other members of the committee were Rai Bahadur Giris Chandra Nag (MLA), Major H.B. Fox (MLC), Babu Ramani Mohan Das (MLC), SSP Barua (MLC), T. MacMorran (representative of ITA), Rev. Dr. O.C. Williams (Medical missionary), Khan Bahadur Wali Muhammad and J.A. Dawson (bureaucrats). *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922).

The oppressive labour regime which was built on a close nexus of contracts and contractors was finally broken. The Assam tea coolie was set free. The enormity of the “episode” can be summed up in the words of a contemporary nationalist newspaper:

The strike of the coolies of the tea gardens of Assam is really a revolt against the age-old tyranny and exploitations to which they have been the most hapless victims. From the time the coolie falls into the hands of the artful recruiter, the arkatti...till he finds his resting-place in his grave away from his native home, his life is one long drawn-out misery. And not only men but women and children have the same old story...the helpless coolie passed into the gardens it was felt that he was lost to civilization and humanity. He had fallen into conditions from which it seemed to earthly power could rescue him...But his redemption has at last come...he is determined to break the shackles for ever or die in the attempt.<sup>644</sup>

This theme titled the ‘Nationalist upsurge in Assam’ sponsored by the Government of Assam, the episode stands as a testimony of the messianic powers of Gandhi who comes to Assam to “deliver” the coolies from their bondage:

To the simple, poor people, Gandhiji was an *avatar* and they fondly believed that he had come to Assam to deliver them from their age-old bondage. Gandhiji’s visit to Assam gave the tea workers an opportunity to take part in the Congress programmes. In May 1921, the historic labour exodus from Chargola and Longai valleys of Cachar district began when thousands of labourers of thirteen tea gardens left their gardens, shouting Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai.<sup>645</sup>

The author, in her zeal to establish the direct role of Gandhi in the episode, plays around with the chronology of the events. Gandhi’s visit to Assam in September 1921 is appropriated in the cause-effect sequence where his calls to involve the coolies in the Congress programme, leads to the historic exodus, a full four months back in May of that year!

This chapter does not intend to merely qualify this argument of transition—from contract (unfreedom) to freedom, from passive to political, from individual to collective. It rather seeks to study the “episode” as an entry point to the changing nature of plantation and the strategies of work and life in the early twentieth century.

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**644** Amrit Bazaar Patrika, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1921.

**645** S.Goswami, ‘The Nationalist upsurge: Its impact on Peasants and tea garden workers’, in A. Bhuyan (ed.) *Nationalist Upsurge in Assam* (Guwahati, 2000) p. 194. For similar writings see S.K. Ghosh, ‘Labour Strike in the Surma Valley Tea Gardens’ in *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 7<sup>th</sup> Session, Pasighat, 1986–87.

## 6.2 Situating the Episode

At the outset, it is useful to make a set of preliminary observations about this particular incident. Unlike other moments of collective withdrawals, the Chargola episode was not restricted to a specific garden and the numbers therefore involved were significantly bigger.<sup>646</sup> Also the coolies were not simply making a bid to the nearby headquarters, but they seemed determined to go back to the districts from which they originally came. The Assam coolies had often made this “collective” journey from home to the tea garden with the “aid” of *arkattis* and *sardars* and the “protective supervision” of the colonial state. It was probably the first time they were “collectively” making the journey from tea garden to their “homes” without the aid of the recruiters and without the supervision of the colonial state.

*Coolies* for Sylhet and specially Chargola valley were historically recruited from Ghazipur, Azamgarh, and Benaras districts of North West Provinces by *sardars* and “settled” primarily on Act XIII contract.<sup>647</sup> In the year 1888, for example, out of 45,000 coolies from North West Provinces in Assam tea plantations, around 35,000 were in Surma Valley. By 1891 more than 57,000 coolies came from North West Provinces and more than half were in the district of Sylhet.<sup>648</sup> The North-Westerns, or the “up-country coolie”, as we had briefly observed, had earned a notorious reputation among Assam planters for being very weak in constitution and showing greater propensity to die and desert. Ironically, these very terms of criticism for the ‘upcountry’ coolies were reversed in the Surma valley, especially the Chargola valley. They, in turn, stood as a confirmation for their suitability as *coolies*.

In case of Chargola valley...contrary to the general opinion elsewhere, *NWP coolies are considered the best available, both in regards to work and ability to stand the Sylhet climate... coolies of this nationality formed a striking contrast to those found in other parts of the province (Assam).*<sup>649</sup>

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**646** The entire Chargola valley alongwith the adjoining Longai valley was affected. In total 8,000 out of the total working population of 15,000 left the gardens. *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922).

**647** In Sylhet more than half the total number of Assam contract labourers imported during the year came from North West Provinces and Behar while in the previous year there was a similar preponderance of Bengalis. *Assam Labour Report, 1877*.

**648** North Western Provinces was renamed as United Provinces in 1901. Assam District Gazetteers. *Special Report on the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886–89* (Calcutta, 1890) p. 214; Sylhet District by B.C. Allen (Calcutta, 1905) p. 137.

**649** There has been a fair evidence of a recruiting region as a source as a source of labour supply for the overseas plantation declining simultaneously with an increase in labour immigration to some inland destination. Chotanagpur region which supplied forty to fifty percent of colonial

Again, the “specific” nature of *sardari* recruitment in Chargola valley was underlined by colonial report in the late 1880s. It made a distinction between the two Assam sardars: ‘a *sardar* maybe a *coolie* sent to his country by his employer, or he might be a *coolie* who obtains leave to go home, and at the time of return brings back neighbours, friends and relatives with him’. In the case of Chargola valley, it went on to argue that the ‘second kind of *sardar*’ existed and the result brought about was what it called was ‘family colonization’.<sup>650</sup> Such informal modes of mobilisation by the *sardars* were deeply affected by the practices of the “free system”. The distinction of the *sardars* and *arkattis* were getting increasingly blurred and *sardars* came to be controlled by “Local agents” within the frameworks of Tea District Labour Supply Association (TDLSA). Such practices were formalised in the twentieth century where the whole system of recruitment came to be channelled through a Labour Board (on the lines of TDLSA).

The changes in the second decade of the twentieth century had a crucial bearing on these developing processes. The war had sparked a boom in Assam tea industry because of a substantial expansion in sales and market of the commodity. Consequently, there was an increased demand for workers, with over a hundred thousand *coolies* arriving on tea gardens in the 1915–16 season. The next two seasons experienced a sudden dip, with only nineteen thousand coming in 1917–18 season. The local demands for labour within the recruiting districts contributed to these shrinking numbers. The end of the war meant that the abnormal

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emigrants during the 1840s and 1850s, became an important source of labour supply to Assam in the following decades. A similar trend was observable in the labour supplying districts of Azamgarh, Ballia, Ghazipur and Jaunpur of North West Provinces, where there was a decline in supply of indentured labourers to the overseas plantation in the last decades of nineteenth century. Mauritius, a major destination of labour from the ‘Eastern Catchment Area’ was already meeting its demands from the settled labour force. A part of this supply got diverted towards the jute mills of Calcutta, the agricultural farms of East Bengal and the tea gardens of Assam. One can clearly locate a switch from a predominantly Bengali labour force to one coming from NWP and Behar in the jute mills of Calcutta from the 1890s. Surma valley plantations especially the plantations of Sylhet, which was coming up most rapidly during this period, drew upon this source of supply. In the period 1881–1890, almost 71,950 coolies were recruited for the Sylhet tea gardens, which doubled on the next decade with 141,650. *Special Report On the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam During Years 1886–89* p. 17 (emphasis mine.); P. Chaudhury, ‘Labour Migration from United Provinces, 1881–1911’, *Studies in History*, 1992 (8,1) pp. 13–14; G. Pandey, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (New Delhi, 1990) p. 77; R. Dasgupta, ‘Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply’ in *Labour and Working Class in Eastern India: Studies in Colonial History* (Calcutta, 1994) p. 18; *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) p. 70.

**650** *Special Report on the Working Act I of 1882 in the Province of Assam during Years 1886–89* (Calcutta, 1890) p. 23.

labour demand within the recruiting regions had partially subsided, which was not the case in Assam plantations. This was not only to compensate the insufficient supplies of workers in the previous years, but also to meet the fresh and growing requirements generated by large extensions of existing tea gardens and opening of new gardens justified by artificial war time prosperity.<sup>651</sup> The existing workforce was also depleted by an influenza epidemic raging in the tea gardens. There was persistent tendency of workers in South Sylhet moving towards the adjoining Tiperrah region offering new and better opportunities.

In 1918–19 and 1919–20 seasons more than three hundred thousand coolies travelled to the gardens of Assam. In the case of Chargola valley the “new” coolies now recruited through the agency of Tea District Labour Supply Association (TDLSA) came from a different geographical background. By the second decades of twentieth century districts like Basti and Gorakhpur were replacing the older districts of Azamgarh and Ghazipur as the major “suppliers” of recruits for the inland destinations.

**Table 6.1 :** Labour Migration to Assam 1910–1921.<sup>652</sup>

Year	Number of Immigrants
1909–10	39,332
1910–11	43,657
1911–12	58,646
1912–13	59,873
1913–14	58,646
1914–15	63,638
1915–16	1,10,376
1916–17	48,130
1917–18	19,407
1918–19	2,22,171
1919–20	1,02,089
1920–21	25,472

The newer recruits were seriously impacted by high mortality during transit and on the plantations. These newer coolies formed the “bulk” of workers leaving the plantations during the exodus. There were reports of over four to five thousand

<sup>651</sup> The all-India area under tea had risen from 624,000 acres in 1914, to nearly 692,000 acres in 1919. P. Griffiths, *History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p. 177.

<sup>652</sup> *Assam Labour Reports* for the years 1911 to 1922.

of the coolies returning to the two districts of Gorakhpur and Basti.<sup>653</sup> The new recruit' theory still does not explain as to why only the new recruits of Chargola valley leave the gardens? Also, how does this explain the nature of the mass withdrawal, which was not restricted to a particular garden and, at times, not just to the newer coolies? For instance, over eleven hundred coolies leaving the valley during the "exodus" had worked for more than decade and more than two hundred fifty coolies were there for almost fifteen years.<sup>654</sup>

### 6.3 Markets and New Networks of Information

Chargola valley extended about thirteen miles north and south where a government road ran all the way down dividing the gardens on west and east side to it.<sup>655</sup> The gardens being in close proximity meant that it opened up possibilities of interaction, association and circulation of information.<sup>656</sup> This also brings into relief the specific social terrain of the Sylhet district. Being a densely populated region, the garden and the surrounding village had significant overlaps. *Ganj*, a very common suffix used in Sylhet district, indicated it to be a market place.<sup>657</sup>

Bazaars and *haats* as we have noticed emerged as sites where new ties and relationships were forged. Very crucial to this was the presence of a large body of time-expired *coolies* who were settled outside the garden grants (*basti*). Time-expired workers also moved between the garden and the *basti*, retaining familial and social ties with workers on the garden.

The newer *coolies* coming from the home districts established larger networks of information. For instance, coolies coming from the districts of Gorakhpur and Basti were witness to "Gandhi talk", where Gandhi had assumed cultic status and rumours about him were very much in the circulation.

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**653** Report of the Revenue administration of UP for the year ending 30<sup>th</sup> September 1921. Reproduced in *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 15.

**654** *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 11.

**655** A. H Walker, *Rivers, Roads and Tea Gardens of Cachar and Sylhet* (Calcutta, 1895) p. 21.

**656** *Assam District Gazetteers, Sylhet District, Supplement to Vol II* (Shillong, 1905) pp. 19–22 and *Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 11.

**657** *Report of the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee* (Calcutta, 1906) pp. 66–69.

## 6.4 Anxieties of Colonial State and Nationalists

In such a context, one of the earliest measures taken by the colonial administration of Assam during the exodus was prohibition of meetings and speeches within seven kilometres of the gardens (section 144). It was hoped that this measure would be able to counter the rumours, which it believed to have been a result of the intensive propaganda campaign of the nationalist volunteers filling the mind of the *coolies* with wild ideas. However, these actions did not yield desired results because of what it called as the covert nature of propaganda campaign targeting the *coolie* population in markets and other places frequented by them.<sup>658</sup> The Labour Enquiry Committee also makes the point:

It is probable that secret propaganda had been carried on for some time in the gardens in the Chargola valley. Otherwise it is difficult to account for the extent and suddenness of the exodus. There is also no doubt that after the prohibition of meetings an insidious campaign was being conducted surreptitiously on some gardens.<sup>659</sup>

This clearly indicates that it was not the regular meetings and speeches of the non co-operators but *bazaar* talk and gossip which were creating all the nasty chat. A proposal by the government of Assam, to apply the Seditious Meeting Act (Act X of 1911) to the districts of Sylhet and Cachar and declare Karimganj subdivision as a proclaimed area clearly stems from such concerns of not being able to check this feeling and articulation of dissension.<sup>660</sup>

Such unease was aptly reflected in the measures deemed necessary by the colonial state to tackle the situation. Attempts were made to strengthen the armed police, intelligence system was beefed up and counter propaganda work was undertaken.<sup>661</sup> A desire to make an impression on the minds of *coolies* about the continued existence of the British Raj—the official version of the situation, was sought to be forcefully pushed. A colonial officer (Llyod) was specially deputed to organise counter-propaganda work in Surma Valley. He held a series of meetings in Sylhet district for this purpose. Special assistance was sought from the United

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**658** Telegram dated 18<sup>th</sup> May from Chief Secretary Government of Assam to Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, Political Branch, June 1921, nos. 143–146. NAI.

**659** *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 19.

**660** Strike of tea garden coolies in Assam, Proposal of the Government of Assam to apply the Seditious meeting Act X Of 1911 to that province. Home Department, Political Branch, nos.143–146, June 1921. NAI.

**661** Political situation in Assam-Increase of the strength of troops in the province for internal security purposes. Home Department, Political Branch, no. 534, 1922. NAI.

Provinces Government to this end, and they accordingly sent two men to conduct counter-propaganda work amongst tea garden *coolies* from United Provinces. Assam rifles were augmented in affected areas so that the continued authority of the British Raj could be impressed upon the *coolies*.<sup>662</sup>

The desire to control information was not limited to the colonial state; the nationalists, as well, realised their shortcomings. A very familiar and often quoted explanation given by the *coolies* of Chargola valley for their decision to leave was that it was *Gandhi ka Hookum*. However, making this as a case for connection with the Non co-operation movement needs to be qualified. Gandhi's first reaction to the exodus is very interesting in this regard:

*I should be sorry if anybody used my name to lead the men to desert their employers, it was clear enough that it is purely a labour trouble..(I was) informed that the trouble is purely economic*<sup>663</sup>

In another issue of Young India, in a reply to a planter accusing him and his men of inducing the *coolies* to strike, Gandhi goes on to write:

I can assure him (the planter) that I never advised a single *coolie* in Assam to strike. I do not profess to know the problem of labour there. . *He should moreover know that there is no non-co-operation going on with capital or capitalists.* Non Co-operation is going on with the existing Government as a system. But there is bound to be non-cooperation wherever there is evil, oppression and injustice, whether anybody wishes it or not. The people, having found the remedy, will resort to it. If they do stupidly or unjustifiably, they alone will be the real losers.<sup>664</sup>

Again, during his visit to Surma Valley in September 1921, Gandhi particularly expressed his disapproval of the *coolie* strikes and hartals and censured them for indifference to what he regarded as the more important matters of boycott and the use of spinning wheel.<sup>665</sup>

The investment of the Gandhian message in this context, often at variance to the dictates of Gandhi and the official Congress version, suggest a lack of control over the information networks within the plantation area covering a number of

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**662** Fortnightly report for the Second half of July for the Province of Assam. NAI.

**663** *Young India*, 8<sup>th</sup> June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX. Emphasis mine.

**664** *Young India*, 29<sup>th</sup> June in Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XX, pp.299–300. Emphasis mine.

**665** Khan Bahadur Saiyid Abdul Majid, a minister who visited Sylhet during the period said, ‘..(that) the people were quite unanimous in thinking that Gandhi unseen was a far greater personage than Gandhi seen..and the common people’s observation was that he was only a *kaya*’. Fortnightly report for 1<sup>st</sup> half of September 1921. NAI.

gardens. An argument of these networks of information inhabiting an “autonomous” sphere is not made where the contacts with other *coolies*, villagers and the non co-operators had a significant bearing.

This period was witness to a general climate of defiance, anticipating a possible end to the British Raj and the imminence of Gandhi’s Raj. Many demonstrations, public meetings and *hartals* in the nearby Subdivisional headquarters of Karimganj and the Sylhet town were held. The realisation of land revenue in the adjoining villages was also extremely low. All of this would have been very strong influence in the circulation of such ideas. The workers bound by a work-schedule could not have personally attended the public meetings and speeches in large numbers, but nonetheless the interactions with villagers, time-expired workers and even the non-co-operators at these *haats* could not deprive them of the “buzz in the town”.

## 6.5 The Legitimacy of the Manager

The post war period was also marked by a new and intensive economy drive in the tea industry. The garden managers were given little discretion in effecting wage hikes or giving out other inducements to workers experiencing want and scarcity. Concerns were raised about the prestige of managers being undermined by the “hard and fast” decisions regarding wage rates by their agencies in Calcutta. There were cases of *coolies* wiring directly to these agencies for relief, which was said to be ‘most subversive of discipline and the very necessary patriarchal control of the manager’. The perpetuation of the authority structure within the plantation, as we have argued, could no longer be premised exclusively on coercive mechanisms of control. It had to be by based on a degree of “approval” and “acceptable conduct”. In such a situation, consider the scene on the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May in the Anipur tea estate described by the manager, from where it all began:

... On the morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup> a number of *coolies* demanded an increase of wages, i.e., 8 annas and 6 annas for men and women. Previous to this an increase of wages had not been asked for. I (the manager) told them it was impossible for me to give them the wages demanded... some one amongst them shouted *Gandhi Maharaj ki jai*. They left the muster ground in a body and in half an hour were leaving the garden.

It is important to recap the decisions taken in the meeting of the managers and local officials held at Dullabcherra Club on the 6<sup>th</sup> May, just four days into the first batches of *coolies* leaving the tea estates of the valley. The extremely tense and nervous body of the planters reluctantly agreed to hike wages. They further felt

that such a decision should be communicated to the *coolies* at the earliest to halt the spread of the unrest. The resolutions of the meeting read:

While recognising the danger of yielding to pressure and the encouragement that such yielding [Wage hike] may give to agitation elsewhere the officials did not consider this a sufficient reason for refusing concessions just due and absolutely necessary to keep the labour on the gardens..we therefore advise to concede the rates they had unanimously agreed on, and to do this at once and not wait for further trouble.<sup>666</sup>

Yet, this could not prevent a delay in its general implementation. At times, concessions were withdrawn on many gardens, after being announced, as they were not being ratified by the Calcutta agents. For instance, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May, Dunlop (manager of Goombhira division) agreed to hike the wages in the order of 6 annas (for men) and 4 annas (for women.). This proposal was not approved by agents of the company. Such a move could only have eroded the credibility, legitimacy and sense of authority of Dunlop. It was not entirely surprising that the coolies of Goombhira division started leaving the garden by the 10<sup>th</sup> of May. Even the personal assurances given by the manager of Dullabcherra that concession offered would not being reversed, could not stop the *coolies* of his garden leaving. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that the concessions after all would not be confirmed.<sup>667</sup>

Some managers complained that their submission to the demand of wage hikes under the pressure of strikes had actually proved counterproductive. The workers believed that it was on Gandhi's orders that the wages have been increased:

... All the remaining *coolies* [of the garden] had worked regularly throughout the week at the old rate of wages. Sunday 8<sup>th</sup>, was our pay day, and pay was proceeding as usual *when word came that three neighbouring gardens had raised the wages to 6 and 4 annas*. From this moment the *coolies* were absolutely mad and for three days the garden was in an uproar. *It was stated that Gandhi has raised wages*.<sup>668</sup>

The decision to hike wages did not necessarily reinvigorate a sense of satisfaction among workers as expected by the managers and the colonial administration. The extra Assistant commissioner of Karimganj Subdivision, for example, ventilated

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**666** Conference of Chargola Valley Tea Planters and Government Officials, 6<sup>th</sup> May 1921. *Report, ALECR 1921–22*.

**667** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 84.

**668** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 58.

the complaints of several managers that even with increased wages the *coolies* were doing just as they liked and were not working satisfactorily. Wage hikes did not necessarily have a deterrent effect and *coolies* on some other gardens went on strike for one or two days even after the wages had been increased.<sup>669</sup> Some managers, who considered themselves extremely fortunate of not having to deal with strikes on their gardens, experienced a 'nasty feeling' among their *coolies* during the period.<sup>670</sup>

... There was a feeling of unrest before the exodus. When I met some *coolies* they were bitterly complaining against the Manager...they said that the manager would not listen to their grievances...when I went to the garden after the exodus and obtained evidence of his extreme unpopularity, I dismissed him. If I had kept him on, I am afraid I would have lost all my *coolies*.<sup>671</sup>

The manager of Tea Estate related about a male returnee who said that he would not have stayed back at the time of exodus for even a rupee a day!<sup>672</sup>

The refusal of the first batches of *coolies* who had left the gardens to accept the rice and other provisions at Karimganj town is particularly suggestive. They believed that the supplies has been provided by their manager, who no longer could claim their loyalty. A most perplexed Subdivisional officer of Karimganj relates the incident to the Enquiry Committee:

I obtained a stock of rice and salt and arranged to supply the *coolies*. About 200 *coolies* came up to me on the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> May as far as I remember and the first question they put me was whether this rice was being supplied by Government or by the tea gardens; they said that they would not touch it if it was supplied by the gardens...I told them that if they did not want to take rice and salt that was offered them, they might go. Nobody took anything and they all went.<sup>673</sup>

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**669** Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj and H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) pp. 61–63, p. 56.

**670** A. Brown, Rajnagar TE. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 47.

**671** *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 28.

**672** H.A Wray, Manager, Singlacherra Tea Estate. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 55.

**673** It is significant to note here the cultural value of salt as an index of loyalty. For accepting food/salt provided by someone would mean an acknowledgement of allegiance to him and the failure to do so would be deemed as *namak-harami* –the term in Hindustani for disloyalty. Rai Bahadur Panchu Gopal Mukherjee, Extra Asst Com, SDO, Karimganj. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 64.

This bankruptcy of legitimacy did arise from a momentary failure of the managers to effect wage hikes. This has to be more concretely situated with other complementary concerns. It was observed during the time of the Chargola exodus that there was a tendency of workers declining to go to hospitals.<sup>674</sup> Dr. Dunlop of the Chargola Valley read this ‘resistance’ as a part of the ‘Gandhi propaganda’ to renounce hospitals and Western medicine.<sup>675</sup> It was not simply a case of tradition versus modernity in the *coolie*’s resistance to go to the hospitals. The general ineffectiveness as relating to the high rates of mortality, especially during this period, evoked a sense of despondancy.

**Table 6.2 :** Mortality on Assam tea gardens 1917–1921<sup>676</sup>

Year	Total Deaths
1917–1918	21,961
1918–1919	62,176
1919–1920	44,866
1920–1921	28,927

The virulent influenza epidemic raging in the tea gardens claimed 40,000 lives in the period from 1919 to 1921.<sup>677</sup> More than 150,000 people lost their lives in the tea estates of Assam in the 1917 to 1921 period. The Labour Enquiry Committee particularly observed these conditions as the reasons for ‘discontentment with garden life’:

The fact that the best medical attention on the gardens could often do little to save life in such circumstances conduced to a feeling of despair, and even to a belief among the more ignorant that the garden was haunted by some evil spirit. It is not, therefore a surprise that some of these *unfortunate immigrants lost faith in European medicines and methods of treatment and that when ill-health began to prey on body and mind and the earning capacity was diminished, they became discontented with the conditions of tea-garden life.*<sup>678</sup>

The failure of the authorities to check falling earnings and protecting lives aggravated a growing feeling that something was drastically wrong. The changing

<sup>674</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 97.

<sup>675</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 97.

<sup>676</sup> Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 94 (Emphasis mine) and Assam Labour Report for the year 1917–18, 1918–19 and 1919–1920.

<sup>677</sup> Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 94.

<sup>678</sup> Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 95. Emphasis mine.

conditions of work, which further affected the material/social circumstances (*dustoor*), fed into this disillusionment.

## 6.6 Changing Practices of Work, Life and Control on Sylhet Plantations

The differentiated nature of plantation landscape in Assam was not just limited to the nature of contracts, practices of contracting and sources of labour supply. In certain significant ways the work practices also took particular and distinctive trajectories.

For instance, in Surma Valley plantations (especially Sylhet) “fine plucking”, which was becoming a “norm” in the Assam valley plantations, was rarely practised. “Coarse plucking” giving greater yield compensated for the lower price it realised in the market.<sup>679</sup> During war, when quality became a secondary consideration, the result was still coarser plucking in Sylhet. However, the end of war led to a huge accumulation of tea stocks.<sup>680</sup> The garden agents realised that the remedy for this overproduction lay in switching to fine plucking. This had a twofold impact: firstly, it made a serious dent to the voluntary opportunities for overtime work. Between January and May 1921, there was little overtime work. Overtime hoeing virtually stopped till the winters when the semi abandoned tea was being reclaimed.<sup>681</sup> Secondly, the precision demanded in fine plucking meant a fall in the quantity plucked by individual workers necessitating a revision in the daily task for plucking. However, such changes were not usually recognized and many managers driven by “economy” steadfastly stuck to their old rates.

It is therefore not surprising that *coolies* on gardens demanded the reduction of *nirikh* (task) or *nal* (measurement).<sup>682</sup> *Coolies* of a particular tea estate went on

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**679** For the differential abilities in the modes of plucking. See Chapter 5.

**680** The war had a tremendous stimulus to the industry. In the period 1914–1919, the increase in production of Indian tea was nearly 64 million pounds. In the 1919 season there was a shortage in the shipping space. Again in 1920, congestion at the Port of London, made it necessary to regulate shipments from India. Thus the 1919 crop was not completely shipped till June 1920. Tea had to be kept on the gardens during the worst part of the monsoon and they arrived at market flat and dull showing the effects of storage. Then the unfavourable conditions in London rendered necessary a limitation of the quantity of tea offered at the weekly auctions in Mincing Lane, as the dealers were unable to finance or pay for larger quantities P. Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry* (London, 1967) p. 177.

**681** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 59.

**682** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 65.

a strike demanding similar wages as the neighbouring gardens. But when the revised wages, with an increase in tasks was offered they refused, continuing with their strike.<sup>683</sup>

This was aggravated by the “novel” practices adopted by plantations in the assessment of tasks. The usual “deductions” made for the weight of the basket, for wet leaf and for the quality of the leaf plucked were more stringently enforced. The managers started deducting the “wastage” in manufacture of tea called the ‘factory charges’. One manager went to the extent of penalising the workers two pounds (of the weight plucked) in peak seasons to “compensate” for the limited plucking during the “off season”.<sup>684</sup> No hard and fast rule was observed in regard to these deductions and in some gardens deductions were as high as fifty percent.<sup>685</sup>

Payment through the so called ‘ticket-system’ was a widespread practice in the Sylhet plantations as can be seen in the next image.



**Figure 6.1:** Tokens on Sylhet Tea Gardens.<sup>686</sup>

The gardens generally cashed these tokens on a weekly basis. By this time the *coolies* might have already been indebted to the shopkeepers. The Labour committee came across cases where the local shopkeepers, accepting the tokens did not honour its full face value, taking huge discounts on them. The Superintendent of Police of Sylhet, observed that a *coolie* taking a ticket to the shopkeeper would get less than fifty percent of its worth.<sup>687</sup>

<sup>683</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 42.

<sup>684</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 42.

<sup>685</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 32.

<sup>686</sup> See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion on the token system. <http://www.koi-hai.com>.

<sup>687</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 31.

The cutting down on the expenditure and changed working practices within the garden meant that certain “norms” were not honoured—*coolies* in many gardens were not given the usual agreement bonuses, overtime was reduced, and they were forced to take leave. A tea manager noticed the “cumulative” effect of these practices:

The unrest, if any, amongst coolies was I think mainly due to cutting down of expenditure. In our own case it meant that coolies were not given the usual agreement bonuses and a smaller amount of *ticca*, and were also encouraged, and in some cases, forced to take more leave than they wanted and could not, of course, and understand the reason. This fact combined with Gandhi talk that was openly being instilled into them by Bengalis in the bustee and bazaar, had the effect of unsettling them and making them think there was something wrong.<sup>688</sup>

During the post war period, land offered to the coolies was increasingly becoming scarce due to the sustained influx of newer workers. This was compounded by the large scale tea extensions to address to the “abnormal” demands in the markets. They intruded into the land held by workers for cultivation, or grazing lands for their cattle. The South Sylhet gardens, which were in close proximity to the independent state of Tipperah, experienced a significant shift of workers towards the new gardens being opened there. They were offered higher wages and rent free land for cultivation for a term of two to three years.<sup>689</sup> Babu Rajniranjan Deb, a tea manager, noted that in the period (1916–1921) about fifty percent of the workers had ‘peacefully absconded to Tipperah, without causing any commotion’. He adds further that ‘*coolies* are attracted to Tipperah because they say that they would get 8 annas for each *hazira* and also plenty of paddy fields’.<sup>690</sup>

The “choices” being exercised by these workers in accessing better opportunities was apparently compromised by the contracts they were held under. A “freedom” from Assam contract in Sylhet (after it was abolished in 1908) was limited by a peculiar articulation of Act XIII. The planters maintained that the contract only offered a minimal “moral pressure” but in reality the rights of control

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**688** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 64 (Emphasis mine).

**689** The manager of Balisera and Lungla tea estate related to the Enquiry Commission of spending more than Rs. 1,80,000 and 60,000 respectively in recruiting during the 1915–1920 period without any increase in the working population, most of them making their way to Tipperah especially in the years 1919 and 1920. Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) pp. 87–88; Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) pp. 35, 37–38, 41.

**690** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 29.

(like private arrest) was frequently invoked.<sup>691</sup> Such planter aspirations were in fact articulated during the discussions regarding the Assam contract in the early twentieth century. A demand for a short contract in lieu of the Act XIII contract was made by the local tea association. This was argued to offer the managers of the gardens giving out bonus some degree of “protection”. Chief Commissioner of Assam, while ruling out the possibility of amending Act XIII contract (which applied to whole of India), encouraged them to arrive at some “common-sense practice” for the interpretations of its provisions.<sup>692</sup> Such “common sense” practices meant that not only four hundred forty odd warrants were issued between July 1920 and June 1921 in two subdivisions of Sylhet for “breaches” against workers but there were cases of managers sending *chowkidars* to neighbouring gardens to bring back workers.<sup>693</sup> Instances of *coolies* returning from prison to complete their contract on the garden were not entirely a rare.

## 6.7 A New Will to Leave

These conditions of a bankruptcy of legitimacy and a general sense of changed conditions in life exacerbated the repressed oppressions and aspirations within the plantations, which was increasingly articulated during the period. Grievances and, at times, purposeful action was directed against the authority structure within the plantation.

The manager of the Doloi tea company said that the *coolies* on his garden went on strike for five days demanding the dismissal of a particular *babu*.<sup>694</sup> During the April strikes in the Burtoll and Lydiacherra gardens, the *coolies* complained of *babus* cheating them in payments and drove out some of them. On being interrogated the *coolies* said that they wanted to get rid of the *babus* first

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**691** During the 1922, several planters referred to the moral effect of Act XIII contract calling it a moral rather than a legal contract. There were suggestions that once the coolie thumb marked the agreement (contract) and took the advance money they felt obliged to work out the period of engagement. The coolies were said to understand that if they wished to breach the terms of the contract they just needed to return the advances and thereby escape scot free. Many planters clearly mentioned that Act XIII was often invoked not to recover the money but to get the coolies back to work. *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 33, p. 70, p. 76, p. 81, p. 127, pp. 185–186.

**692** *Indian Tea Association Report* 1905.

**693** *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 86.

**694** R Pringle, Manager, Doloi Tea Company *Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22* (Shillong, 1922) p. 48.

and then deal with the manager.<sup>695</sup>The batches of *coolies* of Anipur Tea Estate when interrogated by the Subdivisional officer at Karimganj complained about the *Jamadar* of the garden.<sup>696</sup>

The authority exercised by the *babus* over and above that of their *sardars*, who were supposed to be their in-charge, was also resented. They were detested for their corrupt practices in book keeping.<sup>697</sup>

*Coolies* on certain gardens went on strike objecting to the posting of a particular manager recalled from leave.<sup>698</sup> JW Hallan, the manager of Phulcherra Division, talked about the “unreasonable” demand made by his *coolies* that no Europeans should speak to the women and no *Babus* should speak directly to them and that everything should be done through their *sardars*.<sup>699</sup>

The sexual exploitation of the ‘*coolie* women’ by the managers also drew deep antipathy. The *Khoreal shooting case* where a manager shot a *coolie* who was resisting his daughter being forcibly taken by him was widely publicised. The fact that the Manager got away with a small fine could not have but drawn deep resentment.<sup>700</sup>

The general depressed standard of life and loss of “faith” in the managers to address those concerns was inscribed in the message and person of Gandhi. There were reports of *coolies* receiving letters from United Provinces containing the news that Gandhi was arranging their conveyance back home. Some of the departing *coolies* claimed that Gandhi has sent a steamer to Karimganj to take them back where they would be given land for free. There were rumours of food without work, and that land under tea was being given up for rice cultivation. Some claimed that garden and *hats* belonged to Gandhi and that the manager had no right over them, and that they could cut out the tea and plant paddy and sugarcane instead.<sup>701</sup> In certain gardens, the news of wage hikes in other garden,

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**695** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 72.

**696** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 63.

**697** Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 31.

**698** Fortnightly report for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of May. NAI.

**699** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) pp. 38–39.

**700** The local press most extensively covered Khoreal Shooting case and even news articles in Calcutta were published in evidence to the oppression of *coolies* by the planters and complicity of the state in it.

**701** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 62.

made some coolies claim that Gandhi has increased wages and they demanded similar hikes.<sup>702</sup>

*Gandhi Ka Hookum* symbolised the yearnings, anxieties and the general spirit of defiance of the *coolies* expressed and legitimised through cultural/religious idioms, which were much in popular circulation. During the time of the exodus there were reports of a boy in one of the gardens of Anipur proclaiming that the spirit of Gandhi had come upon him and asked all the people to gather around and listen to what he had to say (in effect what Gandhi has to say or *Gandhi ka Hookum*). He was placed on a Hindu shrine in the lines and worshipped by *coolies* for two days. Another man made similar claims in the Singlacherra gardens.<sup>703</sup> There were reports of *coolies* taking oath over a bowl of holy water (*Shapath Lena*) not to disobey *Gandhi Ka Hookum* of leaving the gardens in a body or else being turned into mud or stone!<sup>704</sup>

Victory cries of *Gandhi Maharaj ki Jai* (Hail King Gandhi) manifested that defiance into collective action. Many *coolies* interrogated by their managers during the exodus said that they were leaving because their *bhailog* (brothers) had decided to go.<sup>705</sup> Formal discharge certificates were needed to be obtained for leaving the gardens for coolies serving under Act XIII contract.<sup>706</sup> The Sub-divisional officer of Karimganj pointed out to several batches of the *coolies* of the “illegality” of their action, but later admitted to this practice of coolies coming to the headquarters and applying for discharge. The tea workers on the Assam

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**702** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 57.

**703** Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 57 & 64.

**704** Shahid Amin in his fascinating study of ‘Gandhi as Mahatma’ argues that Gandhi’s pratap and appreciation of his message derived from popular Hindu beliefs and practices and the material culture of the peasantry. What the peasants thought about Mahatma were the projections on the existing patterns of popular beliefs about the ‘worship of worthies’ in rural north India. The stories of Mahatma from the Swadesh journal that he analyses falls in four distinct groups- testing the power of the Mahatma, opposing the Mahatma, opposing the Gandhian creed and boons granted and/or miracles performed. We do not access to such vast and extensive accounts in the region of our study but the last three categories broadly applies. S. Amin, ‘Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–22’, *Subaltern Studies III* pp. 1–61. Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922); P. C. Bamford, *Histories of Non cooperation and Khilafat* (Delhi, 1925) p. 61.

**705** C. Townsend, Superintendent of the Longai Tea Company and H.A. Wray, Manager, Singlacherra T.E. Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) pp. 51–52, p. 56.

**706** Out of 8,799 *coolies* leaving 3,715 were under agreement, 2,286 were not under agreement and 2,798 were dependents. Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 10.

plantations had for long established these traditions of “complaining” and more so they now claimed it to be *Gandhi Baba ka hookum*.<sup>707</sup>

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<sup>707</sup> Evidence recorded by the Assam Labour Enquiry Committee Report, 1921–22 (Shillong, 1922) p. 63.