

7 Epilogue

Assam tea, by the late nineteenth century, operated at several different levels and registers. At one level it came to connote the commodity “Assam tea” and even “Indian tea” increasingly gaining ground in the markets of Europe, North America and Australia. Assam tea in this sense offered a contrast to Chinese tea for being full bodied and stronger. As the nature of the drink (tea) was undergoing a transformation, the nature of the plant, the practices of cultivation and modes and methods of manufacture was also being revised from the Chinese ideal. Assam tea in this sense offered a new template in different sites where commercial tea production was being considered.

At another level Assam tea or rather Assam system indicated to a particular labour regime and came up as a reference in several work settings. As the institution of the ship and colonial plantation was invoked during the formative years, Assam now itself came to be perceived as a generalizable model of developing an industry in a relatively short span of time backed by migrant labour working under penal contracts. Assam mainly stood for a particularly harsh labour regime with exceptional powers for the employers. For instance, the planters of Southern India lobbied for a similar “protection” as Assam planters had over their coolies and the Planter Act 1903 was closely modelled on the Assam Act (of 1901).

The crisis in the Assam tea industry in the beginning of the twentieth century became an occasion to evaluate the Assam system in an entirely new light. The growing recruitment costs linked to widespread unpopularity in recruiting regions and high levels of conflict on plantations raised grave questions regarding the efficacy and the legitimacy of the system. The explicit intention here was to understand and draw lessons from other comparable plantation systems and their labour regimes. Or to put it more bluntly to learn how were coolies produced in these contexts. The enquiry among other things that penal contract with provisions of private arrest was a novelty in Assam and that the nature of contractor was radically different. While in Assam the recruiter (be it contractor or sardar) merely supplied the worker, the kangani, maistry and sardar in Ceylon, Madras and Duars also functioned as their work supervisors apart from being their recruiters. An interesting reading of the report by the commissioner of Assam Valley district (Meltius) gave a fairly insightful commentary as to how the Assam system worked in comparison to the other systems. Questioning the burden of the annual recruitment costs, he argued that in Assam the cost was all initial as the labour was “purchased” outright while in other systems the worker belonged to the headman. To maintain the labour force at strength, an annual recruitment of 5 to 6 percent was required (in Assam) against 10 percent (in Duars) and 15 to 18 percent (in Ceylon). This implied that while entire labour force would have been

imported in 6 to 7 years in Ceylon and 10 years in Duars, it would take at least 17 to 20 years in the case of Assam. The two characteristic and linked features of Assam system of the early twentieth century was immediately made evident. One that coolies were effectively bought in the coolie market creating a degree of “quasi-ownership” over them legitimized by legal rights to private arrest. A degree of property rights not just on labour (as allowed by master and servant contract) but on the person (as allowed by Assam contract) resembled marks of slavery and conditions of bondage. This allowed the possibility of keeping them longer (atleast for 10 to 20 years) and working them harder through chaukidaring (policing) practices and scientific management which included varying levels of intimidation and violence. At the same time the task rate of payment (against monthly wages) also allowed a degree of flexibility required by planters working on cycle of busy and off season and effectively coolies became daily wage workers bound by long term contracts or the fear of it.

This system was organically linked to the coolie market where labour was not hired by attraction to wages and working conditions but where coolies were effectively bought and sold (especially during the free system). This was further revealed in the connection between the periods of famine and distress linked to sharp spurts in the recruitment for Assam. The social vulnerability produced during these periods created grounds for market intermediaries to service debts and offer advances to individuals for their “consent” to proceed to Assam. Apart from advances and debt servicing there were rampant practices of abduction and kidnapping to acquire recruits for Assam. The “potential Assam recruit” commanded high market prices which were further enhanced as they often changed several hands during recruitment (with in built commissions) before being “picked up” by a particular tea garden. The price here also indexed the profitability of whole enterprise but also the risks taken by recruiter and the reluctance shown by people in their decision to go to Assam. It was often argued that costs of acquiring a similar recruit was considerably higher in comparison to plantations in Duars and the colonies and that such costs could be potentially included in the wages paid to the workers making them more attractive. The Assam system precisely depended on buying the coolies and putting them under harsh contracts in contrast to paying better and relaxing the terms of engagement. The idea that Assam system was linked to buying was further revealed in the discussion of 1893 Act. It was argued that value of unexpired terms of contract was fixed on a scale of Rs 12 for the first year, Rs 36 for the second and Rs 60 for subsequent years. The logic offered for a four year contract was that it was the minimum to recoup the advances or wages paid to the coolies but the price paid to the recruiter (running in excess of 100 rupees).

The centrality of contract in the Assam system was made evident from the desires for “settled labour” expressed. The contracts (Act XIII and Assam contract) was seen as a solution to bind migrant workers moving in the plantations from the late 1850s. A collective refusal against the conditions of work and false promises of the recruiters about remuneration revealed the limitations of criminal prosecution. Workers were collectively moving out of plantation and offering to be arrested rather than going back to work. For the planters the criminal breach was not enough and discipline had to be privately enforced if meant anything. Contract therefore expressed the desire of plantation capitalism backed by colonial state but also became an index of failed aspiration, struggles and conflicts. The logic of protection underpinned the justification of contracts with private arrest. But the protection of coolie was often seen by the planters to be violating their protection. While the planter had to be protected by legal enactments (like the private arrest rights) and several exceptions, the coolie was to be protected by logic (as economic investments of planters) and good intentions (of planters). The assumption of magisterial authority in the person of the planter, further meant that the question of worker protection was no longer a matter of state jurisdiction but strictly a private affair. The protection as a complementary obligation did not remain hollow in practice. Again what constituted as its provisions often became part of worker struggles and claimed as rights. For instance, the practice of providing fixed price rice and making complaints to colonial authorities existed before they became part of the provisions of the contract and remain about sites on several future struggles were fought. Again the idea of “sarkari” often referred to Assam plantations and became part of the strategy of recruiters, at one level showed the complicity of the colonial state in the process but generated notions that they were under government protection. A culture of complaining became a feature of Assam plantations. The colonial enquiry into Duars especially noted that such practices of collectively addressing the colonial authorities didn’t exist in Duars. Workers were aware of the practices of wage assessment on plantations (based on task) and often struggles were not fought on monthly wages, which did not exist in practice, but what constituted as the appropriate measure (nirikh) and the how they were assessed by the supervisors.

A particular conjuncture to explore such issues unleashed under the name of free system which effectively changed the nature of contracts (longer harsher contracts) and deregulated the recruitment (easier to recruit to the extent that to be able to abduct). The withering away of state in recruitment (celebrated as freedom) blurred the lines between the sardar and contractor and institutionalized abuses in labour recruitment—now bordered on human trafficking.

Alterations in the nature of contracts and deregulation of labour recruiting stimulated large scale migration to Assam. This demographic shift was also occa-

sioned by a greater systematisation of plantations and new modes of work intensification. The technological innovations and mechanisation, which enhanced the nature and capability of tea manufacturing, did not comprehensively affect the cultivation methods. The field work and plucking of leaves were carried out manually and even required a greater human input to keep pace with the mechanising and quickening production process. Specialization and intensification of work became an integral feature of this routinising plantation regime. This ‘industrial’ organisation of work on plantations is not to imply a historical conflict between the rhythms of ‘modern’ civilized industry (plantation) and the ‘primitive’ ways of tribal/peasant life (of the coolies). Yet, the excessiveness of such strategies was also becoming increasingly evident.

The anxieties of unpopularity of Assam in the regions of recruitment and the “question” of drink on the plantations were rooted in these interconnected and overlapping processes. An unpacking of the overarching category of unpopular Assam ranged from it being perceived as a place of no return, the fear of labour recruiters, difficulties of earnings, to the grave threats to social life on plantations. In the same framework, the practices of worker drinking did not remain confined to the “concerns” of plantation capitalism relentlessly in search for greater efficiency, productivity or emerge as new “modes” of control for planters; but also revealed how working lives and cultures were taking shape on the plantations. The interest here was to stress on how such cultures were informing and informed by the developing routines on the plantations.

This line of reasoning was furthered by exploring a notion of customary (Dustoor)—a new form of “contract”—emerging between the managers and workers in the context of a stabilising and routinising plantations. Dustoor was not understood as an unchanging custom, but rather an “acceptable conduct” of the garden. 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 therefore closed to any bargaining (with the coolies).

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 dustoors were perceived to be gravely violated and “collectivities” forged to address such violations, were not exclusive 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 honour. 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 practice of collective withdrawal drew from a longer tradition initiated by local Kachari labour in early plantations, but such actions assumed new meanings and significance and performed new roles in the changed plantation structures of the late nineteenth century.

The exodus in Chargola was not a historically unprecedented or “unique” event in the sense of an emergence of an entirely new form of collective consciousness among workers. However, in terms of scope, scale and numbers involved and the impact it produced, it marked a certain departure from the past. It showed certain features, like in terms of its scope and numbers involved, that needed to be explained. This we argued, had to be located in the specific history of plantation in the region. The nature and modes of recruitment of the coolies was showing changes happening in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The war and the fillip that it gave to the tea industry meant a new recruitment drive in the industry. The coolies now recruited by the Labour Board came from a different social/regional background in the Valley.

A closer look into the valley and the plantations gave us critical insights into how the networks of communications were forged and information circulated. Rumours in circulation revealed a deep sense of anxiety and crisis among the workers. These anxieties were informed by the context showing a sense of change for the worse. The crisis could not have been better represented: with managers failing to hike wages, medicines failing to protect lives and the British Raj failing to the onslaught of the imminent Gandhi Raj. The perfect makings of a “world turned upside down”. Gandhi ka *Hookum*, in turn, defined that new authority and the legitimacy the act—in this case of moving out of the plantations and attempting to go back home.

The coolies of Chargola stood in stark contrast to the coolies imagined by planters in the 1860s to labour on the tea gardens being established. The practice of production of tea rested to a large extent on the labour of the coolie. The coolies bounded by contracts were imagined to be immobilised in the routines of work and discipline by the planters. Such immobilisation and routines could not be entirely established nor be completely appropriated for the interests of planters. The plantation labour regime showed inventiveness and flexibility in developing modes of control not completely beyond the contract. The 1931 labour enquiry commission found the lingering ideas of contract in the plantations and the bad name attached to Assam persisted in the recruiting regions. The history of labour relations in plantations cannot be reduced to the literal provisions of the contract as it worked more as a field of force or what Slimmon called as “power behind the shadow”. Contracts at one level created the paternalistic authority of

the manager but also allowed for resources in the claims of the worker. This we have seen were results of struggle rather than gifts from authority.